An Examination of the Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
In
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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April 1, 2024
Richmond, Virginia

Keywords: *Principal, School leader, Novice, Rural, History, Context, Challenge, Instructional Practice*

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ABSTRACT

Novice principals leading rural schools experience unique challenges that define their leadership practices. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how novice principals interpret and understand the challenges they experience as developing leaders within a rural school setting in Virginia. The research question for the study was, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools? This study adds to the existing body of research on the challenges novice principals face as leaders of schools situated within a rural community. For this study, six novice principals working in Rural-Remote (Code 43) schools (as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics) in Virginia participated in a 45-minute, one-on-one interview. The findings revealed that the novice rural principals experienced unique challenges with hiring staff, managing limited budgets, wearing multiple hats, distributed leadership, meeting their community's expectations for accessibility and visibility, readily available collaboration opportunities with professionals in similar roles, and intense feelings of ultimate responsibility. Participants hired with previous administrative experience within the district reported smooth transitions to the principalship. Although the participants reported limited activities from their districts to assist with understanding the rural setting, they expressed satisfaction with the overall support provided by their school district. The implications could help school districts, policymakers, and principal preparation programs effectively manage rural principal successions by establishing mentorship

programs; providing field experience to aspiring principals; creating robust principal induction programs; and finding creative solutions to attract, hire, and retain rural school staff.

An Examination of the Contextual Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia

Frank Thomas Wheeler

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Novice principals leading rural schools experience unique challenges that define their leadership practices. This research focused on how novice principals interpret and understand the challenges they experience as developing leaders within a rural school setting in Virginia. The research question for the study was, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools? For this study, six novice principals working in Rural-Remote (Code 43) schools (as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics) in Virginia participated in a 45-minute, one-on-one interview. The implications could help school districts, policymakers, and principal preparation programs effectively manage rural principal successions by establishing mentorship programs; providing field experience to aspiring principals; creating robust principal induction programs; and finding creative solutions to attract, hire, and retain rural school staff.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my daughter Alice and my son Cameron. You both bring so much joy and happiness to my life, and I am beyond proud to be your father. I appreciate your support, patience, and understanding throughout this journey, and I am looking forward to our future adventures and experiences together. I encourage you to follow your own path, dreams, and aspirations, and remember that you are well-equipped to take on any and all challenges and obstacles that lie ahead. Never lose your sense of confidence, ambition, and resilience as these qualities will take you far. I am excited to see what the future holds for both of you, and please know that I love you both very much.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my loving wife, Danielle, for supporting me without hesitation throughout these last three years. You made tremendous sacrifices and took on way too much to ensure I had time and space to work. You took on the responsibility of ensuring Alice's active life never missed a beat, and you made sure Cameron's first three years of college were filled with love and support. I will be forever grateful for your love, encouragement, and sense of humor. You have always believed in me, and I truly could not have made this journey without you by my side.

To my co-chairs Dr. Alexander and Dr. Cash, your expertise, responsiveness, and direction are exactly what I needed to accomplish this lofty goal. I appreciate you keeping me on track and being available for quick calls and chats about ideas and questions. I could not have asked for a better academic support system to help guide me through this process. You have instilled confidence in me and helped to make me a better researcher, writer, and scholar.

I appreciate my additional committee members, Dr. Lowery and Dr. Collier, who brought experiences and expertise that were aligned perfectly with the rural leadership topic of this paper. Your feedback was invaluable and a huge contribution to this study.

Thank you to the participants who took the time out of your extremely busy schedule to respond to the recruitment email and follow through with the interview. The highlight and pinnacle of this dissertation journey was the moment I received a response that you were eligible for the study and that you were willing to participate. I am forever grateful for your contributions to this study, as this would not be possible without your willingness to share your experiences and expertise.

To the remainder of all my Virginia Tech professors throughout these three years–Dr. Mullen, Dr. Price, Dr. Brinkman, Dr. Kniola–you introduced to wide range of topics and

experiences that have helped to make me a more effective leader and confident scholar. I thank you for your time, effort, knowledge, feedback, and support.

A big shout out to my “Elite 11” cohort members that made this journey with me. The frequent communication, advice, and accountability throughout this process were a huge component to my successful completion of the program. I wish everyone all the best in your future endeavors, and I am thankful for your friendship. I appreciate you Amanda, Amy, Antoine, Bobby, Erica, Latrese, Lesley, Sarah, Rebeccah, and Will.

Thank you to my New Kent Middle School administrative team, teachers and staff, students, and families who encouraged me over the past three years and always checked on my progress. My sincere gratitude goes out to Dr. Nichols, Superintendent, and the New Kent County Public Schools district leadership team for your support and confidence in me.

And lastly, thank you to my two cats, Minnie & Trea. You slept for hours by my side during the research and writing, quietly encouraging me to keep going. I am grateful for your companionship during this unforgettable time in my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how novice principals (*novice* is defined as a principal in their first, second, or third year) interpret and understand the challenges they experience as developing leaders within a rural school setting in Virginia. Specifically, this study focused on the challenges that impact a novice principal's ability to exercise their leadership considering the unique rural context and setting of their school. The research question for the study was, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools? The study aims to contribute to the existing body of research on the challenges novice principals face as leaders of schools situated within a rural community. The findings and implications could help school districts, policymakers, and principal preparation programs effectively manage rural principal successions by establishing mentorships, prioritizing collaboration opportunities, and providing specialized training. Aspiring principals may also benefit from the findings of this study to understand and develop effective leadership practices that are responsive to the unique challenges of leading rural schools.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction that includes an overview and purpose of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, conceptual framework, definition of terms, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 2 is a review of the relevant literature that aligns with the research question. Chapter 3 is the methodology that was used to conduct the research and data analysis. Chapter 4 is the data analysis which includes demographics, analysis of interview questions, and interview analysis. Chapter 5 focuses on the

findings of data analysis, implications for practitioners, and recommendations for future researchers.

Statement of the Problem

The modern day principalship is a complex, multi-faceted role that comes with many challenges (Wood, 2019). Over the history of the principalship, there has been a steady increase in expectations that has added to the complexity of the position, reaching a point where change is undeniable (Goodwin et al., 2005). In the last several decades, the principal's role has evolved from building manager to leader of learning (Hayes, 2019). Furthermore, powerful economic and social challenges, in conjunction with recent reform efforts, have strongly influenced the complicated nature of the principalship (Goodwin et al., 2005). Not only is the role of the principalship complex, but the experiences, challenges, and opportunities can be vastly different depending on the setting (Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Rural principals frequently encounter unique challenges associated with the school community related to specific sociocultural and economic challenges, and these attributes can be especially challenging for novice principals (Klar et al., 2020; Preston et al., 2013; Spillane & Lee, 2014). In an era of increased accountability, more than one in five principals vacate their positions each year, and rural districts experience even higher turnover rates (Hansen, 2018). Rural principals leave their position based on a variety of reasons, including personal factors such as family needs and career aspirations; institutional factors such as school academic performance, principal job duties, and salary; and environmental factors including community expectations, isolation, and legislative mandates (Hansen, 2018). Principal turnover has negative outcomes for students, and test scores are considerably lower at schools with new principals (Miller, 2013).

According to a recent biennial report from the Rural School and Community Trust and its partners, *Why Rural Matters*, rural students and families in the United States need improved and equitable educational opportunities due to sizeable challenges with high poverty rates, diversity, and students with disabilities (Showalter et al., 2019). Of the 9.3 million children that attend rural schools, nearly one in six is from a low-income family, one in seven qualifies for special education, and one in nine has moved to a different residence in the previous year (Showalter et al., 2019). In fact, the challenges rural communities face are daunting, including lack of adequate resources, difficulties with teacher recruitment and retention, a shortage of early childhood services, and much more (Showalter et al., 2017). The pressure for policymakers to address education issues in rural areas at the state and federal levels is rising due to the restored control of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to state and local school districts, as well as the political environment to support rural and small-town voters (Showalter et al., 2017).

There are approximately 260,000 students enrolled in Virginia's rural school districts, compared to the nationwide median of approximately 96,000 rural students (Showalter et al., 2019). In fact, rural school districts account for 31.4% of the school districts in Virginia, and there are 71 altogether (listed in Appendix A). According to the *Why Rural Matters* Educational Policy Context Gauge Rankings, Virginia is in critical need for policymakers to address rural education issues, ranking in the highest category (crucial) and third overall in the nation (Showalter et al., 2019). Virginia's high ranking in the Educational Policy Context means there is major improvement needed in the areas of rural instructional expenditures per pupil, ratio of instructional to transportation expenditures, median organizational scale, state revenue to schools per local dollar, and rural adjusted salary expenditures per instructional full-time equivalent (FTE; Showalter et al., 2019). Additionally, Virginia ranks in the highest category (urgent) and

fourth overall in the nation as requiring substantial improvement in rural Educational Outcomes, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; Showalter et al., 2019).

Significance of the Study

The role of the principal as a lever for school improvement has gained considerable attention in recent years due to an expanding body of research that indicates principals play an essential role in supporting student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021). Researchers, policymakers, and financial supporters have become increasingly interested in school-level leadership in response to the designs of current educational reforms (Kafka, 2009; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Recent state and federal policies hold principals accountable for increasing student growth, narrowing achievement gaps, decreasing drop-out rates, and strengthening college and career readiness (Hayes, 2019). According to Sanchez et al. (2017), principals are under increased pressure to meet federal and state accountability standards as measured by high-stakes tests. This increased accountability for principals to produce educational outcomes has added to the existing pressures of the principalship (Grissom et al., 2021).

The principal's role is important in the current educational landscape, as it is instrumental to the school improvement process and overall success of a school (Kafka, 2009). According to Kafka (2009), student performance is substantially influenced by the actions and decisions of a school leader. A school principal's influence on student achievement is second only to that of the classroom teacher (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004; Parson & Hunter, 2019). Principal leadership plays a key role in improving instructional programs, staffing instructional programs, coordinating curriculum, supervising and evaluating teaching, monitoring student learning, and protecting staff from interruptions to their work (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE],

2023). In Virginia, principals are evaluated using a rating system of *highly effective, effective, approaching effective,* and *ineffective* for each of the eight performance standards (See Table 1; VDOE, 2023). To guide the principal evaluation process, each performance standard includes a prescriptive list of observable, tangible principal behaviors (VDOE, 2023).

Table 1

Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Principals (VDOE, 2023)

Performance Standards
1. Instructional Leadership The principal drives the success of all students by facilitating the development, communication, implementation, and evaluation of a shared vision of teaching and learning that leads to student academic progress and school improvement.
2. School Climate The principal fosters the success of all students by developing, advocating, nurturing, and sustaining an academically rigorous, positive, welcoming, and safe school climate for all stakeholders.
3. Human Resources Leadership The principal provides human resources leadership by selecting, inducting, supporting, evaluating, and retaining quality instructional and support personnel.
4. Organizational Management The principal cultivates the success of all students by supporting, managing, and overseeing the school's organization, operation, and use of resources.
5. Communication and Community Relations The principal fosters the success of all students by communicating, collaborating, and engaging with family and community stakeholders to promote understanding and continuous improvement of the school's programs and services.
6. Culturally Responsive and Equitable School Leadership The principal demonstrates a commitment to equity and fosters culturally inclusive and responsive practices aligned with division and school goals, priorities, and strategies that support achievement for all students.
7. Professionalism The principal fosters the success of all students by demonstrating behavior consistent with legal, ethical, and professional standards, engaging in continuous professional development, and contributing to the profession.
8. Student Academic Progress The principal's leadership results in acceptable, measurable, and appropriate student academic progress based on established standards.

Although rural leadership has been studied by many scholars and universities across the United States, the research is limited on novice rural principals (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In fact, most of the recent research on novice rural principals has been completed across

international locations (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The research on novice principals in the United States has mostly focused on urban school settings (Spillane & Lee, 2014). The significance of this study is the narrow focus on novice principal leadership in rural settings in Virginia. The findings of the study may contribute to the gap in research that exists within the novice rural leadership context in the United States. For this study, 45-minute, one-to-one interviews of six novice principals leading a rural school in Virginia were conducted.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was developed through the process of reviewing the recent literature. Figure 1 depicts the challenges and factors that influence a novice, rural principal's leadership practices, including federal and state policy implementation challenges and accountability pressures, rural principal contextual challenges, and novice principal contextual challenges.

Definition of Terms

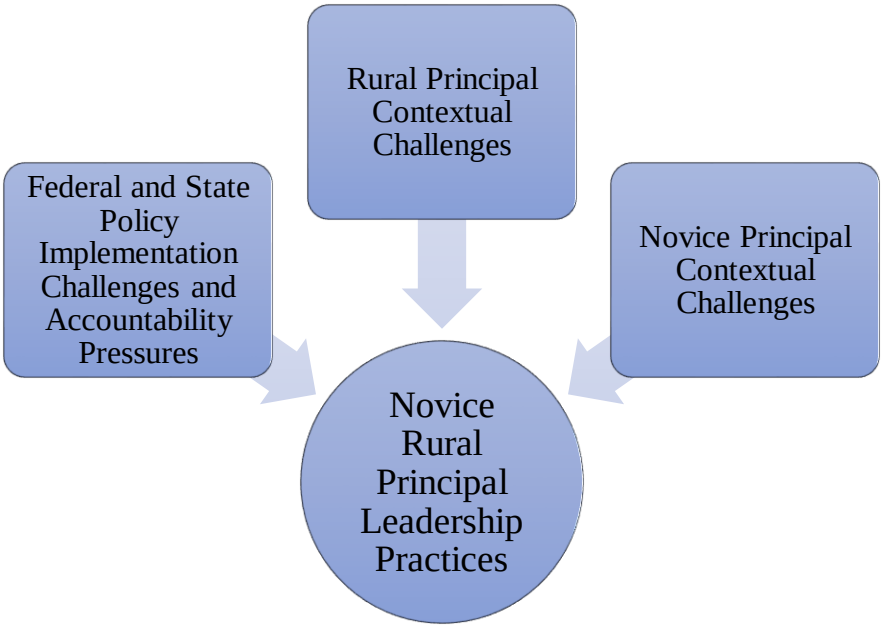
The following terms and definitions are relevant for this study:

Novice: the term *novice* is used in research to describe a principal that is in their first, second, or third year in their current head leadership position (Hayes, 2019; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). This term does not consider an individual's previous years of experience as a teacher or assistant principal.

Principal: the leader with the highest authority within a public school and held responsible for leading change, developing staff, student achievement, human resource management, school climate, and community relations (Fullan, 2014).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Challenges of Novice Rural Principals that Influence Leadership Practices



Rural: a non-urban setting characterized by geographic isolation and small population size by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Rural locale classifies rural locations into subtypes (fringe, distance, and remote) based on the distance and size to the nearest urban area (NCES, 2023a).

Rural-Remote (Code 43): census-defined rural territory that is more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster and more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area (NCES, 2023a).

Limitations

There were several limitations, or factors beyond the researcher's control, for this qualitative, phenomenological study. The first is the researcher's lack of experience with conducting interviews for a phenomenological study, which could have influenced the type of

responses provided by the participants. Second, the participants were aware of the researcher's professional status as a current novice rural principal in Virginia, which also could have influenced the participants' responses. Third, large amounts of data in the form of participant responses were collected from the 45-minute interviews with the six participants. Analyzing the data was a time-intensive process and served as a disadvantage to identifying themes and findings. Fourth, due to the essence of the qualitative study design, the findings may not be generalizable to other novice rural principals. Lastly, the data that were collected are self-reported, and the researcher is unable to confirm that the participants' responses accurately describe their leadership experiences.

Delimitations

Purposeful sampling was used to set boundaries and narrow the focus of the study. First, the study only represented the perspectives of novice principals working in Rural-Remote (Code 43) schools in Virginia, which excluded participation from novice principals working in Rural-Fringe (Code 41) and Rural-Distant (Code 42). Second, the study excluded participation from novice rural principals in other parts of the United States and principals working internationally. Third, principals with more than three years of experience and urban and suburban principals were excluded. Lastly, the study was limited to only principals, excluding key stakeholders in the educational process, including students, parents, teachers, school support staff, assistant principals, district leaders, superintendents, and community members.

Researcher's Professional Background and Assumptions

This research is heavily influenced by the researcher's current position as a public middle school principal in a rural school district located on the outskirts of central Virginia. His experience in education includes a total of 20 years, with eight years as a classroom teacher, nine

years as an assistant principal, and three years as a principal. He is particularly interested in sharing the findings from this study with other scholars, school administrators, and division leaders. The researcher's professional experience is a potential source of bias that could impact his ability to objectively analyze results of the qualitative study to discover findings and conclusions. As a practitioner, the key assumption he brings to the proposed study is that novice rural principals are overwhelmed with the responsibility of the position and lack the supports needed to mitigate the unique challenges they encounter to successfully lead their schools.

Summary

In Chapter 1, an overview and purpose of the study was provided, including the research question. In addition, statements of the problem and significance of the study, including an overview, were provided. A conceptual map, definition of terms, limitations, and delimitations were also included to provide context and clarity to the research. Chapter 2 includes the search process and the literature review of prior empirical evidence on the challenges of novice principals, the challenges of rural principals, and effective leadership practices. Further, it discusses the limited research of novice rural principals.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the challenges and effective instructional leadership practices of a novice principal in a rural setting. The implications of this research will support efforts to develop future principals, inform school division leaders, improve leadership preparation programs, and focus on professional development. The three main topics that will be discussed in this literature review are the evolution of the principalship; the novice principal context, which includes challenges and instructional practices of principals with three years or fewer of experience; and the rural principal context, which includes challenges and instructional practices of principals in rural settings.

Search Process

The literature review is a comprehensive process that involves building a case through a written argument by gathering and evaluating of a wide range of credible evidence and literacy sources from previous research (Machi & McEvoy, 2016; Preston & Barnes, 2017). The search process for this literature review included the utilization of Education Research Complete from EBSCOhost, ERIC from EBSCOhost, and JSTOR from the library of Virginia Tech. Research that was unavailable through the Virginia Tech research databases was accessed through the Virginia Tech interlibrary loan program. Additional research was identified from reference lists of the research studies obtained through the Virginia Tech library system. The research for this literature review was organized in the Mendeley Reference Manager program. The keywords that were used for the Boolean searches included *principal*, *school leader*, *novice*, *rural*, *context*, *challenge*, *instructional practice*, and *history*. A comprehensive examination of the literature was conducted, including a total of 53 articles. To ensure the most current literature was retrieved, a

date range of 2003–2023 was used. The date range feature was removed when conducting research on the history of the principalship to access relevant historical information.

Evolution of the Principalship

The literature on the history and origin of the principalship is somewhat limited and incomplete (Rousmaniere, 2007). Historian Kate Rousmaniere (2007) stated that "The principal is missing from both the political history of school administration and the social history of schools. It's as if the principal did not exist at all, except to appear occasionally, without elaboration or explanation, as a spontaneous actor in the experience of a teacher or the development of the school" (p. 4). Historically, the principal's role was not viewed as important, as early principals were involved in the execution of menial, clerical, and janitorial tasks (Goodwin et al., 2005). However, there is evidence revealing that the principal's role has always been complex and multi-faceted (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007; Wood, 2019). Although the history of the American principalship is relatively small, there is evidence indicating that simply being an effective building manager was never viewed as sufficient for the position (Kafka, 2009). In addition, historical records indicate that the role of the principal has always included elements of instructional leadership since the role originated in the early nineteenth century (Kafka, 2009).

As student enrollment began to increase in the early 1800s, schools became larger and transitioned from one-room schoolhouses to grade-level classes (Rousmaniere, 2007). As the number of teachers and students in schools increased, the position of "principal teacher" was created to ensure the school functioned properly (Rousmaniere, 2007). In addition to their primary role as a teacher, the principal teacher carried out administrative duties that ensured the

effective operation of the school, including student discipline, building maintenance, assigning classes, creating the schedule, and taking attendance (Kafka, 2009).

Due to the increasing demand of leadership in schools and because the role had expanded, teaching responsibilities were ultimately removed from the principal teacher role. As the nineteenth century progressed and schools became larger, the principal position grew and became primarily an instructional leader, manager, administrator, supervisor, and increasingly a politician (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007; Wood, 2019). Principals in the mid nineteenth century also administered discipline, organized the separate courses of study, and supervised the operation of classes (Rousmaniere, 2007). This new position also came with ambiguity related to job responsibilities. According to Rousmaniere (2007), district officers and early administrators often advocated for more power and authority over educational matters. In addition, early principals may not have been selected based on qualification or merit, but a range of other factors, including willingness to do the job, most experience held as a teacher, or the teacher most favored by the school board (Rousmaniere, 2007).

By the early twentieth century, the principal position had expanded and became more professionalized, including supervisory responsibilities and increased academic qualifications for the position (Rousmaniere, 2007). According to Goodwin et al. (2005), the role of principal was seen as transcending the instructional plain and a move to a more theoretical world of central office personnel and university professors. In contrast, however, principals often found themselves torn between attending to teachers and classroom matters, and time-intensive administrative tasks (Goodwin et al., 2005). By the mid twentieth century, it was unclear whether the principal was a teacher or an administrator (Rousmaniere, 2007). This often-conflicting role of the *middle manager* still exists today in the principalship (Kafka, 2009).

Recent studies claim that the current principalship needs to be, or should be, radically different from what it once was (Kafka, 2009). Due to recent state and federal mandates, the principal's role has evolved from building-level manager to instructional leader (Kafka, 2009). Although principals in the nineteenth century were instructional leaders due to the nature of the principal teacher position, most of the work was based on expediency, and not necessarily on learning outcomes or school operations (Rousmaniere, 2007). Due to the increased accountability of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and similar measures, educators and principals feel this pressure in deeply personal ways (Kafka, 2009). According to Sanchez et al. (2017), the American public education system is highly affected by the recent calls for increased accountability and higher academic standards. The drive for high academic standards is felt intensely with school leaders, who are increasingly being held accountable for the quality of teaching and student performance outcomes (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003).

To become effective leaders, principals must understand how educational policies influence their leadership practices, school improvement plans, decision-making for resource allocation, and professional development needs (Williams & Welsh, 2017). In 2015, President Obama enacted ESSA, an educational law that is the most recent federal policy with meaningful implications to the school principalship (ESSA, 2015). ESSA is a reauthorization of the 1965 educational law known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and replaces NCLB that was enacted in 2002. ESSA is the paramount educational law that prioritizes education for all children through the funding of various programs, emphasis on early childhood education, protection for high-needs and disadvantaged students, support and accountability to low-performing schools, professional development for teachers and principals, high academic standards measured by standardized testing, and much more (ESSA, 2015; Williams & Welsh,

2017). ESSA serves as a driver for policy and accountability standards from state to state, and it is important that new principals working with scarce resources understand the impacts and implications of this educational law (Williams & Welsh, 2017). The enactment of ESSA means that state education policy will have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of principals (Williams & Welsh, 2017).

An updated accountability system for schools has been developed by the VDOE in response to ESSA (VDOE, 2022). Multiple performance indicators are utilized to identify schools needing support and improvement, including academic achievement of all students, achievement gap measures, and student engagement indicators (VDOE, 2022). Schools are evaluated using a school quality tiered rating system and must develop a multi-year improvement plan (VDOE, 2022). Performance level one means the school meets or exceeds the state standard and data should be continually monitored (VDOE, 2022). Performance level two means the school is near the standard or making sufficient progress and revisions should be made to the improvement plan along with conducting an academic review (VDOE, 2022). Performance level three means the school is below the standard and a corrective action plan should be developed along with an academic review, and the progress is subject to monitoring (VDOE 2022; See Table 2).

Despite these recent educational policy standards, a question remains as to whether this level of accountability for building-level leaders is justified. After all, there are a variety of factors that influence student achievement efforts, and schools may not have the power or ability to exert influence over all of them. According to Weiner and Woulfin (2017), “The external accountability context may be largely to blame for the difficulty districts and schools have in negotiating controlled autonomy” (p. 346). The struggle for autonomy within the context of the

Table 2

Performance Level Chart for Achievement and Achievement Gap Indicators (VDOE, 2022)

	English (Includes Reading and Writing)	**Mathematics**	**Science**
Level One Meets or exceeds state standard or sufficient improvement	Current or cumulative three-year rate is greater than or equal to 75% Or: Current year rate is less than 75% but greater than 65% and the school decreased the failure rate by at least 10% (R10) from the previous year.	Current or cumulative three-year rate is greater than or equal to 70% Or: Current year rate is less than 70% but greater than 65% and the school decreased the failure rate by at least 10% (R10) from the previous year.	Current or cumulative three-year rate is greater than or equal to 70% Or: Current year rate is less than 70% but greater than 65% and the school decreased the failure rate by at least 10% (R10) from the previous year.
Level Two Near state standard or sufficient improvement	Current year or cumulative three-year rate is less than 75% but greater than 65% Or: Current year rate is greater than or equal to 50% and less than or equal to 65% and the school decreased the failure rate by at least 10% (R10) from the previous year.	Current year or cumulative three-year rate is less than 70% but greater than 65% Or: Current year rate is greater than or equal to 50% and less than or equal to 65% and the school decreased the failure rate by at least 10% (R10) from the previous year.	Current year or cumulative three-year rate is less than 70% but greater than 65% Or: Current year rate is greater than or equal to 50% and less than or equal to 65% and the school decreased the failure rate by at least 10% (R10) from the previous year.
Level Three School demonstrated performance below the benchmarks for Level One and Level Two.	Current year or cumulative three-year rate is less than or equal to 65% Or: School has stayed at a Level Two or Three through four consecutive years. (Level Three - 4 Years Rating)	Current year or cumulative three-year rate is less than or equal to 65% Or: School has stayed at a Level Two or Three through four consecutive years. (Level Three - 4 Years Rating)	Current year or cumulative three-year rate is less than or equal to 65% Or: School has stayed at a Level Two or Three through four consecutive years. (Level Three - 4 Years Rating)

"middle-manager" position can leave principals feeling powerless over educational outcomes. Large-scale quantitative studies conclude that the effects of school leadership are mostly indirect and account for only 3–5% of the variation in learning across schools (Leithwood & Reihl,

2003). However, this effect is nearly one-quarter of the total effect of all the school-related factors that impact student learning, indicating that effective school leadership behaviors including setting directions, developing people, and making the organization work are small but educationally significant (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Reihl, 2003).

Nonetheless, the rationale behind increased accountability measures for building-level leaders is based on the premise that leadership matters. The role of the principal is key to increasing student achievement and improving the working conditions within a school (Hayes, 2019; Kafka, 2009; Weiner & Woulfin, 2017; Wood, 2019). Educational research confirms that principals have a strong influence on educational outcomes, as school leadership is ranked second only to classroom instruction (ranked first) as a variable that has an impact on student achievement (Hvidston et al., 2015; Lee, 2015; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). A strong argument has developed over the last several decades that there is an increased need for instructional leadership in the contemporary principalship to influence student achievement.

The principal's role is diverse, spanning across managerial, instructional, and political realms (Hayes, 2019; Hvidston et al., 2015). Over the last two decades, the responsibilities of the principal have increased tremendously with expectations of running an efficient school, managing health and safety, innovating without upsetting anyone, connecting with students and teachers, being responsive to parents and the community, answering to district offices and leadership, and, more importantly, delivering results (Fullan, 2014). Moreover, the principalship position is increasingly more difficult, time-consuming, and critical today than ever before (Goodwin et al., 2005; Kafka, 2009). According to Goodwin et al. (2005), "When one reflects on the duties of the principal teacher in 1839 and reviews the social, legal, managerial, and political

expectations that have been added through the 19th and 20th centuries, one begins to understand the complicated and complex role of the contemporary principal" (p. 7).

This complexity is also the result of a vast educational environment including curriculum standards, program requirements, policy directives, response to increasing diversity student characteristics, collaboration with other social agencies that support children, and rapid development in learning technologies (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003). On one hand, the principalship has traditionally included many responsibilities and has carried the expectation to accomplish a great deal with few resources (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007). On the other hand, Goodwin et al. (2005) argued that the principal's role has not necessarily evolved, but there has been an *accumulation* of responsibilities over time. The responsibilities of the principalship, since its inception in the early nineteenth century, have increased in the areas of accountability, instructional leadership, and complexity of the role. In fact, "…75 percent of principals feel that their job has become too complex, half of all principals feel under great stress 'several days a week,' and the percentage who say they are satisfied in their work has dropped from 68 to 59 since 2008" (Fullan, 2014, p. 5). In fact, Fullan (2014) posited that the role of the principal should be repositioned from *direct* instructional leader to *overall* instructional leader to maximize the learning for all the teachers and, in turn, the students.

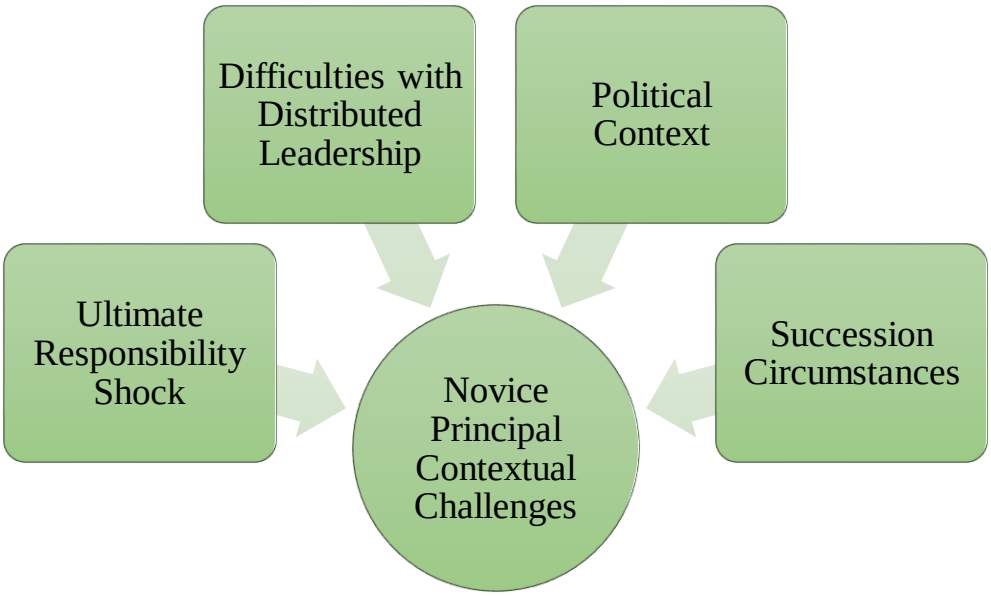
Novice Principal Context

The contemporary principalship is increasingly complex, and there is also research that suggests that a principal's experience varies depending on the environment and context (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). The novice principal is defined as having limited experience in their role as the sole leader of the school and is in their first, second, or third year as principal. Within the first three years in the position, novice principals face considerable leadership challenges (Spillane &

Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Figure 2 shows the major challenges of a novice principal that include (a) an overwhelming sense of ultimate responsibility, (b) difficulties with distributed leadership, (c) an understanding of the political landscape, and (d) managerial challenges depending on succession circumstances (Caruso, 2013; Hayes, 2019; Hvidston et al., 2015; Lee, 2015; Petzko, 2008; Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019; Spillane et al., 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Swen, 2020; Viloria et al., 2021;Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the Challenges of Novice Principals



Ultimate Responsibility Shock

One of the biggest challenges a novice principal encounters is the overwhelming sense of responsibility within the first three months (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Novice principals must appear calm, in control, and competent, despite entering a type of "culture shock" where the transition to the prominent principal position is traumatic (Caruso, 2013). Beginning principals experience feelings of loneliness, professional isolation, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility (Caruso, 2013; Lee, 2015). Novice principals also feel

accountability pressures and challenges that vary in intensity depending on the school context and setting (Spillane et al., 2015; Swen, 2020). Contributing to the sense of ultimate responsibility are the new technical challenges of the job, including managing the budget, maintaining the school building, and implementing new government initiatives (Lee, 2015).

Spillane and Lee (2014) conducted a theory-building, mixed-methods, longitudinal study that examined a random sample of 17 first-year elementary principals from Chicago Public Schools. In-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were held on three separate occasions: at the start of the school year, three months into the school year, and at the end of the school year. According to the findings of the study, "A consistent theme in new principals' accounts, even prior to the start of their first academic year on the job, was the shock of responsibility that came with entering the principal occupations" (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 442). The shock of ultimate responsibility included increased decision making, commitment, unpredictability of the job, and stress from being the one ultimately responsible for the operation of the school. The increased demands on time and expectations to initiate change and immediately save the school were intense and overwhelming, especially withing the first three months (Spillane & Lee, 2014). After the first three months, task diversity increased and principals were expected to wear many hats, including instructional leader, counselor, engineer, social worker, cafeteria manager, etc. The unpredictability of the job also increased after the first three months with principals describing having to adapt and change plans frequently. Although the sample size of the study was limited to elementary principals in the same school district, this study is meaningful and has implications for future studies of novice administrators transitioning into the principalship (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Difficulties with Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership plays a key role in the school improvement process. With the increasing complexity of the principalship and the ultimate responsibility novice principals experience, it is difficult for organizational change to occur due to the actions of a stand-alone leader. Spillane et al. (2015) conducted a study to examine the way novice principals interpret their new leadership role and their understanding of the enablers or constraints to taking a distributed leadership approach to school leadership. The study is based on data from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of novice principals using survey and interview data from novice principals in Chicago Public Schools. The first cohort of novice principals completed a survey for a total of 59 responses. The second cohort of 17 new principals participated in interviews throughout their first year. The limitation of the study was the reliance on the accounts of only principals, as the perspectives of students, teachers, policymakers, and parents were not included (Spillane et al., 2015). The findings indicate that novice principals struggle with empowering other teacher leaders and staff members to take on leadership roles due to "inherent tensions" for leadership to exist among multiple individuals (Spillane et al., 2015, p. 1081). On one hand, the novice principal has certain incentives (enablers) for adopting a distributed leadership perspective, including volume and diversity of the work. On the other hand, the novice principal's sense of ultimate responsibility serves as a disincentive (constraint) to distributing the workload and responsibility. This is a meaningful conclusion as novice principals prepare for the principalship and begin prioritizing building trust and collective efficacy with their staff. Moreover, the novice principal can benefit from the idea of distributed leadership being seen as an intentional process that happens over time.

Political Context

Novice principals are challenged with understanding the unique political context of their position (Caruso, 2013; Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019). For instance, in a year-long, qualitative study of two suburban novice middle school principals in New Jersey, an extreme budget crisis forced principals to eliminate positions within the building, creating a culture of shock (Caruso, 2013). The two school leaders were unprepared to manage this period of decline in education, and eventually came to terms with their roles being political in nature by serving as the ultimate decision makers in the allocation of resources and deciding who gets what, when, and how (Caruso, 2013). Consequently, the macropolitical budget crisis forced the principals' leadership styles from a collaborative approach with stakeholders through open dialogue and social structures to a coercive, closed, and conflicted approach (Caruso, 2013). Ultimately, the drastic changes in leadership style decreased teacher morale, efficacy, and motivation to implement the necessary educational changes (Caruso, 2013). Managing external stakeholder claims is surprising for new school leaders and challenging to address (Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019). Over time, however, novice principals come to terms with taking difficult and unpopular positions, setting priorities, and adjusting their expectations about the job (Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019).

Succession Circumstances

Lastly, novice principals struggle with managerial tasks, including managing the budget, maintaining the school building, leading resistant staff members, and prioritizing (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). According to Petzko (2008), novice principals require additional support in human relations, personnel issues, instructional leadership, special programs, and student services. Novice principals also face specific challenges depending on the

conditions of their successions, or circumstances surrounding the principals they are replacing. According to Lee (2015), beginning principals have difficulty managing the legacy, style, and practices of the previous principals.

Lee (2015) studied a random sample of 16 novice principals in a major American urban school district using two waves of interview data to examine the connection between different succession situations and the challenges their successors face. The four types of succession circumstances are planned continuity, unplanned continuity, planned discontinuity, and unplanned discontinuity (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012). A planned succession describes when a candidate has relevant experience in a similar role and setting, knowledge and access to important information about the school, and is often "groomed" to be the next leader (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Lee, 2015). An unplanned succession describes when a candidate is "thrown into the principalship blind" with little knowledge of the building, limited support, and spends most of the first year trying to figure out the building, including technical tasks, learning which staff members can be trusted, and generally orienting themselves to the position. (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Lee, 2015, p. 275). A continuity succession is the expectation that the new leader is generally aligning their leadership on a path consistent with the previous administration (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Lee, 2015). Lastly, with a discontinuity succession, the leader is expected to make changes to fundamental aspects of the school (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012).

The findings suggest that in a planned continuity, a candidate's transition is likely to be planned in advance with the support of district leaders. Therefore, the candidate is more likely to have access to large amounts of information about the school, and less likely to face staff resistance. In an unplanned discontinuity, the candidate enters the principalship with little

knowledge of the building and experiences difficulties with gathering critical information about the school. In these unplanned circumstances, the principal is also more likely to face challenges with technical tasks, personnel matters, staff resistance, and relationship building. This study serves to inform division leaders to recognize the circumstances under which novice principals begin their tenure so that support can be focused to increase the likelihood of a successful transition. Additionally, Lee (2015) stated, “Organizational and educational research have shown that leadership succession creates organizational instability—for better or worse” (p. 263).

Supporting Novice Principals

Formal mentoring programs are one of the most beneficial ways to support new school leaders and to help them become leaders of learning (Hayes, 2019). A mentoring relationship that involves developmental relationships can support a novice principal as a leader of learning to improve student outcomes (Hayes, 2019). According to Caruso (2013), novice principals rely heavily on the support of colleagues and district leaders to navigate challenging times, preserve educational programs and staff members, and initiate necessary educational change. Beginning principals are successful when they focus on developing and growing future administrators within their own staff (Viloria et al., 2021). By fostering lifelong learning amongst staff, they can become effective instructional leaders by nurturing and growing lifelong learners (Viloria et al., 2021). The findings of the research on novice principals are important not only for beginning principals, but for district leaders, mentorship programs, and leadership preparation programs.

Rural Principal Context

There are also many challenges that extend beyond a principal’s experience and are specific to the context of their leadership (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). For instance, the principal experience, opportunities, and challenges may vary among urban and rural settings

(Preston et al., 2013; Spillane et al., 2015). Depending on the educational setting, principals may not apply core leadership behaviors to their unique situations with the same technique (Urick & Bowers, 2014). According to Pendola and Fuller (2018), “Research has indicated that rural principals face different sets of challenges, pressures, and perceived social roles than their urban counterparts” (p. 1). Additionally, rural school leaders are frequently asked to fulfill various roles and responsibilities, while receiving considerably less support (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Preston et al., 2013). In fact, principal turnover in rural schools is beginning to gain momentum and becoming a critical problem in education (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Hansen, 2018; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). In accordance with recent research in rural education, this section is organized into four categories: defining the rural setting, contextual challenges rural principals encounter, leadership practices of successful rural principals, and a spotlight on the limited research that exists regarding novice rural principals.

Defining Rural

To gain an understanding of the context of rural school leadership, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term *rural*. Defining the rural setting is complex and has evolved over time with technological improvements and changes in population growth (Klar & Huggins, 2020). In fact, many federal agencies such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Office of Management and Budget have their own interpretations of rural (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Nonetheless, the U.S. Census Bureau has developed classifications of urban and rural settings that are widely accepted by many agencies and have evolved to define rural by the areas that remain after urban areas have been classified (Klar & Huggins, 2020; Ratcliffe et al., 2016). The U.S. Census Bureau currently defines *urban* areas using criteria including distance, land use, density, and population thresholds (Ratcliffe et al., 2016).

The NCES locale framework relies on standard definitions of rural and urban developed by the U.S. Census Bureau and is used to categorize U.S. territory into four types of areas—City, Suburban, Town, and Rural—using the Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) program (NCES, 2023a). Each type contains three subtypes that are differentiated by size and proximity (NCES, 2023a). NCES uses the local framework to help key stakeholders understand the relationship between educational institutions and the communities they serve, as well as to support research, analysis, and sample design (NCES, 2023a). The NCES locale framework uses the U.S. Census Bureau's designation of "non-urban territory" to define rural areas, which account for the overwhelming majority of U.S. land area (NCES, 2023a).

The NCES rural locale designates three subtypes depending on the size and distance of the nearest urban area: fringe, distant, and remote (NCES, 2023a). The first rural subtype is *rural-fringe*, defined as "Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster" (NCES, 2023a). The second rural subtype is *rural-distant*, defined as "Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster" (NCES, 2023a). The third rural subtype is *rural-remote*, defined as "Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster" (NCES, 2023a). In the Commonwealth of Virginia, the rural-classified areas account for 31.4% of all school districts (NCES, 2023a). Therefore, geographic isolation is a key factor in understanding the context of school leadership in Virginia. The utilization of a consistent designation system is particularly important because policy decisions impacting rural education are made using the classification of rural status (Showalter et al., 2017).

Contextual Challenges

In rural education literature, there are four macro-level contextual factors commonly discussed that influence schools and the communities they serve: political context, economic context, demographic context, and sociocultural context (Klar et al., 2020). These factors influence not only the schools and the communities they serve, but also one another as well (Klar et al., 2020). Klar et al. (2020) also identify overall professional challenges for rural school leaders, including accountability demands, limited resources, a heavy workload, community relations, and limited professional learning opportunities. The rural school context also has unique features that may influence how long principals stay in their position as sole leader of the building. Pendola and Fuller (2018) conducted a quantitative longitudinal study that examined the stability of principals in rural school districts using eight years of data from all principal positions in the state of Texas. The methods of the study included the use of logistic regression models to examine which individual and school characteristics influence five-year retention rates for all principals (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). The findings from the study revealed that the rural context influences principal stability, with rural principals leaving their positions earlier than non-rural principals and less than one third staying for five years or more (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Although data indicated the rural principalship was dominated by White males at over 91%, female principals demonstrated more stability than their male principal counterparts, while the racial identity of principals was not a contributing factor for stability (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Rural principals that were the most stable were those aged 38–50 with comparatively higher salaries, more than three years of teaching experience, and little to no experience in the assistant principal position (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Hansen (2018) conducted a qualitative study to identify the reasons why principals leave the rural setting. Six principals that had left their rural Minnesota schools participated in semi-structured interviews to investigate the factors that led to their departure. The interview questions were organized into three categories: institutional factors, personal factors, and environmental factors. After an analysis of the interviews was conducted, Hansen (2018) found that the top reasons principals left their rural schools were classified as institutional factors, or those within a school district's control. These reasons included a heavy workload; lack of professional support; frustration with micromanagement, lack of clear direction, and lack of appreciation from the school board and superintendent; and frustrations over the salary and contract negotiation process (Hansen, 2018). Although the limitation of the study included self-reporting bias, it is worth noting that the principals had left the position already, which increased the likelihood of candid responses.

The study conducted by Klocko and Justis (2019), however, revealed a different perspective about rural principalship by investigating the difference in stressors and loss of joy between rural and urban school principals. The methods of the study included a quantitative time-series design from questionnaires over nine years in three-year increments in 2009, 2012, and 2015 for a total of 3,685 responses from principals in urban, suburban, and rural schools. The findings of the study revealed that although stress levels are increasing among principals from various settings, rural principals were the least stressed and demonstrated the greatest resiliency and acceptance of their role. The biggest difference in stress and the impacts of stress occurred between 2009 and 2012 when principals were facing increased accountability, funding disparities, and external mandates. During this time, rural principals reported a stabilization of stress and seemed to exhibit resiliency and an acceptance of the challenges of their role as

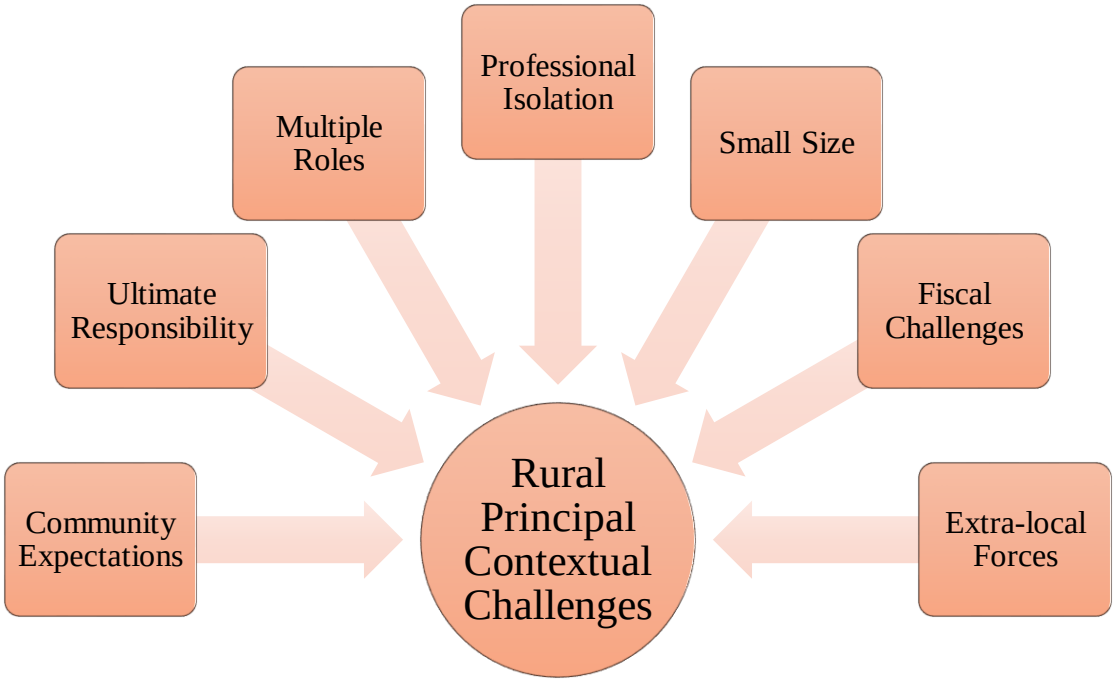
principals (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Although the rural principals experienced increased levels of loss of joy through their mid-career (10–14 years), later in their career loss of joy levels decreased, which was unique to the rural principals.

From the perspective of the rural principal in their role as sole leader of the building, a conceptual framework has been developed by the researcher based on the current research that identifies the contextual challenges they encounter. Rural school leaders experience unique challenges that may interfere with receiving the necessary support in meeting state and federal mandates, as well as other stakeholder expectations (Stewart & Matthews, 2016). As shown in Figure 3, rural principals face distinct contextual challenges, including (a) community expectations, (b) ultimate responsibility, (c) multiple roles, (d) professional isolation, (e) small size, (f) fiscal challenges, and (g) extra-local forces (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Hansen, 2018; Hatton et al., 2017; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Klar et al., 2020; Klocko & Justis, 2019; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Preston et al., 2013; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2017; Showalter et al., 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2016; Wells et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Williams & Welsh, 2017).

Community Expectations. Rural residents have a strong sense of connectedness to their communities (Klar & Huggins, 2020). In fact, schools play a central role in nurturing the social capital of families in the community and sustaining local history and cultural traditions through community activities and school functions (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Principals in rural communities are seen as respected and prominent community leaders who need to embrace being visible (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018) and are expected to serve active roles in the community

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework of Rural Principal Contextual Challenges



while simultaneously fulfilling their responsibilities as leaders of their schools (Hatton et al., 2017). Moreover, rural principals and teachers recognize that schools are often portrayed as the local beacons of stability and future possibilities (Sanchez et al., 2017). It is important for rural school leaders to possess the ability to work with parents and the community and may experience opposition if they are not members of the community (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). For this reason, rural superintendents seek out principal candidates that are connected or affiliated in some way with the school community for their potential to understand the unique political and social context (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Preston et al., 2013).

Principals in rural settings face sociocultural challenges that are specific to the school community (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Preston et al., 2013). To be influential, rural school leaders must understand the community's values and beliefs and must be visible, accessible, and approachable to individuals within the school community (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Additionally, they must establish productive relationships with district leaders due to geographically dispersed schools and non-traditional grade distributions (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Rural principals feel the need to be seen everywhere and "always have to be on" to appear engaged in the school and community (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018, p. 9). Community expectations, including pressure to be visible at athletic and community events, expectations of a direct line of communication with the principal, immediate access from school board members, and negative community reactions due to consolidation discussions, can influence a principal's decision to leave the position (Hansen, 2018). In fact, rural principals find it difficult to maintain a work-life balance due to obligations to their schools, communities, and families (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). According to Pendola and Fuller (2018), the large scope of rural community expectations may impact job fit and satisfaction. As a coping mechanism, aspiring rural school leaders should know what to expect by accepting and integrating their professional identities as principals and citizens into a mutually beneficial and servant-oriented leadership style (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Ultimate Responsibility. Rural principals feel intense pressure and a sense of ultimate responsibility to lead and improve their schools (Hansen, 2018; Hatton et al., 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). They are often inundated with endless paperwork and time-consuming activities such as after-school events, parent meetings, teacher meetings, and professional development sessions with teachers and peer leaders (Sanchez et al., 2017). They also arrive to work early in the morning and stay late at night due to the burden of responsibility they feel to their school and communities (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Additionally, rural principal stressors are different from those of urban principals. Klocko and Justis (2019) found a strong inverse relationship between rural and urban principals related to the

stressors they identify as impactful to their roles, including working with ineffective teachers, changing demographics, and increased expectations from central office.

To gain a better understanding of how rural middle school principals and teachers perceive the increased expectations of being under chronic academic stress, a qualitative study was conducted that consisted of semi-structured interviews of 12 school leaders and 12 core academic teachers (Sanchez et al., 2017). The selected schools for the study were all in rural settings and were considered low performing as measured by state-wide assessments. When comparing the responses from the school leaders to the teachers, several themes emerged associated with building a culture of school improvement.

The first theme was a misalignment of how school leaders interpret efforts to improve the school. School leaders expressed optimism and confidence about school improvement, while core academic teachers were pessimistic and made statements about being demoralized by the external pressures for school improvement (Sanchez et al., 2017). Secondly, both principals and teachers focused on what was wrong with their schools in their responses, indicating a lack of celebration and recognition for any form of success (Sanchez et al., 2017). The third theme was that principals experienced a heavy weight of responsibility and felt alone in the process (Sanchez et al., 2017). The researchers hypothesized that these feelings may have contributed to why the misalignment in perceptions related to school improvement efforts existed in the responses between the school leaders and the teachers (Sanchez et al., 2017).

Multiple Roles. Rural principals are often assigned additional responsibilities out of organizational necessity and for their school district to run more efficiently (Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Additional responsibilities may include formal, district-level roles outside of the building, such as athletic director, transportation director, facility management

director, curriculum specialist, special education coordinator, and even superintendent (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019). Extended responsibilities for rural principals may also include tasks that contribute to the overall operation of their buildings, including substitute teaching, driving a bus, and assisting in the cafeteria (Parson & Hunter, 2019). Wearing multiple hats as a rural principal increases workload and demands on time, and may limit instructional leadership efforts (Hansen, 2018; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). According to Hansen (2018), the overlapping responsibilities encountered turn the position into one of building manager and less of an instructional leader, and the additional workload may influence a rural principal's decision to leave the position.

There may be, however, an upside to the rural principal that experiences multiplicity of roles. Klocko and Justis (2019) found that, "While many have dissented about overseeing multiple programs, services, and constituencies, the data suggest that the *Principal with Many Hats* may possess leadership coping strategies that mitigate stress and loss of joy in being a principal due to limited autonomy" (p. 30). Additionally, principals in rural settings have a resiliency that allows them to remain in control and seek out additional supports that mitigate challenges characterized by isolation (Klocko & Justis, 2019). On the other hand, although rural principals may experience multiple roles in the position, Parson and Hunter (2019) found no distinguishable difference in the number of responsibilities between principals from varied contexts.

Professional Isolation. Principals in rural settings often experience professional isolation due to the size of the school division, as well as geographic location (Klocko & Justis, 2019; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wells et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals often experience feelings of loneliness and the overall burden of

responsibility for school improvement (Sanchez et al., 2017). As policy changes influence their leadership behaviors, rural principals feel a unique type of pressure since they are often isolated with no administrative peers to develop networks or brainstorm ideas (Hatton et al., 2017). With limited access to colleagues with whom they can share their experiences and seek advice without feelings of judgement, the professional isolation principals experience can be detrimental (Hansen, 2018). According to Sanchez et al. (2017), "Even though, principals made efforts to collaborate with their teachers, build rapport with students, engage the community, and foster external partnerships, there was still a sense of isolation in the work that had to be completed" (p. 8). In contrast, Parson and Hunter (2019) found that the rural setting for a principal was not a significant predictor of loneliness, stress, role enjoyments, self-efficacy, or success meeting the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards.

Small Size. Many rural school districts in the U.S. are considered very small with respect to student enrollment. In fact, the median enrollment for rural school districts in the U.S. is only 494 students (Showalter et al., 2019). At least 90 percent of rural districts in Montana, North Dakota, and Vermont have fewer than 494 students, and at least half of rural districts in 23 states enroll less than the median (Showalter et al., 2019). These smaller, rural school districts are more likely to serve smaller schools with multiple levels of students, which presents unique challenges for rural principals (Parson & Hunter, 2019). For instance, a principal of a K–12 school experiences increased stress levels due to time constraints from leading a school with such a wide range of needs (Parson & Hunter, 2019). The small size of rural school districts also creates operational challenges, including staffing for intervention, collaboration with other schools, increased stress from principals, professional isolation, and the pressure of ultimate responsibility (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Low student enrollment can also impact how

schools absorb fiscal changes, leading to an ever-present reality of consolidating with other school districts out of financial necessity (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Fiscal Challenges. Rural school districts are often met with fiscal challenges and may be unable to provide the level and variety of resources associated with larger urban and suburban school districts (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Preston et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2016). According to Klocko and Justis (2019), "The poverty of rural schools poses often-insurmountable challenges for novice and experienced principals" (p. 23). Regardless of high or low land valuations, rural school districts may receive low levels of state funding, which could impact funding for schools (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Consequently, mandates and requirements from state-level education departments may be expected to be implemented without adequate funds (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). This lack of funding leads rural principals to work hard to ensure instructional programs their students need are implemented, including receiving Title I funding and grants, and reaching out to the community for support (Hatton et al., 2017). Resource constraints can also impact a principal's ability to recruit teachers and maintain instructional programs (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). To account for policy inequities that serve as the root cause for many rural school challenges, the following recommendations are made: achieving funding formula equity, identifying fragile funding responses to changing student racial and linguistic demographics, articulating the impacts of school consolidation, promising approaches to rural educator salary equity, and creating policies related to early childhood education access and system building (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023).

To find out how external influences impact the ability for rural principals to develop programs for students, Hatton et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing 11 rural

elementary principals about their experiences. For this study, *programs* were defined as initiatives, interventions, student activities, after-school programs, or services that take place within a school that receives federal, state, local, or building-level funding (Hatton et al., 2017). The first theme that emerged was the influence of accountability and new regulations on student programming decisions in an over-stressed system. One principal stated, "It is just the crunch…the push down from upper administration and the push up from teachers and parents. Just trying to juggle all of that" (Hatton et al., 2017, p. 14). Secondly, principals identified funding as an external influence that impacts their programming decisions for students, including Title I funds, grants, and fundraising efforts (Hatton et al., 2017). Lastly, principals expressed concerns about the side effects of accountability, regulations, and funding pressures on teachers, specifically stress and work overload (Hatton et al., 2017). The external factors that influenced these rural elementary principals' programming decisions highlight the complexity of the position, especially in instructional leadership.

Extra-local Forces. Effective school leadership requires elements of instructional knowledge, capacity to navigate competing demands, and the ability to understand and interpret policy messages (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). To become effective leaders, it is important that principals understand how educational policies influence their leadership practices, school improvement plans, decision-making for resource allocation, and professional development needs. External influences, including accountability systems and changing regulations, have an impact on the types of programs rural principals implement (Hatton et al., 2017). For rural principals, the external influences that drive school improvement efforts such as professional development initiatives serve as a constant reminder of school deficits and a lack of achievement (Sanchez et al., 2017). This increased level of accountability for principals began with NCLB

and continues with the implementation of ESSA. The enactment of ESSA means that state education policy will have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of principals (Williams & Welsh, 2017).

A qualitative study conducted by O'Shea and Zuckerman (2022) compared rural and non-rural principals' instructional leadership practices in the age of ESSA. The study focused on 20 principals working in diverse schools with free and reduced-price lunch rates at or above the Nebraska state average of 45%. The researchers found that extra-local forces, such as ESSA's focus on principals as levers for school improvement, shaped rural principals' methods for carrying out instructional leadership tasks. The rural principals relied heavily on building trust with teachers due to the increased opportunities to engage and have direct contact to observe and provide instructional feedback. Consequently, the rural principals experienced challenges implementing extra-local policies aligned with ESSA. For instance, to maintain the trust and relationship with teachers, one principal refused to score a state-mandated teacher evaluation rubric. Additionally, rural principals experienced unique challenges related to funding, small organizational size, and geographic isolation (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022).

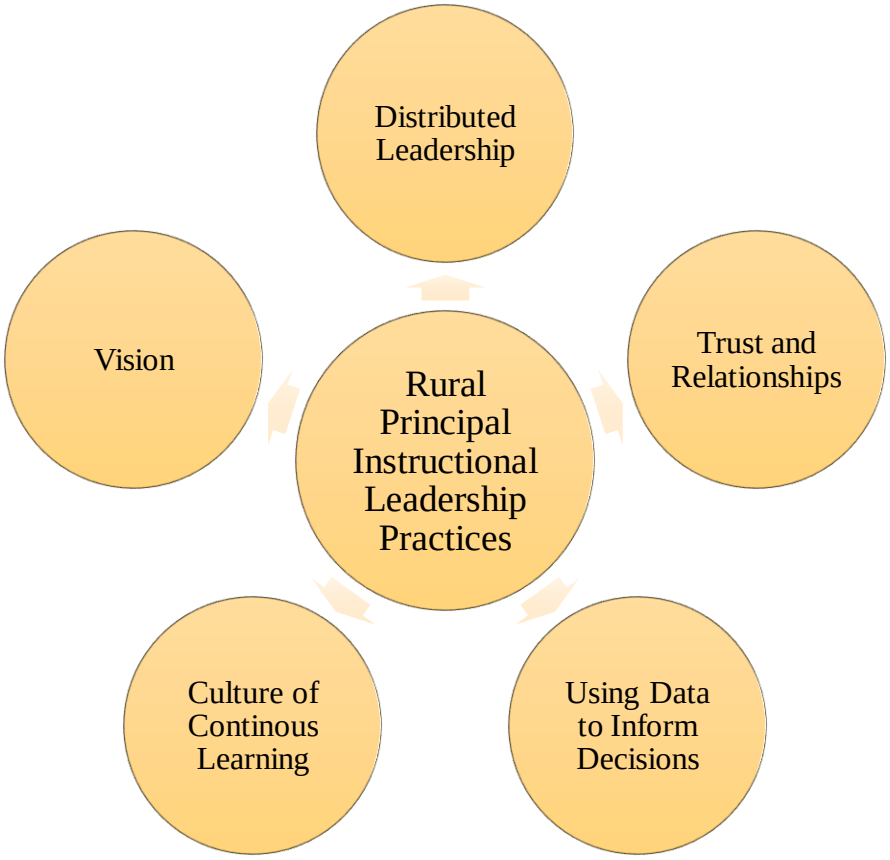
Instructional Leadership Practices

There are instructional leadership practices effective rural school leaders employ that may help mitigate the challenges encountered by rural principals (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Enomoto, 2012; Hall et al., 2021; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Mette & Stanoch, 2016; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2017). The challenges that confront rural schools require school leaders to develop their schools as learning organizations focused on addressing challenges through continuous school improvement (Klar et al., 2020). As shown in

Figure 4, the current research on rural school principals suggests there are instructional leadership practices that contribute to creating a culture that supports teaching and learning, including (a) having a vision, (b) employing distributed leadership practices, (c) building trust and relationships, (d) using data to inform decisions, and (e) developing professional learning communities (Bartanen, 2020; Cox & Mullen, 2023; Enomoto, 2012; Hall et al., 2021; Hatton et al., 2017; Klar et al., 2020; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Mette, 2014; Mette & Stanoch, 2016; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Reed, 2020; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2017).

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework of Rural Principal Instructional Leadership Practices



Vision. Rural principals experience greater challenges accomplishing their goals and leading school improvement efforts (Parson & Hunter, 2019). They are often reluctant to introduce new programs or initiatives in their schools due to fears of increasing teacher responsibilities that could lead to burnout (Hatton et al., 2017). In fact, rural schools under chronic academic stress place repeated pressure on principals and teachers, leading to an increased focus on what is wrong with the school, and a noticeable absence of the successes and positive attributes of the school (Sanchez et al., 2017). Teachers in rural schools can also be misaligned with school improvement efforts and can feel pessimistic and demoralized due to lack of autonomy and external pressures to perform (Sanchez et al., 2017).

Successful rural principals have a vision of the school, clearly articulate a plan that aligns with that vision, and initiate change by influencing their staff (Preston & Barnes, 2017). As leaders of school improvement efforts, they display optimism and confidence that their knowledge, experience, and skills can negotiate the challenges facing the school (Sanchez et al., 2017). The vision of a rural school principal can have a substantial influence on the overall success of the school, especially related to the allocation of resources. For instance, a school leader's ability to distribute instructional resources effectively and equitably can be impactful in the achievement culture of the school (Cox & Mullen, 2023). When creating a vision for the school, it is important for rural school principals to understand that federal government funding through school improvement grants alone may not improve the outcomes of rural, disenfranchised communities (Mette & Stanoch, 2016). Investments should be made in human capital with cultural considerations of the community, as opposed to technology and infrastructure (Mette & Stanoch, 2016). Importantly, Wieczorek and Manard (2018) found that novice rural principals had difficulties articulating comprehensive instructional leadership goals,

activities, or strategies to implement long-term improvement efforts due to the extensive number of tasks and duties.

Preston and Barnes (2017) conducted a literature review to identify the personal qualities and professional competencies frequently associated with successful leadership in rural schools. The literature review included a collection of over 100 sources, which were analyzed to identify patterns and create overarching themes. Two themes emerged from the findings of the literature review, which represented nearly 40 research articles that aligned with the author's purpose. First, successful rural school leadership involves understanding the importance of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with key stakeholders (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Specifically, successful rural principals work as a team with staff to build trust and gain knowledge, collaborate with parents and students by communicating effectively and being responsive to needs, and nurture positive school-community relationships (Preston & Barnes, 2017). The second theme that emerged is that successful rural principals are agents of change and use their influence to improve their school, especially through strong instructional leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017). More precisely, they focus their efforts on creating a school culture where teachers are empowered to take reasonable risks in the classroom and try new ideas, engage in professional development, and understand the style of instruction that supports high academic standards (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Using Data to Inform Decisions. School improvement efforts of rural school leaders should effectively incorporate data to make decisions and to promote a continuous improvement process (Klar et al., 2020). According to Klar et al. (2020) "In order for data to be systematically used to inform decision, school leaders need to ensure there are opportunities for personal, interpersonal, organizational, and community capacity to be developed in the area of data usage"

(p. 34). Rural principals have more autonomy to use data to examine curriculum and make the necessary changes (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). In high-poverty rural schools, effective principals attend meetings regularly to guide and learn from teachers analyzing performance data to improve outcomes for students (Cox & Mullen, 2023).

Monitoring attendance data to reduce chronic absenteeism is also a crucial responsibility for rural principals. In fact, school leaders are held accountable for many facets of school improvement, including student attendance, which is aligned to student academic achievement (Hall et al., 2021). Moreover, principal leadership behaviors directly influence student attendance, especially in high-poverty schools (Bartanen, 2020). Hall et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to examine best practices of rural principals in West Virginia whose low-socioeconomic (SES) schools achieved high attendance rates. Purposeful sampling was used to select eight high school principals, and data were collected by conducting interviews related to their specific actions and leadership behaviors designed to encourage students to attend school (Hall et al., 2021). Best practices were revealed and ranked from most frequently to least mentioned: (1) using incentives and student recognition, (2) establishing a positive school culture with high expectations, (3) communicating personally with students and parents, (4) reaching out to families of absent students, (5) following established district and state policies, and (6) picking up absent students at their homes. Hall et al. (2021) concluded that, "A rural school culture and a community's implementation of best practices is crucial to increasing attendance in low-SES rural high schools" (p. 78).

For rural school principals, understanding how their respective state administers ESSA can help them to recognize the challenges of implementation as well as identify supports that are needed. Reed (2020) conducted a document analysis of the school improvement plans of eight

rural schools in Virginia and interviewed each school's principal to determine the impacts on student achievement through the implementation of ESSA. The findings of the study revealed that although the principals implemented recommended best practices, including teacher collaboration, frequent use of assessments, and social emotional learning curriculum, chronic absenteeism was prevalent and significant achievement gaps remained for students with disabilities (SWDs; Reed, 2020). From the interviews, the principals questioned whether the standardized assessments used in the state of Virginia were appropriate for SWDs and proposed an alternate assessment that would accurately measure learning progress and growth (Reed, 2020). The findings also revealed that the principals recommended additional strategies for lowering chronic absenteeism and closing the achievement gap with SWDs (Reed, 2020).

Distributed Leadership Practices. To improve the motivation, morale, and job performance of staff members, successful rural principals utilize a collaborative leadership style (Preston & Barnes, 2017). By leveraging the expertise and experience of their staff, rural principals can effectively solve school-related problems (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Rural principals often use informal arrangements for distributed leadership by empowering teachers, communicating regularly, encouraging school improvement ideas, and relying on teachers in non-formal leadership roles to engage in school-wide decision making (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). As demonstrated by a failed technology school improvement goal initiative with a Native American rural school district, teachers and students should be involved in the process of school improvement (Mette & Stanoch, 2016).

On the other hand, Parson and Hunter (2019) used a mixed-methods approach to explore the difference in experience between rural and non-rural principals in North Dakota. In Phase I of the study, a qualitative approach was used by conducting structured interviews with 31

principals, 13 of which were principals from rural schools. The findings of the interviews suggested that the rural principals in North Dakota were more likely to use a sole leadership style due to the limited resources of the rural setting and feelings of isolation from fellow colleagues and their division leadership (Parson & Hunter, 2019). The qualitative study also revealed that the rural principals were more likely to face challenges unique to the rural setting, including professional isolation, serving multiple levels of students, and time constraints leading to increased stress. Additionally, the qualitative study revealed that all principals, regardless of rurality, experienced responsibility challenges related to the multiplicity of roles (Parson & Hunter, 2019).

In Phase II of the study a quantitative approach was used by surveying 98 North Dakota principals, 68.89% (62) of which were classified as rural (Parson & Hunter, 2019). The findings of the study reinforced that rurality increased the likelihood that a sole leadership style would be employed. The findings also revealed that rurality increased the principals' perceptions that they experience greater challenges accomplishing their goals. However, the quantitative study did not find rurality to be a significant predictor of loneliness, stress, role enjoyment, principal self-efficacy, or success meeting ISLLC standards (Parson & Hunter, 2019).

Building Trust and Positive Relationships. Communication with students, parents, teachers, and community members is a crucial component of successful rural school leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Rural principals place themselves in a position to succeed when they prioritize fostering collaborative relationships with students, teachers, parents, community members, and senior leaders (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Building positive relationships using visibility and transparency with all stakeholders influences student attendance, increases family communication, and has an impact on learning and student achievement (Cox & Mullen, 2023).

Although both rural and non-rural principals establish credibility and trust by developing positive relationships that support a culture of teaching and learning, rural principals can cultivate more direct relationships with teachers and their instruction (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Novice rural principals focus mainly on building and maintaining strong relationships with teachers, parents, and students (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In fact, novice rural principals use positive relationships as a mechanism to establish developing instructional leadership (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Successful rural principals also meet frequently with teachers to help guide their professional development needs (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Successful rural principals recognize the importance of developing positive relationships with students by getting to know them, praising them, understanding their personal and academic backgrounds, and publicly rewarding students for their accomplishments (Preston & Barnes, 2017). School turnaround efforts are dependent upon school leaders to build positive relationships not only with students and staff, but also with outside agencies and turnaround specialists to foster shared leadership and accountability (Mette, 2014). According to Enomoto (2012), relationships across school, district, and central office leadership are important for shared authentic leadership preparation programs to be effective for aspiring principals. Furthermore, engaging the community in the turnaround process provides a balance of technical and cultural improvement by taking into consideration the cultural and historical contexts of the community (Mette & Stanoch, 2016). To strengthen rural education partnerships, recent research highlights the need to seek out collaborative relationships with multiple stakeholders, explore and identify ways to mitigate partnership challenges, and share examples of innovative partnership practices (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023).

Culture of Continuous Improvement. In response to large-scale assessments from external mandates, rural school principals are expected to provide professional development to teachers regardless of the contextual, geographic, and resource challenges they face (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). For instance, a rural school district encountered challenges with leadership professional development efforts including scheduling time, interruptions and modifications to the agenda, and assistant principals maintaining their own agency over required observations (Enomoto, 2012). Effective rural principals promote a professional school culture whereby teachers feel empowered to take risks in the classroom and try new ideas (Preston & Barnes, 2017). As strong instructional leaders, they use role-modeling and conduct professional development workshops for teachers (Preston & Barnes, 2017). According to Cox and Mullen (2023), job-embedded professional development is a strong influencer in the achievement culture and helps to develop and retain effective teachers.

Establishing and sustaining professional learning communities is a challenge for rural principals due to the lack of opportunities for teachers to collaborate, limited time for leadership teams to meet, an inability to trust teachers to establish and maintain professional learning communities, scarce resources, and minimal attention and support from the national government (Willis & Templeton, 2017). Despite these challenges, successful rural principals establish and maintain professional learning communities by building trust with faculty and facilitating collaboration, consistently leading through action, continually recognizing goals, providing time for teachers to collaborate, and communicating with and among teachers (Willis & Templeton, 2017). Additionally, rural principals in high-poverty schools improve educational outcomes by participating in collaborative planning to encourage teachers' curriculum development (Cox & Mullen, 2023).

Limited Research on Novice Rural Principals

According to a study conducted by Wieczorek and Manard (2018), novice principals in rural schools face unique challenges related to their leadership practices. Situated in a U.S. midwestern state, six novice, rural principals participated in semi-structured interviews as part of a phenomenological, qualitative study (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Using the sensemaking phenomena as a socially constructed theoretical framework, an analysis was conducted to interpret the response results of the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The findings of the study reveal that novice principals felt pressure to meet their rural community's expectations of visibility and engagement and worked to create a professional and personal work-life balance. The principals also experienced resource constraints at the district level that impacted hiring efforts and their ability to maintain instructional programs. They also described challenges with multiple and overlapping leadership roles due to their school districts' efforts to consolidate capital and human resources (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In addition, the researchers found that principals experience difficulties describing extensive instructional leadership goals and strategies for long-term improvement due to overwhelming workloads and duty assignments (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Due to the small sample size, subjective response bias from the participants, and recall inconsistencies, the findings of the study are limited and not generalizable to novice principals in rural settings (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The researchers recommend that best practices should continue to be investigated to improve preparation efforts for aspiring principals, mentoring programs of novice principals, and coaching of contextually responsive leadership practices that meet the needs of rural communities.

The previous research is limited relating to both the history of the principalship and the challenges novice principals encounter in a rural setting. According to Wieczorek and Manard (2018), further research is recommended regarding the preparing of principal candidates, mentoring of novice principals, and coaching of experienced rural principals to meet the needs of the school and community. The next step to add to the body of literature is to conduct a study examining the challenges and supports needed for novice principals working in rural settings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate how novice principals interpret and understand their experiences as developing leaders within a rural setting. The term *novice* is used to describe a principal with three years or fewer of experience in their current position, and the term *rural* is used to describe a setting characterized by geographic isolation and a small population size. The findings of this research will guide district leaders and rural principals in mitigating challenges to support novice principals.

Research Question

The research question for this study was, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools?

Research Design and Justification

This study was a qualitative research design that included one-on-one, virtual interviews to examine the challenges experienced by novice principals working in Rural-Remote (Code 43) schools in Virginia. Interview protocol for the one-on-one interviews (See Appendix B) was developed by the researcher to collect data for this study. Questions 1–13 were open-ended and aligned to the research question of the study. Lastly, question 14 is designed to give the participants the opportunity to share final thoughts on their experiences.

The approach that was used for this qualitative research design is called phenomenological research. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), conducting a qualitative, phenomenological study enables researchers to identify a phenomenon to develop a deeper understanding of a common meaning through the sharing of lived experiences by several participants. The qualitative research design allowed the researcher to understand the contextual

experiences of the principals in a detailed way by examining how and what they have experienced in their unique leadership positions. Using this method, an exploration of six rural principals in Virginia with three years or fewer of experience in their current leadership roles was conducted.

Selection of Setting

The study took place within six different rural school districts in Virginia. Each school district met the standard definition of *rural* developed by NCES locale framework (See Table 3). The three subtypes of *rural-fringe*, *rural-distant*, and *rural-remote* are classified according to the distance and size of the nearest urban area (NCES, 2023a). Specifically, only schools located in Rural-Remote (Code 43) school districts were eligible to participate in this study (NCES, 2023b). The one-on-one interviews were conducted remotely using a virtual meeting platform.

Table 3

Criteria for School Districts Included in the Study (NCES, 2023a)

School District	NCES Locale Rural Classification
Rural-Fringe	Code 41: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster
Rural-Distant	Code 42: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster
Rural-Remote	Code 43: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster

Participant Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants (See Table 4). The participants were selected using this method because it can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study” (Creswell & Poth,

2018, p. 158). Although there is no specific or exact number of participants required for a qualitative study, a range of 3–10 participants is recommended in phenomenology studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Smith et al. (2022), the recommended sample size for a phenomenological study is three to six participants. For this study, six participants were included. The study population focused on the head or sole leader of a school, also known commonly in the education profession as the *principal*. The principal population included those situated in a Rural-Remote (Code 43) setting in the Commonwealth of Virginia (NCES, 2023a). Additionally, all participants were principals working in a rural school district with three years or fewer of experience in their current role.

Table 4

Selection Criteria for Participation in the Study

Demographics	Selection Criteria
Role in Education	K–12 Principal
Years of Experience	Currently in First, Second, or Third Year
Type of School District	Rural-Remote (Code 43)
Location of School District	Virginia

The inclusion criteria for interview participants consisted of current principals with three years or fewer of experience in the position that were currently employed in a school district defined as Rural-Remote (Code 43; NCES, 2023b). All participants were screened for eligibility for the study. The first step included viewing the school quality profiles of all Rural-Remote (Code 43) school districts from the Virginia Department of Education website. The school quality profiles provide the schools located in the district, grade span of each school, and each principal's name.

Next, a recruitment email (See Appendix C) was sent to all 52 rural-remote principals in Virginia requesting the following information: (a) including the current school year, the total

years of experiences in the principal position, and (b) upon qualification, a request for the principal to participate in a virtual, 30–45-minute interview. Out of the 52 rural-remote principals in Virginia, 13 (25%) responded to the email and expressed an interest in participating. Out of the 13 principals that were interested, seven (54%) met the qualifications of the study by meeting the definition of *novice* and were currently in their first, second, or third year as a principal; and six (12%) of the principals that responded did not meet the qualifications due to being in their fourth year or more in the principal position. Based on this information, a potential sample of participants was identified.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting interview data, the required approval was obtained from the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB; See Appendix D). The IRB approval process ensures the research methodology follows specific procedural and ethical guidelines. Additionally, the researcher successfully completed the Social and Behavioral Research course offered through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program (See Appendix E).

The superintendents of the seven interested participants were sent an email notifying them of the study (See Appendix F) with the interested participants copied (cc'd) on the message. The approved IRB Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study (See Appendix G) was attached to the email so they could review the full details of the research study. Next, the seven principals were sent a message requesting their participation and a response to the email to provide a time and date within a seven-day window to schedule the 30 to 45-minute virtual interview (See Appendix H) with the information sheet attached. Out of the seven principals, six (85%) responded to the message by agreeing to participate and providing a time

and date to schedule the interview. Two follow-up messages within a ten-day window were sent to the seventh potential participant without a response.

Interviews were scheduled with the six participants at a time that was convenient for them. The interviews for this study were collected over an eight-day span in January and February 2024. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via the Zoom platform. For member-checking purposes, an Excel spreadsheet was created that included each participant's full name, email address, interview data and time, and transcript issue dates. The audio recordings and transcriptions were saved to a desktop, stored to a flash drive, and uploaded to a secure folder in the researcher's Virginia Tech Google Drive. The audio recordings were transcribed using a Microsoft Word document, and these files were saved on the researcher's Virginia Tech Google Drive.

Data Analysis

Using phenomenological data analysis steps, data from the one-on-one, virtual interviews were collected using audio recordings of the responses to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a Microsoft Word document, the transcripts were reviewed and corrected for accuracy using the audio recordings as an aid. The transcription files were saved on the researcher's Virginia Tech Google Drive. The revised transcripts were then sent to each participant to verify accuracy. The participants were asked to review the transcripts and respond to the email within a two-week deadline to make recommendations for corrections. None of the participants responded with a request to make any corrections to the transcripts.

After the two-week deadline, the transcripts were read, and the audio recordings were listened to numerous times. Next, a process called *horizontalization* occurred, in which the transcripts were analyzed line by line. Using the comment field and highlighting feature in the

Microsoft Word document, the *significant statements* and *themes* were identified that captured how the principals experienced their unique challenges and the supports they feel they need (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memos, responses, and ideas was documented and filed with the transcriptions and recordings.

Next, the responses, keywords, and phrases of emerging codes were transferred into a Microsoft Word table and were ordered and labeled by interview question. A second round of coding was then conducted to identify themes and further organize the responses, keywords, and phrases to develop a deeper understanding of the participants' responses and experiences. Key words and phrases from research questions and the literature search were refined. The frequency of each key word and phrase in the data were documented and color-coded. The coded and highlighted data were used to identify themes and patterns. After the data set was analyzed, an independent reader with a doctorate degree in educational leadership reviewed the data for validation.

Instrument Design and Validation

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the procedures for preparing and conducting interviews include (a) determine the open-ended research questions to be answered, (b) identify interviewees based on purposeful sampling procedures, (c) distinguish type of interview based on mode and interactions, (d) collect data using adequate recording procedures, (e) design and use an interview protocol to guide interactions, (f) refine interview procedures through pilot testing, (g) locate a distraction-free place for virtual interviews, (h) obtain consent from the interviewee to participate, (i) as an interviewer, follow good interview procedures, (j) and decide on transcription logistics.

The interview questions were analyzed in January 2024 by a panel of four educators that each had experience collecting qualitative data using interview protocols for their respective doctoral studies. The conclusions of the developing panel of principal educators led to the following modifications to the interview questions: (a) reduced the volume of questions from 17 to 14 by eliminating questions 1, 13, and 14 due to concerns about the length of the interview and ensuring all questions directly aligned to the research question, (b) modified the phrasing of interview questions 2, 6, 7, and 8 to more effectively align them to the research question, (c) re-ordered question 3 to question 1 to begin the interview with the participant discussing their roles and responsibilities in the principal position, and (d) modified the phrasing of the introductory statement in the Interview Protocol.

The instrument design was aligned to the procedures for preparing and conducting an interview and remained consistent with all participants for the one-on-one interviews. It took a total of four weeks to enroll all the study subjects. Including primary analysis of the data, it took the researcher three months to complete this study.

Interview Protocol

A consistent interview protocol was used for all the participants in the study. The study involved one data collection method, including six, separate one-on-one interviews with novice Rural-Remote (Code 43) principals each lasting 45-minutes that were scheduled in advance. The interviews were conducted remotely at scheduled times via the Zoom platform to gain an in-depth analysis of the challenges of novice principals leading rural schools. The data was collected using audio recordings of the participant’s one-on-one interviews.

Confidentiality and Ethical Treatment of the Data

Steps were taken to ensure confidential and ethical treatment of the data. To protect privacy, a numerical code was randomly assigned to each participant. The researcher kept an Excel spreadsheet on his Virginia Tech Google Drive with the participants' names and numerical codes only accessible by the researcher and principal investigators. Verbal consent of each participant was obtained prior to the interviews and noted on the spreadsheet next to each participant's name and numerical code. Additionally, member-checking strategies were used to guarantee the confidential and ethical treatment of the data and improve confidence in data interpretations. Each participant was asked to verify the transcription for accuracy. All data, including audio recordings, transcriptions, and coding data, were securely stored on the researcher's Virginia Tech Google Drive. Once the audio recordings were transcribed and listened to in their entirety numerous times for data collection and analysis, they were destroyed by the researcher. All other data will be secured on the researcher's secure Virginia Tech Google Drive for five years upon the researcher's successful completion of the dissertation. All data will be destroyed once the five-year time frame has expired.

Research Timeline

Table 5 indicates the researcher's timeline for the study.

Table 5

Timeline for Completing the Study

Dates	Step(s)	Process
September 2023	Preliminary exam	Successfully defended a review of the literature to the committee
January 2024	Prospectus exam	Successfully defended the research proposal to the committee
January 2024	Human Research Protection Program (HRPP/IRB) submission	A version 1.0 of the IRB protocol to HRPP was submitted. Corrections were made and version 2.0 was approved within seven days.
January 2024	Recruitment email	A recruitment email was sent to the 52 Rural-Remote (Code 43) principals requesting information about the total years of experience in the principal position and interest in the study. Eligibility and sample size were based on the responses.
January 2024	Notification of study was sent to Superintendents	An email was sent to the superintendents of the interested participants with information about the study
January 2024	Request to participate message sent to interested participants	An email was sent to the interested and eligible participants requesting a time and date within a seven-day window to complete the interview
January 2024	Scheduling interviews	Arrangements were made to conduct the 45-minute, one-on-one, virtual interviews
February 2024	Data collection	Interviews were conducted over an eight-day span. Interviews were transcribed and verified by the participants.
February 2024–March 2024	Data analysis	The data from the interviews were analyzed and significant themes and patterns were developed. Major findings, implications, and recommendations for future research were developed.
April 2024	Dissertation defense	The dissertation according to the VT Graduate School guidelines was prepared.
May 2024	Graduation	Participation in graduation walk

Summary

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology needed to conduct this study, including an introduction, research questions, the research design and justification, selection of setting, participant sample, data collection, data analysis, instrument design and validation, interview protocol, confidentiality and ethical treatment of the data, and the research timeline. Using one-

on-one virtual interviews, this study aimed to examine principal experiences as developing leaders within a rural setting and to identify contextual challenges they encountered. Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the collected interview data.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Introduction

This qualitative study aims to contribute to the existing body of research related to novice principals and rural school leadership. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how novice principals interpret and understand the challenges they experience as developing leaders within a rural school setting in Virginia. The data collected from this study can be used to understand the unique challenges novice rural principals face to support their leadership efforts more effectively.

The research question for the study was, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools?

Demographics

The six participants were principals that worked in six separate Rural-Remote (Code 43) school districts. Of the six participants, one (17%) was a high school principal, three (50%) were middle school principals, and two (33%) were elementary principals (See Table 6). Included in Table 6 is the Fall Membership, or total student enrollment from each participant's school from school year 22–23 (VDOE, 2024). Additionally, of the six participants, one (17%) was in their first year, three (50%) were in their second year, and two (33%) were in their third year (See Table 6).

Table 6

Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	School Level	Fall Membership from SY 22-23	Total Years of Principal Experience
P1	Elementary	97	1.5
P2	Middle	206	.5
P3	Middle	352	2.5
P4	Elementary	440	2.5
P5	Middle	370	1.5
P6	High	495	1.5

Interview Analysis

The following analysis of interview data will be presented and organized by interview question. Each section will describe each table followed by participant responses for additional interpretation of the data. The participant responses are either summarized by the researcher or quoted verbatim using the participant's assigned number and the corresponding line from the interview transcript.

Interview Question 1, Part A

Research indicates that rural principals wear multiple hats. Please tell me about your building-level principal responsibilities (Part A). Table 7 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's roles and responsibilities at the building level.

The study participants identified a total of 31 roles and responsibilities in the principal position. Of the 31 roles and responsibilities identified, 26 were considered "building-level." The most frequently occurring roles and responsibilities that were identified by five participants (83%) were instructional leadership, school finance, and everything/all/whatever is needed/multiple hats. Participant 4 captured the frequency of these themes in his response:

> Well, obviously I would agree that a principal does have a many-hat role for sure. During the school day I am primarily concerned with the instructional program. I'm in charge of

Table 7

Participants' Reported Building-Level Roles and Responsibilities

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
After-school programs				✓		
Attendance			✓			✓
Athletics		✓	✓			
Communication						✓
Custodial and maintenance supervisor			✓			
Discipline	✓	✓	✓			✓
Event coverage					✓	✓
Everything/all/whatever is needed/multiple hats	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Facility usage			✓			
Finance	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
First responder for building emergencies	✓					
Front office coverage					✓	
Gradebook manager	✓					
Instructional leader	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Long-term substitute					✓	
Meeting with parents			✓			✓
Mop floors during lunches					✓	
Professional development planning						✓
School improvement goals						✓
School nurse	✓					
School safety team	✓					
Social media						✓
Sole administrator in school	✓	✓				
Special education Supervisor			✓			
Student organization chair						✓
Tiered systems of support implementation						✓

all of the financial programs, and all of the scheduling that actually deals with that. So basically, I'm the CEO of the school. (P4, *l25)*

Participant 2 described his principal roles and responsibilities by stating, "Inside the building, I'm responsible for it all…so, because we're so small, [everything] responsibility-wise

falls onto my shoulders…I'm in team meetings. I essentially act as a grade-level content-area leader for all subjects" (P2, *l*42).

Four participants (P1, P2, P3, & P6; 67%) identified discipline as a role or responsibility, and two participants (P1 & P2; 33%) reported not having an assistant principal and were considered the sole administrator in their school. Participant 2 explained another level of support that helps support discipline efforts in his school:

> …I don't have an assistant principal…we have a student support mentor who does help me a great deal when it comes to discipline. And you know, steering kids down one path or the other as to whether or not, you know, formal discipline procedures are handled, or not. (P2, *l45)*

Unconventional roles and responsibilities were reported by two participants (P1 & P5) of the principal including front office coverage, mopping floors during lunches, school nurse and first responder for building emergencies. Participant 1 shared her perspective:

> …if anything happens to the building like Christmas when we had a flood last year, I'm the person that gets called. So, we have a maintenance department of sorts, but basically, they come to our house and say, "Hey, this is happening come handle it"…I have a custodian, and then the high school has a custodian. That is our maintenance department. (P1, *l*38)

Participant 5 identified another unconventional role as a long-term substitute for vacant positions in her school:

> Currently, this year we have been down a teacher in eighth grade, so I've taught Math 8. I'm currently still recording all the grades and lesson plans for Math 8. I also had to teach history for about two months this year. So yeah, it's a whole different world over here

(P5, *l*25). That's another role I had. I was counselor from July to beginning October, so I did all the scheduling myself over the summer. (P5, *l*221)

Interview Question 1, Part B

Do you have any additional roles or responsibilities outside of the building that support your school district, and if so, can you describe these (Part B)? Table 8 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's roles and responsibilities at the district level.

Table 8

Participants' Reported District-Level Roles and Responsibilities

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Committee/council member			✓	✓	✓	
Curriculum specialist for school	✓	✓	✓			
Recruiting			✓			
School board meeting attendance/presenting					✓	✓
ESSA Title I–IV coordinator	✓					

The study participants identified a total of 31 roles and responsibilities in the principal position. Of the 31 roles and responsibilities identified, five were considered "district-level." The district-level roles and responsibilities that were identified by the participants included Curriculum Specialist for the school, ESSA District Title I–IV Coordinator, District Recruiting, District Committee/Council Member, and School Board Meeting Attendance/Presenter. All six participants (100%) identified at least one district-level role or responsibility, and three participants (P1, P2, & P3; 50%) reported that they serve as the curriculum specialist for their building. Participant 3 discussed his role related to curriculum and instruction within his school:

But at least in my setting at the middle school, I don't [have] specialists, like I don't have a math, reading specialist, coaches, coordinators and things, for the middle school… I'm

> overseeing instruction and observations and feedback, that's coming from me. If a teacher needs certain coaching, that's coming from me. (P3, *l*50)

Three participants (P3, P4, & P5; 50%) discussed their involvement in district-level committees/councils. Participant 4 provided a specific example of how he has supported district efforts to create a more competitive salary scale:

> [I help with] the county-wide salary committee. I was the data person when we, were [sic] restructured all of the salary scales in our actual county. So, I led the data side of that and analyzed all of the actual scales across all of the 132 school divisions across the actual state so that we could make a competitive scale. (P4, *l*36)

Two participants (P5 & P6) reported that attending and presenting at school board meetings were considered principal responsibilities. Participant 6 shared her perspective:

> …there's an expectation for us to attend board meetings. That is something in the larger divisions that the assistant principals and the principals usually aren't expected to attend every single board meeting. We used to report out [to the school board at school board meetings] monthly. That is something that is being changed a little bit to where we're reporting out quarterly. But that's something that typically in a large division, you know, that would not be a requirement or an expectation. (P6, *l*97)

Interview Question 2

How would you describe the expectations of the rural community you serve for a principal leading a school in their district? Table 9 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's perceived community expectations for the principal position.

Table 9

Participants' Perceived Community Expectations of the Principal Role

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Accessibility	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Communication			✓			
Increased discipline		✓				
Increased sense of pride in school		✓				
Leader who can get things done				✓		
Overcoming negative perception, competing with private school options		✓				
Parents are resistant to change	✓					
Parents expect to be seen promptly without an appointment	✓		✓			✓
Parents want things their way	✓					
Schools as caregivers, neighbors, and friends				✓		
Start at principal if they want something done				✓		
Visibility	✓	✓	✓			✓

The study participants identified a total of 12 perceived expectations their rural communities have for them in the principal position. Five participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, & P6; 83%) identified accessibility as an expectation of the community, specifically parents. Similarly, three participants (P1, P3, & P6; 50%) specified that parents expect to arrive at the school and promptly meet with the principal without an appointment. Participant 3 describes the expectations of the community in a small district where people feel like they know everyone, and they expect instant and constant access to the principal. Whether someone is asking to speak to the principal by calling the school or showing up to the building, they do not expect to wait for a call back or wait to be seen. Participant 3 described this accessibility expectation:

> …and they want you accessible…it was an adjustment coming here because there wasn't [such] a thing as an appointment. If they came in, they expect to be seen. If they call, they expect to be spoken to. Things of that nature. Kind of on call. (P3, *l*66)

Four participants (P1, P2, P3, & P6; 67%) indicated that visibility was an expectation the community had for the principal position. Participant 3 described the school as "the central hub of things," and the community expects the principal to be seen and be a part of the event including any type of school, sporting, or community event (P3, *l*132). Participant 1 stated, "They want you to be seen. They want you to be at everything" (P1, *l62).* This expectation of visibility was also shared by Participant 6:

> I try to be extremely visible. Not only on the school campus during the school days, during pick-ups and drop-offs and bus routes all that good stuff, but also at games. One of the things that is very, very important is our athletic programs are, you know, in a small town that Friday night lights baby…[Our] school has a rich history of some national football championships back in the day. And so, football season especially…I'm there. (P6, *l*85)

Seven of the community expectations were voiced by one participant, indicating that these expectations for the principal may be unique to their community and setting.

Interview Question 3

How would you describe the pressure and demands in the principal position? Table 10 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported pressure and demands as the principal.

Table 10

Participants' Reported Pressure and Demands

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Demanding (feel the pressure, heavy, intense, overwhelming, stressful)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Everything falls back on you			✓			
Heavy weight to move a school towards excellence						✓
Managing discipline	✓					
Meeting deadlines	✓					
Paperwork demands	✓					
Pressure from myself	✓				✓	
Pressure to improve accreditation status		✓				✓
Safety responsibility						✓
School board pressure	✓					
Small size doesn't mean less responsibility	✓					
Time-consuming	✓		✓	✓		
Underestimated demands of principal position compared to assistant principal position						✓
Volume of emails			✓			

The study participants used a total of 14 terms or phrases to describe the pressure and demands they experience in the principal position. All six participants (100%) used a term or phrase that is closely aligned with the term "demanding" (P3), including (a) "intense" and "overwhelming (P1), (b) "feel the pressure" (P2), (c) "very stressful" (P4), (d) "overwhelming" (P5), and (e) "heavy" (P6). Participant 1 drew a comparison of the pressure and demands to her previous experience in a larger, urban setting,

> Intense. That'd be my first word. There's a big difference between the city and the country. So, when you're coming to rural, I think it's important to understand the different hats and how much time they consume when you're talking about being smaller, it doesn't

> mean the responsibilities are less…so just coming in and taking on the Admin role, but all the different other pieces that go along with it, can be overwhelming. (P1, *l*73)

Three participants (P1, P3, & P4; 50%) reported that the principal position is "time consuming," which creates stress and makes the position demanding. Participant 3 shared that without instructional support positions at the building and district-level, the principal is the first "go to" for questions, which can be time consuming (P3, *l*163). Participant 4 stated, "So, it's kind of a very stressful position in a lot of ways, because there's definitely not enough time in the day to complete all that they [community] think you should do" (P4, *l*83).

Two participants (P2 & P6) described feeling pressure to improve their school's state-wide accreditation status, specifically for standardized testing measures. P2 stated,

> …the pressure is there to have these kids perform. But it's also understood by leadership above me that…this isn't gonna change overnight. This is process. So, while we're aware of what the pressure is from the state, I'm also fortunate to have leadership above me that understands exactly what I'm trying to do and how I'm trying to do it now. That doesn't mean I've got years and years to do it. It's got to happen, and it's got to happen now. (P2, *l*123)

Two participants (P1 and P5) reported that some of the pressure and demands are self-imposed. For instance, Participant 5 stated,

> …I probably put more demands on myself than I have to. But I do that to allow me to be free and visible for my students and staff on school days. Always tell people, the day time is for the people, the evenings are for the paperwork, and that's something I definitely stick to, or try to, anyway. (P5, *l*126)

Interview Question 4

What opportunities, if any, do you have to collaborate with other professionals in similar roles to support your leadership efforts? Table 11 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported collaboration opportunities with those in similar roles.

Table 11

Participants' Reported Collaboration Opportunities

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Central office staff		✓		✓		
Collaboration opportunities require principal initiative	✓	✓	✓			✓
Continuing education networking			✓			
Formal mentorship assigned	✓				✓	
Limited access to same-level rural principals	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Principal within district (different level)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Principal within district (same level)				✓		
Same-level principal accessed through previous assignment networking	✓	✓				✓
Higher learning-sponsored professional development			✓			
Regional administrator conferences						✓
Regional athletic conferences Statewide conference					✓	
Statewide professional development and advocacy organization for educators' conference	✓					
Statewide educational agency meetings and webinars for principals	✓					
Statewide public-school consortium					✓	✓
Statewide professional organization conference for principals	✓				✓	✓

The study participants identified a total of 15 different opportunities for collaboration with others in similar roles. Five participants (P1, P2, P4, P5, & P6; 83%) reported collaboration opportunities with other leaders and principals within their district. Participant 4 explained that due to recent school consolidations, he is one of four principals in the district. As a result, he considers the principals a "close-knit group" who communicate frequently and help one another troubleshoot issues that may arise (P4, *l*98). Participant 5 shared a similar dynamic with the principals within her district:

> …being a small district where [we know] each other…it's only handful of us. But we all have our own group chats. And we have cell phone numbers and we reach out to each other whenever we need each other. And we're really good about that, and bouncing ideas off each other. (P5, *l*149)

Four participants (P1, P2, P3, & P5, 67%) reported having limited opportunities to collaborate with same-level principals, and only one participant (P4) reported a collaboration opportunity with a same-level principal within the district. Participant 2 shared, "But in terms of supports, as in a first-year principal of a middle school, we're the only middle school in the county. So, there's no one else like me" (P2, *l*138).

Four participants (P1, P2, P3 & P6; 67%) acknowledged that collaboration with other same-level principals in similar settings required initiative on the part of the principals. Participant three stated, "You just need to be purposeful with it. So, it can happen. It's just not as ready-made and you have to take some ownership and doing it" (P3, *l*221).
Similarly, participant 6 explained,

> …I have friends that I've reached out to that that I have from different divisions where I have worked and continue to collaborate with them as well as like the middle school

principal in our division. Some good opportunities are out there, but you have to make them. They just don't fall on your lap. (P6, *l*153)

However, three participants (P1, P2, & P6; 50%) stated they have connections to same-level principals from previous work assignments, and have reached out for support and questions. Participant 1 stated, "…as far as other elementary principals, it's calling friends from where I came, emailing other principals from divisions where I've worked, those type of things (P1, *l*98). Participant 2 reported, "…I rely a lot on my former placement, my former boss, when I need help or ideas…she's also been doing this for 25 years" (P2, *l*145).

Two participants (P5 & P6) reported that they collaborate with other principals through statewide professional organizations and consortiums, and two participants (P2 & P4) have experienced central office staff, some of which are former principals, to collaborate with. Additionally, two participants (P1 & P5) mentioned that a formal mentorship had been established with another principal within their school district that worked at a different level.

Interview Question 5

What type of impact does the enrollment size of your school have on your leadership and decision-making? Table 12 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported impact of enrollment size on their leadership and decision-making.

The study participants identified a total of 16 impacts that the enrollment size of their school has on their leadership and decision-making. Three participants (P1, P3, & P6; 50%) indicated that their small enrollment size has its advantages. For instance, having fewer students and families provides the opportunity to get to know them better to build meaningful relationships. Participant 3 stated,

Table 12

Participants' Perceptions of the Enrollment Size Impact

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Allocation of funds related to enrollment size	✓		✓		✓	
Curriculum purchases	✓					
Freedom with spending decisions	✓					
Get to know students and families better	✓		✓			✓
Immediate access to district support	✓					✓
Large enrollment size dictates demands on time, more logistics					✓	
Limited space with increasing enrollment size					✓	
More opportunities to help families in need	✓					
No/little impact		✓		✓		
School-wide behavior plan implementation	✓					
Shared resources with other schools within-district	✓					✓
Small size means less flexibility with student scheduling						✓
Small size means evaluation measures from state can be affected by a few students						✓
Small staff challenges			✓			✓
Student-centered decision making	✓					
Visibility to students easier			✓			

> …I do know the students' first names [because] it's a smaller group. And if you're purposeful about it and going out and meeting with the students and being a part of the classes, you can. You can get to know them better. So, I think the smaller size does help with getting to know families and getting to know the students. (P3, *l*239)

Three participants (P1, P3 & P5; 50%) indicated that enrollment size has an impact on funding from the local, state, and federal level. Participant 1 explained,

> Financially, it impacts everything. Financially from the state, it's a disaster. Just because, you know, when the state allocates, okay, everybody's going to have one reading specialist. Well, that's fantastic, but when you have 100 students it means they pay one day of that reading specialist, and our School Board has to pay the other 4. So, when we're looking at mandates that come down the pike, we tend to tense up…(P1, *l146)*

Participant 3 also expressed his concern regarding enrollment size impacts on upcoming budget allocation, which could ultimately impact staffing:

> The upcoming budget allocation is obviously tied to enrollment. Our enrollment is, it's slowly going up, but it's down overall from prior to COVID…[the] budget isn't finalized, but will be less coming into this year. All the signs are showing we're probably gonna have less funding this year going into next school year. So, I guess that could affect the amount of staff. (P3, *l*259)

Two participants (P1 & P6) identified shared resources with another school within their district as an enrollment size impact. For schools with smaller enrollment sizes, the participants provided examples of sharing staffing positions with another school, including a librarian, instructional resource teacher, reading specialist, music teacher, art teacher, business teacher, Spanish teacher, special education teacher, and English language teacher. The participants reported that the sharing of resources impacts budget decisions and creates strains with scheduling. Participant 6 stated, "We've just really had to get creative and working between the two schools to help meet the needs" (P6, *l*204).

Interview Question 6

How would you describe your fiscal experiences with managing the school's budget and funding for school programs and initiatives? Table 13 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported fiscal experiences as a principal.

Table 13

Participants' Reported Fiscal Experiences

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Adequate general funds allocated	✓				✓	
Budget responsibilities allocating resources and monitoring program purchases			✓	✓	✓	✓
Consolidated finances from 3 schools				✓		
General funds supplemented by school fundraiser	✓				✓	
Grant writing and funding as key supplement to budget	✓		✓			✓
Limited budget			✓		✓	✓
Lacked experience with school finances prior to principalship		✓			✓	✓
Procedures for finances for all staff should be monitored (annual audit compliance)			✓			
Must be conservative/fiscally responsible with spending		✓	✓		✓	
Recent state funding helped with facility upgrades and hiring					✓	✓
Title funded due to needs	✓				✓	
Superintendent/district leadership handles majority of big budget items	✓	✓				
Support from experienced staff member		✓	✓			✓

The study participants reported a total of 13 fiscal experiences with managing the school's budget and funding for school programs and initiatives. Four participants (P3, P4, P5, & P6; 67%) described their responsibilities with allocating resources and monitoring program purchases, and three participants (P3, P5, & P6; 50%) reported experiencing limited funding to meet their school's current and future needs. Participant 3 reported that once he receives funds for instructional and general accounts at the beginning of the year, the amount is final, and it must be budgeted responsibly. He drew a comparison to his experience with school finance like managing your own finances, or "balancing a checkbook" (P3, *l*290). Participant 3 emphasized that understanding what programs are being purchased and which programs are returning from the previous year is key, as well as allocating funds to various side accounts such as athletics, gifted programs, etc.

Participant 4 is leading a new school this year that is a result of three elementary schools consolidating into one. He described his experiences from the school financial aspect of combining the finances from each school into one system. He reported that his responsibilities include managing the budget, paying bills, negotiating the needs for the school, making purchases, and being fiscally responsible. He added, "…I tried to make the money go as far as it possibly can, so that I can provide as many opportunities for students as I possibly can" (P4, *l*132)

Participant 5 stated, "So, it's been a little easier the last couple of years. But with that funding running out in September, we're going to have to be a little more stringent on what we spend our funds on" (P5, *l*199).

Participant 6 described her experience with the unpredictability of expectations from the school board regarding how general funds are used:

> I will say that one of the things that we're struggling with right now is fees, student fees…the desire of the board is to not have any fees for any of our students. And I completely understand that, and then completely get that with our population. However, we still have [a] large bill, so to speak…so, we're really starting to struggle. My first year I was here the division just paid for those big, those big chunks of money…And then this year, after my allotment came, I was told, this money is supposed to, this needs to all come out of your allotment, and I was like Whoa…I wish I would have known that; I would have put that in my budget request back, prior. (P6, *l*235)

Three participants (P2, P5, & P6; 50%) reported to have lacked experience in school finance in their previous administrative positions. Participant 6 shared her apprehensions about the financial aspect of the principalship:

> One of the things that I was most afraid about and felt very much in the dark coming into the role was the financial side. I just didn't have a lot of experience in it beyond what I had learned in my classes. Just as an AP, I was never pulled into that. I was quick to say that in my interviews, letting them know that, you know…this is an area I'm really going to need somebody to kinda hold my hand and walk me through. (P6, *l*226)

Three participants (P2, P3, & P6; 50%) described receiving support from an experienced staff from either the building or district level. Participant 2 explained, “Here now, I'm fortunate that we have a bookkeeper who's been doing this for a long time. She's very knowledgeable. Our CFO has been here a long time, is very knowledgeable” (P2, *l*182).

Three participants (P1, P3, & P6; 50%) mentioned grant writing and funding as a key supplement to their school funds.

Interview Question 7

Please describe your experiences as a principal with implementing state and federal policy initiatives and mandates. Table 14 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported experiences with implementing state and federal policy initiatives and mandates.

Table 14

Participants' Reported Experiences with Policy Implementation

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Collaboration with district and building leaders	✓		✓			✓
Creative solutions to purchase resources	✓	✓	✓			
Implementation challenges	✓	✓		✓		✓
Limited district support	✓		✓			
Meeting accreditation				✓		

The study participants reported a total of five experiences with implementing state and federal policy initiatives and mandates. Four participants (P1, P2, P4, & P6; 67%) reported challenges implementing statewide initiatives including staffing shortages for student intervention after-school programs, learning about initiatives mid-year, interpreting guidelines for initiatives, initiatives misaligned with classroom teacher learning objectives, generating staff buy-in until they realize the benefits, taking on most of the burden of initiative implementation for concerns of overwhelming staff, and not moving too quickly with implementation to avoid "backtracking," and making unnecessary revisions to the plan. Participant 2 shared his perspective with the implementation of a recent statewide initiative:

> I think the biggest challenge or barrier to it is the fact that we're told that kids have to use certain programs like [digital math program] and [digital literacy program] and [digital math program]. And when the kids think of traditional after-school tutoring, they don't

> think of it as extra work. [The students say] why isn't this time for me to be able to come in, do some makeup work and get a better understanding of what we're doing in class? Not more work on top of what I'm already doing. They don't see the learning loss recovery piece as being as important, or more important than what they're currently doing. (P2, *l*216)

Participant 6 learned to be patient when developing plans for statewide initiatives, stating,

> So, I am learning as a new principal that when something does come out from the State. Yes, we need to be thinking about it, but maybe not act as fast as I initially would. Because I'm finding that sometimes we're getting some backtracking, or we get a promise that we'll have this information by the State on this date and then we act on that. And then we kinda, I kind of look back and think, Oh, my goodness, what do we look like to some of our parents sometimes? …learning to [say] okay, just let them hash it out a little bit. Then we communicate. (P6, *l*286)

Three participants (P1, P3, & P6; 50%) indicated that collaboration with district leadership plays a critical role in interpreting and implementing initiatives and mandates. Participant 1 explained how important these collaborative efforts are, especially in a small district without district-level departments to manage policy implementation.

> But really a lot of it is adjusting and making things work for us. And then, you know the bigger, bigger localities like [previous school district], where I'm from, they have a department to manage that. Okay, that you all are dealing with this initiative, and you're going to roll it out to the staff and the students. We have us, being myself, the high school principal, one tech director, one HR person, and the superintendent. And so, we just get

together and have meetings and go. Okay, this is what's being handed to us. How are we going to do this? (P1, *l*185)

Three participants (P1, P2, & P3; 50%) expressed the need for creative solutions to purchase the necessary resources for successful implementation of initiatives and mandates. The participants described the importance of identifying guidelines for how to use funds to meet the requirements of initiatives including purchasing K-3 curriculum with grant money, using textbook funds to purchase new curriculum for grades 4 and 5, funding a staff member's reading specialist degree, and compensating staff for after-school commitments.

Interview Question 8

Are you able to identify any challenges you experience as a principal that can be attributed to the Rural-Remote setting of your school? If so, how do you overcome them? Table 15 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported challenges attributed to the rural-remote setting.

Table 15

Participants' Reported Rural-Remote Challenges

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Community access to specialized healthcare providers						✓
Educating parents on the importance of their child's education				✓		
Digital divide (internet access, access to technology)			✓			
Emphasis on interpreting guidelines			✓			
Geographic isolation	✓					
Hiring challenges	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Loneliness	✓				✓	
Transportation			✓		✓	

The study participants identified 8 total challenges they perceived to be related to the rural-remote setting of their school. Five participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, & P6; 83%) reported hiring challenges as result of the rural-remote setting. Participant 5 explained that for the current school year, she has had to fill a school counselor and history teacher vacancy. She still has a math teacher position that she is trying fill, and she is aware of six vacancies in her school for the upcoming school year that she is responsible for. She shared her insight on recruiting and retaining candidates to fill vacancies in the school:

> Our biggest challenge, I would say, due to our setting is just one that everybody's facing is staffing…but you know, being a rural setting, we don't have a whole lot to draw them here for [sic] and once we get them here, we don't have a whole lot to keep them here…[six vacancies] doesn't sound like a lot to some of these bigger counties around us, but for us, that's a lot. Typically, we have one or two. (P5, *l*234)

Participant 1 reported that her school district's rural-remote setting presents recruitment challenges for attracting high-quality teaching candidates. She reported that in most cases, staff members must have a connection to the area to be successful, both personally and professionally. She explained,

> We will fill the vacancy. The question is, do you fill the vacancy with the licensed teacher? Most of what we do is we find somebody who's interested in education or has a degree. We hire them, and then we help them work toward getting their provisional and their license. (P1, *l*225)

Participant 2 shared unique staffing challenges associated with the rural-remote location of his school. He explained that multiple teachers that have been recently hired had never been to the United States prior to their teaching assignments and were from locations such as the

Philippines and Ghana, West Africa. Participant 2 perceived the cultural differences between the teachers and the community as a challenge. He discussed that a key component of teaching in a rural-remote school district is making sure staff understand the community, the culture of the classrooms, and the hurdles and challenges students are facing.

Two participants (P1 & P5) reported that loneliness was as a challenge experienced as a principal that is associated with the rural-remote setting of their schools. Participant 1 stated,

> Personally, it's very lonely…You're either the principal or you're the boss. And so, trying to make true friends moving into a very rural school, [unless] you grew up there, is extremely difficult because of the role. You can't share anything really outside of the building, and you can't always trust who's in the building. (P1, *l*200)

Two participants (P3 & P5) indicated that transportation was a challenge in their school setting as principals. Participant 3 explained that their county is geographically large, which presents challenges for families that may not have access to reliable transportation. This can impact areas such as student attendance, participation in scheduled intervention times outside of school hours, and participation in extra-curricular activities. Additionally, participant 3 shared that there are limited bus drivers in the school district, which presents logistical issues as well.

Interview Question 9

How would you describe your succession circumstances during the transition phase of the principalship? Table 16 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's succession circumstances during the transition phase of the principalship.

An internal candidate is described as someone who is employed in the school district during the hiring phase of the principalship. An external candidate is described as someone who is employed outside the school district during the hiring phase of the principalship.

Table 16

Participants' Descriptions of their Succession Circumstances

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Attained principalship at school attended as a child				✓	✓	
Challenges with organization		✓				✓
External candidate	✓	✓				✓
Internal candidate			✓	✓	✓	
Principal position had been vacant for several months	✓	✓				
Parent resistance	✓	✓				
Planned continuity			✓	✓	✓	
Smooth transition			✓	✓	✓	✓
Staff resistance		✓			✓	
Student resistance		✓				
Teacher buy-in	✓	✓				
Unplanned continuity	✓	✓				✓

Four participants (P3, P4, P5, & P6; 67%) reported a smooth transition to the principalship. Of the four participants that reported a smooth transition, three (P3, P4, & P5; 75%) were also classified as *internal candidates*, with a succession circumstance classified as *planned continuity.* Participant 3 explained how his experience as a teacher and assistant principal in the same school with developing working relationships with colleagues, establishing a good rapport with students and families, and working closely with central office staff has allowed for a smooth transition to the principalship. In fact, he explained that when the principal position opened, he was notified by the superintendent that he was being recommended to the school board to be appointed principal. Participant 3 also described the efforts he and his principal made when he was an assistant principal that he perceived to help with the transition:

> …when I made that transition…I knew the teachers in the building. I knew what our challenges were, what we were good at. I knew our student population. I was very familiar and comfortable with central office staff, because again, we are smaller. So, even

> as assistant principal, I worked closely with them. So, for me, being within the same building, and making that transition. I found it smooth. I was also fortunate where [I had the same principal] as an AP [during] those 4 years…the culture we needed to change then, was a bit different. We had to put in a lot of work on that, and we had really started building to a good place. (P3, *l*432)

Participant 4 shared similar circumstances and reported that he had served as the assistant principal for ten years prior to attaining the principalship at the same school. He also reported that he had attended school there as a child. Participant 4 explained that he established himself during his time as an assistant principal with understanding the role of the administrator and the many facets that come along with leading a building before being appointed as the principal. He also shared a unique experience with consolidating three elementary schools to begin the year in his third year as principal. Participant 4 reported that he was tasked with the responsibility of leading and bringing the three schools together into one, large elementary school with 600 students.

Participant 5 shared her planned continuity circumstances:

> [I] was offered the job for the coming school year, I would say, probably in April. And then, you know, once I knew then I was able to work, I guess you could say more closely with my principal at the time, but we worked pretty close from the time I walked in the door until the time he walked out...I had worked in in the AP slot for 5 or 6 years…and had built some rapport with the teachers during that time. They knew who I was, [they know what I stood for], and my leadership style and my discipline style, and all of those things, and luckily they were on board with those. (P5, *l*285)

Three participants (P1, P2, & P6; 50%) were considered *external candidates*, and the succession circumstances of participants 1 and 2 were classified as *unplanned continuity*. Participants 1 and 2 both experienced unique succession challenges and described entering the principalship when the position had been vacant for several months. Both participants had attained the principalship as the sole administrator in the building without the support of an assistant principal. Participant 1 began the principalship in the month of June, as the school year was coming to an end. Participant 2 entered the principalship in the month of September, and his first day on the job as principal was the first day of school for students. Participant 2 stated,

> The first four weeks were a blur. Without a doubt it was a blur. Trying to learn staff names, staff members who taught what where. Trying to re-familiarize myself with certain policies. And what expectations were. Trying to figure out due dates for different documents for the school, like our school improvement plan. How I was going to be evaluated and due dates for that. Just trying to stay on top of everything organizationally was a challenge. There were a lot of late nights, without a doubt. Trying to get everything squared away, and in a place where I felt comfortable going home every day. And I'm honestly still not sure I'm at that point yet. (P2, *l*311)

Participant 1 described her unique challenges and successes:

> I got more resistance from the families. Because, what I heard a lot when I came up here was, “you're not from [our county], that's not the [way of our county].” The teachers were fantastic. I planned meetings with them when I came up in June…we all sat down. They were extremely open. And [said], “This is where we are. This is what's happening. This is what needs to change. This is what we like.” So, I spent that month just getting to know the staff, walking around, meeting with students, but really just getting to know the staff.

> And when they came back in August, the focus was getting to know the students, getting to know the families. There was a lot of, I think, transition last year. Last year was my first full year up here. Because they didn't understand…the families didn't understand where I was trying to go. The teachers did. And so, the teachers were on board very quickly. (P1, *l*301)

Two participants (P1 & P2) reported examples of teacher buy-in with implementing change, and two participants (P2 & P5) reported examples of staff resistance with implementing change.

Interview Question 10

Can you describe any efforts you have made to take a distributed leadership approach to lead your teachers and staff, and if so, how effective were these efforts? Table 17 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported efforts to take a distributed leadership approach. No response was provided from Participant 6.

Table 17

Participants' Responses to Distributed Leadership

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Distributed leadership success	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Distributed leadership challenges	✓		✓	✓		
Growing leaders balanced with not overloading teachers			✓		✓	

Four participants (P1, P2, P3, & P5; 80%) reported successful experiences with efforts to distribute leadership amongst their staff. Participant 2 shared that he communicated with his staff early in the year regarding bringing change and new ideas to the building. Since then, teachers have approached participant 2 with ideas they are willing to take the lead on to improve the

school. Participant 5 expressed that she tries to rotate her leaders every several years so that various teachers gain experience in the role. She stated that she relies on grade level leaders to share ideas, solicit feedback, and disperse smaller-scaled items back to their teams.

Three participants (P1, P3, & P4; 60%) reported challenges with efforts to distribute leadership amongst their staff. Participant 1 shared that in her first year, she experienced staff resistance by two key positions in the building, which had an adverse impact on her distributed leadership efforts. These two staff members refused to work towards their licenses, and both retired at the end of the school year. Consequently, participant 1 reported that distributed leadership efforts had improved in year two, and the two new individuals in these roles are taking initiative, coordinating events, and meeting her expectations.

Participant 3 expressed several challenges with distributing leadership at his school with concerns of having limited staffing and not wanting to overwhelm teachers:

> …the main issue there, is having the people to do it with…to be able to give some of those duties to. So that can be tricky. And what can happen there is when [you try] to put teachers in leadership positions, And [for some] that's a goal of theirs to get their [administrative endorsement]…[and you want] to provide opportunities for them. What can happen sometimes which makes it tricky, is when there's not a ton of staff to turn to, typically the few people who are capable of it. You also have to be mindful of not overloading and not burning them out too. (P3, *l*449)

Participant 4 explained his efforts to align the staff of three schools in one team:

> So, it's been a task for me to try to get all three groups of you know, or faculty from all of our school communities to kind of come together…and go in one kind of actual path. So, that's been kind of a unique experience. The philosophy that I have used is, we bring the

very, very best from all actual three schools, and bring the best, and move forward there and leave the things that we're not as successful. And try to do a new approach there. (P4, *l*250)

Interview Question 11

Please describe the political context in your position as the principal and any impacts this has had on your ability to exercise leadership. Table 18 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's perceived political context in the principal position. No response was provided from Participant 3.

Table 18

Participants' Perceived Political Context

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Being an outsider has its advantages						✓
Defending difficult decisions		✓				
Efforts to address concerns before they escalate to school board or social media					✓	
Fair and consistent/following policy is the goal, not always easy		✓				✓
Magnified in a rural place				✓	✓	
Political context does not impact leading staff	✓					
Politics are present in the community	✓					✓

The study participants described seven total perspectives regarding the political context of the principalship position and impacts on leadership efforts. Two participants (P2 & P6) indicated that being fair and consistent and following policy is the goal for decision-making, but not always easy. They acknowledged that the political context of the position comes into play, especially when making decisions. Participant 2 discussed this concept further:

> I think when it comes to this office, it's very political, because you've got to do your best to try and keep folks happy within the realm of policy. You're responsible for making decisions that aren't going to be popular because of the policy being what they are. And in a perfect world, you know, keeping everybody happy would be great. But that's not what this job is. This job is paid to make difficult decisions within the scope of policy and within the scope of what's best for kids. And, you kind of have to set personal feelings aside sometimes in order to get done what you need to get done. (P2, *l*391)

Participant 6 discussed the politics involved while making decisions:

> Our motto has been to be fair and consistent…I have listened when those people have come in, and I think at times have expected, and maybe in the past have received preferential treatment. I've listened to them. Let them feel that, and know that they have been heard, but also reiterate where we are, and you know what our code of conduct [says] or what our policy is on this, and that we are going to be fair and consistent to the best of our ability to do that. At first, that's very difficult. Over time, when they see the consistency, you gain the respect. You know, and that's not [always] easy. You know, we have people in our building all the time who want to pull…do you know who my father is? Do you know who this? Do you know who that? (P6, *l*437)

Two participants (P4 & P5) perceived the political context of the principal position to be magnified in a rural setting. Participant 4 shared,

> Well, I did not realize the effects of the political arena in education until I became a school administrator. And especially in a very, you know, rural place. I don't know why the case may be, but the political effect sometimes is more magnified in a smaller

> place…it's not uncommon for a School Board person to call me and say, Hey… how's things going…and ask what I think about certain things. (P4, *l*260)

Participant 6 also discussed how being someone without historical connections to the community has its advantages. She stated,

> …I think sometimes it's an advantage to not be a part of it, because I'm not as entrenched in it. I can kind of come in and look at it from a different angle, because I didn't go to school with their dad. I didn't go to school with their mom. I didn't go to school with their aunt. I wasn't at the barbecue last weekend with them. (P6, *l*448)

Interview Question 12

What district-level activities or professional development have you participated in that were designed specifically to help you better understand the rural setting of your school district, and if so, how effective were they? Table 19 displays the distribution of responses to each participant's reported rural-focused district-level activities or professional development.

Table 19

Participants' Reported Rural-focused District-Level Activities or Professional Development

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Community meet and greet	✓					
Organizations/connections made outside district	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Learned through community members	✓					
Learning on the job	✓	✓				
No intentional district activities		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Previously worked in district		✓				
Raised as a child in a rural community			✓	✓	✓	✓

Five participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, & P6; 83%) reported that there were no district-level activities or professional development specifically designed to help principals better understand the rural context of their setting. Five participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, & P6; 83%) indicated that organizations outside the school district have connected them with other rural school leaders including regional meetings and trainings, professional development provided by local universities, and professional organization conferences.

Four participants (P3, P4, P5, & P6; 67%) shared that their experience growing up in a rural community has served as an advantage to understanding their unique setting in the principal position. Participant 6 shared, “I grew up in a rural community. So, I had an understanding. My parents were both educators in the local school. I saw how the small school systems work” (P6, *l*498)

Participant 1 shared a district activity that was designed to establish a connection with the community and learn about their perspective. She shared that the activity itself was unsuccessful, but she did find a support network soon thereafter. She stated,

> …[the superintendent and I] scheduled a couple of meetings throughout the county where they could come and just meet us, and we could communicate. Nobody came. The newspaper came, the radio came, but nobody came. So, I was fortunate enough that one of the local bakeries has a mom who is part of a group that welcomes people into [the county] and she's very down to earth and realistic…so, she came over to the house and kind of went over a few things and gave me some background, some family, and gave me some background on [the county], and just things to be aware of. But it was literally, just, this one parent happened to kind of take me in as a newbie in town. (P1, *l*371)

Interview Question 13

Please share anything else that your school district could have done, beyond what you have described, to help prepare you to lead a rural school. Table 20 displays the distribution of responses for each participant's recommendation for additional school-district support.

Table 20

Participants' Responses for Recommended School-District Support

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Assistant principalship in rural school district				✓	✓	
Mentorship programs with same-level rural principals	✓					
Rural-focused education with teacher and administrative college preparation programs		✓				
Rural-focused education with teacher and admin college preparation programs		✓				
School districts did all they could		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Five participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, & P6; 83%) reported that their school district has been supportive of their leadership efforts and believed they have done all they could in terms of helping the participants lead a rural school. Participant 6 stated, "One of the things that I love about [our school district] is they are supportive. We are**,** we are like a family. We feel that in the schools. But you also feel that at the division level" (P6, *l*491).

Two of the participants (P4 & P5) shared that their experience as an assistant principal helped better prepare them to lead a rural school. Participant 4 explained that his school district is intentional about preparing assistant principals for the next step, and they try to avoid allowing principals with little administrative experience to attain the position before they're ready.

Participant 1 shared her recommendation for support at the state level that would have been helpful. She stated,

> My situation's unique, as there was no administrator coming in there. There was nothing…So, as I ask for things, things happen. But I had to ask for things. So, there wasn't…but there's no people…it would have been helpful if somebody from the state had said, "Hey, we have a brand-new principal coming in, [neighboring county], you're close, you're about the same size, let's hook up some kind of mentorship. (P1, *l*383)

Interview Question 14

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a principal? What have I missed? Table 21 displays the distribution of responses for each participant's additional comments regarding their experiences as a principal.

Table 21

Participants' Additional Comments Regarding the Principal Experiences

Participant Responses	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Needs to be a support network for principals moving into rural areas	✓					
Rural principals need to know how to be flexible and overcome unique challenges					✓	
Rural principals need to know how to work within very tight budgets, and find grants to supplement budgets			✓			
Rural principal job is very rewarding				✓		✓

Two participants (P4 & P6) shared the rural principalship is a very rewarding job. Participant 4 explained that to be an effective principal, you have to be there for the students and work long hours to make sure students have what they need. He stated, "You have to be here for

the right reasons, and you have to keep the goal and focus in mind in everything we do" (P4, *l*317).

Participant 6 explained that the job of the principal is an amazing job that is very rewarding, despite the long hours and heavy responsibility. She also expressed her perceptions on the current state of education:

> I do think that we've got to find ways just in general across education as a whole is how to support our teachers and how to support our admin. We're struggling to keep and to gain, keep good talent and to attract. You know I hardly, when I walk through the halls of my school, and I'm talking to our students. Hardly any of them are saying they're going into education, and I'm from a family of teachers. (P6, *l*519)

Summary

This chapter provided the data analysis for the qualitative research study. Interviews were conducted and recorded in audio format though the Zoom platform with six study participants. The research coded the responses for important key words, categories, and themes maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Analysis of the data revealed unique challenges experienced by novice principals working in rural schools. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings developed from the research as well as provide implications for practitioners, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine how novice principals interpret and understand the challenges they experience as developing leaders within a rural school setting in Virginia. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of emergent themes from the study, findings from the study, implications for practice, recommendations for future studies, a chapter summary, and a personal reflection.

This qualitative research study focused on the experiences and perceptions of novice principals leading rural schools via one-on-one interviews. Participants were recruited for the study by receiving an email from the researcher requesting information about their years of experience in the principal position and their interest in participating in a study. Out of the 52 rural-remote principals in Virginia that were sent the recruitment email, six (12%) were eligible and agreed to participate in the study. Participants were interviewed in a one-on-one, virtual setting using open-ended questions that had been analyzed and critiqued by a panel of developing experts with qualitative research experience. A singular research question guided the interview questions that were designed for this study.

Research Question

The research question for the study was, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools?

Findings

The findings from this study emerged from the themes that developed from the data analysis of the interviews discussed in Chapter 4. All ten findings were a result of the participants' responses to the 14 interview questions, and the discussion of those findings includes a connection to the literature discussed in Chapter 2.

Finding 1

Participants identified wearing multiple hats that include roles and responsibilities at the school and district level. The participants reported a wide range (31 total) of building-level and district-level roles and responsibilities, and many were specialized and unique to each participant's setting and school district. All participants reported that their roles and responsibilities as a principal were comprehensive and multi-faceted. The most common roles and responsibilities that were reported by the participants (83%) included being an instructional leader for the building, managing the budget for the school, and anything else that is required or needed at the time. Four participants (67%) mentioned discipline as part of their responsibility as a rural principal, and all six participants (100%) reported at least one district-level role or responsibility each, which varied from each participant. Four participants (67%) reported challenges with implementing initiatives and mandates including staffing shortages for programs, learning about initiatives mid-year, spending time interpreting guidelines for initiatives, misalignment of initiatives to classroom teacher objectives, generating staff buy-in, and taking on the burden of implementation to avoid back tracking.

The participants were generally accepting of their varied and unique roles and responsibilities in the position and praised their school district leaders for their supportive efforts and guidance. One responsibility that overwhelmed the three participants (50%) was serving as the curriculum leader and point of contact for curriculum-related questions for their school, with little to no district-level curriculum support. Two participants lacked a building-level administrative team, serving as the sole administrator in their school. The findings suggest that aspiring rural principals should be prepared to be assigned multiple roles and responsibilities as

leaders of their building, and the specific types of assigned roles and responsibilities are dependent upon the unique setting of the school's and district's present needs.

This finding is consistent with the academic research regarding rural principal leadership. Wieczorek and Manard (2018) found that rural principals wore multiple hats in their schools and districts, and often extended beyond the traditional responsibilities that are customary to the principalship. The multiple hats rural principals wear also have the potential to limit their ability to engage with teachers in instructionally focused conversations and activities (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Additionally, lacking a building-level administrative team and key district supportive positions are common experiences for rural principals and are often the result of the relative size of their organizations (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Hansen (2018) investigated why rural principals leave the position and found that institutional factors were the most prevalent. Specifically, two themes of a heavy workload and lack of professional support were so powerful that they emerged from all six participants in the study (Hansen, 2018). Hansen (2018) posits that this is good news for school districts, as these factors are within the scope of what school districts can control and ultimately help support. Furthermore, the actions of a principal and their leadership behaviors are influenced by educational policy in many ways (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Williams & Welsh, 2017). Effective school leaders need to possess the ability to interpret educational policy, allocate resources, communicate action items with their followers, and develop their people in the form of professional development (Hatton et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017).

Finding 2

Participants indicated that their communities expect them to be accessible and promptly available upon request. Five participants (83%) identified accessibility as an

expectation of the communities they serve, and three participants (50%) mentioned the expectation of the community for immediate access to the principal upon request without an appointment. This finding is consistent with the academic research on rural school leadership related to principal accessibility. Rural communities expect immediate access to school principals and a direct line of communication (Hansen, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals feel obligated to meet this expectation of accessibility, as they recognize the importance of community relationships and role the school plays in bringing stability and being the place for future possibilities (Sanchez et al., 2017). Successful rural principals understand that social capital, the bonds and network between people within a community, can be used to strengthen relationships, and ultimately improve the school (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Although not considered a major finding of this study, one participant mentioned a challenge consistent with rural school research. Participant 4 indicated that he felt the need to educate parents on the importance of their child's education. He perceived the community to not understand the value of education, citing statistics regarding the low levels of high school diplomas in his community. According to Sanchez et al. (2017), participants experienced community resistance raising academic standards in their school due to community members not valuing or prioritizing education.

Finding 3

Participants indicated that their community expects them to be visible at school, athletic, and community events. Four participants (67%) indicated that visibility was an expectation of the community, and they want you to be "seen at everything." Participants described attending school and community events in the evenings and on the weekends in their free time. Students, parents, and community members will often ask the participants if they plan

to attend an upcoming event, adding to the pressure of visibility. This finding of visibility as an expectation of the community is consistent with rural school leadership academic research. Rural communities expect principals to be seen and engaged at school and community events (Hansen, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Visibility also provides an opportunity for school leaders to strengthen relationships with key stakeholders in the educational process, which could lead to desired school improvement outcomes (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Finding 4

Participants indicated a feeling of intense and overwhelming pressure as the one ultimately responsible. All six participants (100%) used terms and phrases that characterized the principalship as demanding, including "intense," "overwhelming," "feel the pressure," "very stressful," and "heavy." Participants cited examples related to the sources of pressure and demands, including being the one ultimately responsible for the school and making big decisions; pressure to improve the school and increase student achievement as measured by statewide assessments; and a heavy workload with meeting deadlines, managing the volume of emails, and completing paperwork. Three participants (50%) reported that the role is "time-consuming," which increases the stress and makes the position more "demanding."

Contributing to the participants' sense of ultimate responsibility was the political nature of the principal position. Participants reported challenges they navigated, including "micropolitics" in the community, doing their best to make fair and consistent decisions, and attempting to address situations before they escalate to the school board or social media. Two participants acknowledged the complexity of decision making in their role as a principal. Participant 2 reported his perspective about balancing policy, doing what is best for students, and making people happy. He concluded, "…you have to set personal feelings aside sometimes in

order to get done what you need to get done" (P2, *l*391). Once participant believed that her status as an "outsider" was an advantage and allowed her to be fair and consistent with decisions without being fully aware of the politics of the situation.

This finding is consistent with research related to the principal position, which indicates that novice principals and rural principals feel a sense of ultimate responsibility (Caruso, 2013; Hansen, 2018; Hatton et al., 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). For novice principals, there is a "shock of ultimate responsibility" that is caused by increased decision making, unpredictability of the job, heightened commitment, and stress from being the one ultimately responsible for the operation of the school (Spillane & Lee, 2014). The accountability pressures principals experience for the first time creates an overwhelming sense of responsibility in their new role as leader of the school (Caruso, 2013; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Although novice principals struggle with being the ultimate decision makers, over time they adapt and become more confident with making difficult decisions and accept this a part of their responsibility as a leader (Caruso, 2013; Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019).

Finding 5

Participants indicated collaboration opportunities with other professionals in similar roles were available for the participants but are not "ready-made." Five participants (83%) reported collaboration opportunities within their district with principals and district-level leaders. Four participants (67%) indicated that initiative and ownership on the behalf of the participant are required to seek out opportunities to collaborate with other professionals, especially same-level participants. This included reaching out to former colleagues in other school districts, joining professional administrator organizations, and attending trainings and

webinars offered through the state. Participant 3 explained that collaboration as a rural principal is not as “ready-made,” but it is possible if sought out. Four participants (67%) reported having limited opportunities to collaborate with same-level principals. Furthermore, five participants lead schools that are the only school of its level in the district. Two participants mentioned a mentor assignment with another different-level principal within their school district to support their leadership efforts. Two participants reported that loneliness was a challenge associated with the rural-remote setting of their school.

The research indicates that rural principals often experience professional isolation with limited access to administrative peers that are in similar roles that they can trust, and with whom they can brainstorm and share experiences without the fear of being judged (Hatton et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017). Despite the efforts of rural principals to collaborate with teachers, build positive relationships with students, and develop external partnerships, there was still a sense of isolation in the context of their leadership efforts (Sanchez et al., 2017). Although collaboration opportunities were limited and most were initiated by the participants, professional isolation was not perceived by the participants as a major challenge as a novice principal leading a rural school.

Finding 6

Participants identified hiring challenges as the biggest obstacle they faced as principals that can be attributed to the rural-remote setting and enrollment size of their schools. Five participants (83%) reported hiring challenges as the biggest obstacle they face. The obstacles included difficulties attracting and retaining candidates to their rural settings, hiring unlicensed teachers and helping them obtain their credentials, filling vacancies that have been present since the beginning of the year, substitute teaching (including planning, delivering

instruction, and grading), teaching multiple courses due to necessity, sharing teachers with other schools, and hiring candidates from other countries with no experience in the United States. Participants also made the connection that funding for staffing is based on enrollment at the state level, so additional requests for much-needed staff may not be within the school district's budget. They also perceived that the national teacher shortage problem is exacerbated in the rural settings. Participants also described that staff members often remain in their positions well past their retirement qualification status, which has pros and cons from a staffing perspective.

Three participants (50%) reported small enrollment size advantages, including meaningful relationships with students and families, direct line of communication to district staff for questions and support, and more autonomy with leadership and decision-making.

Research indicates that rural school districts struggle to compete with salary and benefits compared to larger urban districts due to resource constraints (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Resource constraints can also impact a principal's ability to recruit teachers to their schools (Hatton et. al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). However, the participants in this study uncovered a challenge that was not found during the literature review process (See Figure 3, Chapter 2). Hiring challenges was reported as the biggest obstacle the participants faced and is considered a major finding of this study. It is unclear whether the hiring challenges that were described by the participants are a unique to Rural-Remote schools or are challenges that many schools across settings are currently facing with equal intensity.

Finding 7

Participants indicated fiscal challenges as leaders of their rural schools. Four participants (67%) reported logistical experiences of managing the school's budget, including allocating resources, purchasing programs, approving purchasing requests, and monitoring

effectiveness of program purchases. Three participants (50%) reported having limited exposure to school finance in their previous role, three participants (50%) indicated receiving support from an experienced financial support staff member from either the building or district-level. Three participants (50%) indicated limited funding to meet their school's present and future needs, and three participants (50%) reported grant writing as a key supplement to budgets, and two participants reported that the school's general funds are supplemented by fundraising efforts.

Fiscal challenges were found to be a challenge that rural principals face during the literature review process. Rural school districts often experience fiscal challenges with providing adequate resources to schools, receiving low levels of state funding, and insufficient funding for state-level mandates. (Klocko and Justis, 2019; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Preston et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2016). According to Hatton et al., (2018), the lack of funding for rural schools often leads school leaders to supplement funds through title funding, grants, and reaching out to the community for help.

Finding 8

Participants with previous administrative experience within their current district indicated they experienced a smooth transition to the principalship. Four participants (P1, P4, P5, & P6; 67%) reported a smooth transition to the principalship. Three of the four participants (75%) were internal candidates with a succession circumstance classified as planned continuity. Additionally, serving as assistant principals in the school they now lead appeared to be an advantage and seemed to ease the burden of the transition to the principalship. Although they experienced the typical challenges aligned to novice and rural principal research, they did not mention difficulties managing their predecessor's legacy and living up to idealized versions

of the previous principal. However, in rural schools, the succession circumstances that have just been described are not always possible. In fact, two of the four schools in the study are led by a sole administrator without a building-level administrative team.

Two participants (P1 & P2) were external candidates and were classified with a succession circumstance of unplanned continuity. Although the participants did not reveal pressure or directives from district leaders to make sweeping changes to the school, they both experienced unique challenges that were attributed to the unplanned circumstance and timing of their transitions. For instance, Participant 2 began his first day of the principalship on the first day of school, which is a tremendous challenge to overcome. He reported he was still learning to manage all the responsibilities and trying to get to a good place with organization. Community resistance to new leadership was only found when a participant (P1) came from a different setting with no connections to the school or rural community.

The circumstances of the succession to the principalship influence a leader's effectiveness and ability to accomplish organizational goals (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Lee, 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Novice principals face unique challenges and require support in managing human resources, leading people towards a common instructional vision, and providing student services (Petzko, 2008). Candidates with a succession circumstance of planned continuity are less likely to face staff-resistance and more likely to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the building with access to more information (Lee, 2015). The succession of a leader is a critical event within an organization, and years of progress could end without a properly managed succession (Lee, 2015).

Finding 9

The participants identified some successful efforts and some challenges related to distributed leadership. Four participants (80%) reported successful efforts to distribute leadership amongst their staff to support their leadership efforts. Participant 2 employed an open-door policy with his staff to initiate change and bring ideas they would like to spearhead (enabler). His efforts were transparent, and an effort was made to distribute the workload amongst his small staff. Three participants (60%) reported challenges with distributed leadership. One participant (P5) took on more responsibility themselves for fears about overcommitting her staff with additional responsibilities which could lead to teacher burnout (constraint). Another participant (P1) met staff resistance (constraint) as a first-year principal with refusals by two staff members to take on more responsibility as well as work towards licensure. Participant 3 also expressed concerns of overwhelming teachers (constraint) with additional responsibility, as well as having limited staff to distribute the workload (constraint).

Although participants were open and cited specific examples of successful attempts to distribute leadership, many challenges persisted that aligned with research regarding novice principal efforts to empower staff to take on leadership roles. The mixed results align with the study conducted by Spillane et al. (2015), which identified certain incentives (enablers) for novice principals adopting a distribute leadership perspective, as well as disincentives (constraints) for distributing leadership.

Finding 10

Participants expressed satisfaction with their school district related to supporting their leadership efforts in a rural school. Five participants (83%) reported that there were no district activities or professional development designed to help them better understand the rural

setting of their school district. Interestingly, the same five participants (83%) expressed satisfaction related to the school district supporting their efforts to lead a rural school. In fact, the five participants cited examples of their backgrounds in rural communities, including growing up in a rural community, teaching in a rural community, and even leading the rural school they attended as a child. One participant shared that the building and district leadership consisted of all males, and she would have preferred another female mentor from the region or state level.

Implications

Six implications emerged from the ten findings of this qualitative study. Each implication is associated with one or more findings from the interview analysis presented in Chapter 4.

Implication One

District, regional, and state-level leadership should collaborate and develop formal mentorship programs to support new principals with their transition to the position. Mentoring is one of the most effective ways to support new principals in developing their leadership skills (Hayes, 2019). Hayes (2019) concluded that school districts should establish mentoring programs that include (a) a carefully selected mentor that is recognized as a leader of learning and trained on effective mentoring practices; (b) a matching of mentees to mentors who serve in similar contexts, including school level, similar demographics, and similar programming; (c) provided release time for mentees and mentors to meet frequently and visit each other's schools; and (d) establishing long-term mentorships for novice principals for a minimum of two years. Rural principal mentor programs should also consider the circumstances of the succession when matching mentees with a mentor, especially principals entering from a different non-rural setting. This implication is associated with Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10.

Implication Two

Leadership preparation programs should bring attention to the common challenges of the novice rural principal through field-based learning experiences. Aspiring rural principals should be provided practical, relevant, and meaningful experiences in their leadership preparation programs to gain a firsthand approach to what principals encounter on a daily basis. Programs should include the integration of field work that highlights the wide range of managerial and leadership functions that are required for rural principals (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). For instance, to prepare aspiring educational leaders, one principal preparation program required graduate students to visit and interview three novice principals in their respective schools to gain insight into their experiences (Viloria et al., 2021). The graduate students were required to develop "lessons learned" findings from the responses of each of the 10 questions (Viloria et al., 2021). The graduate students' findings included (a) the success of a principal was determined by their ability to develop life-long learners, especially with growing future administrators within the staff, and (b) a successful instructional leader fosters a positive school culture and environment to support life-long learning for students and staff (Viloria et al., 2021). This implication is associated with findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9.

Implication Three

Rural school district leaders should create robust induction programs to support principals in their transitions that are responsive to their anticipated needs and challenges. Rural district leaders should avoid unplanned transitions to the principalship to the best extent possible (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Lee, 2015). Rural superintendents should develop a principal pipeline within their current teaching and administrative staff. Candidates with rural education

experience that established themselves in the community will be better prepared to respond to the expectations of the community related to accessibility and visibility.

However, an induction plan should be developed for principals to increase the likelihood of a successful transition. For instance, Lee (2015) recommends that district leaders support principals by (a) facilitating meetings with key stakeholders, including parents, teachers, staff, community leaders, and students; (b) assigning specialized coaches that support principals in their first several weeks on the job to address their technical systems are running smoothly, and (c) require novice principals to attend professional development and networking events that allow for long-term support and camaraderie. The induction program should also include professional development at the district level that provides clarity for what a successful rural principal looks like to the community, as well as to the district. Messages about what it means to be a "good leader" can shape mental models of what it means to be a good rural principal, which can better prepare school leaders (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Additionally, rural principal induction programs should slowly integrate principals into their roles and responsibilities, especially those coming from different settings outside the district. A robust induction program will provide the novice principal with immediate support and access to key information, as well as mitigate professional isolation in the role. This implication is associated with findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10.

Implication Four

School board members, district leadership, school administrators, and teachers should partner with community members and leaders to develop strategies to attract and retain teaching candidates to their respective communities. Efforts to bring talented educators to rural areas should be a creative and collaborative process from a variety of stakeholders. Using

networking and pre-established connections with current and aspiring educators residing in or outside their respective districts may influence success and longevity in the desired teaching positions. This implication is associated with finding 6.

Implication Five

Rural school districts should provide support to principals with the hiring process, including competitive salaries and benefits, partnering with teacher preparation programs from local universities, and creating alternative pathways to licensure for seemingly qualified candidates. Rural principals should have access to a quality applicant pool when filling a teaching vacancy. Teacher salary scales and benefits should be evaluated annually to remain competitive and attract high-quality candidates. By forming creative partnerships with teacher preparation programs, talented candidates may gain experience in rural schools during their student-teaching and practicum experiences, leading to promising recruitment opportunities. Additionally, school districts may use alternative pathways to licensure to expand their applicant pools. This implication is associated with finding 6.

Implication Six

State level leadership should develop programs that incentivize teachers and administrators to work in rural schools. The biggest challenge the participants reported in this study was related to recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers and key staff members. In response to the hiring challenges described by the participants in this study, statewide programs should be developed that assist rural candidates with tuition reimbursement, bonuses, and higher entry-level salaries with extended commitments. This implication is associated with finding 6.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The findings from this qualitative study provide researchers and practitioners with the challenges experienced by six, novice principals working in Rural-Remote schools in Virginia. The implications provide key recommendations based on the findings and relevant academic research.

1. Conduct a qualitative study to examine the best practices for instructional leadership in rural schools.
2. Increase the sample size to include principals of all experience levels.
3. Expand the setting to include school districts that are classified as Rural-Fringe, Rural-Distant, or Rural-Remote. The setting could also be expanded by identifying school districts with the lowest student enrollment.
4. Consider a study that includes rural school district leadership, including rural superintendents. The study could also involve comparisons between instructional leadership practices specific to rural and non-rural settings.
5. Consider a study that investigates the perceptions of urban and suburban novice principals to see how they align to those of rural novice principals.

Summary

Chapter 5 provided a summary of the findings of the study that answered the research question, what challenges do novice principals situated in a rural setting in Virginia experience as leaders of their schools? Also included in the chapter were the implications for district leaders, regional leaders, statewide leaders, policy makers, and leaders of principal preparation programs, as well as recommendations for future rural leadership studies.

Personal Reflection

My experience as a school administrator helped guide the focus of this study. When I began this doctoral program in educational leadership and policy studies three years ago, I was a first-year principal working in a rural setting with a desire to become an effective principal. The research I conducted for Chapter 2 immediately benefitted my leadership practices in many ways and helped me develop an understanding of the unique characteristics of rural schools and the communities they serve. Furthermore, interviewing novice rural principals from various school districts in Virginia and analyzing the data to develop findings allowed me to get an up-close look of the unique challenges principals face daily. I look forward to using this research to inform my leadership practices and decision-making as a rural principal.

I am grateful to be able to use my time, resources, and experience not only to accomplish a professional and academic goal, but also to contribute to the field of educational leadership. I have learned a great deal throughout this process, and I know my quest for knowledge and life-long learning is only beginning. I am inspired by the academic scholars and practitioners that continue to push our field forward to create meaningful and sustainable change. We are working together to build a better and brighter future for our students, families, and communities, and I am proud to be on this journey with you.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Rural School Districts in Virginia

Rural-Fringe (Code 41):	**Rural-Distant** (Code 42):	**Rural-Remote** (Code 43):
Albemarle County	Alleghany County	Accomack County
Amherst County	Amelia County	Bath County
Augusta County	Appomattox County	Buchanan County
Bedford County	Bland County	Buckingham County
Brunswick County	Caroline County	Charlotte County
Buena Vista City	Carroll County	Cumberland County
Campbell County	Charles City County	Dickenson County
Charlottesville City	Craig County	Grayson County
Dinwiddie County	Fauquier County	Highland County
Gloucester County	Floyd County	Lancaster County
Harrisonburg City	Fluvanna County	Lunenburg County
Henry County	Goochland County	Northampton County
Isle of Wight County	King and Queen County	
Mecklenburg County	King William County	
Prince William County	Lee County	
Pulaski County	Louisa County	
Smyth County	Madison County	
Spotsylvania County	Mathews County	
Staunton City	Middlesex County	
Washington County	Nelson County	
Winchester City	New Kent County	
	Northumberland County	
	Nottoway County	
	Orange County	
	Page County	
	Patrick County	
	Pittsylvania County	
	Powhatan County	
	Prince George County	
	Rappahannock County	
	Richmond County	
	Russell County	
	Shenandoah County	
	Southampton County	
	Surry County	
	Sussex County	
	Westmoreland County	
	Wythe County	

Note: Retrieved from NCES (2023b).

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for One-on-One Interviews

An Examination of the Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia

Consistent interview protocols will be used for all participants in the one-on-one interviews. There are 14 questions related the purpose of this study, which is to provide novice rural principals and their school division leaders a framework that identifies common challenges and the necessary supports to mitigate these challenges. Follow-up questions may be used as needed.

Interview Protocol

Interviewer:
The interviewer will greet the participant, share the primary objective of the interview, and obtain verbal consent to participate, and audio record the interview.

Thank you for participating in this interview. The primary objective of this study is to investigate how novice principals interpret and understand their experiences as developing leaders within a rural setting. As a novice principal leading a rural school, your experiences, practices, and insight can inform current and future practitioners leading rural schools and school districts of the unique challenges experienced to guide principal recruitment, retention, evaluation, professional development, mentoring programs, and preparation programs. The virtual, one-on-one interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will focus on the rural context of your position, experiences in your limited time as a principal, and strategies and support in the position.

The interviewer will share norms for the one-on-one interviews so that participant feels comfortable participating as freely and fully as they choose.

For the interview, please know that your voice is valued and there are no right or wrong responses to any of the questions that will be asked. Please stop me at any time if you have a clarifying question or would like to slow the pace in questioning. The interview is being audio recorded and transcribed through Zoom and will be sent to you for verification.

May I have your permission to audio record and transcribe the interview? You will receive a notification momentarily, and please click on the "I got it" button. *Wait for each participant's response, and record consent in the spreadsheet.*

Before we begin, do you have any specific questions about the study, interview protocols, or anything I have covered?
The interviewer will answer any questions. If there are none, the interviewer will proceed to questions number one.

Interview Questions	Sources to Inform Questions
1. Research indicates that rural principals wear multiple hats. Please tell me about your building-level principal	(Hansen, 2018; Klocko & Justis, 2019; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson &

responsibilities. Do you have any additional roles or responsibilities outside of the building that support the school district, and if so, can you describe these?	Hunter, 2019; Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
2. How would you describe the expectations of the rural community you serve for a principal leading a school in their district?	(Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Hansen, 2018; Hatton et al., 2017; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Pendola and Fuller, 2018; Preston et al., 2013; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
3. How would you describe the pressure and demands in the principal position?	(Hansen, 2018; Hatton et al., 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
4. What opportunities, if any, do you have to collaborate with other professionals in similar roles to support your leadership efforts?	(Hatton et al., 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
5. What type of impact does the enrollment size of your school have on your leadership and decision-making?	(O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Showalter et al., 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
6. How would you describe your fiscal experiences with managing the school's budget and funding for school programs and initiatives?	(Hatton et al., 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Preston et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
7. Please describe your experiences as a principal with implementing state and federal policy initiatives and mandates.	(Hatton et al., 2017; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2017; Williams & Welsh, 2017)
8. Are you able to identify any challenges you experience as a principal that can be attributed to the rural-remote setting of your school? If so, how do you overcome them?	(Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
9. How would describe your succession circumstances (internal or external candidate, time of year entered, recruited or applicant, time as an AP) during the transition phase of the principalship?	(Lee, 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
10. Can you describe any efforts you have made to take a distributed leadership approach to lead your teachers and staff, and if so, how effective were these efforts?	(Spillane et al., 2015)

11. Please describe the political context in your position as the principal and any impacts this has had on your ability to exercise leadership.	(Caruso, 2013; Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019)
12. What district-level activities or professional development have you participated in that were designed specifically to help you better understand the rural setting of your school district and if so, how effective were they?	(Caruso, 2013; Hayes, 2019; Viloria et al., 2021)
13. Please share anything else that your school district could have done, beyond what you have described, to help prepare you to lead a rural school.	(Enomoto, 2012; Willis & Templeton, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018)
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a principal? What have I missed?	

Appendix C: CITI Certificate

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 11-Dec-2021
Expiration Date 10-Dec-2024
Record ID 45000221

This is to certify that:

Frank Wheeler

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Social & Behavioral Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?we0a7129d-6de4-4e43-b202-5f90874fa3e9-45000221

Appendix D: Virginia Tech IRB Approval Letter

Division of Scholarly Integrity and Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

VIRGINIA TECH.

MEMORANDUM

DATE: January 24, 2024

TO: M. David Alexander, Carol S Cash, Frank Thomas Wheeler III

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

PROTOCOL TITLE: An Examination of the Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia

IRB NUMBER: **23-1365**

Effective January 24, 2024, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date: **January 24, 2024**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Appendix E: Recruitment Email

Subject Line: Proposed Study on Rural Principals

Dear Principal:

My name is Frank Wheeler, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Tech. I am also a third-year principal at New Kent Middle School in New Kent County, Virginia. My proposed qualitative study for my dissertation is focused on the experiences of principals working in rural settings in Virginia. Specifically, I am exploring if there are enough principals leading schools in Rural-Remote (Code 43) school districts (as defined by NCES locale classifications) to sample for this proposed study.

If possible, please help by replying to this message with the answers to the following questions:

1. Including the current school year, how many total years have you been in the Principal position (this includes your current school and any other schools)?

2. If you qualify to be a participant in the study, would you be interested in a virtual, 30–45 interview to discuss your experiences in early February?

If you are selected, I will complete the process of notifying your Superintendent, providing additional information about the study, and schedule the interview.

Sincerely,

Frank T. Wheeler
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Virginia Tech
IRB#23-1365
fwheeler@vt.edu

Appendix F: Notification of Study to Superintendent Email

Subject Line: Notification of Study

Dear (Superintendent's Name),

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program at Virginia Tech under the supervision of my advisory and committee co-chairs Dr. M. David Alexander and Dr. Carol S. Cash. I am reaching out to notify you of my research to meet the requirements of my coursework necessary to complete my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to investigate how novice principals interpret and understand their experiences as developing leaders within a rural setting. I am using a qualitive research design for the methodology of the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges novice principals working in rural settings encounter and the supports needed for their success. The study is titled *An Examination of the Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia*.

The population I am studying is principals with three years or fewer of experience in the role as principal that are currently working in a Rural-Remote (Code 43) school, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics. (Potential Participant's Name) meets the criteria for the study and has agreed to participate in a 30–45-minute one-on-one virtual interview to be scheduled in the next few weeks. The virtual interviews will consist of 14 questions related to (his/her) experiences as a novice principal working in a rural school. I have developed an interview protocol to collect data for this study that will remain consistent for all interviews. The data collected from the interviews will be confidential and the names of the principals, schools, or school district will not be identified in the study. The results of the study will be analyzed and shared with you and the participants upon request. Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and there are no known risks involved.

The primary endpoint of this study is to add to the research and provide novice rural principals and their school district leaders a framework that identifies common contextual challenges and the necessary supports to mitigate these challenges. The results have the potential to guide professional development, mentoring programs, and overall supports for principals. For your reference, I have attached the information sheet that will be provided to (Potential Participant's Name).

Thank you so much for your time, and hope things are going well in (Superintendent's School District Name).

Sincerely,

Frank T. Wheeler
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Virginia Tech
IRB#23-1365
fwheeler@vt.edu

Appendix G: Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. M. David Alexander

IRB# and Title of Study: IRB#23-1365 An Examination of the Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of my course work.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete an interview. As part of the study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual, one-on-one interview. You will be asked to answer open-ended questions about the challenges you have experienced as a novice principal in a Rural-Remote (Code 43) school. Virtual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed through the online platform, Zoom. Handwritten notes by the researcher will be taken in addition to recordings and transcriptions to be utilized in data analysis.

The study should take approximately 45 minutes of your time.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio and video recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a random numerical code. The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer in the researcher's office. The researchers

will maintain a list that includes a key to the codes. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the researcher, Frank T. Wheeler or the Principal Investigator, Dr. M. David Alexander, at the College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences, School of Education, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program at Virginia Tech (540-231-9723 or mdavid@vt.edu). You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix H: Email to Principal

Subject Line: Request to Participate in Study

Hello (Potential Participant's Name),

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program at Virginia Tech under the supervision of my advisory and committee co-chairs Dr. M. David Alexander and Dr. Carol S. Cash. I am reaching out to notify you of my research to meet the requirements of my coursework necessary to complete my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to investigate how novice principals interpret and understand their experiences as developing leaders within a rural setting. I am using a qualitive research design for the methodology of the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges novice principals working in rural settings encounter and the supports needed for their success. The study is titled *An Examination of the Challenges Experienced by Novice Principals Leading Rural Schools in Virginia*.

The population I am studying is principals with three years or fewer of experience in the role as principal that are currently working in a Rural-Remote (Code 43) school, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics. For this study, you will participate in a 30–45-minute one-on-one virtual interview. The virtual interviews will consist of 14 questions related to your experiences as a novice principal working in a rural school. I have developed an interview protocol to collect data for this study that will remain consistent for all interviews. The data collected from the interviews will be confidential and the names of the principals, schools, or school district will not be identified in the study. The results of the study will be analyzed and shared with you and the participants upon request. Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and there are no known risks involved.

The primary endpoint of this study is to add to the research and provide novice rural principals and their school district leaders a framework that identifies common contextual challenges and the necessary supports to mitigate these challenges. The results have the potential to guide professional development, mentoring programs, and overall supports for principals. For your reference, I have attached the information sheet for participation in this study.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in the study, and I have included additional details regarding the study below. Please send me two potential dates/times next week to conduct the virtual interview that works for your schedule. Once we agree on a date and time, I will send the meeting link. Here is my availability:

Monday, *(month, day, and times)*
Tuesday, *(month, day, and times)*
Wednesday, *(month, day, and times)*
Thursday, *(month, day, and times)*
Friday, *(month, day, and times)*
Saturday, *(month, day, and times)*
Sunday, *(month, day, and times)*

Sincerely,

Frank T. Wheeler
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Virginia Tech
IRB#23-1365
fwheeler@vt.edu