

Principals' Role in Fostering School-Family Partnerships: Improving the Achievement  
of Students Living in Poverty within Rural Appalachia

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**ABSTRACT**

Authentic and effective family engagement requires a high commitment from the school principal. This study is a representation of the researcher's effort to better understand how principals can form strong school-family relationships in order to improve overall achievement for economically disadvantaged students living in rural communities. Interview data were examined pertaining to six elementary school principals serving Title I schools within rural Appalachia. Data were analyzed to identify strategies practicing principals and policy makers can use to better strengthen school-family relationships. The findings focus on the principals' role in fostering and improving these relationships. As an educator in a high-poverty school system in rural southwest Virginia, I want to add to the literature research-based strategies for implementing family engagement strategies in elementary schools within rural communities. This research should provide practitioners with effective strategies for reflecting on their own strategies and to build relationships with families to ultimately improve the overall achievement for students experiencing economic distress.

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**GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT**

Authentic and effective family engagement requires a high commitment from the school principal. This study is a representation of the researcher's effort to better understand how principals can form strong school-family relationships in order to improve overall achievement for economically disadvantaged students living in rural communities. The researcher completed interviews with six elementary school principals serving Title I schools within rural Appalachia. This research should provide practitioners with effective strategies for reflecting on their own strategies and to build relationships with families to ultimately improve the overall achievement for students experiencing economic distress.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my children, Connor and Caroline. Do not ever let anything dull your sparkle. You can accomplish anything your heart desires with hard work and dedication. Be sure to set and accomplish goals that no one can take away from you. Remember to put God first in all that you do, and He will grant the desires of your heart. I love you both to infinity and beyond!

I also dedicate this research to Dr. Kristie Legg. You have been far more than just my mentor and my friend. You taught me what it takes to provide all students with the experiences they deserve. You have shown me that one person can have more strength than ever thought possible. You have provided me opportunities to learn and grow in the field of education by giving me your trust. For that, I am forever grateful. You have shown me that our impact in this world is not measured by status or title, but by support and love. You are one incredible woman!

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study**

### **Overview of the Study**

This study was an effort to better understand how school principals can form strong school-family relationships in order to improve achievement for economically disadvantaged students living in rural communities. The study was guided by the following research question: What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region? As a student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program through Virginia Tech and an educator in rural southwest Virginia, I am adding to the literature research-based strategies for implementing family engagement strategies in elementary schools within rural communities. The data analysis of this research provides practitioners with effective strategies to build relationships with families to ultimately improve overall achievement for students experiencing economic distress.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In rural America, childhood poverty is escalating and is relentless (Schaefer, Mattingly, & Johnson, 2016). School principals must foster family–school partnerships to improve overall achievement for students in rural poverty circumstances (Bearden, 2018; Budge & Parrett, 2018; Sheninger, 2017). Darling-Hammond (2013) cited the poverty crisis: “About one out of four US children lives in poverty, more than twice the rate of most European nations” (p. 7).

Economically disadvantaged students more acutely experience difficulties influencing their academic performance than their counterparts (Bearden, 2018; Budge & Parrett, 2018; Kronholz, 2016; Lawson, 2008; Mullen & Kealy, 2012).

The gap in reading achievement among students across socioeconomic status has been illustrated in standardized test scores for many years (Bradley, 2010). Academic Achievement is defined as student progress on a variety of cognitive assessments used to assess specific goals. Milne and Plourde (2006) considered academic achievement as the grade standard reading level for students based on a reading assessment in their own research. On national literacy assessments, students in lower socioeconomic status homes continue to score lower than students in homes that do not qualify for free lunch programs (Lee, Griggs, & Donahue, 2007). Many researchers have studied the effect of specific interventions on reading achievement (e.g., Crowe, Connor, & Petscher, 2009), but according to the research done for this literature review there is a gap in the current research on improving student achievement through the use of family engagement strategies in rural schools.

### **Significance of the Study**

To better understand the importance of parental involvement in a child's education, it is also important to understand the context and its influence on best strategies (Epstein, 2011). Day and Dotterer (2018) found that combinations of parental involvement strategies are associated with an increase in adolescents' academic achievement regardless of socioeconomic status. Additionally, their research found "evidence that although parental educational involvement tends to decline as children age, it continues to be an important means of support for high school students' academic outcomes" (Day & Dotterer, 2018, p. 1346). By monitoring their child's success and emphasizing the importance of education, parents can help to initiate greater academic success for the student (Ross, 2016).

Many studies (Auerbach, 2009; Bearden, 2018; Bradley 2010; Payne 2008) discussed the need for family engagement to be authentic in order to make an impact on student achievement.

School leaders should work with partners in education, including families and communities, to better understand the realities faced by students in their schools in order to establish stronger relationships (Mullen & Patrick, 2000). With the emphasis on urban poverty in existing literature, this study will focus on strategies and solutions through the lens of rural poverty. The findings of this study will add to the literature to enable school leaders in helping to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students through effective family engagement strategies implemented by the school's leader of educational decision making.

### **Purpose and Justification of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study, using interviews, was to inquire into effective family engagement strategies used to strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region. This study focused on a targeted sample of school principals serving Title I schools. Examining family engagement strategies used in these schools adds to the current literature on family engagement in elementary schools. Additionally, this research provides practitioners with a list of strategies that can be implemented in schools to increase family engagement towards improving the achievement for students living in poverty. This study adds to the breadth of literature on school-family partnerships, more specific research on high quality strategies used to build school-family relationships to improve achievement for students living in poor, rural communities.

While it is important for education leaders to recognize and empathize with barriers faced by economically disadvantaged families and students, the deficit perspective surrounding poverty can cause unintended consequences such as lack of high expectations (Gorski, 2012). Gorski called for education leaders to reflect on the programs, policies, and practices used in schools to ensure stereotypes and prejudices against families in poverty are eliminated in order to

provide the best educational experiences possible to all students. Mullen (2014) reported, “a holistic approach to well-being is a practical gauge that educators can use for combating the status quo of poverty and for turning around low-performing schools in which capacity is being built for positive learning, critical thought, and informed action” (p. 163). The research of Gorski and Mullen suggested that in order to improve the reading achievement of economically distressed elementary students, education leaders must be proactive and authentic in their approach to fostering school-family partnerships by eliminating prejudice and having an awareness of the whole child and the barriers they face.

The emphasis on urban poverty in the current literature base surrounding family engagement strategies for families experiencing economic distress (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Bradley, 2010; Hill et. al, 2004) is an indicator for the need to focus more research on rural poverty. This study will concentrate on strategies implemented by the school principal in rural Appalachia to create stronger school-family partnerships based on the unique challenges faced by families experiencing barriers created by rural poverty.

### **Research Question**

What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The research question for this study combined four elements in the current literature including the role of the principal, school-family partnerships, student achievement, and rural poverty; however, the combination of all elements in one study is not as extensive. Due to the depth of literature on each individual topic, the conceptual framework for this research helps to

connect each of the elements. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2019), “a conceptual framework forces you to be selective – to decide which things are most important; which relationships are likely to be most meaningful; and, as a consequence what information should be collected and analyzed—at least at the outset” (p. 15). Figure 1.1 displays the relationships between the elements of this study.

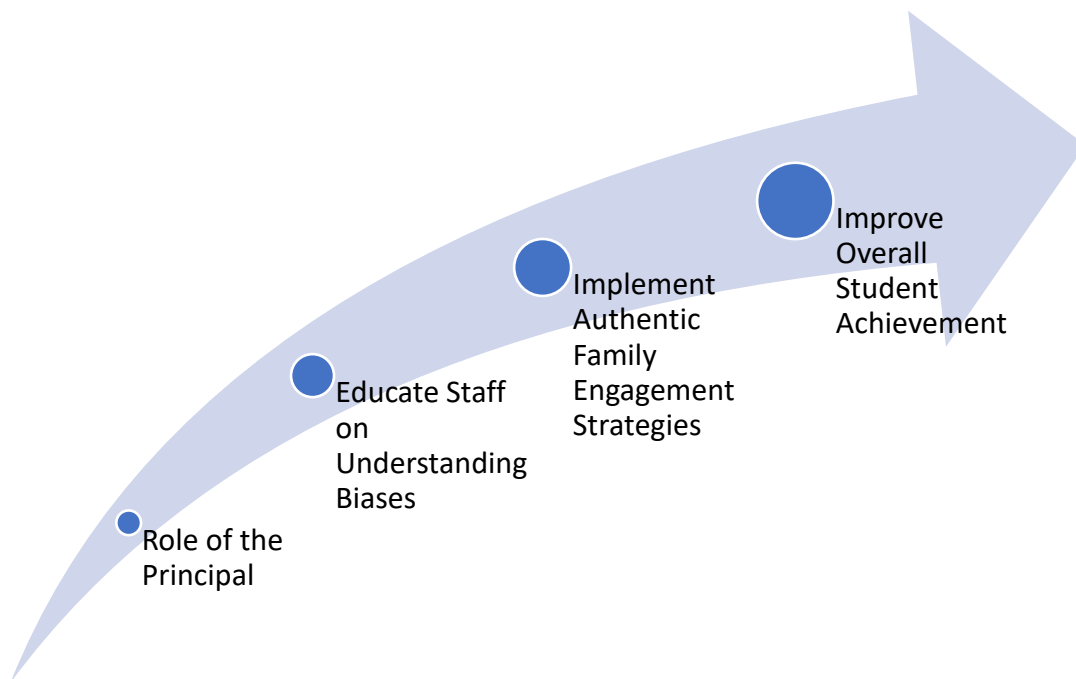
The need for this research stems from the barriers faced by students living in poverty within rural communities. The research in this study focused on rural poverty due to the unique barriers faced by students experiencing economic distress within rural communities (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Bradley, 2010; Hill et. al, 2004; Tieken, 2014). There is also contradicting research (e.g., Gorski, 2017; Payne, 2008) on the stereotypes and perceptions of poverty which has led to this study focusing on specific family engagement strategies which are successful in rural communities in Appalachia. It is the role of the principal to implement these strategies, but researchers (Budge & Parrett, 2018) have derived conclusions that these leaders must ensure bias surrounding poverty is broken down for all school staff.

Figure 1.1 focuses on the concept that elements including the role of the principal, school-family partnerships, academic achievement, and rural poverty are linked together in multiple ways. It is the role of education leaders to assist school stakeholders in breaking down any personal bias against stereotypes surrounding poverty. Additionally, it is their role to implement strategies that strengthen school-family partnerships and ensure individualized instruction is being used to improve student achievement. The review of the literature in Chapter 2 supports the connection between poverty and lower achievement surrounding multiliteracies. Furthermore, researchers (e.g., Gorski, 2012; Payne, 2008) indicated that prejudices around poverty can hinder the ability to build authentic school-family partnerships. Finally, the last



connection is between school-family partnerships and student achievement. Budge and Parrett (2018) outlined the following steps which can improve the causal relationships between these two themes: caring relationships and advocacy, high expectations and support, commitment to equity, professional accountability for learning, and the courage and will to act.

While all elements of the conceptual framework are linked, the role of the principal in helping others to understand biases surrounding poverty and implementing successful, authentic strategies lays the groundwork for creating strong school-family partnerships towards improving overall student achievement.



*Figure 1.1.* Conceptual Framework for improving the barriers of poverty in school-family partnerships.

## **Definitions of Terms**

*Education Leader*, for the purposes of this paper and the focus on school-wide strategies, refers to the school principal and any other administrator making decisions regarding family engagement at the school level.

*Literacy* regarding reading achievement was approached in a more general way including the multiple facets of literacy. The New London Group (1996) has proposed the concept of multiliteracies, which views literacy as continual, supplemental, and enhancing or modifying established literacy teaching and learning rather than replacing traditional practices (Rowse, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008).

*School-Family Partnerships* are defined by Kronholz (2016) as relationships built between school and home to help improve trust between stakeholders.

*Rural* school divisions eligible for this research study include divisions within the Appalachian region defined as rural by the National Center for Education Statistics.

*Poverty*, in the field of education, is often based on the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). For the purpose of this study, poverty was based on Title I eligibility.

## **Limitations/Delimitations**

The limitations to this study are generalized in nature. The data collected can only be generalized to economically disadvantaged students attending schools in rural Appalachia. The results cannot be generalized to students who do not face the same barriers presented by living in rural poverty. Another limitation is the size of the population sample. Due to the nature of a case study, only between five to ten school principals were selected to provide data using the interview protocol. The research does not include the perspective of the students, families, social

workers, or affiliates, but only the role of the education leader. The interview protocol aims to include an all-inclusive list of questions to gain a comprehensive list of family engagement strategies or philosophies used by each of the participants interviewed.

The delimitations of this study are in the areas of academic subjects and geographic region. This study examines only data based on the overall achievement of students, leaving out specific academic areas. Additionally, the participants in the study are principals only in Title I schools within rural Appalachia in order to add specific literature to the research surrounding rural poverty in this geographic area of the United States.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature on the role of the principal in school-family partnerships, academic achievement for students living in poverty, and governance and policy issues surrounding poverty in education. The following literature review attempts to provide a comprehensive review of research surrounding family engagement strategies employed by school leaders towards improving achievement for students living within poor rural communities. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the study. Additionally, this chapter addresses the data sources, participants, setting, and data analysis employed by the researcher. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the findings followed by an analysis of the data collected through one-on-one interviews with each participant. Chapter 5 is a review of the findings, implications of the research for practitioners and policy makers, and the reflections of the researcher.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In this literature review I analyze common themes on the education leader's role in fostering family-school partnerships to improve literacy achievement for economically disadvantaged students. While all students encounter difficulties that have an impact on their academic performance, students of poverty experience them more commonly and acutely (Bearden, 2018; Budge & Parrett, 2018; Kronholz, 2016; Lawson, 2008). Poverty is measured based on a formula provided by the U.S. Census Bureau which is determined by total family income and the number of persons living within the household.

Many students across the United States and in rural Appalachia are living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2017). For a family of four in the United States, an annual income of \$25,100 or less would indicate poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 2018). According to these statistics, 11% of Virginians have an income level below the poverty line. This number drastically increases for areas in Southwest Virginia, including Galax City where the poverty rate is 25%. Farther southwest into Lee County, Virginia, in 2017, the poverty rate stands at 29.9% (United States Census Bureau, 2017). In addition to these statistics on poverty, the Virginia Department of Education (2018) provides documentation exhibiting a decrease in reading achievement scores for students who are economically disadvantaged. Schools with a free and reduced-price lunch rate of at least 40% qualify as Title I schools in the United States. Within the Title I plans for these schools, education leaders are required to make an effort to engage families in the education of their children and keep proof in documentation, proving the importance of improving school-family relationships (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Research cited in this paper confirms an increase of Americans living in poverty since the start of the 21st century, and rural Appalachia is not an exception (U.S. Census Bureau). With the increase in the number of low-socioeconomic students comes the need to increase support for those students, the teachers, and their families. Hetzel and Soto-Hinman (2007) reported, “Low-income children come into school in kindergarten with 3,000 words in their listening vocabulary, as opposed to a listening bank of 20,000 for the middle-income child” (p. 23). According to Witzier, Bosker, and Kruger (2003), education leaders should have high expectations for teacher and student achievement, supervise teachers, coordinate the curriculum, emphasize basic skills, and monitor student progress. These researchers suggest that education leaders are tasked with the responsibility of closing the achievement gap for students living in poverty, but this is not something they can do on their own.

The 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress’s (NAEP, 2015) results showed there was a significant gap in reading achievement between students who receive free or reduced lunch and those who do not. The NAEP is a nationally representative standard measure of what students know and can do. Results from fourth graders who took the reading test in 2015 showed that 36% performed at or above the level of proficiency on the reading assessment (NAEP, 2015). When the data are disaggregated based on eligibility for free/reduced lunch, only 21% of fourth graders who qualify for free and reduced lunch performed at or above the proficient level. Students ineligible for free/reduced lunch scored much higher than their peers with 52% performing at or above the proficient level (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2014). In Virginia, students living in a low-income household had an average score that was 32 raw score points lower than that for students who were not eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. Bridging the gap between these performance discrepancies is one of many roles of the

principal. As the number of students coming from poverty continues to grow (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), so does the responsibility of the principal to educate school stakeholders on the importance of improving literacy proficiency for these students (Bradley, 2010). This literature review is guided by the following question: Which family engagement strategies are employed by the principal to facilitate academic achievement for economically disadvantaged students?

### **Purpose of the Literature Review**

The research reviewed will display the discrepancies in reading achievement for students living in poverty as opposed to their middle-class peers. When looking at student achievement, I took a more general approach towards reading including multiple facets of literacy. The review of research will also reveal the importance of school-family relationships in building achievement for this group of children. Although I am aware that the lens of the student and family are important to these relationships, I looked more at the role of the education leader, specifically the school principal. However, due to the crucial nature of all stakeholders in this process, the points of view of the student and family will play a role in my research. The findings I will present focus on rural poverty as it relates more to the demographics of my current and future educational experiences. It is my hope to better understand where further research is needed in linking the two areas of student academic achievement and family engagement and how those can be facilitated by the school principal.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Databases were consulted during the search process for this literature review on the topic of the principal's role in fostering school-family partnerships and the impact on student achievement for students living in poverty. EBSCOHost and VTWorks were searched along with

the following databases: Complementary Index, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Humanities International Complete, Business Source Complete, and SocINDEX with Full Text. Inclusion years for all searches were limited to 2000-2018. I was not focused on research from the perspective of the students, families, social workers, or affiliates, but only the role of the education leader. However, the literature reviewed does not look only at that perspective. The preliminary sources found overwhelming emphasis on urban poverty in the literature. Based on the prominence of urban poverty in the literature, I decided to limit my focus to rural and situational poverty as it is more applicable to my current and future educational experiences.

For this literature review, I reviewed high quality academic journals, books, and dissertations. Parameters used were full text and scholarly journals. I searched the following terms and the total hits for each were:

- *poverty in education* (12,186)
- *family and school partnerships* (3,679)
- *school engagement strategies* (5,153)
- *academic achievement for children in poverty* (1,040)
- *Every Student Succeeds Act* (157)
- *Title I* (409)
- *academic achievement and poverty* (1,886)
- *school leadership and family engagement* (36).

Once limiting my scope to rural and situational poverty, I searched the following terms with the total hits as follows:

- *rural poverty and student achievement* (62,459)

- *situational poverty and student achievement (10,873)*
- *rural poverty and family engagement or parental involvement and school (124,349)*
- *situational poverty and family engagement or parental involvement and school (16,345).*

These searches were conducted between August 2017 and September 2018 after I was trained by my dissertation chair, Dr. Carol A. Mullen, and a Virginia Tech Online and Graduate Engagement Librarian on how to conduct successful searches of literature. When determining what information to use, I read the abstract of each study to determine relevance and looked at references cited within the articles, books, and dissertations to help identify further sources. Once the literature was determined to be relevant to the topic, it was read and analyzed in its entirety. Table 5.1 (Appendix A) indicates the highest quality sources with the strongest relationship to this topic.

### **Methods Used in the Sources**

My review of sources indicates that a variety of methods are used to research the effects of poverty on student cognitive ability and how to improve that with effective family engagement strategies. Most methods used to research these correlations are qualitative in nature. Researchers often use data to identify discrepancies in achievement, but follow-up with individual and focus group interviews to target specific information regarding strategies being used inside of the schools. These qualitative research methods include case study, correlational study, critical discourse analysis, ethnographic phenomenological approach, and hierarchical linear method. Auerbach (2009) and Budge and Parrett's (2018) theoretical case study approach used interviews to gain information about incorporating family engagement and disrupting poverty with effective classroom strategies. Similarly, Owens (2016) used a Delphi Technique in which three rounds of surveys were completed by the same group of practitioners each time.



Coruk (2018) conducted a set of interviews with school principals to compile a collection of opinions about the importance of public relations using critical analysis.

Two studies (Bradley, 2010; Cascio & Reber, 2013) used a correlational study method in their research to compare at least two variables. Both of these studies were empirical in nature. Bradley (2010) researched the correlation between survey results and student achievement results while Casico and Reber (2013) studied the correlation between Title I funding and per pupil expenditures. Both Johnson, Avineri, and Johnson (2017) and Mullen and Kealy (2013) adopted a priori analytic approach using critical discourse analysis to research existing literature on the topic of interest. The study done by Bradley in 2010 focused on African American males in the Tidewater Region of Virginia and a suggestion was made for future research in rural school districts. Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2001) used a theoretical ethnographic phenomenological approach to make connections within the research on the beliefs of the principal and the ability to provide adequate educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students based on those beliefs. Crowe, Connor, and Petscher (2009) applied a hierarchical linear model method to estimate student growth based on socioeconomic status with a focus on policy.

### **Synthesis of the Literature**

The topic of this literature review is the role of education leaders in building relationships between schools and families to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students. Table 5.1 (Appendix A) contains the high-quality sources from the literature search and review process in relationship to these topics. It is color-coded based on central themes found during the review of literature.

### **Education Leaders' Role in Family Engagement**

School leadership is a prominent theme in understanding the effect of poverty on students. Several studies (Auerbach, 2009; Bradley, 2010; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001) highlighted the responsibility of education leaders in understanding these effects of poverty on students. Each of these studies found that school administrators must have the will and courage to act on behalf of economically disadvantaged students. Auerbach (2009), Bradley (2010), and Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2001) discussed the importance of education leaders in educating others to ensure that best practices are being used in schools to promote achievement for students with low socioeconomic status. To purposefully and successfully educate others and act on behalf of the students in their schools, Coruk (2018) stated that school administrators must possess strong skills in the areas of communication and public relations.

Coruk (2018) focused on the connection between public relations and the role of the school principal. Through interviews completed with practicing principals in a study group, Coruk discovered opinions which I summarize next. The awareness of the school principal on public relations can help to improve family partnerships. Also, increased modes of communication make it easier for principals to connect with the public. Principals and teachers should be trained on public relations and communication. Additionally, Coruk's research showed that public relations specialists in schools can increase the effectiveness of school-family partnerships. If school principals do not have effective training in communication and public relations, this could hinder their ability to communicate the positive attributes of the school including the mission and vision. Overall, this could negatively affect school-family partnerships according to his findings. Sheninger (2017) supported Coruk by presenting the need for the school principal to create their own branding, stating, "if you don't tell your school's

story, someone else will” (p. 233). When the school principal controls the information being shared, it is less likely for the information to be skewed or incorrect.

There is a need for future administrators to be provided more opportunities to learn from experienced practitioners who are successful in school-family relations. Auerbach (2009) discussed the importance of graduate programs including formal education in the area of school-family partnerships and effective communication. Coruk (2018) made a connection between communication and teamwork within the school while Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2001) discussed the gravity of the principal’s opinion about poverty’s effects on teaching and learning and how to best support these practices in their schools. According to these researchers, tackling the issue of underdeveloped reading achievement in students living in poverty should be a collaborative effort with all school employees and the families of the students being served. Additionally, Auerbach (2009) reported that not only should future school administrators learn from those with more experience, they should also learn how to effectively coordinate the efforts of school staff to improve the quality of parental involvement.

In *Disrupting Poverty*, Budge and Parrett (2018) acknowledged the importance of leaving our comfort zone to examine our practices to best overcome inequities created by poverty (p. 12). Many times, these inequities prevent parents or guardians of students from fully participating in the child’s education. In addition, schools are oftentimes seen by parents as an unwelcome environment, making it even more difficult for a school and family connection to take place. Principals are tasked with the responsibility to elicit change in this perception. Student achievement will improve if trusting relationships are formed between students, parents, and school staff. Family engagement strategies are mentioned within the school leadership theme, but there is also plentiful literature on this topic alone.

## Family Engagement Strategies

Many studies (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Bearden, 2018; Bradley 2010; Payne 2008) discussed the need for family engagement to be authentic. Family engagement is defined as communication and family engagement techniques used by school systems to engage parents and families in the education process. To create authenticity within this engagement, school leaders must be willing to put the time into creating lasting relationships with school families in order to best understand these important stakeholders (Bearden, 2018). Kronholz (2016) defined school-family partnerships as relationships built between school and home to help improve trust between stakeholders. Authentic family engagement can be achieved by taking proactive steps to encourage family participation. According to Bearden (2018), leaders in education should dig deeper and ask questions to learn more about families they serve in order to best serve their children. Parents need support and instruction on how to best help their children be successful in school and how to understand the resources available to them in schools. Students from families with low socioeconomic status do not always have the language skills needed to achieve high academic success (Budge & Parrett, 2018; Crowe, Connor & Petscher, 2009; Johnson, Avineri, & Johnson, 2017; Payne, 2008).

Epstein's (2011) Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships, as seen in Table 1.1, showed six types of family involvement and examples for how those can take place within the home, school, or community environments. This model highlights the need for family engagement to be authentic with the focus on health and safety needs, which would be determined on an individual student basis.

Table 1.1. *Epstein's (2011) Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships*

Type	Description of Type	Examples
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1	Basic obligations of families	Providing children with basic needs such as health and safety
2	Basic obligations of schools	Communication between school and family such as memos, phone calls, report cards, and parent–teacher conferences
3	Involvement at school	Volunteering at the school to assist teachers in the classroom or attending school events
4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Helping children with homework
5	Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy	Serving in a parent–teacher association (PTA), on committees, or in other leadership positions
6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	Making connections with organizations that share responsibility for children’s education, such as afterschool programs, health services, and other resources

Language is another central theme in the research focusing on instructional strategies and needs of students. Educators must explicitly teach formal language which is often unfamiliar to students living in poverty while still having an appreciation for a variety of language backgrounds. Formal language is described as academic vocabulary which is expected to be known and used within the school setting. Payne (2008) referred to this language as a formal register and promotes educators teaching students how to translate their words from casual language to formal language. Payne also stated that formal language “uses precise word choice and syntax” which is less familiar to students living in poverty (p. 48). In order to improve formal language in the home, school leaders need to share their focus with the students and the families. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) reported that higher parent education levels are associated with higher academic achievement for the child. A conclusion was that education leaders can implement programs in the school to encourage and support parental education.

One common theme in the research is the need to break down predetermined notions about poverty (Budge & Parrett, 2018; Crowe, Connor & Petscher, 2009; Johnson, Avineri, & Johnson, 2017; Payne, 2008). To accomplish successful school-family partnerships, these same researchers believe that stereotypes must be understood and overcome by school leaders and school staff. According to Bearden (2018), the mindsets of educators must be reframed so that family engagement can be honest and authentic. Additionally, Bearden suggested that educators be honest with themselves about their preconceived thoughts and feelings toward parents so that they can develop relationships to foster student success. Educators must be willing to take the parent's perspective into consideration in order to achieve effective communication. Mullen and Kealy (2012) reported that "culturally competent teachers are not blocked by racial or class stereotypes or overcome by students' diversity or hardships; instead, they use cultural knowledge as a source for engaging students living in poverty and for connecting with them" (p. 71). Additionally, Budge and Parrett (2018) stated, "educators are more likely to change their conceptions if they are allowed to articulate their prior conceptions, are provided with alternative ideas, and are supported to explicitly consider the status of competing ideas within their mental maps" (p. 19). These stereotypes concerning poverty affect the attitudes of educators throughout the United States.

The research on family engagement studied for this literature review has the common theme of relationship building. Bearden (2018) focused a great deal of her work on the principles needed for effective communication to take place between the school and home. Some examples of these principles are developing rapport, gaining respect, supporting others, engaging listeners, developing insight, and increasing productivity. She encourages education leaders to show appreciation for parental involvement in order to develop a rapport with the

parents, guardians, and students. This relationship building strategy can be helpful in learning parental insights and can create solutions to help students succeed. Just as families are important in decision-making, they should also be included in celebrating the success of the school along with all other stakeholders (Auerbach, 2009; Bearden, 2018; Budge & Parrett, 2018). Greater education is needed for all school stakeholders to disrupt poverty and make a positive difference for students living in poor households.

### **Family Engagement and Academic Achievement**

Personalized, authentic instruction is critical to close the achievement gap for students experiencing lack of exposure due to poverty. In their study on the Reading First Initiative compared to other instructional strategies, Crowe, Connor, and Petscher (2009) suggested that “adjusting instruction according to students’ individual language and literacy needs may be more effective than more global ‘one size fits all’ approaches” (p. 211). This finding in their research demonstrates the need to further investigate the effects of school-family partnerships on reading achievement for economically disadvantaged students because these students often face language challenges not experienced by their wealthier peers. Gorski (2017) encouraged school leaders to research and eliminate the barriers facing students from a low socioeconomic family. He also stated, “learning to see the barriers these students face is the responsibility of school leaders” (Gorski, 2017). Additionally, Gorski conveyed that as the instructional leader of the school, the principal can implement school-wide strategies and create an environment conducive to student learning and support.

Education leaders must engage all instructional staff in the efforts to improve reading instruction. Susan Hoch, a reading specialist at an elementary school in Virginia, said:

We must be intentional about filling gaps in student instruction. This is particularly

important for economically disadvantaged students as they have not had exposure to books or meaningful conversations which can build vocabulary skills. These students will usually need additional pull-out or in-class remedial time above and beyond time spent with other students. (Hoch, personal interview, 2017)

Being intentional about filling these gaps in student instruction includes thoughtfully observing the students and paying close attention to their data.

A great deal of research shows the significance of parental involvement for student academic success (Hill et al., 2004; Sheninger, 2017). This research includes students across different racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as, students with differing socioeconomic status. All literature I read suggests that parental involvement is key in ensuring student success. Sheninger (2017) stated, “families have a tremendous influence on their children’s school achievement” (p. 214). Parental educational involvement—parenting practices at home or at school intended to improve academic outcomes—is often cited as an important avenue for improving academic achievement and subsequent educational attainment among diverse populations of students (Hill et al.). This study researched strategies for improving family engagement for students with low socioeconomic status.

School leaders in the United States have the role of working to ensure a level playing field for academic achievement for students living in poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Gorski, 2012; Payne, 2008). Unfortunately, students living in poverty do not have access to the same life experiences as their middle-class peers. It is the duty of instructional leaders to give students with low socioeconomic status access to an education which will close this gap (Rothmier, 2011). Research has shown that literacy is the foundational building block for a child’s education. Kainz and Vernon-Feagans (2011) showed that to be successful in school, students



must have a foundation of literacy upon entering elementary school (p. 407). Rothmier maintained that the school community has the responsibility to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students. Additionally, Rothmier communicated:

When the entire school community (administrators, teachers, staff, parents, students and community) work together using all the available programs, training, and community supports to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students, educators can close the literacy achievement gap between those students and children who are not low-income. By closing the literacy achievement gap, school community members increase students' literacy, which provides those students a foundation for success in school and life. (p. 4)

Standardized test scores provide data to schools which show the achievement gap between students living in poverty and those who do not. While raising test scores for these students demonstrates improvement, the goal is to improve student achievement so that all students can have a successful future.

### **Rural Education**

The term *rural* and its meaning is dependent upon specific researchers. Tieken (2014) discussed the confusion often surrounding the term rural and the many definitions used within the federal government to define the word (p. 15). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) “revised its definitions of school locale types in 2006 after working with the Census Bureau to create a new locale classification system” (2014, para 1). The following definitions are used by the NCES to define rural schools in the United States.

1. *Rural Fringe* 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.
2. *Rural Distant* 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.
3. *Rural Remote* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

This same classification system was used to determine eligible schools for this study as noted in Chapter 3. While these definitions are helpful in determining schools considered as rural, they do not give the opinions and characteristics often associated with the term rural.

Although the government was able to come up with definitions to define the geographical location of rural schools, it is even more difficult to define their culture. Tieken (2014) described rural schools as the community. In her analysis of different rural schools in the United States, she stated, “these (rural) schools define these communities, giving them substance, boundaries and meaning” (p. 151). In a case study analyzing rural school-community partnerships, Zukerman (2019) found that despite the difficulties of rural living,

Participants were quick to identify strengths in their community and clearly took pride in them, including a collective approach to living in a difficult climate, challenging terrain, and declining economy that supported prior cross-sector collaboration efforts in K-12 and early childhood education. (p. 7)

Both Tieken (2014) and Zukerman (2019) found the stakeholders within the rural communities studied had a strong sense of pride.

Stereotypes further marginalize students with low socioeconomic status, but also students within rural communities. Similar boundaries and inequalities exist for students living in rural Appalachia as do for students who are poor (Wray, 2010). While the research is heavy on social inequality, Wray encouraged researchers to, “focus on how white majorities are made not just on the basis of race, but through successful attempts to control and define multiple boundaries of social difference” (p. 139). Wray’s research on historical perspectives of whiteness encouraged researchers to look at White from a social lens rather than a racial one.

### **Policy and Governance Issues**

Funding, governance, and policy are common themes in research surrounding poverty in education. Several researchers (Casico & Reber, 2013; Mullen & Kealy, 2013; Mullen, 2014; Owens, 2016; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001) discussed the obligation of educators to be advocates for children living in poverty. This begins with the role of the principal to guide and inform other school employees through communication and action. Casico and Reber (2013) and Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2001) also noted that accountability testing alone cannot induce the change economically disadvantaged students need to improve academic achievement.

School leaders must communicate with parents the importance of early education for students living in poverty (Parker, 2018). Parker stated, “investment in early childhood intervention, such as a three-year-old preschool program, will return future savings on social programs associated with positive adult outcomes” (p. 50). Pre-Kindergarten experiences can increase students’ chances for high school graduation and success later into adulthood. Early education is a proven indicator to help improve the academic success for underprivileged students. In their research on state trends in child well-being, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) reported, “well-implemented, high-quality prekindergarten for at-risk students can help

narrow the achievement gap” (p. 8). Policymakers can improve and increase access to necessary early childhood education for students living in poverty. This literature review shows that many elements including authentic family engagement, effective policy, and strong school leadership are necessary to induce change and create academic success for students living in financially unstable environments.

Evidence-based family engagement programs are plentiful and can assist school leaders in creating a more comprehensive school program for parental involvement. Despite the variety of programs available, school systems do not always have the money needed to implement these research-based programs. There is a need for more policy and funding regarding parental engagement in public school instruction according to Ansell (2011) who discussed the importance of education and school funding policies and how they can exacerbate the opportunity gaps for students in poverty, reporting, “analyses by The Education Trust, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization, and others have found that students in poverty and those who are members of racial minority groups are overwhelmingly concentrated in the lowest-achieving schools” (p. 3). Ansell’s research suggests that for high poverty schools to be more successful, more funds should be allotted to implement evidence-based family engagement programs.

Oftentimes, high poverty school districts lack the funding needed to implement effective programs to engage and support families. Ross (2016) stated:

Research has shown that parents with lower SES may observe the same parental engagement processes as higher SES parents once they are taught how to navigate the complex system of American schools and how to support their children in ways that promote academic success. (p. 5)

In this research, Ross displays the importance of local, state, and federal policy in providing increased opportunities for parental education, specifically how to traverse the intricate system of modern schools. Public education is constantly changing, and it is difficult for practitioners to keep up with the developments. School leaders must be expected to inform parents in a language in which they understand so they can better help their children be successful and improve personalized academic achievement (Auerbach, 2009).

### **Title 1**

Title I is a federal program that helps to level the playing field for students with a lower socioeconomic status. The U.S. Department of Education explained:

Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended (ESEA) provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. (para. 1)

According to the Virginia Department of Education website, there were 756 Title I identified schools (35%) in the state of Virginia for the 2017-2018 academic year.

Each year, the U.S. federal government allots a great deal of financial assistance to Title I schools in the United States. According to Matsudaira, Hosek, and Walsh (2012),

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 is the biggest Federal government program targeted towards elementary and secondary education. At nearly \$14 billion per year, it accounted for nearly one-third of all federal appropriations for elementary and secondary education in 2008. (p. 1)

The emphasis on helping to support Title I schools and students living in poverty shows the need to provide greater support for this subgroup of students. One goal of the Title I program is to

help at-risk populations of students meeting challenging goals and improve their academic achievement. The at-risk population targeted is economically disadvantaged students.

<b>Measure 1.1 of 4:</b> The difference between the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in grades 3-8 scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on State reading assessments and the percentage of all students in grades 3-8 scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on State reading assessments. (Desired direction: decrease)			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Actual (or date expected)</b>	<b>Status</b>
2004		13.9	Measure not in place
2005		13.2	Measure not in place
2006	Set a Baseline	13	Target Met
2007	11.4	12.8	Made Progress From Prior Year
2008	9.8	12.5	Made Progress From Prior Year
2009	8.1	11.5	Made Progress From Prior Year
2010	6.5	(September 2011)	Pending
2011	4.9	(September 2012)	Pending

*Figure 2.1. Discrepancy of Academic Achievement for Economically Disadvantaged Students. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018)*

Figure 2.1 displays discrepancies in reading achievement between students living with economic distress as opposed to their peers who do not. The goal of Title I is to decrease the separation between the two subgroups measured.

Title I schools must follow strict policy on spending the funds given by the federal government to the school district. Title I funds are provided to schools with the hope of supplementing instructional needs, rather than supplanting, to help level the playing field for students living in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Casico and Reber (2013) stated, “There is considerable debate over whether additional school spending can narrow gaps in achievement between poorer and richer students. But the first-order challenge to a compensatory intergovernmental grants program like Title I is to ensure that it narrows gaps in school spending between higher-poverty and lower poverty school districts” (p. 423). Research shows that

students living in poverty have less access to programs and materials that improve academic achievement (USDOE, 2018). Providing increased access to students with low socioeconomic status to help improve academic achievement and student success is the goal of the Title I program.

### **Every Student Succeeds Act 2015**

As previously reported in this chapter, the percentage of students living in poverty is increasing in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Additionally, the federal government continues to implement regulations which must be followed by school leaders to close the achievement gap for the economically disadvantaged subgroup. Bradley (2010) addressed NCLB and the requirements of the school to close the achievement gaps. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into law by President Obama in 2015, is legislation reauthorizing the ESEA of 1965 which was also updated by NCLB. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act is federal legislation which monetarily supports K-12 federal education by ensuring an equal education for all students regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or disability. ESSA is educational law that requires schools to show improvement in the areas of academic achievement for different subgroups including: students from major racial and ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students, children with disabilities, English learners, students with homeless status, and children in foster care. Ross (2016) reported:

High socioeconomic status (SES) parents will likely have better access to additional services (after school tutorials, study grounds, community sports programs) than low SES parents, federal and locally-funded programs may be needed to offset costs, as well as provide transportation and other resources for high-needs children. (p. 25)

Government officials should be responsible for researching and understanding the need to provide additional funding to help students in Title I schools have access to after school support services involving parents and families (Ross, 2016).

Lawmakers often make changes to federal policy concerning public education based on the shifting needs of students and school systems. According to the U.S. Department of Education website, “ESSA includes provisions that will help to ensure success for students and schools” (para. 8). This legislation reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 which was also updated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The ESEA is federal legislation which monetarily supports K-12 federal education by ensuring an equal education for all students regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or disability. Darrow (2016) reported, “The bill was enacted as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty,’ due to his belief that equal access to education was vital to a child’s ability to lead a productive life” (p. 41). In the 50 years the ESEA legislation has been in place, many changes have been made to improve the quality of education for all students in the United States.

Some of the most notable changes in the ESEA legislation include the accountability standards for school districts across the country. With the revisions made to NCLB by Congress, schools were required to give standardized tests to students across various grade levels, including students with disabilities. Many educators became frustrated with the accountability procedures of NCLB and “among the top concerns of NCLB critics were the cost of implementing its policies, the degree to which NCLB had narrowed curriculum only to subjects being tested, insistence on standardized testing as the only way to measure student progress, and intrusion of the federal government into an area that both the U.S. Constitution and tradition have left to the



jurisdiction of the states” (Darrow, 2016, p. 41). Due to the increasing opposition of NCLB, and after several years of discussion and revisions, the ESSA was passed by Congress in 2015.

According to Klein (2018), the following are some of the most important changes due to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA):

- **Title IV:** ESSA scrapped many smaller programs—aimed at services like elementary and secondary school counseling and Advanced Placement course fees—in favor of a new, flexible \$1.6 billion fund that districts can use for health, safety, arts education, college- and career-readiness, and more. Districts can also transfer the funding to Title II, the main federal teacher-quality program; unfortunately, Congress only provided a quarter of the funding for this program in its most recent spending bill. Some school districts received only \$10,000 and are using the money to make up for reductions in Title II, not to create new programs. Congress, though, recently upped the program's budget to \$1.1 billion, which could help pay for some new initiatives.
- **Weighted Student Funding:** ESSA allows up to 50 districts to participate in a "weighted student funding pilot," meaning that they can combine federal, state, and local dollars. The move is intended to help districts ensure that students from high-needs populations, such as English-language learners and students in special education, get their fair share of funding. Four districts and Puerto Rico applied to join the program in the 2018-19 school year.
- **Innovative Assessment Pilot:** ESSA allows up to seven states to try out new forms of testing in select districts, with the goal of eventually using the new tests statewide. Four states—Arizona, Hawaii, Louisiana, and New Hampshire—expressed formal interest in the opportunity before the deadline.

- Title I Set-Aside for School Improvement: States must set aside 7 percent of their Title I funding to improve the lowest-performing schools. Ninety-five percent of that money must be distributed to districts, either through a formula or using a competition. Schools that receive these funds must choose a school improvement strategy that has at least a "promising" level of evidence to back it up.
- Title I Set-Aside for Direct Student Services: ESSA allows states to set aside up to 3 percent of their Title I money for so-called direct-student services, including course choice, tutoring, and dual enrollment. Only two states—Louisiana and New Mexico—are taking advantage of this opportunity.
- Indicators: ESSA requires states to look beyond test scores in rating schools by choosing at least one indicator of school quality or student success. At least 33 states picked chronic absenteeism as their additional indicator, and another 35 chose college- and career-readiness. Other choices included discipline data, science, school climate, and even physical education. (p. 28)

In addition to these changes, the ESSA focuses on targeting and improving low-performing schools. While schools are still required to annually test students to measure student achievement, the changes from NCLB to ESSA focus on giving states more opportunity to make changes with testing, spending, and school improvement.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

The topic of this literature review is the role of education leaders in encouraging, implementing, and sustaining relationships between schools and families to help economically disadvantaged students reach full academic potential in literacy. Statistics show about 16% of children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade do not graduate from high

school on time, a rate four times larger than that for proficient readers; for children who are poor for at least a year and are not reading proficiently, the proportion failing to graduate is 26%; and for children who are poor, living in communities of concentrated poverty and not reading proficiently, the proportion is 35% (Hernandez, 2012). All aspects of literacy, including reading, writing, comprehending, and communicating, are life skills.

The role of the education leader in fostering school-family collaboration requires high levels of energy and expertise during a time when there is increased participation of the federal government in schools (Hulley & Dier, 2009). The 21st century principal works in complex environments that include specialized services with increasing levels of regulation (Hulley & Dier, 2009). The research reviewed supports proactive and authentic school-family partnerships utilized by education leaders. These relationships are essential towards improving the reading achievement of economically distressed elementary students.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study, using interviews, was to inquire into effective family engagement strategies used to strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region. An anticipated practical outcome was identification of effective family engagement strategies that improve academic achievement in an economically depressed area and the desires of school principals in implementing family engagement strategies. Guidance is provided for university principalship programs around preparing future leaders as agents of change.

### **Research Design/Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to inquire into effective family engagement strategies used to strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region. A two-part data collection methodology, as explained below, was used to assess the research question: What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region? This research was supported by the following sub questions:

1. What family engagement strategies do principals use in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? Why do they think the strategies are helpful in improving school achievement?
2. What family engagement strategies do principals wish they could implement in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? What may be currently preventing them from implementing these strategies within their schools? Why do these principals think the strategies could be helpful in improving school achievement?

These research questions are exploratory in nature and the research method utilized was able to produce data that are supported by current practitioners' descriptive accounts. Data collection—part 1 involved analysis of data from a school division consortium in one rural Appalachian region.

Auerbach's (2009) original research methodology was adapted to rural, high-poverty schools by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with between five and ten principals of Title I schools in one rural Appalachian region for data collection part-two. The second part of this data collection was based on the data analysis in part-one determining Title I eligible elementary schools within one rural Appalachian region. Auerbach's explanation follows:

Data for this study were collected mainly through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with administrators; each interview was one and a half to three hours long and was audiotaped and transcribed. Interview data were triangulated with field notes from observations of administrators, staff, and parents at site-level parent meetings, workshops, and conferences, as well as informal interviews with other school staff and parent leaders. (p. 12)

My research triangulated the data from the interviews with documents provided by the principal during the interview visit. Also, as Auerbach explained,

Data came from the review of parent-related documents such as school newsletters, web sites, press releases, and program materials. Data were analyzed with the constant comparative method, first within-case through topical, theoretical, and en vivo coding, and then cross-case to determine broader patterns, emerging themes, and discrepancies. (p. 12)

The methods of this research included analysis of data using deductive coding consisting of *terms* from the literature review and researching questions (e.g., communication, connection, stereotype, support, resource, authentic, poverty). More details on my method of analysis are included in the Data Analysis section below. I also reviewed parent-related documents provided by school principals to support data collected through the interviews. As my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Carol Mullen, a qualitative researcher, was a critical reader of this document including the interview protocol reviewed in the following paragraphs. A detailed timeline for these proposed methods can be found in a section below.

The interview protocol suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) using the following steps was used to complete the study. The following procedures were followed to ensure an effective, research-based process:

- Determine the research questions that will be answered by interviews.
- Identify interviewees who can best answer these questions based on a purposeful sampling procedure.
- Distinguish the type of interview by determining what mode is practical and what interactions will net the most useful information to answer research questions.
- Collect data using adequate recording procedures when conducting one-on-one or focus group interviews.
- Design and use an interview protocol, or interview guide.
- Refine the interview questions and the procedures through pilot testing.
- Locate a distraction-free place for conducting the interview.
- Obtain consent from the interviewee to participate in the study by completing a consent form approved by the human relations review board.

- Follow good interview procedures.
- Decide transcription logistics ahead of time. (p. 165)

Through these steps, I was able to better understand the participants' point of view on effective family engagement strategies and unpack their beliefs about rural poverty. Analyzing these data allowed me to align common themes which can be used by education leaders (e.g., principals) to provide authentic family engagement in their schools. Additionally, the information discovered through this study can be shared with university principal preparation programs to better prepare future administrators on creating strong school-family relationships.

### **Research Design Justification**

The results of this study add to the breadth of the literature surrounding family engagement strategies. A basic qualitative methodology using interviews was utilized to identify the family engagement strategies principals use in Title I elementary schools in one rural Appalachian region and stories behind their experiences. A practical outcome was identification of effective family engagement approaches that improve academic achievement in an economically depressed area. These strategies can be used by practicing principals in schools where families and students experience high poverty to strengthen school-family partnerships and provide support to those families.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions used to guide this study were as follows. What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region?

**Sub Questions.**

1. What family engagement strategies do principals use in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? Why do they think the strategies are helpful in improving school achievement?
2. What family engagement strategies do principals wish they could implement in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? What may be currently preventing them from implementing these strategies within their schools? Why do these principals think the strategies could be helpful in improving school achievement?

**Site/Sample Selection****Study setting.**

Criteria provided by The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) were used to determine schools eligible with the classification of rural and Appalachian. The definitions for these criteria were noted in Chapter 2. The schools represented in this study received a rural locale status from the NCES and are considered public schools in the rural Appalachian region of the United States.

When choosing an interview location, the interviewee was asked to provide a location easily accessible for him or her where a private conversation could be held and recorded using a digital sound recorder. A consent form was approved and signed by the interviewee prior to completing the interview, but not until after the interviewee had been informed of the purpose of the study and the plans for using the results. I followed good interview procedures including “staying within the study boundaries, using the protocol to guide the questions, completing the interview within the time specified, being respectful and courteous, and offering few questions



and advice” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 166). Following the interview, transcription was completed for important statements made by the interviewee. These important statements were determined by the researcher based on the purpose of the research.

### **Selection of the participants.**

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy by looking at existing data on Title I elementary schools in one rural Appalachian region. Robinson (2014) reported, “Purposive sampling strategies are non-random ways of ensuring that particular categories of cases within a sampling universe are represented in the final sample of a project” (p. 32). I aimed to locate Title I elementary schools in one rural Appalachian region. I selected between five and ten principals of these schools to participate as participants to be interviewed to collect research. Specifically, a criterion sampling strategy was utilized which Creswell and Poth (2018) defined as a case study that, “seeks cases that meet some criterion; useful for quality assurance” (p. 159). In order to achieve this, specific criteria of Title I eligibility must be known in advance to ensure the quality of the information being shared through interviews.

Identifying qualified participants for this study was important to ensure that the quality of responses provides the researcher with the opportunity to analyze and compare the data being collected. The research methodology used in Auerbach’s (2009) study served as a model for this case study design. She included four principals proven to have high success with implementing authentic family engagement strategies in communities with a high Latino population. Prior to contacting potential participants, the superintendents of those school districts were contacted first. The superintendent was contacted by the researcher by electronic mail to explain the study and request permission to interview the principal of one of the schools in that division based on the data collected in part one. Then, a confirmation by the superintendent was requested

granting permission to proceed in contacting the school principal within that same division. The researcher then followed-up with the potential principal participant by electronic mail to explain the study and recruit the individual for the study. Additionally, a follow-up confirmation was requested by the potential participants requesting correspondence to show willingness or unwillingness to participate in the study.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

### **Data collection.**

Approval from the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) through the Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to conducting the study (see Appendix G). CITI training on Social and Behavioral Research has been completed. A copy of the certificate of completion can be found in Appendix C. Additionally, the researcher sought permission from school divisions which qualify for participation based on Title I eligibility. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with each participant. In addition to recording the interview, handwritten notes were utilized to track anecdotal data throughout the interview. In order to refine the interview questions and procedures, I conducted a cognitive interview with a principal in a Title I elementary school within the same rural Appalachian region. The demographics of this school make this cognitive interview discussion relevant to the research conducted. Additionally, it is convenient geographically.

## **Instrument Design and Validation**

The first step in creating an acceptable, valid, thorough, and effective interview protocol is determining the research questions to which the interviewees will respond. I researched several interview protocols including The Family Engagement Inventory provided by the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2017), several dissertations completed from 2015-2018, and an article in

the *School Community Journal* on strategies for increasing parental participation (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & Pedro, 2011). The questions created and used by Smith et al. (2011), gathered information about current parent involvement activities, the goals of parent involvement at the school, the techniques employed to obtain high levels of involvement, the ways in which parent involvement is monitored or enforced, and the challenges to parent involvement faced by the school. (p. 81)

These questions were pilot tested by the researchers prior to data collection and refined to remove any possible bias. The conclusions from their research suggested that the interview questions used gained the data necessary to relate their findings to Epstein's (2011) Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships seen in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. *Epstein's (2011) Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships*

Type	Description of Type	Examples
1	Basic obligations of families	Providing children with basic needs such as health and safety
2	Basic obligations of schools	Communication between school and family such as memos, phone calls, report cards, and parent-teacher conferences
3	Involvement at school	Volunteering at the school to assist teachers in the classroom or attending school events
4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Helping children with homework
5	Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy	Serving in a parent-teacher association (PTA), on committees, or in other leadership positions
6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	Making connections with organizations that share responsibility for children's education, such as afterschool programs, health services, and other resources

I adapted the interview questions created by Smith et al. (2011) due to the validity of the questions verified through their own research in urban charter schools. The interview questions were adapted for the rural focus of my study. Table 6.1 in Appendix B shows the relationships between the interview questions and the review of the literature. These interview questions and the adaptations I made helped to assess the research question: What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region?

Interview Questions:

1. *How do you feel your school is performing based on the newest accreditation guidelines provided by your state education department? What are your school's greatest strengths? In what areas does your school struggle?*

According to Auerbach (2009), Bradley (2010), and Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2001), school administrators must have the will and courage to act on behalf of economically disadvantaged students.

2. *How does rural poverty affect your student population? Can you give an example of a student in your school who lives in rural poverty?*

Budge and Parrett (2018) cited the importance of educators leaving their comfort zone to examine practices in order to best overcome inequities created by poverty. Through interviews they assessed that many times these inequities prevent parents or guardians of students from fully participating in the child's education.

3. *What are the goals of family engagement at your school? (prompts: benefits to the school, to the students, to the whole family/community). What do you feel are the benefits of family engagement?*

Effective family engagement leads to developing rapport, gaining respect, supporting others, engaging listeners, developing insight, and increasing productivity (Bearden, 2018).

4. *What family engagement strategies have your school implemented that you think had a positive effect on school achievement and/or school-family partnerships? Why? What percentage of families was involved in these activities? How do you determine if a family engagement strategy was effective for your school?*

Accountability testing alone cannot induce the change economically disadvantaged student need to improve academic achievement; however, according to researchers, Title I policy is more effective when the funds are directly related to state accountability systems (Casico & Reber, 2013; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001).

5. *What family engagement strategies have your school implemented that you think did not go as planned? Why do you think this strategy was unsuccessful? What percentage of families was involved in these activities?*
6. *What measures do you use to monitor family engagement at your school? (Prompts: counting number of hours, statistics on attendance at events, satisfaction surveys, etc.)*
- Bearden (2018) reported, through interviews with educators and parents, relationship building strategies can be helpful in learning parental insights and can create solutions to help students succeed.
7. *How has your school tried to tailor family engagement opportunities to the needs of working parents, single-parent households, other family members helping to raise students, or foster parents? Please explain.*
8. *To what extent were families involved in the Title I parent involvement plan for your school?*

Coruk (2018) suggested that the connection between public relations and the role of the principal is crucial in communicating the vision and goals of the school to all stakeholders. Additionally, families are important in decision-making, and they should be included in also celebrating the success of the school (Auerbach, 2009; Bearden, 2018; Budge & Parrett, 2018).

9. *Has the level of involvement changed over time? If yes, in what ways?*

10. *Do you think the level of family engagement at your school is different from other public schools outside of your geographic region? If so, why and in what ways?*

Ansell (2011) suggested that evidence-based family engagement programs are plentiful and can assist school leaders in creating a more comprehensive school program for parental involvement. The researcher also reported that despite the variety of programs available, school systems do not always have the money needed to implement these research-based programs.

11. *Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to family engagement. Does your school... Have a parent liaison? Have a family center? Have a family contract? Have a school handbook for parents/families? Have a Web site with a specific portal for parental information?*

These questions are supported by researchers (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Bradley, 2010; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2011) signifying the high importance of education leaders in educating others to ensure that the best strategies are being used in schools to promote achievement for students with low socioeconomic status. Coruk (2018) also stated that public relations specialists in schools can increase the effectiveness of school-family partnerships. Additionally, when the entire school community works together using all the available programs, training, and community

supports to improve the literacy achievement of their lower-income students, educators can close the achievement gap between those students and their middle-class peers (Rothmier, 2011).

*12. What family engagement strategies do you wish you could implement in your school?*

*Why are you currently not implementing these?*

Effective family engagement leads to developing rapport, gaining respect, supporting others, engaging listeners, developing insight, and increasing productivity (Bearden, 2018).

*13. What challenges do you face in trying to involve families at your school using your current family engagement strategies? (Prompts: involving low-income parents or families, lack of transportation, sustaining involvement in the long term.)*

This question is included in hopes to assess the challenges principals face which could be targeted in higher education. Auerbach (2009) supported the importance of graduate programs, including formal education, in the area of school-family partnerships and effective communication. Additionally, learning to see the barriers faced by economically disadvantaged students is the responsibility of school leaders (Gorski, 2017).

*14. What sorts of family engagement strategies would you like to see implemented in your school in coming years?*

The interviewees who could best respond to these questions was decided based on a review of the data provided by the state educational agency. Interviews took place in a one-on-one format between the researcher and the interviewee. These were held in the same room the interviewee specified to where the researcher traveled. In order to have the ability to reflect on the responses of the interviewees, a recording device was used to review the data.

### **Interview Protocol**

A consistent interview protocol was used for all cases in the study. The protocol used followed the method suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) (see Appendix D).

### **Data Treatment and Management**

All data collected were stored on the researcher's computer and protected by a unique password to ensure anonymity of participants and their schools. There was no information stored which could identify individual student data. All data used from state education agency is public information stored on the state education's website. Anonymity of participants was assured not identifying the participant, their school, division, or region. The dissertation researcher is the only individual with access to information which can identify the participants. All documentation will be shredded upon successful completion of the dissertation defense.

### **Data Analysis Process**

A variety of methods can be utilized to explain relationships within the data. Before deciding on a proposed method of data analysis, the researcher investigated multiple aspects of qualitative research. Figure 3.1, below, is an overview of the qualitative data analysis process utilized for this research study.





*Figure 3.1. Overview of Qualitative Data Analysis Processes*

After completing the interviews and the deductive coding of data, the data were compiled into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This program assisted the researcher in analyzing open text to better understand the viewpoints of the participants by color coding responses to help find themes within the research. Additionally, an independent reader, with a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in School Counseling, reviewed the compiled data set.

Data analysis and representation for each participant followed the process outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). The following steps were utilized by the researcher. Microsoft Excel was used to color-code interview responses in order to organize the data and explore themes within the research.

- Create and organize data files to manage and organize the data.
- Read through text, make margin notes, and form initial codes to read and memo emerging ideas.
- Describe the case and its context to describe and classify codes into themes.
- Use categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns to develop and assess interpretations.
- Use direct interpretation and develop naturalistic generalizations of what was learned to represent and visualize the data. (p. 199)

This process of coding and analyzing assisted the researcher in making connections across the data to complete the data analysis.

### **Fulfilled Timeline for Completed Research**

The initial work on this study began in February 2019 following a successful defense of the preliminary examination. It was submitted to the dissertation chair, Dr. Carol A. Mullen, for review and feedback. Data collection began after a successful prospectus defense in April 2019. The study was submitted for IRB approval in April 2019 with official approval given in June 2019. Upon receipt of IRB approval, the researcher began with part one of the data collection as seen in Table 3.1. Following the analysis of this pre-data collection, the researcher proceeded with part two of the data collection and the data analysis process.

Table 3.1. *Timeline fulfilled for the completed research.*

Projected Dates	Step(s)	Process
April 2019	Prospectus Defense	Prospectus Examination completed.
April 2019	IRB Submission	Following a successful defense of the Prospectus Examination, version 1.0 of the IRB protocol was submitted to the HRPP.
Summer 2019	Data Collection – Part 1	Consultation of state education agency data to identify the Title I elementary schools in one rural Appalachian region. This was completed immediately following IRB approval.
Fall 2019	Data Collection – Part 2	Based on the data desegregated in part one of the data collection process, the researcher obtained approval from district superintendents to begin participant interviews. The researcher sought permission to interview the principals of between five and ten schools in this area of rural southwest Virginia. Interviews were conducted with selected participants using the Interview Protocol in Appendix D.
Fall 2019	Data Analysis	Data analysis was completed based on the data collection during the participant interviews using deductive coding to perform an analysis of the data.

### **Methodology Summary**

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research design, site selection, participant selection, and procedures for collecting, managing, and analyzing data. The data collected provided the researcher the opportunity to identify family engagement strategies used by principals of Title I elementary schools in one rural Appalachian region to build effective school-family partnerships. A basic qualitative methodology using interviews was chosen by the researcher to gain the opinions, insights, and experiences of principals leading Title I elementary

schools. An academic analysis of data collected was completed by the researcher. The data were grouped into themes to create a comprehensive list of strategies principals in high-poverty schools in one rural Appalachian region use to create stronger school-family relationships in order to improve the success for economically disadvantaged students.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Introduction**

Six elementary school principals serving seven Title I schools in one region of rural Appalachia participated in this study. Ten division superintendents were contacted and gave approval to ask principals within their division to participate. Out of the 10 principals contacted, six agreed to participate, equaling a 60% participation rate. Of the six principals who participated, five were the principals during the previous school year in the same schools and one was the Assistant Principal the previous school year in the same school. Principal A serves as the principal of two Title I elementary schools. All other participants serve only one school.

After the interviews were conducted, participants' responses were individually transcribed using the GMR Transcription Service. All transcriptions were then put into one Microsoft Excel document. In the Excel document, all responses were aligned for each question in a worksheet to help organize the data. Once all responses were organized by question, a thorough analysis of the data was completed through deductive coding exercises. Common themes and strategies utilized by the principals interviewed were developed. The present chapter displays the findings for each interview question. The findings will be presented followed by corresponding interview responses to support the claim.

### **Research Question**

The research questions used to guide this study were as follows. What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region?

### **Sub Questions.**

1. What family engagement strategies do principals use in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? Why do they think the strategies are helpful in improving school achievement?
2. What family engagement strategies do principals wish they could implement in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? What may be currently preventing them from implementing these strategies within their schools? Why do these principals think the strategies could be helpful in improving school achievement?

### **Findings**

#### **Finding 1. Principals feel that success of the school can be mostly attributed to the staff.**

When asked about the strengths of the school, five out of the six principals explained the staff was the greatest strength. Research on effect sizes for teacher credibility supports this finding. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) reported, “Teacher credibility is a constellation of characteristics, including trust, competence, dynamism, and immediacy” (p. 11). In their research, teacher efficacy held an effect size of 0.90 putting it near the top of the list of positive influences in a student’s success. The participants in this study agree that teacher, or staff, credibility has the highest potential to make a positive difference for all students.

#### ***Analysis to support finding 1.***

Interview Question 1. *How do you feel your school is performing based on the newest accreditation guidelines provided by your state education department? What are your school’s greatest strengths? In what areas does your school struggle?*

During interviews, all principals reported their schools had met the threshold for accreditation as set by the state education agency. The six participants interviewed serve seven Title I schools in rural Appalachia. Principal A serves two schools which differ significantly in the free and reduced lunch rate. While all schools represented are accredited, participants spent a greater amount of time responding to the second sub question regarding areas of struggle rather than their strengths.

Table 4.1 demonstrates the abbreviated responses of all principals when discussing the greatest strengths of their schools. Five of the six participants reported faculty, staff, and/or teachers were the greatest strength of the school leading to overall success and meeting accreditation standards. Principal B discussed a new initiative started in the school last year in which teachers “adopted” a student to support, in hopes of diminishing the disconnect in school-family partnerships. The staff members were responsible for checking in with the students and their teachers every week to ensure certain tasks, such as homework and classwork, were being completed and to see what support they could offer. Similarly, Principal C explained that all staff members feel a responsibility for the success of the students and go above and beyond to help them reach high expectations. Principals D, E, and F mentioned the word “love” when discussing the reason why the staff and teachers were the greatest strength of the school.

Table 4.1. *Interview Q1: Strengths of School*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Strengths of School</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup> in state in overall achievement data
<i>Principal B</i>	Strong faculty
<i>Principal C</i>	Faculty
<i>Principal D</i>	Teachers
<i>Principal E</i>	Staff

While all schools represented are considered successful in terms of state accreditation standards, every participant spent more time discussing the weaknesses and struggles of the school rather than their strengths. These data suggest that by focusing on areas of needed improvement, the principals are helping their schools to reach a desired level of success. Two of the six participants reported parental involvement being their greatest struggle, two reported special education, one reported poverty, and one reported support for teachers. It is important to note that while these were the greatest struggles reported by the participants, they are not the only struggles. Table 4.2 displays the abbreviated responses from each participant.

Principal A spoke specifically about the differences in parental involvement between the two schools served. She stated,

Both my schools are different. At one there are a lot of parents who want to be involved and the other one it's like 'pulling teeth' to get parents involved. That is the main struggle. There's a big disconnect and there is a major difference socio-economically between the schools.

Principal D also spoke about parental involvement in a different way reporting, "Our biggest struggle is with parental support. I don't think it's necessarily they don't want to do it, but a lot of times, they just don't know how." This participant also spoke of a personal experience of moving from the business world into education and realizing how little she understood about how schools operate until making that change.

Principals B and C shared that special education was the greatest struggle for their represented schools. While both expressed frustrations with trying to help students achieve who



are several grade levels behind, Principal C also reported having a large special education population as an additional struggle. Principal C said,

My school tends to have a larger special education population than we should and that has a lot to do with environmental things the students are exposed to in this area. The education levels of the parents may play into that.

While speaking about the special education population, the parental impact was mentioned as a possible reason for part of the struggle.

Principal E focused on the overarching theme of poverty as the greatest struggle for the school and all that encompasses. Specifically, this participant felt that the high rate of free and reduced lunch in the school created delays and/or minimized the opportunities for many students. Principal F said the greatest struggle in the school is providing support for teachers because it is crucial, but there are limited resources to do so properly. Principal F stated, “There’s always something to improve on, but the most important is making teachers’ jobs better. In my opinion, giving teachers the support they need and the extra support makes everything else come together.” Principal F also mentioned community-school relations and 21st century educational practices as areas of weakness.

Table 4.2. *Interview Q1: Struggles of School*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Struggles of School</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Parental involvement
<i>Principal B</i>	Special Education test scores
<i>Principal C</i>	Special Education population
<i>Principal D</i>	Parental support
<i>Principal E</i>	Poverty
<i>Principal F</i>	Support for teachers

**Finding 2. Principals feel that the biggest struggle for students living in rural poverty is the lack of basic needs.**

All principals reported students living in poverty are affected in some way by these circumstances. They all agreed that lack of basic needs has an adverse effect on these students. In addressing Maslow's research on the hierarchy of needs, McLeod (2018) stated, "If physiological needs are not satisfied the human body cannot function optimally. Maslow considered physiological needs the most important as all the other needs become secondary until these needs are met" (p. 4). Additionally, Epstein's (2011) Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships centered on the importance of health and safety needs for all students. The participants in this study agreed with Epstein's research, that for students to be able to perform academically these basic needs must be met first and they spend time at school making sure that happens.

***Analysis to support finding 2.***

Interview Question 2. *How does rural poverty affect your student population? Can you give an example of a student in your school who lives in rural poverty?*

All principals interviewed stated ways in which students living in poverty are affected by their circumstances. Table 4.3 shows the effects of poverty listed during the interviews and the percentage of participants who mentioned each one when answering question number two. All participants reported a lack of basic needs as an adverse effect on economically disadvantaged students whether it be food, sleep, or clothing. Principal A shared a story about a student in kindergarten showing up to school sick one day. Upon speaking with her, staff learned she had not eaten dinner the previous night and that the only food she received was when she was at

school. Similarly, Principal B spoke about a first-grade student who received a weekend food bag from the school. Principal B said,

He stopped by the office to give me a hug and thank me for the food bag. The boy said he heard his parents the night before talking about how they didn't have enough money to buy food and they didn't know what they were going to do the next few days.

Principal C told a similar story of a student that week who had come to school and told his teacher he did not have anything to eat at home and the school sent him home that evening with extra bags from the Backpack Buddy program. Principal C said of these situations,

It's hard because most of us, principals and teachers, were not raised like that so it is hard for us to relate and it is frustrating. We have students coming from these situations and when their basic needs are not met, how in the world can they focus on what they need to do at school?

Three out of six principals reported an increase in students who are being raised by someone other than their biological parents as an effect of rural poverty. Principal F suggested this increase is due to the basic needs of children not being met by parents, and consequently, students are being removed from the home. He said,

Some of our kids do not have running water or clean clothes. Many are being raised by grandparents, aunts and uncles, or foster parents. Our school nurse and secretary are amazing, they are like some of these kids' moms basically. They take care of them, providing clothes and food if necessary.

Principal B suggested the rise of students in foster care is due to an increase in opioid usage in her rural community. She reported seeing a large increase in the number of kids in foster care or being raised by someone other than a parent. This school has responded to the needs of these

students with a program in which school staff “adopt” a student in need to help them manage the demands of school. Principal E also shared a story about two students living in a home where drugs were an issue with the parents. The students were living in a cabin without electricity and as a result of this and the drugs the students were removed from the home and placed into foster care.

Another item of significant response was the lack of school supplies for students living in impoverished circumstances. Principal D gave an account of a student who never brought his homework in and told the teacher he did not have a pencil at home. After a visit to the home, the principal gave the following account,

When we pulled up to the house, there was no door, there was a goat standing in the doorway, and there were chickens all over the front porch. Plastic was covering some of the windows and it was dark as dungeons inside, so I assumed there was no electricity. So, when the child said he did not have a pencil at home, I believe he did not have a pencil at home. I was able to discuss that with the teacher and share where that child lived.

She reported this conversation allowed the teacher to see the circumstances facing the child from a different perspective. Rather than asking him, “Why didn’t you do your homework?” the question was, “What can I do to help you get this done?” The principal shared it wasn’t about sending a pencil home at that point because it was clear the child was in survival mode at home, and homework was the least of his concerns. Principal C also discussed home visits as a part of the administrative role. He said, “I sometimes have to make home visits for attendance, and I really see what some children live in. It’s just heartbreaking.”

Problems with absenteeism and lack of vocabulary development were other issues discussed in the interviews. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two supports these additional concerns, but they were not discussed in the interviews as much as the lack of basic needs, increase of children in foster care, or the limited access to school supplies to complete and manage school tasks. Every principal indicated they could share multiple stories with me about the circumstances faced by their students who live in rural poverty.

Table 4.3. *Interview Q2: Effects of Rural Poverty*

<i>Percentage of Principals</i>	<i>Effect</i>
100%	Lack of basic needs (food, sleep, clothes)
50%	Being raised by someone other than the biological parent
50%	Lack of or limited access to school supplies
33%	Absenteeism
33%	Lack of homework
33%	Vocabulary development
13%	Increase in opioid use by caregiver

**Finding 3. Principals want to create a welcoming atmosphere for all parents and families.**

The number one goal of family engagement for all participants in this study was to create a welcoming environment for all families, parents, and guardians. As discussed in the literature review of this study, Kronholz (2016) defined the partnership between school and family as one that must be built on trust. Additionally, Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg, and Harry (2017) stated, “trust is a key factor in building the types of relationships that will foster true parent engagement” (p. 223). While all participants’ goals were aligned with improving family

engagement, creating a welcoming environment established on trust was the main goal for each principal.

*Analysis to support finding 3.*

Interview Question 3. *What are the goals of family engagement at your school?*

The number one overall goal of family engagement for all principals was to create a welcoming environment for all families, parents, and guardians. Kronholz (2016) defined school-family partnerships as relationships built between school and home to help increase trust between stakeholders, supporting this goal of the participants. Additional responses included providing volunteer opportunities for parents, creating homeroom sponsors, improving the Parent-Teacher Organizations already in place, having open communication with parents, providing fun activities families can experience together, and training parents on how to best help their children. Table 4.4 displayed later in this section shows the abbreviated responses for each participant's answer to this question.

All principals felt strongly that creating a welcoming school environment for families was the number one goal of their administration. Principal A discussed a history of parents not feeling welcomed in the school, and the faculty is now trying to reverse that perspective by creating roles within the school specifically for parents, including homeroom sponsors. On the contrary, Principal C feels that parents feel very welcome in the school. She stated,

“I try to keep good, positive open communication between myself and the parents so that they are not afraid to come in and speak with me should they need or want to. Our school is known for being very caring and understanding.”

Principal D wants to support the families and help them understand that someone is in their corner and cares about their needs. Principals D, E, and F discussed the need to make positive

connections first and foremost, and to provide opportunities for the families to visit the schools in a positive manner, so that when problems did arise, they felt comfortable coming in for those, too.

Three out of the six principals discussed the desire to improve the current Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) established within the school. Principal B described the PTO as the parents who are “ultra-involved” in the school. Principal C described the PTO in the school to be monthly meetings planned around a class production which typically has a different audience for each event. Principal C stated, “Because it is a different group of parents, I try to educate the parents about chronic absenteeism and what that means.” Chronic absenteeism is a new indicator for accreditation for the state education agency. Principal F hopes to get better connected to the families by bringing them in for events, such as PTO meetings and activities.

Table 4.4. *Interview Q3: Goals of Family Engagement*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Goals</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Provide volunteer opportunities for parents, initiate homeroom sponsors, welcome parents into the school
<i>Principal B</i>	Provide volunteer opportunities for parents, improve PTO
<i>Principal C</i>	Improve the PTO, open communication with parents, fun activities for families to experience together
<i>Principal D</i>	Increase parent involvement, create a welcoming atmosphere, train parents how to best help their children
<i>Principal E</i>	Create a comfortable atmosphere where parents want to visit and share information
<i>Principal F</i>	Make more connections with families, improve the PTO, Invite parents into the school more frequently

Interview Question 9. *Has the level of involvement changed over time? If yes, in what ways?*

The responses to interview question number nine were inconsistent from one participant to another. Responses surrounding changes in parental involvement included an increase due to the change in administration, decrease due to parents lacking trust in the school and due to the change in caregiver roles, change based on the specific group of students and parents in the grade level, and two principals reported no change in parental involvement over the years. Both principals reporting no change stressed it was due to the pride held by the community for the school, as most adults had attended the same elementary school when they were students themselves.

Principal A discussed the previous administration's desire to not pursue parental involvement as a goal of the school. Now, with parental involvement being a focus, the school is making more of an effort; therefore, they are seeing an increase in participation. Principal C believes the level of engagement in the represented school depends on each grade level and the students and parents that move through each year. Principal C reported,

Some of that may be due to the fact that it takes both parents working full-time to pay the bills, and even with both parents working, they are just barely surviving and can't afford to miss a day of work.

This participant did not believe the level of parent engagement has changed for better or worse over the years, but that it goes through continuous cycles of change.

Principals B and D reported a decrease in parental involvement over the years for different reasons. Principal B stated,

When I started in administration 12 or 13 years ago, parents accepted your professional opinion, and it seems like now you have to convince parents to be on your side from the beginning, even though we are on their side and most importantly the student's side.



Principal B emphasized that the school only wants to do what is best for every student, but sometimes it is hard for parents to hear that their child is not meeting all the standards. The participant perceives this may be due to new state standards by reporting,

We know some kids are going to need a lot of assistance to get where the state wants them to be and because of that, we have to have more difficult conversations with the parents from the beginning. Even though we try to be positive, nobody wants to hear that their child needs help.

While Principal D also reported a decrease in parental involvement within the school, it was because of the change in roles of caregivers. Principal D supported this by stating,

I have seen a decline as far as not as many parents are raising their own children. Most of what I see is grandparents and foster parents. While some foster parents are better involved than the biological parents, grandparents are not because they are older. They just don't know what is needed and they are tired. They've already raised their own kids.

Principals E and F both contributed the importance of the school within the community to the increase in family engagement. Principal E replied,

We are still kind of like in a capsule here. We still get more (parental involvement) than most places, and it's needed, and it's just part of the culture of this community. The school is the center of this community and everyone takes so much pride in it. If somebody says anything or they are going to try to take something away, we will have a huge contingency at a school board meeting to show support of the school.

Likewise, Principal F trusts that community pride is an important part of the increase in parental engagement. Principal F explained that he was a student in the school, grew up in the small community, and because of that gets respect from parents simply because he had the same

upbringing. This participant explained that when people from outside of the area come to work in the school, they have to work harder to prove themselves to the parents than those who walked the same halls as students.

Table 4.5. *Interview Q9: Change in Parent Involvement*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Changes in Parental Involvement</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Increase due to change in administration
<i>Principal B</i>	Decrease due to parents lacking trust in the school
<i>Principal C</i>	Varies due to the group of students and parents
<i>Principal D</i>	Decrease due to change in caregivers (grandparents, foster care, other relatives)
<i>Principal E</i>	No change due to pride of community in the school
<i>Principal F</i>	No change in involvement due to closeness within the community

Interview Question 10. *Do you think the level of family engagement at your school is different from other public schools outside of your geographic region? If so, why and in what ways?*

All principals interviewed felt as if they were not able to answer this question with confidence as they have not spent a great deal of time outside of the geographic region. However, some of the participants drew on the limited time they had spent outside of rural Appalachia or the conversations they have had with colleagues working in other geographic regions. Three of the six principals felt that family engagement in their school was likely less than other geographic regions due to less funding, higher poverty, and fewer resources. Similarly, one principal felt that the small school, with no athletic teams, was a reason for lower family engagement within the school. One principal felt there was likely no difference in family

engagement and one felt that family engagement was likely higher due to the pride held by the community.

Principals A, C, D, and F feel that family engagement within their schools was likely lower than schools within other geographic regions for similar reasons. Principal A shared that the school is a feeder school and does not have any school or little league athletic teams, which limits the number of parents and families coming into the school for extracurricular activities. Principal C felt that schools in suburban areas have a higher budget, increasing the opportunity to provide more family engagement activities. Principal C, however, feels that urban schools have a similar level of parent engagement as rural schools based on conversations held with colleagues who work in inner cities. This principal stated, “It was a little eye opening to me when I went to some meetings and talked to some people working in inner city schools to realize there are so many similarities.” Principal D has not worked outside of the geographic region but said there are differences even within their school division. This participant reported, “If I go 20 minutes down the road, there is a different level of family engagement because their socioeconomic status is much higher.” Principal F felt that due to the size of the school division in the represented region, there were smaller budgets and fewer resources for all areas of education, including family engagement.

Principal B responded that there was probably not much difference in levels of family engagement outside of the geographic region. This participant believes it varies from school to school based on the programs in place and the staff supporting the programs. Opposite from all other participants, Principal E responded there was likely more family engagement in the school compared to other geographic regions because of the pride of the community in the school. This principal stated, “I am certain the level of family engagement in our school is higher than most

and it is a different kind of family engagement, too.” He discussed the tradition of parents picking up their children at the end of the school day to talk with other parents. The school even has benches at the entrances to make this time more comfortable for the families.

Table 4.6. *Interview Q10: Differences between Appalachia and other geographic regions*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Differences</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	No school athletic teams
<i>Principal B</i>	No difference
<i>Principal C</i>	Less funding to provide more opportunities
<i>Principal D</i>	Less participation due to high poverty
<i>Principal E</i>	More participation than other regions due to community pride
<i>Principal F</i>	Fewer resources to provides students and parents

Interview Question 14. *What sorts of family engagement strategies would you like to see implemented in your school in coming years?*

Principals C and D have set goals of continuing to expand the strategies already in place within the school. Both principals feel they have a good foundation and want to build upon that. Principal E stated the goals of their school would be dependent upon acceptance of the after-school program grant. With the grant, there are more opportunities to implement family engagement strategies and activities. Principal E did state the school would try to implement as much as possible even if the grant was not received. Principal F responded that the goal would be to continue fostering relationships with families and community members, especially building those relationships with staff members who are new to the community.

Principal B, while reporting that young parents were a challenge to get involved in the school, shared the goal would be to increase support for grandparents raising their grandchildren and foster parents. Principal B stated,

More and more kids that we are serving are in foster care even though they're technically not marked as a foster care student. This is very misleading when you look at the state data, because they don't have them marked as that when a kinship situation arises, but had that not been there, they would definitely be in foster care, because these are the people that have stepped up to take of them, and those kids just come with a lot of needs.

Principal A would like to start a couponing class for parents after a conversation with one parent within the school. This participant feels this type of class would greatly benefit the families within the school community and wants them to understand the school cares about more than just students' academic success.

Table 4.7. *Interview Q14: Family Engagement Goals for the Future*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Strategies</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Couponing class for parents
<i>Principal B</i>	More support for grandparents and foster parents
<i>Principal C</i>	Continued development of ongoing strategies
<i>Principal D</i>	Continued development of ongoing strategies
<i>Principal E</i>	Dependent on acceptance of after-school program grant
<i>Principal F</i>	Fostering relationships with families and community members

**Finding 4. Principals feel that providing family engagement activities after school hours is accommodating to parents.**

A majority of the principals in this study reported that they try to accommodate parents by holding events during the evening hours. None of them addressed accommodating the time for parents who may work during the evening hours except for one principal who tries to send things home to allow parents to volunteer on their own time.

***Analysis to support finding 4.***

Interview Question 7. *How has your school tried to tailor family engagement opportunities to the needs of working parents, single-parent households, other family members helping to raise students, or foster parents?*

Four of the six principals explained trying to accommodate parents with the timing of school events was the number one way of tailoring opportunities for all caregivers. Other responses included providing a variety of options for parents to be able to participate, providing separate activities for children, and changing the terminology for how the school refers to student caregivers. Most principals reported offering events after traditional work hours in order to allow parents a better opportunity to attend.

Principals A, C, E, and F reported using accommodating times to help parents attend the events sponsored by the school. Principal A tries to schedule most family engagement events past 5 o'clock in the evening and adjusted the Open House event to run from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. In addition to having all meetings after 6 o'clock in the evening, Principal C also asks for parents to sign up for events to best prepare for the number of attendees. Principal E reported being flexible with all times, except for the Title I meetings that occur during the school day to help accommodate the staff in the building. Principal E stated, "We typically don't start anything until after 5:30 or 6:00 p.m." Most events discussed in the interviews took place after the 5 o'clock working hour.

Principal F discussed the school's willingness to be flexible with times based on feedback from the parents, but also explained they will accommodate the children at all meetings to make it easier for parents to attend. Principal F stated,

We all understand the need for parents to bring their kids, even for parent-teacher conferences. We don't want a kid by themselves at home or sitting in the car. What we say to a parent, we should be able to say to a student and a parent.

Similarly, Principal B discussed the need to offer a variety of opportunities for all parents, despite their work hours or schedule. This principal described their efforts by saying,

Our parents can be involved without ever really coming to the school. We have things that can work such as the box-top committee that can be done entirely at home. A lot of teachers will send things home for centers to be cut out and send back so that parents can feel like they are contributing something even it is something they can work on at home over a couple of weeks.

She also discussed trying to talk with parents whenever they are at the school picking up their child, saying that it was not necessarily planned as parent involvement but is still valuable contact.

Principal D was the only participant to mention changing the terminology to be more understanding of changing family dynamics within the community. Rather than using the word "parents," the school refers to all events as "family engagement." Events traditionally referred to as parent-teacher conferences are family conferences at the school represented by Principal D. They oftentimes leave out the words "parent" or "family" altogether so that all community members feel welcome to attend, understanding that sometimes students are in the care of neighbors or family friends.

Table 4.8. *Interview Q7: Strategies Used to Tailor Family Engagement*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Strategies</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Accommodating times
<i>Principal B</i>	Variety of options for participation

<i>Principal C</i>	Accommodating times
<i>Principal D</i>	Changing terminology from “parent” to “family”
<i>Principal E</i>	Accommodating times
<i>Principal F</i>	Accommodating times, activities for children

**Finding 5. Traditional activities, such as Back to School Night and Thanksgiving lunch, are the most highly attended within Title I elementary schools in rural Appalachia.**

The participants interviewed for this study reported that traditional events, which have been a part of the school culture for several years, are more highly attended than new initiatives which have been introduced in more recent years. These traditional events such as Thanksgiving lunch and fall festivals typically do not include academic components. In their research, McDowall and Schaughency (2017) discussed the multidimensional nature of parent involvement in elementary schools. They concluded

Programs implemented with the goal of strengthening partnerships between home and school, or the school and community, can lead to positive changes both in teachers’ attitudes and perceptions about involving parents, and in their engagement efforts (p. 362).

Reports from the participants in this study, along with the research from McDowall and Schaughency suggest that despite lacking the academic component, traditional parent engagement activities can have a positive effect on school engagement efforts and student success in school.



*Analysis to support finding 5.*

Interview Question 4. *What family engagement strategies has your school implemented that you think had a positive effect on school achievement and/or school-family partnerships? Why? What percentage of families was involved in these activities? How do you determine if a family engagement strategy was effective for your school?*

Three of the six principals reported traditional school events as having a positive effect on school-family partnerships. Principals B, C, and E signified events with a history as being the highest attended events held by the school. Principal E stated, “One of the biggest events is our Thanksgiving lunch. We will have 700 parents come through, or grandparents, and it’s such a tradition here that it’s a beautiful thing.” Principal B reported that the traditional fall festival is a community event in which the school staff has no problem getting volunteers to help host. Principal B also spoke about the annual Christmas program saying, “We have a crazy turnout for it, usually standing room only.” At this event, all students participate in the Christmas program which has taken place for over 25 years at the school. The biggest event for the school represented by Principal C is the traditional spring fling. “It occurs every March, is a community event, and the building is packed with people,” according to the principal. She reported that these traditional events bring the highest number of people into the school and help to build comradery between the school and the families. Additionally, all three principals believed canceling these events would cause an uproar within the community due to the historical context. While these events do not attribute to the overall success or achievement of the school and the students, they do help in stabilizing partnerships between the school, families, and the community.

Other events discussed by the principals as a success were events described as helping parents understand how to best help their children within the school environment. Principal A

discussed an initiative to provide Chromebooks to every student in the school. Starting in fourth grade, students can take them home to use each day. The school implemented a class for parents to learn how to use the Chromebooks effectively. Additionally, Principal A stated, “When the Chromebooks are taken home, the students do not have the same filters we have at school, so we want to educate the parents on how to look out for safety guidelines and that sort of thing.”

Principal B talked about a successful Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) night in which parents and their children did activities together which could easily be replicated at home. Principal D’s school holds a homework help night where the help is provided to the parents. Teachers provide strategies for how parents can help their child at home, as well as providing websites parents can use to better understand the content of homework. During this event, the students are taken to a different area of the school to do their own activities while the parents work with school staff. Principal E discussed an internet safety class offered to the parents throughout the school year at which the school resource officer is present to help educate them and answer questions they may have. Finally, the school represented by Principal E holds a reading night where parents learn what their children should be doing at home to improve reading skills.

All principals reported looking at data to be the best way to determine if family engagement strategies were successful. Principal B discussed the difficulty of monitoring the success of family engagement strategies, and that looking at the numbers is really the only way to measure success. Principal B stated,

Parent involvement is hard to monitor. We try to use sign-in sheets to track the number of participants and increase that each time by keeping things fresh, going about it in a

different way, and building it up to the kids. I think it's hard to do a lot anymore because everyone has so much going on.

Principal F also discussed the need to track the data, and added, "We also look at the feedback from those who attended or were involved. Were the parents involved or were they bored? You have to get their feedback and reflect on it." Four of the six principals mentioned throughout the interview, the need to keep the sign-in sheets for Title I reporting.

Table 4.9. *Interview Q4: Family Engagement Strategies with a Positive Effect*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Strategies</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Grant, state testing support, technology class for parents
<i>Principal B</i>	Traditional fall festival, Christmas program, STEM night
<i>Principal C</i>	Traditional spring fling
<i>Principal D</i>	Homework help night for parents, family engagement nights
<i>Principal E</i>	Traditional Thanksgiving lunch, internet safety class, Feeding America food truck event
<i>Principal F</i>	Title I parent reading night

Interview Question 5. *What family engagement strategies have your school implemented that you think did not go as planned? Why do you think this strategy was unsuccessful? What percentage of families was involved in these activities?*

Interview question number five produced diverse results from the principals. Principal A discussed the new initiative for homeroom sponsors and the lack of participation during the first stage of implementation. However, the principal was hopeful that with word of mouth and continued efforts, it would grow into a successful strategy to get parents into the school. Additionally, Principal A discussed the need to discontinue the annual fall festival at the school stating,

We used to have a lot of parents who would come in and volunteer, ask for donations, and different things. We just don't have that now and parents don't understand that it's hard for us to do it all with such a small staff.

The decision to not proceed with the traditional fall festival was not due to attendance population, but the lack of parents willing to help put on such a large event.

Principal B discussed a back-to-school movie night which did not go as planned. It was planned on the same evening that a local church was hosting a back to school night where they gave away free school supplies to students in the community. To combat this issue, the school combines with the church and now host a back-to-school event together at the school on the same evening. Similarly, Principal D discussed one of the more unsuccessful events hosted was due to timing. The school always schedules the annual fall festival event around home football games because the games are so heavily attended. The year the festival was unsuccessful was when they held it after Halloween because of the football schedule. Principal D stated, "In order for a family engagement event to be successful, you have to get the timing right."

Principal E reported having a difficult time coming up with an unsuccessful event because he feels even if one person grows from it, it is a success. He did discuss the Title I back to school meeting being a difficult event to get parents to attend because it is held during the regular school day, where less than 1% of parents attend. Principal C also had a difficult time coming up with events considered unsuccessful, for a different reason than Principal E. Principal C reported the school has not tried to implement anything new recently, despite their plan being to do so each year. They continue to organize events that have proven to be successful in past years.

Principal F gave a specific event that did not go as planned, a stargazing event held at night. He stated that it took so long for it to get dark, the families started getting impatient and listened to the host of the event talk for about an hour before being able to look through the telescope. He commented, “I don’t think the event was completely thought out. While the premise of the activity was amazing and the children learned a lot, the timing of the activity and the wait period made it difficult to keep everyone engaged.” Principal F also stated that any event where food is not provided to the families typically is much less populated than events that do serve food.

Table 4.10. *Interview Q5: Unsuccessful Family Engagement Strategies*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Strategies</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	General volunteering in the school
<i>Principal B</i>	Back to school movie night
<i>Principal C</i>	No response
<i>Principal D</i>	Fall festival
<i>Principal E</i>	Title I back to school meeting
<i>Principal F</i>	Stargazing family event

**Finding 6. Lack of funding prevents principals from implementing new programs or reinstating old programs with the goal of increasing family engagement.**

Over half of the principals reported the desire to have more funding specifically to implement new programs with the goal of improving family engagement. The implementation of this goal is supported by research completed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) which suggested that the more parents understand how to help their children, the more they will help.

Increased funding could pay for staff to work outside of contractual hours with the specific goal of increasing family engagement.

***Analysis to support finding 6.***

Interview Question 11. *Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to family engagement. Does your school... Have a parent liaison? Have a family center? Have a family contract? Have a school handbook for parents/families? Have a Web site with a specific portal for parental information?*

One out of the six principals has a parent liaison for the school. Principal D has a full-time family engagement coordinator. This position oversees all the family engagement activities and helps with the Title I program. This position is also in charge of running the parent resource center within the school. Principals A and C reported their schools do not have a parent liaison, but either the administration or the teachers take the lead on the role. Principal F shared that while the school does not have a parent liaison, the school division has a school social worker who works closely with the families when needed.

Two out of the six principals reported having a family center inside of the school. Principal F reported the family center is a new addition to the school. This participant said, The center is going to have brochures and any other important information we can share with parents. There will also be a counseling area in the center, some medical information, and resources parents can use at home to help their children. Principal D did not elaborate on the details of the center but did answer in the affirmative to the question. Principal A reported not having a family center but did share several churches in the area provide a space to help families within the community.

Four of the six principals reported having some sort of family contract. Principals A, B, and D reported sending home attendance contracts for parents or guardians to sign agreeing to follow the school attendance policy. Principal C shared the family contract is part of the handbook sent home where parents agree to following all policies set forth by the school. Principals E and F reported the only contracts signed are with outside agencies. Principal E shared that parents only have a contract to sign if social services becomes involved with the family for some reason. Principal F responded that parents only sign a contract if their child receives day treatment counseling services from an outside agency.

All principals reported having a school handbook and a website which offered information to parents and guardians. Like school websites, five of the six principals also mentioned using some sort of social media to share information with families and the community. Three out of the six principals did share that broadband service was weak in their areas and this limited some parents' ability to use the school website or access the social media pages. One principal shared that recent state legislation is bringing more broadband service to their area within the next 2 years.

Table 4.11. *Interview Q11: Policies and Positions within the School*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Parent Liaison</i>	<i>Family Center</i>	<i>Family Contract</i>	<i>School Handbook</i>	<i>Website</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Principal B</i>	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Principal C</i>	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Principal D</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Principal E</i>	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Principal F</i>	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Interview Question 12. *What family engagement strategies do you wish you could implement in your school? Why are you currently not implementing these?*

As seen in Table 4.12, the responses to question twelve were inconsistent. Principal A would like to reinstate the traditional fall festival which no longer occurs. This participant said, “I would love to bring back the fall festival because it was such a huge event for the community, but we just don’t have the resources for it anymore.” Principal C would like to start a family clinic and a family laundry center based on the needs assessed within the school community. Principal C replied,

We have so many students who have health problems and the parents will want to talk to the school nurse about those problems, but they must go to the doctor. I think it would really benefit our students and families to have a medical clinic that could be accessible to our school community.”

Principal D would simply like to have 100% parent involvement. Principal D shared, “I wish I could do a lot of things. I wish I could make every parent want to help. I wish I could save them all, but I can’t do that. I just do the best I can do to help as many as I can.”

Principals B, E, and F would like to start new programs within the school to better support parents. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) reported that higher parent education levels are associated with higher academic achievement for the child. A conclusion was that education leaders can implement programs in the school to encourage and support parental education. Principal B reported wanting to start a program with families to improve the chronic absenteeism rate. This participant stated, “We threaten the parents with court, and we take them to court, and then they are automatically dissatisfied with us. If there was a way we could turn that around, it would be great.” Principal E reported having applied for an after-school grant and



at the time of the interview was not sure if it was awarded. If so, some of the money from that grant could be used to bring families in as part of the after-school program for the students. Parents and families could even take part in attending field trips with their children as part of the program. Principal F has put much thought into a family engagement reading program that would not only put more books into the students' hands, but also teach the parents how they can best help improve their child's reading skills while at home. Principal F stated,

I think just getting kids to have books in their hands would be my biggest thing. And trying to convince them and their parents that a book is an amazing thing, and it can change the world. It really can. Because education is the one thing that's free in this world that you can start out in poverty and be successful in life because of that piece of paper.

He went on to discuss the relationship between high poverty and lower literacy skills which is supported in the literature review. Hetzel and Soto-Hinman (2007) reported, "Low-income children come into school in kindergarten with 3,000 words in their listening vocabulary, as opposed to a listening bank of 20,000 for the middle-income child" (p. 23). With the rise in the number of low-socioeconomic students comes the need to increase support for those students, the teachers, and their families.

Table 4.12. *Interview Q12: Family Engagement Wish List*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Strategies</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Reinstate the traditional fall festival
<i>Principal B</i>	Program to improve chronic absenteeism
<i>Principal C</i>	Family clinic, family laundry center
<i>Principal D</i>	100% parent involvement
<i>Principal E</i>	After school program which includes family participation
<i>Principal F</i>	Family engagement reading program

**Finding 7. Most principals use sign-in sheets to monitor family engagement strategies.**

All participants use either sign-in sheets or a head count to monitor the attendance and success of family engagement activities. Title I policy requires that parents be involved in creating a plan to monitor parental involvement in the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This plan must go beyond only keeping track of the attendance at school events; however, the researcher will further address parental involvement in creating this plan in Finding 9 below.

***Analysis to support finding 7.***

Interview Question 6. *What measures do you use to monitor family engagement at your school?*

Five of the six principals reported using sign-in sheets at all school-hosted family engagement activities, which is a requirement of Title I schools. Principal C reported doing a headcount but did not specifically state using a sign-in sheet to collect the names of participants. Additionally, Principals C and D discussed using informal conversations with parents to gauge their level of interest in the activities offered and using that anecdotal data to make changes for the next event. Principal E was the only participant to report using surveys to gather parent feedback, although Principal C mentioned the benefit of surveys. Principal C stated,

It's hard to ask parents to do some sort of survey. I'm sure some schools do that, and we probably should do something like that. In my experience, we've done something as simple as ask a few questions, and they just put a yes or no on an index card and turn it in when they leave."

Principal D also discussed the importance of meeting as a staff soon after each event to debrief about what went well and areas of needed improvement.

Table 4.13. *Interview Q6: Measures Used to Monitor Family Engagement*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Measures to Monitor Family Engagement</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Sign-in sheets
<i>Principal B</i>	Sign-in sheets
<i>Principal C</i>	Headcount, parent conversations
<i>Principal D</i>	Sign-in sheets, parent conversations
<i>Principal E</i>	Sign-in sheets, surveys
<i>Principal F</i>	Sign-in sheets

**Finding 8. Transportation is the biggest struggle for family engagement in rural communities with high poverty.**

Five of the six participants reported transportation as the biggest struggle for trying to involve parents in school activities. Residents in rural areas typically have fewer options for public transportation. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), an economic development agency of the federal government, is currently conducting research on rural public transportation issues. The ARC is hopeful that this project will help them, “better understand the extent to which existing public transportation services are adequately creating or enhancing access for disadvantaged populations, particularly in rural areas” (para. 1). This ongoing study supports the reports of the participants in this study that transportation is an issue for the Appalachian population living in poverty.

*Analysis to support finding 8.*

Interview Question 13. *What challenges do you face in trying to involve families at your school using your current family engagement strategies?*

Five of the six principals reported transportation as being the number one challenge in getting parents involved in the school. Principal A shared,

We do have parents who can't get here because of transportation, a lot of our families were affected by the mines that went bankrupt, so we have a lot of students that were affected by that at this school. With my two schools being 20 miles apart, or 20 minutes apart, not even 20 miles, you wouldn't think there would be such a big difference, but there really is.

In addition to transportation, Principal F reported that the closed-off community caused an issue for newcomers. This participant said,

A lot of parents from (this community) are very community-involved, but they also are a little skeptical of somebody new coming in. And they almost want to be like, 'Why are you doing this? We want our own teaching our kids.' And so, that's one of those things, just getting parents on board. Getting parents to know that what I'm doing is best for their children.

Different from the other participants, Principal B thinks that young parents pose a challenge in getting parents involved. Principal C replied,

When you look at them closely, they've not grown up themselves to get these kids to where they need to be, because they're not meeting the step one, get up, get ready. So, I think that's a lot of it, and that's huge, because I don't know how you get them to be involved when you can't even get them to do the simple things of getting the kids up and getting them on the bus.

She went on to discuss that she does not know how to make parents care or how to help them understand the basics of parenting.

Table 4.14. *Interview Q13: Family Engagement Challenges*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Challenges</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Transportation
<i>Principal B</i>	Young parents lacking necessary skills
<i>Principal C</i>	Transportation
<i>Principal D</i>	Transportation
<i>Principal E</i>	Transportation
<i>Principal F</i>	Transportation, closed off community

**Finding 9. Most schools use parents that are faculty members to contribute to the Title I schoolwide plan, rather than parents not employed by the school division.**

All participants reported having minimal parent participation in creation of the Title I schoolwide plan. Additionally, four out of the six participants stated that the only parents involved on the planning committee were faculty members who also had children in the school. Section 1118 of Title I policy states that all Title I schools must,

Conduct, with the involvement of parents, an annual evaluation of the content and effectiveness of the parental involvement policy in improving the academic quality of the schools served under this part, including identifying barriers to greater participation by parents in activities authorized by this section (with particular attention to parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any racial or ethnic minority background), and use the findings

of such evaluation to design strategies for more effective parental involvement, and to revise, if necessary, the parental involvement policies described in this section (A.2.E).

This research shows that most of the participants in this study, while in compliance with Title I policy, do not use parents who are also not staff members to assess the parental involvement plan used by the school.

***Analysis to support finding 9.***

Interview Question 8. *To what extent were families involved in the Title I parent involvement plan for your school?*

All principals reported having minimal parent participation in the creation of the Title I parent involvement plan for the school. Title I funds are provided to schools with the hope of supplementing instructional needs, rather than supplanting, to help level the playing field for students living in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). All schools have parents on the committee, which is a requirement of Title I policy; however, four of the six principals reported that the parents on the committee were also faculty members at the school. Principal C wants parents to understand what the Title I funds are used for because the majority of parents do not. This participant stated, “When talking with parents, I always make a point to say this is your federal tax money, and without this money some of our teachers would not be here working with your children.” Principal D agreed that parents do not understand how the Title I funding works by saying, “Parents don’t understand what it (Title I) means and that you can only use certain funds for certain things. There are times they have told me that they had to Google it just to better understand the program.” Principal E shared that most parents in the school represented did not even know their children were being serviced with Title I funds because they do not show up to the meetings or complete the surveys sent home asking for parent input.

Table 4.15. *Interview Q8: Parent Involvement in Schoolwide Title I Plan*

<i>Principal</i>	<i>Parental Participation in Title I Plan</i>
<i>Principal A</i>	Parents on committee, but not involved in plan
<i>Principal B</i>	Parents who are also faculty members
<i>Principal C</i>	Explain the plan to the parents and allow parent input
<i>Principal D</i>	Parent chosen for committee who is also a faculty member
<i>Principal E</i>	All parents invited but minimal parent participation
<i>Principal F</i>	All parents are welcome, but only two on the committee

### **Summary**

The participants' responses to many of the interview questions showed consistency in their professional opinions based on experience in the field. Most principals felt the strength of their school was the strong staff working each day to help the students. Most principals also felt that the biggest struggle for students living in rural poverty was the lack of basic needs being met such as food, water, shelter, and clothing. The majority of participants have set a family engagement goal of providing a welcoming atmosphere for all parents and families and work to do so by providing activities at times that are accommodating to the parents.

While most of the strategies implemented by these principals are traditional activities which have taken place over many years, many wished they had the funds to implement a variety of new programs to increase parent involvement. Each principal uses sign-in sheets or a headcount to monitor the current success of these events and feels that the greatest struggle for eliciting more participation is lack of transportation for the families. One of the least attended events at all schools is the creation of the Title I schoolwide plan. Most principals reported using teachers who are also parents to help write the plan in order to stay in compliance with Title I regulations.

The data analysis based on responses of the 6 principals to the 14 interview questions led to some emerging themes within the data. Additionally, Chapter 5 addresses strategies for practitioners based on the findings and implications for future policy in the area of family engagement strategies within Title I schools in rural Appalachia.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to inquire into effective family engagement strategies used to strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region. The research examined the perceived effectiveness of different family engagement strategies implemented by elementary school principals. The research question used to collect and analyze data on the topic was, what family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region?

### **Research Question**

The research questions used to guide this study were as follows. What family engagement strategies do elementary principals use, and how do they strengthen school-family partnerships in high-poverty schools within one rural Appalachian region?

#### **Sub Questions.**

1. What family engagement strategies do principals use in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? Why do they think the strategies are helpful in improving school achievement?
2. What family engagement strategies do principals wish they could implement in Title I elementary schools within rural Appalachia? What may be currently preventing them from implementing these strategies within their schools? Why do these principals think the strategies could be helpful in improving school achievement?

## **Review of Findings**

1. Principals feel that success of the school can be mostly attributed to the staff.
2. Principals feel that the biggest struggle for students living in rural poverty is the lack of basic needs.
3. Principals want to create a welcoming atmosphere for all parents and families.
4. Principals feel that providing family engagement activities after school hours is accommodating to parents.
5. Traditional activities, such as Back to School Night and Thanksgiving lunch, are the most highly attended within Title I elementary schools in rural Appalachia.
6. Lack of funding prevents principals from implementing new programs and reinstating old programs with the goal of increasing family engagement.
7. Most principals use sign-in sheets to monitor family engagement strategies.
8. Transportation is the biggest struggle for family engagement in rural communities with high poverty.
9. Most schools use parents that are faculty members to contribute to the Title I schoolwide plan, rather than parents not employed by the school division.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The principals interviewed for this study worked with elementary students living in poverty within rural Appalachia. Their responses to the interview questions provided data that produced findings on the influence of poverty on family engagement within the geographic

region. These findings can lead to better understanding of the barriers faced by principals wanting to support the students in their school using family engagement.

This study confirms that a big struggle for students living in rural poverty is the lack of basic needs. Participant responses prove that the principals and the staff in these schools go above and beyond the duties of their jobs to provide for student needs. This research shows that in order to help students living below the poverty line, school principals must make connections with community agencies and resources to provide basic needs that cannot be provided by the school alone. The willingness of the school principal to provide support for basic needs, such as food and clothing, to students could help with their goal to create a welcoming atmosphere for all students, parents, and families. As families experience the support of the school, the bridge of trust connecting the school with the families it serves will become stronger.

The principals participating in this study reported that providing family engagement activities after school hours is accommodating to parents; however, this is otherwise unknown because there was no documentation collected from parents whose children attend these schools. To better understand the authentic needs of the parents and guardians, it would benefit principals to include family members who are not staff members in creating the Title I schoolwide plan to ensure the needs of all students are being met through family engagement. Additionally, family surveys should be used to better understand these needs, including a potential solution to the lack of transportation, which is the biggest struggle for family engagement in rural communities with high poverty.

This research found that traditional activities such as Thanksgiving lunch, fall festivals, and spring flings are the most highly attended within Title I elementary schools in rural Appalachia. It would benefit school principals to use the high attendance at these events to build

upon school-family partnerships. All principals in this study reported trying new family engagement strategies within their schools. These new strategies could be incorporated during the traditional events to reach a greater number of parents, family members, and community members. Taking advantage of having more stakeholders in the school during these events could limit the need for additional events and could save money as funding is an issue for most of the participants.

Most importantly, principals of high poverty schools within rural Appalachia should spend time reflecting on the strategies they are using to promote family engagement within their schools. This reflection should be purposeful and include feedback from all school stakeholders including students, staff, families, and community members. It is strongly suggested that these principals build strong relationships with community partners who can support the school's effort in trying to provide basic needs for all students and invite these partners to help create a welcoming, trusting atmosphere within the school environment.

### **Practitioner Implications**

Elementary school principals in Title I schools within rural Appalachia should consider the findings of this study when deciding to assess and improve family engagement strategies within their schools.

1. Principals should train all staff members on how to effectively establish trust with the families of the students they are serving in order to maximize the potential of creating a welcoming atmosphere for all parents and guardians. The data suggest that staff members are the most influential factors in the success of a school.
2. Principals should include parents who are not staff members in the creation of the Title I schoolwide plan. If parents who do not work in the school are not involved in the

evaluation of parental involvement strategies, principals cannot truly assess the authentic needs of the families they are serving.

3. Principals should survey parents after each family engagement activity to better help evaluate the function and benefit of the program to parents and students.
4. The findings suggest that colleges and universities in rural Appalachia should educate aspiring administrators on the need to involve parents authentically in their school plans for family engagement. These principal preparation programs should also address the challenges current principals face in trying to engage families in school events and their child's education.

### **Policy Implications**

School systems in rural Appalachia should consider the findings in order to make changes to policy regarding parental involvement.

1. School policy should be changed to require schools to include parents, who are not staff members, on the Title I schoolwide plan to assess parental involvement at the school.
2. School policy should also require an effort to include at least 50% participation by parents in giving feedback on the schoolwide plan, either through face to face meetings or surveys.
3. School leaders, politicians, and activists should advocate for funding to lead to the reversal of rural population trends. Gurley (2016) reported,
 

There is evidence that rural populations will only continue to shrink in coming decades and that rural spaces will become more and more geographically and culturally isolated. It seems that the only way to reverse these trends is through continued efforts made by

activists, academics, and politicians at every level of government to call attention to rural poverty—efforts that may seem unattractive or futile. (p. 603)

4. Comprehensive funding should be provided by the state department of education to support Title I schools in managing the workload necessary to increase parental involvement in the schoolwide plan.

### **Conclusions**

This study contributes to the body of research on school-family partnerships from the view of the school principal. The focus on Title I elementary schools in rural Appalachia makes it specifically helpful for current principals in this geographic region. The researcher inferred compassion from all the participants and believes the interviews caused these principals to reflect on their own strategies regarding family engagement. The role of school principal in this era of accountability requires practitioners to purposefully reflect on all areas of the job, including family engagement.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

1. To further examine data on strengthening school-family partnerships towards improving the overall success of students living in poverty in rural Appalachia, it may be advantageous to conduct a case study of parents within the same geographic region. Research on the family's perceptions of the school's plan for parental involvement would help practicing principals to better understand the needs and desires of the population they are serving. It is important for school leaders to gather input from parents to ensure their needs are being met and that principals are not making unwanted assumptions about those needs.

2. This study could be adapted using both Distinguished Title I elementary schools and Non-Distinguished Title I elementary schools to determine if these findings are consistent across the schools.
3. The study could also be expanded by interviewing more principals within this geographic region to add more responses to the data set. The addition of more participants could lead to more extensive set of responses. This data would benefit professors working in principal preparation programs to better prepare practitioners for working with families in the role as principal.
4. Future research could also be completed on the specific findings of this study. Each finding could be studied in depth to gain a more extensive understanding of the impact on school-family relationships. This could be completed by asking principals within rural Appalachia to implement strategies based on the findings and tracking the family participation at the school based on the changes implemented.

### **Researcher Reflections**

The Chinese Proverb, “Tell me and I forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I understand,” is just as important when helping families as it is in the classroom while working with students. As an educator in a community within rural Appalachia, I understand the lack of resources available to students. They need a strong support system of school and family, especially those living in impoverished circumstances, to overcome the barriers they face each day. I am excited about the findings of this study because I feel they encourage principals to reflect upon their own strategies. I am happy to have added to the breadth of literature surrounding school-family relationships. It is my hope that practicing principals will review the findings and reflect on their own practices to help strengthen the relationships with families they

are serving and supporting. Finally, I hope that principals who are not currently implementing family engagement strategies will review the findings to help them implement an effective family engagement program to increase overall student achievement.



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**Appendix A**

This table contains the high-quality sources from the literature search and review process in relationship to the role of education leaders in building relationships between schools and families to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged children. It is color-coded based on central themes found during the review of literature. Themes in red focus on school leadership, themes in blue are associated with family engagement strategies, instructional strategies and needs are indicated in green, and funding, governance, and policy issues are purple.

Table 5.1. *Literature Review of Family Engagement on Improving Academic Achievement for Students Living in Poverty.*

Author and Year	Purpose/ Goals	Methods/Data Sources	Type(s) of Poverty	Challenges for Stakeholders	Central Themes
Auerbach (2009)	Portraits in leadership for family engagement in urban schools	Case Study – In-depth, semi-structured interviews	Urban	Administrators’ fear of parents can distance the relationship needed to improve student achievement.	<p>Meaningful family engagement is possible by taking proactive steps to achieve it.</p> <p>Taking a proactive approach to family engagement can help administrators deal with the stress of the job.</p> <p>Authentically engaging parents in the school community is essential to provide social justice for students.</p> <p>Schools that take a stand on children’s language learning appear more community-oriented.</p>

					<p>“Future administrators need more field experience working with parents and exposure to community-oriented leaders.” (p. 28)</p>
Bearden (2018)	Foundational tools for effective communication with families of student	Case Study of Highly Effective Education Leaders	ND	<p>Lack of relationships and effective communication hinder the ability for schools and families to best help their students.</p> <p>Communicating with others is often the most stressful part of a job and can lead to leaving the profession for educators who struggle in this area.</p>	<p>Educators must be honest about their preconceived thoughts and feelings toward parents. They must be willing to take the parent’s perspective into consideration.</p> <p>Educator mindsets must be reframed and motivating factors for family engagement should be honest and authentic.</p> <p>Appreciation for parents should be expressed often and is a tool which should be used to show gratitude when looking for school-family solutions.</p> <p>Educators should dig deeper and ask questions to learn more about the families of the students they serve.</p> <p>Principals should work to develop a rapport with parents and guardians of students in their schools in order to learn more about their insights and solutions for helping the student succeed.</p> <p>Celebrating success with all stakeholders, including families, strengthens those relationships.</p>
Bradley (2010)	Parental involvement and helping academic	Pearson Correlation Coefficient – Survey Results	Urban	Students who have difficulty learning to read are disproportionately poor.	Need for schools to improve family engagement programs

	achievement for African American males	and Achievement Scores			On-site parental involvement coordinator would be beneficial.  Parents need education on reading development and instruction.  Schools need support from higher education institutions to provide education on effective family engagement.
Budge & Parrett (2018)	Disrupting poverty using effective practices in the classroom	Narrative - Interviews	Urban, Rural, Situational	Educator bias can prevent students living in poverty from receiving an appropriate and fair education.	Five classroom practices that permeate the culture of successful high-poverty schools: (1) caring relationships and advocacy, (2) high expectations and support, (3) commitment to equity, (4) professional accountability for learning, and (5) the courage and will to act.
Cascio & Reber (2013)	Poverty gap in school spending after Title I	Correlational Study – Title I funding and per pupil expenditures	ND	High poverty states spent less money on education.  Mismanagement of federal funds prevents supplemental academic opportunities for students in poverty.	Title I narrowed gap in spending, but program too small to close gap entirely.  Negative correlation in spending and poverty has decreased since Title I.  More effective when Title I funds are tied to state accountability systems
Coruk (2018)	Reveal opinions of school principals on importance of public relations	Content Analysis - Interviews	ND	School principals do not always have the expertise needed to effectively communicate with members of the community.  Lack of expertise can hinder the principal from sharing the best aspects of the school including the mission and the vision.	The awareness of the school principal on public relations can help to improve family partnerships.  Increased modes of communication make it easier for principals to connect with the public.

Principals and teachers should be trained on public relations and communication.

Public relations specialists in schools can increase the effectiveness of school-family partnerships.

Crowe, Connor, & Petscher (2009)	Relations among reading curricula, poverty, and first through third grade reading achievement	Hierarchical Linear Modeling - estimating mean growth trajectories allowed the examination of how children's SES status affected growth over the school year (7 months)	Free/ Reduced Lunch	<p>On national literacy assessments, students in lower SES homes continue to score lower than students in homes that do not qualify for free lunch programs.</p> <p>Children from lower-SES homes often begin school with weaker language and literacy skills than do children from higher-SES homes</p> <p>Students from lower-SES families tend to have fewer literacy opportunities compared to their higher-SES peers.</p>	<p>“A well-designed, evidence-based core curriculum can assist in raising and sustaining achievement for students in lower SES homes.” (p. 211)</p> <p>“Adjusting instruction according to students' individual language and literacy needs may be more effective than more global “one size fits all” approaches.” (p. 211)</p> <p>Curriculum alone cannot positively affect a student’s literacy skills. It takes an evidence-based curriculum provided by a strong teacher.</p>
Johnson, Avineri, & Johnson (2017)	Exposing links between language gaps and poverty	Critical discourse analysis of 63 different online-accessible articles and stories focused on the word gap between 2012 and 2015	ND	<p>Students from low SES backgrounds experience verbal deprivation and challenges including less access to healthcare and inadequate nutrition.</p> <p>Language patterns differ in lower SES households.</p>	<p>The meaning of linguistic achievement varies depending on the source and type of assessment used.</p> <p>“Home-language skills should not be targeted as a deficit for remediation.” (p. 18)</p> <p>“Helping children understand the value of different language proficiencies across multiple contexts should be the goal—without solely promoting the legitimacy of</p>

					language forms prioritized in school.” (p. 18)
					Educators should value social language skills and include families with diverse linguistic styles in engagement programs.
Mullen & Kealy (2013)	Acute Poverty Challenges Perceptions of Practicing Teacher Researchers on Poverty	A priori analytic approach focusing on research questions	Urban, Rural	Rural: Difficulty attracting quality teachers, less access to services, lack of parenting skills, attendance problems. Urban: Inadequate services, substandard teaching, conflicting beliefs about equity among teachers.	Teacher as advocate for equity for children living in poverty  A socially responsible compass for educators  Teachers demonstrate leadership helping narrow achievement gap for students living in poverty.
Owens (2016)	Essential leadership skills needed to promote student achievement in high poverty elementary schools	Delphi Technique – Three rounds of surveys	ND	Greater risk of academic failure. Future implications: fewer job opportunities, lack of adequate housing and health care, more susceptible to involvement with crime.	Highly effective leaders: establish clear and high expectations, demonstrate knowledge of curriculum, have strong communication skills, regularly monitor data and instruction, work collaboratively, establish relationships, model behaviors, and establishes trust.
Payne (2008)	Strategies to raise achievement for students living in poverty	ND	ND	Home language often differs from school language for students living in poverty.	Building relationships with students and families and understanding student resources is essential.  Educators must teach formal speech, important school skills/rules, and help students learn how to ask appropriate questions to access more knowledge

<p>The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017)</p>	<p>State trends in child well-being</p>	<p>ND</p>	<p>Rural, Urban, Situational, Generational</p>	<p>Despite improvement in reading proficiency, the progress has been slow and there are still gaps for underprivileged students.</p> <p>Students living in poverty are less likely to have a nurturing home which is necessary for better social-emotional and learning outcomes.</p> <p>“Parents struggling with financial hardship have fewer resources to invest in children and are more prone to stress and depression, which can interfere with effective parenting” (p. 41)</p>	<p>Higher parent education levels are associated with higher academic achievement for the child.</p> <p>“Well-implemented, high-quality prekindergarten for at-risk students can help narrow the achievement gap” (p. 8)</p> <p>Policymakers can improve and increase access to necessary early childhood education for students living in poverty.</p>
<p>Touchton &amp; Acker-Hocevar (2001)</p>	<p>The importance of the lens of the principal to effectively provide appropriate and adequate instruction for students living in poverty</p>	<p>Ethnographic Phenomenological approach</p>	<p>Central and Southeast Florida</p>	<p>“Often, students of poverty live outside mainstream social networks, which could provide them with the support to make the transition into another class.”</p> <p>Teachers do not fully understand how their roles must differ in a lower SES school. Middle class learning is the norm to which all other learning is compared.</p>	<p>Educators must be educated on effects of poverty to create a more socially just educational experience for poor students.</p> <p>Accountability testing alone cannot improve achievement for students living in poverty.</p> <p>“Educators play a critical role in helping poor families increase their expectations for their children's success and provide them with the necessary social capital to navigate the system.” (p. 17)</p> <p>“School leaders need to be aware of the effects of poverty on teaching and learning</p>

and the research on schools that are making a difference.” (p. 18)

“School leaders must systematically study the effects of pedagogical practices on improved student learning and achievement in high poverty schools and schools of color and create time for school discussion to ensure the practices become part of the culture of the school.” (p. 18)

Note:

ND – Not Discussed

SES – Socioeconomic Status

System for Tracking Sources:

School leadership

Family engagement strategies

Instructional strategies and needs

Funding, Governance, and Policy

## Appendix B

This table shows the relationships between the selected interview questions and the review of the literature. These questions created and used by Smith et. al (2011), were pilot tested by the same researchers prior to data collection and refined to remove any possible bias. The conclusions from their research suggested that the interview questions used gained the data necessary to relate their findings to Epstein’s (2011) Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships.

Table 6.1. *Connections of Interview Protocol Questions to Relevant Literature and Research.*

Interview Question	Source(s)	Relevance
How do you feel your school is performing based on the newest accreditation guidelines provided by your state education department? What are your school’s greatest strengths? In what areas does your school struggle?	Auerbach (2009), Bradley (2010), Touchton & Acker-Hocevar (2001)	School administrators must have the will and courage to act on behalf of economically disadvantaged students.
How does rural poverty affect your student population? Can you give an example of a student in your school who lives in rural poverty?	Budge & Parrett (2018)	Importance of leaving our comfort zone to examine our practices to best overcome inequities created by poverty. Many times, inequities prevent parents or guardians of students from fully participating in the child’s education.
What are the goals of family engagement at your school? (prompts: benefits to the school, to the students, to the whole family/community). What do you feel are the benefits of family engagement?	Bearden (2018)	Effective family engagement leads to developing rapport, gaining respect, supporting others, engaging listeners, developing insight, and increasing productivity.



Family engagement needs to be authentic and can be achieved by taking proactive steps to encourage family participation.

What family engagement strategies have your school implemented that you think had a positive effect on school achievement and/or school-family partnerships? Why? What percentage of families was involved in these activities? How do you determine if a family engagement strategy was effective for your school?

Casico & Reber (2013), Touchton & Acker-Hocevar (2001)

Accountability testing alone cannot induce the change economically disadvantaged students need to improve academic achievement; however, according to these researchers, Title I policy is more effective when the funds are directly related to state accountability systems.

One goal of the Title I program is to help at-risk populations of students meeting challenging goals and improve their academic achievement.

What family engagement strategies have your school implemented that you think did not go as planned? Why do you think this strategy was unsuccessful? What percentage of families was involved in these activities?

What measures do you use to monitor family engagement at your school? (prompts: counting number of hours, statistics on attendance at events, satisfaction surveys, etc.)

Bearden (2018)

Relationship building strategies can be helpful in learning parental insights and can create solutions to help students succeed.

How has your school tried to tailor family engagement opportunities to the needs of working parents, single-parent households,

other family members helping to raise students, or foster parents? Please explain.

To what extent were families involved in the Title I parent involvement plan for your school?

Coruk 2018

Connection between public relations and the role of the school principal.

Auerbach (2009),  
Bearden (2018), Budge & Parrett (2018)

Families are important in decision-making, and they should also be included in celebrating the success of the school along with all other stakeholders.

Has the level of involvement changed over time? If yes, in what ways?

Do you think the level of family engagement at your school is different from other public schools outside of your geographic region? If so, why and in what ways?

Ansell (2011)

Evidence-based family engagement programs are plentiful and can assist school leaders in creating a more comprehensive school program for parental involvement. Despite the variety of programs available, school systems do not always have the money needed to implement these research-based programs.

Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to family engagement. Does your school...Have a parent liaison? Have a family center? Have a family contract? Have a school handbook for parents/families? Have a Web site with a specific portal for parental information?

Auerbach (2009),  
Bradley (2010), and  
Touhcton & Acker-  
Hocevar (2001)

High importance of education leaders in educating others to ensure that best practices are being used in schools to promote achievement for students with low socioeconomic status.

	Coruk (2018)	Public relations specialists in schools can increase the effectiveness of school-family partnerships.
	Rothmier (2011)	When the entire school community (administrators, teachers, staff, parents, students and community) work together using all the available programs, training, and community supports to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students, educators can close the literacy achievement gap between those students and children who are not low-income. By closing the literacy achievement gap, school community members increase students' literacy, which provides those students a foundation for success in school and life.
<p>What family engagement strategies do you wish you could implement in your school? Why are you currently not implementing these?</p>		
<p>What challenges do you face in trying to involve families at your school using your current family engagement strategies?</p>	Auerbach (2009)	Importance of graduate programs including formal education in the area of school-family partnerships and effective communication.
	Gorski (2017)	Learning to see the barriers faced by economically disadvantaged students is the responsibility of school leaders.
<p>What sorts of family engagement strategies would you like to see implemented in your school in coming years?</p>	The Annie C. Casey Foundation (2017)	Pre-Kindergarten experiences can increase students' chances for high school graduation and success later into adulthood. Early education is a proven indicator

to help improve the academic success for underprivileged students.

## Appendix C



Completion Date 17-Feb-2019  
Expiration Date 16-Feb-2022  
Record ID 30623895

This is to certify that:

**Emily Boyles**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**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/?wa4b14ba8-1356-40a6-b7b8-3c5cc84e5ef2-30623895](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wa4b14ba8-1356-40a6-b7b8-3c5cc84e5ef2-30623895)

## Appendix D

### Family Engagement Interview Protocol

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

(Briefly describe the project)

Questions:

1. How do you feel your school is performing based on the newest accreditation guidelines provided by your state education department?
  - a. What are your school's greatest strengths?
  - b. In what areas does your school struggle?
2. How does rural poverty affect your student population?
  - a. Can you give an example of a student in your school who lives in rural poverty?
3. What are the goals of family engagement at your school? (prompts: benefits to the school, to the students, to the whole family/community).
  - a. What do you feel are the benefits of family engagement?
4. What family engagement strategies has your school implemented that you think had a positive effect on school achievement and/or school-family partnerships? Why?
  - a. What percentage of families was involved in these activities?
  - b. How do you determine if a family engagement strategy was effective for your school?
5. What family engagement strategies has your school implemented that you think did not go as planned? Why do you think this strategy was unsuccessful?
  - a. What percentage of families was involved in these activities?
6. What measures do you use to monitor family engagement at your school? (prompts: counting number of hours, statistics on attendance at events, satisfaction surveys, etc.)
7. How has your school tried to tailor family engagement opportunities to the needs of working parents, single-parent households, other family members helping to raise students, or foster parents? Please explain.
8. To what extent were families involved in the Title I parent involvement plan for your school?
9. Has the level of involvement changed over time? If yes, in what ways?
10. Do you think the level of family engagement at your school is different from other public schools outside of your geographic region? If so, why and in what ways?

11. Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to family engagement. Does your school...
  - a. Have a parent liaison?
    - i. If so, is the position voluntary or paid?
    - ii. If paid, does the money come from the general operating budget?
  - b. Have a family center?
    - i. If so, what is the space used for and how often is it used?
  - c. Have a family contract?
    - i. If so, what is the content of the contract?
    - ii. How is the contract enforced?
  - d. Have a school handbook for parents/families?
  - e. Have a Web site with a specific portal for parental information? (review prior to interview)
    - i. If so, what information is it used to convey (prompts: newsletter, students' ...)
12. What family engagement strategies do you wish you could implement in your school?
  - a. Why are you currently not implementing these?
13. What challenges do you face in trying to involve families at your school using your current family engagement strategies? [Prompts: involving low-income parents or families, lack of transportation, sustaining involvement in the long term]
14. What sorts of family engagement strategies would you like to see implemented in your school in coming years?

The interviewer will say to the participant: Thank you for participating in this interview. I assure you that your responses will remain anonymous by not identifying you, your school, division, or region.

## Appendix E

### Superintendent Permission Letter

Dear Superintendent:

I am currently working on my dissertation as part of the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral program through Virginia Tech. I am also an educator in Region VII of southwest Virginia. My research is guided by my dissertation chair, Dr. Carol Mullen. The purpose of my study is to examine the role of school principals in implementing family engagement strategies towards improving school achievement in elementary schools within rural Appalachia. I have created an interview protocol to use in interviewing subjects in order to collect data for this study. All interview questions included in the protocol are guided by an extensive review of the literature surrounding the topic. Prior to these interviews, I analyzed data surrounding school achievement for Title I schools in rural Appalachia. Based on this data, I am seeking permission to interview a principal at one of the schools in your division. Allowing me this opportunity will help provide better data of specific family engagement practices utilized in this school.

The information provided by the principal will be confidential. All responses will remain anonymous by not identifying the principal, school, division, or region. The results of the interviews will be analyzed and shared with your principal. Participation is voluntary and greatly appreciated.

This research may provide data that will improve school-family partnerships in Title I elementary schools in rural Appalachia. These improved partnerships and strategies could have the potential to improve school achievement for schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Please respond to this letter with correspondence granting permission or denial to contact the principal. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Emily T. Boyles  
Doctoral Student, Virginia Tech  
Grayson County Public Schools  
Email: [etboyles@vt.edu](mailto:etboyles@vt.edu)  
Phone: 276-237-3667



## Appendix F

### Participant Letter

Dear Principal:

I am currently working on my dissertation as part of the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral program through Virginia Tech. I am also an educator in Region VII of southwest Virginia. The purpose of my study is to examine the role of school principals in implementing family engagement strategies towards improving school achievement in elementary schools within rural Appalachia. I have created an interview protocol to use in interviewing subjects in order to collect data for this study. All interview questions included in the protocol are guided by an extensive review of the literature surrounding the topic. Prior to these interviews, I analyzed data surrounding school achievement for Title I schools in rural Appalachia. Based on this data, I have been granted permission by your superintendent to request your participation in this study. Allowing me this opportunity will help provide better data of specific family engagement practices utilized in your school.

The information you provide will be confidential. All responses will remain anonymous by not identifying the principal, school, division, or region. The results of the interviews will be analyzed and shared with you once the dissertation is successfully defended. Participation is voluntary and greatly appreciated.

This research may provide data that will improve school-family partnerships in Title I elementary schools in rural Appalachia. These improved partnerships and strategies could have the potential to improve school achievement for schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Please respond to this letter with correspondence expressing your willingness or unwillingness to participate. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Emily T. Boyles  
Doctoral Student, Virginia Tech  
Grayson County Public Schools  
Email: [etboyles@vt.edu](mailto:etboyles@vt.edu)  
Phone: 276-237-3667

## Appendix G



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>

### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** June 18, 2019  
**TO:** Carol Ann Mullen, Emily Tolley Boyles  
**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Elementary Principals's Role in Implementing Family Engagement Strategies: Towards Improving the School Achievement in Title I Schools within One Rural Appalachian Region

**IRB NUMBER:** 19-305

Effective June 18, 2019, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) and Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 a new request to the IRB 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: **June 18, 2019**

### 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.

*Invent the Future*