

**The Networking of Rural School Administrators**

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Title: The Networking of Rural School Administrators

This dissertation examines the professional networking practices of rural school administrators, with a focus on Oregon's educational leaders. As rural school administrators often face significant isolation due to geographic and professional barriers, networking has the potential to provide professional support, support resource sharing, and improve job satisfaction. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study collected quantitative data via surveys and qualitative insights from focus groups to assess how rural administrators perceive networking, their engagement in networking activities, and the impact of these networks on reducing feelings of loneliness and stress.

The findings reveal that while rural administrators value networking, many experience challenges in participating due to time constraints and isolation. Networking opportunities, including face-to-face and virtual formats, are generally available in the state where the study was set, but they are often underutilized. Participants reported that networking provides essential learning and combats job-related isolation, enhancing both their professional growth and well-being. They expressed a strong desire for face-to-face opportunities to network with other rural education leaders.

Implications of this research underscore the need for more structured networking support, particularly in rural settings, to bolster administrators' access to peers and the resources they might provide. Future research could explore more specific frameworks and programs that

facilitate sustainable, accessible networking opportunities for rural school leaders and the effectiveness of face-to-face versus virtual networking.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

*One afternoon the phone rings as the rural school administrator enters their office prior to the sun rising for the school day. As the school leader answers the phone, they jiggle their mouse to open their school email. On the phone is a school board member wanting to discuss the football coaching performance from the weekend game. As the leader listens to the board member, they click through various staff emails, answering as appropriate. Turning from the email to the pile of papers left by the administrative assistant the afternoon before, the school leader signs staff maternity leave paperwork, school cafeteria purchase orders, field trip requests and the technology lease agreement for the new student laptops. Still listening to the board member, after thumbing through the documents to sign, a written complaint about the social studies curriculum is placed in the items to view along with a rough draft agenda of the next school board meeting. Looking at the calendar of events for the day shows two formal observations of new teachers on the docket as well as a meeting with the parent teacher association and the athletic booster club. All this, including ending the board member football phone conversation, has to be accomplished before noon because the school leader will need to drive the mini-bus to the college fair for the seven senior students exploring next steps in their college and career journey. All this on the plate of one rural administrator in one morning.*

Nearly one-third of American public schools are considered to be rural education sites. Nearly one-quarter of all school children in the United States are enrolled in these rural schools. Over half of all operating regular school districts are located in rural areas as well (NCES, n.d.). Of course, there is great variety in rural schools as well. Rural school districts can range from a district encompassing nearly 10,000 square miles of land, with students coming from over 2-hours' drive time away to stay in a public dormitory during the week, to a rural school district a short drive away from a large population center. Rural school district boundaries can frequently be large, with a small population that is quite often declining (Duncan & Stock, 2010). Whether 40 minutes or over two hours from a shopping center, rural schools are charged with educating students, a task made all the more challenging in rural settings due to geographic isolation.

In 2020, the United States Census Bureau defined *urban areas* as locations with high housing density, rather than based on population density, as in 2010. Regardless of whether one is using the 2010 or 2020 definition of what it means to be *urban*, approximately 81% of the U.S. population lives in an urban area. Those areas not classified as urban are classified as *rural*. To qualify as urban, an area must have at least 2,000 housing units or have a population of at least 5,000 (US Census Bureau, 2023). To qualify as rural, an area must have fewer than 2,000 housing units or have a population under 5,000. Even more remote, areas classified as *frontier* are defined as having fewer than six people per square mile (Oregon Office of Rural Health, n.d.).

The school leader is a vital position in ensuring that schools and school districts function and that student learning takes place. Multiple studies have documented the link between academic success and the quality of school leaders. The school leader is second only to the teacher in impacting student learning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2022; Grissom & Lindsay, 2021; Marzano et al., 2005; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). As Stewart and Matthews (2018) note, “Many studies have established that the quality of a principal and his or her impact on academic success of the school is powerful” (p. 1). Prior research on the role of school administrators has primarily focused on those working in urban or suburban districts. In their 2013 review of the literature on the challenges faced by rural principals, Preston et al. noted, “a limitation we identified was the general lack of research addressing the challenges that principals face specifically in rural communities” (p. 1). This limitation remains true a decade later, in 2023, despite the prevalence of rural schools in the United States.

I use the term *school leader* to encompass multiple roles in this manuscript. In rural settings a district superintendent may serve solely in the superintendent role, but they might also

serve in a dual role as superintendent-principal. In other rural settings, a school leader may serve as a principal and be supervised by a superintendent. This document will analyze school leaders in rural settings that encompass all three of these differing roles, but have in common limited access to other school leaders due to a variety of factors.

### **Challenges Faced by School Leaders**

Fostering student learning and student achievement, whether the focus is on higher learning or the ability to read at grade level in the third grade, is not the only job of school leaders. Yes, supporting the learning of our youth is quite important to the majority of school leaders, but additional priorities also rise to the forefront. In light of the tragic school shootings in recent history, school safety has become a priority. School funding, or the lack of school funding, often rises to the top of school leaders' minds, as do the recent debates about critical race theory in the classroom and the highly-charged political debates happening in our national and state political arenas that are spilling over into our school board elections and then into schools.

School leaders in rural settings may have additional stressors that their urban and suburban counterparts do not. These rural stressors can be amplified by the mandates created by state and national governments. Rural school and district leaders, unlike their urban or suburban counterparts who benefit from an administrative support staff with sizable resources, must meet the same standards as larger urban districts, with the same accountability standards set by the state and federal government, but without much support. Often in rural settings, school leaders are the sole administrator in their school and their school district. The rural school leader may be stretched thin and hold multiple roles that may include the district superintendent, kindergarten through high school principal, district transportation supervisor, district athletic director, district

special education coordinator, and teacher of multiple classes (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).

Rural school leaders may find themselves responsible for nearly every aspect of a school district including but not limited to “accountability, planning, monitoring, reporting, school performance” (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006, p. 78). As Ashton and Duncan (2013) note:

Rural principals often find themselves responsible for all aspects of the daily running of the school, including: budgetary issues, human resources, school discipline, conflict management between various stakeholders, as well as, serving as instructional leader, working with stakeholder groups (PTO), reporting to the superintendent . . . The list could go on. (p. 7)

Preston et al. (2013) note that rural school leaders often struggle with taking on funding issues, infrastructure, travel to non-web-based professional development opportunities, budget creations and accountability measures without anyone else as support. The context of the rural school is significant, as principals in these schools work within, as Wieczorek and Manard (2018) write, “social communities that require them to fulfill multiple roles and unique responsibilities that encompass the school and the community” (p. 1).

### ***Isolation Presents a Substantial Challenge***

School leaders, regardless of the location in which they work, face many challenges. These challenges are amplified for those who lead in rural schools. Parson et al. (2016) collected data in a North Dakota study of rural principals and reported that the vast majority executed their roles in greater isolation than their urban or suburban counterparts, with no one to delegate to or share job responsibilities with. Likewise, Ashton and Duncan (2013) have described conditions

found within rural schools that can present challenges to new administrators and ultimately all school leaders. These conditions might include geographic isolation that focuses the school as the center of the community. Conditions also include school leader cultural isolation that prevents diffusion of effort and inadequate staffing, requiring individuals to wear multiple hats that limit specialization.

Another condition linked closely to isolation is personal loneliness. Rural school leaders are typically highly visible members of the community, and this high personal visibility is complicated, by a social communication network that moves quickly through the community. Southworth (2004) “found that rural principals, especially in small schools, when compared to medium and large schools, were more isolated from resources, other principals, and leadership programs” (p. 2). Geographic and social isolation were contributing factors for two-thirds of respondents in decisions to leave principal jobs in a Minnesota rural principal study (Hansen, 2018). Hansen (2018) interviewed six Minnesota rural elementary principals who recently left their positions to determine which factors influenced their leaving. Two-thirds of the participants stated environmental factors of geographic and social isolation impacted their decision to leave.

Maxwell (2015) wrote that the job of the school principal is often referred to as the “loneliest position in K-12 education” (p. 2). Being alone at the top of a school districts with a lack of familiar social interactions can lead to a feeling of isolation (Kamrath, 2022). The school leader is surrounded by people all day, but the school leader, including the principal and superintendent, can most definitely be considered isolated from job-alike peers. Echoing this sentiment is a principal coach as cited in Wells et al. (2021), who noted that “Rural principals are so lonely... even if they don’t know it” (p. 52).

Isolation is keeping leaders from collaborating, and this lack of collaboration is contributing to leaders exiting the profession (Salazar, 2007). As school accountability under *No Child Left Behind* and *Every Student Succeeds Act* increases, the data are clear that the school leader job is one that is gaining momentum in terms of turnover. Data from a decade ago brought to light that 1 in 5 principals leave positions each year and that principal turnover is negatively impacting student achievement. Roughly 1 in 10 principals in public schools left the profession between school years 2020-21 and 2021-22. In the same time frame, principals with over 10 years of experience left at an increased rate of 15% (NCES, 2023). Principal turnover rate is higher in rural areas where professional isolation is increased (Hansen, 2018). Rural superintendents follow a similar trend as Zuckerman et al. (2023) wrote “more recent research suggests the turnover rates of rural superintendents remain higher compared to those of non-rural peers” (p. 56). Oregon, a largely rural state, is no exception to the turnover of superintendents. Of Oregon’s 197 school districts, 60 had new superintendents in 2022 or 2023 (Associated Press, 2023).

### ***Stress Can Impact School Leaders Negatively***

School leaders are experiencing stress due to many issues noted previously and the stress for many is resulting in, as Klocko and Justus (2019) note, “the general loss of joy in the role of school principal” (p. 32). Stress is impacting the school leaders, and in return, impacting the organization as a whole. School leader stress can transfer to the teachers and ultimately be transferred to students. Stress may result in poor leadership and lack of joy and may prompt school leader turnover and potentially teacher turnover (Martin & Clemensen, 2022).

Principals influence teacher outcomes, and they do so through creating positive and supportive working and learning conditions. These conditions play a strong role in both

attracting and retaining teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Teachers cite principal support as one of the most important factors in their decision to stay in a school or in the profession (Podolsky et al., 2016). Poor school environments set in motion by poor school leadership, which may be set in motion by leader isolation, risk negatively impacting the ability to retain or recruit teachers and undermine student learning (Klocko & Justus, 2019).

To adapt to the ever-changing education profession, it is crucial that school leaders continue to grow and learn throughout their career. In the past few decades, school leaders have been tasked with learning innovative technology and about social-emotional learning. They have been expected to find ways to address learning loss due to the COVID pandemic and to implement equity-centered policies. With so many changing expectations being placed on them, school leaders must continually develop to ensure school success. The variety of challenges presented to rural school leaders makes rural districts less attractive for both recruitment of new leaders and retention of those in the job (Zuckerman et al., 2023).

### ***Professional Networking: A Potential Source of Hope***

Bauer and Brazer (2013) and Bauer et al. (2019) studied school leaders and concluded that lower degrees of perceived isolation produced greater levels of satisfaction. Social supports in the study were defined as principals experiencing guidance, having opportunities in place to encourage a sense of connectedness, and receiving resources from other professionals (Cazer, 2020). However, the literature is limited on rural school leaders working in isolation and networking with others.

The early studies on networking and isolation by Garber (1991) explored school leader networking prior to the majority of rural homes and schools using the internet extensively. Garber (1991) noted that “Generally, K-12 rural school principals are least

likely to network about anything. Their isolation is doubled—once by the isolation of the job and once by geographic isolation” (p. 11). The 1991 study had administrators networking about staffing, student outcomes, scheduling and other day to day operations. The administrators’ most commonly used methods of networking were: “(a) doing favors for other administrators, (b) attending social events or professional conferences where other administrators are likely to be present, (c) calling to provide helpful information or offer assistance to another administrator, and (d) talking to other administrators before, during or after meetings” (Garber, 1991, p. 9).

In a previous study, Howley et al. (2002) note that “For rural principals, the ability to exchange ideas with peers (i.e., "networking") seems to be an extremely important feature of professional development initiatives” (p. 2). Face to face and telecommunication technologies allowed for experiences and relationship creation for those experiencing like situations (Howley et al., 2002). Examples from multi-state networking opportunities have school leaders saying the strengths of the program were, “support and networking” and “... the ability to connect with other principals” (Martin & Clemensen, 2022, p. 15).

External stressors for school leaders include making difficult decisions in isolation or in what some term a “fishbowl” (where their every action is on public display and subject to a great deal of scrutiny) such as those associated with Covid-19 school shutdown and response (Zuckerman, et al, 2022). Despite the many technological changes (e.g., widespread access to the internet and the introduction of the cellular phone that eliminated charges for long distance calling) that have occurred since Garber’s study was published in 1991, many school leaders still report that they feel isolated or alone in their role (Stewart & Matthews, 2018; Wells et al., 2021;

Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Preston et al. (2013) noted that “Much of the research on the professional development for rural principals documents that rural principals find it more difficult to network with other principals” (p. 5). Darling-Hammond (2022) reported that “nearly half of principals did not have regular access to a peer network” (p. 48). Isolation, lack of diversity in rural viewpoints, travel expenses, and extreme workloads expected of rural school leaders are all school leader networking deterrents (Preston et al., 2013).

Although school leader networking can be difficult for various reasons including isolation, Stewart and Matthews (2018) concluded that in the “isolated and overloaded position...principals might benefit from more formalized opportunities for networking and collaborating with other principals” (p. 11). Literature supports the contention that school leaders should collaborate within a network of other principals and have a mentor in order to learn and implement best practices. Several studies have concluded that networking and mentoring are effective models to support principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2013; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Wells et al., 2021). Parson et al. (2016) suggested that isolated rural principals require ongoing and specialized professional development to focus their time on instructional leadership and find opportunities to collaborate with other principals. In other words, networking is suggested by many scholars to improve the practices of school leaders.

Although not ideal, as relationships often require a personal touch, technology cannot be removed from the conversation on effective mentoring and networking. Electronic networks including social media, video conferencing, and emails can present opportunities to connect with those in distant locations while saving both time and money. A leadership mentoring program study allowing matches of those from great distances provided better mentor-mentee matches

due to the technology use that also alleviated distance issues. Most participants indicated they would continue using social media in professional growth (Hildreth et al., 2018).

When discussing the positives of school leader networking, it is important to define what is classified as networking and also what it is not. Networking is professional colleague desired interactions; it is not community interactions or being on call for the community or as one principal was cited in Lock et al. (2012) as saying, “You become very public property” (p. 70), when referring to his role in the community. This is not networking. Professional networking could, however, be discussing with a professional network how to handle such community situations when present and how to prevent these situations from becoming problematic.

One school leader network participant, as cited by Wells et al. (2021), noted, “I don’t have data to back it up. Just a general feeling that, at least for the principals that I work with, they seem to enjoy having someone outside their district to just talk to.” The leaders networking in the Southern United States found that those networking “had the ability to reach outside the county and within for support,” and that the networking provided opportunities for school leaders to “share ideas or problem-solve” (p. 52). The study concluded that members of school leader networks reported that they perceived the networking opportunities to be beneficial (Wells et al., 2021).

For rural school leaders, the ability to exchange ideas with peers (i.e., "networking") seems to be an extremely important feature of professional development initiatives (Costa, 1979). Depending on the area, state, and region, networking is enabled in some initiatives through inter-district collaborations, distance learning technologies, and summer institutes (Peterson & Kelley, 2001). One example is Alaska's Rural School Leadership Network, which provides opportunities for rural principals to get together in face-to-face sessions as well as

through various kinds of technologies. According to one participant, “face-to-face contact with your peers has been an idea that one could only wish for a friend who knows you and has experienced the same situations” (Cline, as cited in Hagstrom, 1987, p. 32). An additional study on rural principals suggested that they valued professional development when activities focused on practical administrative issues that involved interaction with mentors and peers. The reduction of isolation participating school leaders experienced was accomplished through the establishment of support networks (Howley et al., 2002).

Hardwick-Franco (2018) suggested that rural school leaders should collaborate in networks. Networks of school leaders may provide needed collaboration and support to rural principals in isolated areas with tools to develop approaches in self care, instructional practices and in effectively developing teachers (Lazenby et al., 2020; Partin & Hayes, 2024).

In summary, it is apparent that multiple themes emerge in the literature on rural school leaders, but one overarching theme was present more than others. This theme can be summarized by Hildreth et al. (2018): “While the principals of small, rural schools recognize the importance of networking to enhance their own professional growth, most report that they have little, if any, time for such endeavors” (p. 46). This theme presents a paradox with which rural educators struggle. It may be difficult to improve schools. as Wood et al. (2013) noted, an “area presenting significant need in rural regions is professional learning for leaders . . . principals can only provide this type of leadership if they themselves have received the appropriate training” (p. 2).

Given the potential benefit of professional networking for school leaders and the very real challenges that make such networking difficult to implement in rural settings, it is my hope that my dissertation will contribute to the existing literature on rural school leadership, with a specific focus on the impact of networking.

Specifically, my study will explore professional networking among rural Oregon educational leaders. In my study, I will gather information on the degree to which rural Oregon educational leaders self-report feelings of loneliness and stress, as well as solicit information about the ways in which such leaders engage in professional networking and their satisfaction with the opportunities they have for engaging in professional networking. In addition, I will seek to understand the impact of professional networking on these leaders: Specifically, does professional networking reduce loneliness and stress among rural educational leaders?

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

In this chapter, I present the methodological approaches for my dissertation study. Initially, I describe the research design, including the participants and setting. This is followed by a description of the procedures used in distinct phases of this sequential-dependent mixed methods study. Phase one uses quantitative methods, and phase two uses qualitative methods.

#### *Research Design Overview*

I used a mixed methods design for data collection. Specifically, I used an explanatory sequential design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), where quantitative data collection and analysis occurs first followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. I used a mixed methods design because I believed it would provide me with the richest sources of data to more fully study this topic, about which very little has been written.

Prior to initiating this sequential-dependent mixed-methods design study, I received approval from the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board. Mixed methods allows for the interweaving of quantitative and qualitative data in such a way that research issues are explained meaningfully. Mixed methods offer flexibility and an in-depth understanding of smaller cases and enable researchers to answer research questions with both depth and breadth (Dawadi et al, 2020).

Ventakesh et al. (2013) states, “in a sequential mixed methods design, quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses are implemented in different phases and each is integrated in a separate phase” (p. 17). Using a sequential design, the study is expected to add to the knowledge base regarding networking in rural school leadership and best practices in the schools and school leadership.

Throughout this manuscript, activity associated with school leader quantitative analysis will hereafter be referred to as Phase I. Activity involving the qualitative portion of the proposed study will hereafter referred to as Phase II. The primary goal of Phase I data collection was to gain a general sense of rural Oregon school leaders' perception of and experience with school leader networking. The primary goal of Phase II data collection was to gain a deeper understanding of school leaders' perceptions regarding networking. In keeping with qualitative traditions, it is important that I remained open to unexpected findings.

### ***Setting, Participants, Data Sources and Collection***

***Phase I.*** I contacted rural school leaders from Oregon via email during Phase I in May and June, 2024. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2024) developed a rural-urban definition based on population density and distance from major urban areas. Schools fall into broad categories including rural, town, suburb, or city. Oregon towns and rural categories are broken down further and defined as remote, distant, and urban fringe. Remote rural schools, or what many consider *frontier*, include unincorporated areas such as Crane and North Lake and locations with small populations such as Enterprise and Fossil. Oregon towns on the urban fringe include Dallas and St. Helens. Using this definition of rural, 38% of Oregon students attend rural schools. School districts, using this definition cover the vast majority of Oregon's land mass (Chalkboard Project et al., 2013). Of the 197 school districts and more than 1,200 public K-12 schools, the majority of school districts in Oregon are rural.

To help ensure an adequate sample size, I recruited participants using a combination of non-probability and voluntary sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Participants from the study were recruited in stages. I initially contacted all Oregon rural school leaders via email. There are more than 1,200 schools in Oregon. I invited all of the approximately 400 Oregon rural

leaders to participate, and 16%, or 64, responded. Thus, Phase I of my study included 64 school leader participants across no fewer than 28 different rural Oregon school districts. Among the 64 school leaders, some worked as superintendents, some worked as principals, and some worked as dual superintendent/principals. The ethnicity, gender, and age among participants in Phase I may differ; however, these differences were not collected in the current study because they were not the focus of the study and were not collected to protect the confidentiality of the school leader responses.

For data collection in Phase I, I used an online survey which I developed (see Appendix B). The survey included questions to gather information about rural school leaders' perception of and experience with school leader networking and collected demographic data about length of time worked in education, in leadership, and in rural leadership. The survey included selected response items, the first of which was a 5-point scale score indicating a general perception of the benefits of school leader networking, with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Another selected-response item asked participants to self-assess how frequently they participated in school leader networking. Further questions asked about satisfaction with opportunities to engage in rural school leader professional networking. Open ended questions asked participants to share things they appreciated about being a rural education leader and challenges of being a rural education leader. Overall, the survey took participants approximately 5-minutes to complete with 4 basic demographic multiple-choice questions, 9 selected response and 2 constructed-ended response questions.

***Phase II.*** Phase I analysis provided the mechanism by which I selected potential participants for Phase II of the study. Because my primary interest was to better understand the perspectives of rural and/or frontier Oregon school leaders who network with their colleagues, I

recruited for Phase II participation from those who indicated in Phase I that they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that networking is important. Additionally, to understand the opposing perspective, I hoped to recruit those who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that networking is important to gain insight into their perspectives. However, no participants in Phase I of the study who *neither agreed or disagreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed* with the sentiment listed their contact information, so I was unable to include people who had the opposing perspective in Phase II.

Phase II was set in various locations in Oregon where both interviews and/or focus groups could take place. Data collection occurred in June of 2024. Specifically, participants were recruited during Phase I for inclusion in Phase II. Phase I participants who indicated in that they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they networked or valued networking with school leaders were contacted and asked if they would be willing to participate in Phase II of the study.

Voluntary sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was used to identify participants for the focus groups following the initial Phase I survey. Participants for the study were selected by using purposeful and homogeneous sampling. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher seeks to discover the participants from whom the most can be learned. Qualitative research participants should be selected based on those who can assist the researcher in understanding the concept under exploration (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 2009). As Gibbs (1997) noted, focus groups are useful “when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic” (p. 1). To select the appropriate candidates for the focus groups and interviews, it was important that I be able to recruit participants for interviews who were open to speaking honestly and would tell a story...their story (Turner, 2010).

I initially contacted Phase II participants by email to introduce myself and the study. Follow-up contact was made via phone and/or email to determine interest and to gain permission to participate in a focus group. In all, 3 interviews and 5 focus groups accommodated a total of 20 participants in Phase II of the study. Focus groups averaged 55 minutes in length. One of the focus groups included 2 participants, two included 3 participants, another included 4 participants, and the final included 5 participants. Phase II recruitment and data collection stopped when I reached data saturation. In other words, I continued to conduct additional interviews/focus groups until no new insights were being shared. All questions from the focus group protocol (see Appendix C) were asked to each focus group. Open ended and probing interview and focus group questions assisted in theme development and were used in the data analysis taking place following focus groups.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis varied by the phase of the study. For Phase I, I report frequency counts and the percentage of participants selecting each of the response options from the online survey. This analysis, although simple, was sufficient to provide a snapshot of current rural Oregon school leaders' perspectives on and experiences with school leader networking. The analysis included information about rural Oregon school leaders' self-reported use of the internet and technology to network with colleagues, as well as the relative distance between colleagues, time management considerations, social media use, and opportunities to network. Coding the quantitative data was one of the initial steps in the analysis. In this study, *strongly agree* was coded as 5, and *strongly disagree* as 1 (Creswell, 2015). I displayed the results in tables, which I summarized and interpreted.

In Phase II, the qualitative piece of the mixed methods study, I sought “to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote, “A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (p. 24). I sought to understand individual stories about lived experiences through a qualitative approach in exploring school leader experiences with in-depth school leader interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative approach allows for information provided by the participant to be captured easily (Creswell, 2012).

Maxwell (1992) wrote, “The first concern of most qualitative researchers is with the factual accuracy of their account—that is that they are not making up or distorting the things they saw and heard” (p. 285). To ensure accuracy, I recorded and transcribed each of the 45-90 minute focus groups of school leaders. Focus groups were transcribed from a recorded Zoom meeting or an audio recorder, allowing me to verify the accuracy of the interview data. I conducted member checks, providing the participants with the transcription of their focus group and asking them to note any areas where I might have misunderstood their intended meaning. This step helped to ensure that I interpreted data in the way participants intended. Curtin and Fossey (2010) wrote that member checking “is a way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with participants’ experiences” (p. 105). Careful member checking limits misinterpretation, allows the researcher to recognize potential biases, and assists in ensuring perceptions do not influence interview interpretation (Birt et al., 2016). In this study, member checking confirmed the accuracy of all transcripts, and no changes were made.

Once member checks were completed, I analyzed the data for themes using inductive strategies involving the connection of key terms and phrases. Open-ended questions in Phase II

allowed for themes to develop using coding. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote simply that “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (p. 202). The quotes and rationale provided during Phase II helped enrich my interpretation of the data provided in Phase I.

Using the first level of coding, *open coding*, I identified distinct concepts and themes to be categorized. The first level of interview and focus group respondent data were organized by creating broad thematic domains. “The first step [open coding] aims at expressing data and phenomena in the form of concepts. Units of meaning classifying expressions (single words, short sequences of words) in order to attach annotations and ‘concepts’” (Flick, 2009, p. 307). I read and re-read all focus group transcripts and read and reread field notes while taking notes. I looked for repetitive language in focus groups. Additionally, I looked for similarities, differences and data that may be missing (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

The first focus group was organized into similar phrases and similar words by concept. Strauss and Corbin (1998) noted that “indicators are symbols or conventional signs, thus a man and woman are concepts. So are love, mate selection, divorce, death, and depression” (p. 841). The process was repeated for all focus group data. I then sorted the concepts and patterns that came together into categories that illustrate recurring ideas. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted these categories or themes are “buckets or baskets into which segments of text are placed (p. 224). I then reviewed the data to ensure they were represented accurately within the categories and themes.

### ***Design Considerations to Address Limitations***

All research is faced with limitations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The most glaring limitation in this study is external validity in that the research responses will be limited to Oregon State school leaders, and thus findings may not be applicable to other states. In addition,

it is possible that those school leaders who agreed to participate in Phase II interviews/focus groups may differ in some significant ways from their colleagues who did not agree to participate in Phase II. To the extent that the sample was biased, the results will be equally slanted. To address this potential bias, I sent the Phase I invitation to participate in the survey to all rural/frontier school leaders in the State of Oregon for whom I was able to secure an email address. This exhaustive sampling of the research population was intended to reduce the impact of sampling bias. However, not all potential participants responded to the invitation to participate in this study. To the extent that some rural/frontier school leaders opted not to participate, the sample may be biased and thus not representative of rural school leaders in the State of Oregon. School leaders are stretched thin in their jobs and have multiple competing obligations. Participant recruitment in Phase 2 presented a challenge due to school leader availability. I worked with school leaders to make multiple dates, times and locations available for data gathering.

Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources including surveys and focus groups with school leaders from multiple districts across the state increases the trustworthiness and credibility of this study. In addition, my own experiences as a rural school leader in the State of Oregon may be seen as both a strength (in that it might have encouraged my colleagues to agree to participate in the study and because my experiences might have provided insights that could help with my interpretation of the findings) and as a potential weakness (in that my experiences might have predisposed me to particular interpretations). It was important that I reflected on my own biases and preconceptions related to professional networking throughout data analysis and as I wrote up my findings.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

To understand the issues associated with rural school leadership and their feelings of loneliness, connectedness and support, I administered a quantitative survey to a total of 64 rural school leaders in the State of Oregon and conducted focus groups with a subset of these leaders.

#### *Demographics*

Those filling out the survey varied in experience in education, education leadership, involvement in rural settings, and in rural school leadership experiences (see Table 1). Of the 64 respondents, 52 (81.25%) had *worked in education* for over 15 years. The remaining 12 respondents (18.75%) had worked in education for 7 to 15 years. No respondents had worked in education fewer than 7 years. Of the 64 respondents, 2 had *worked in rural education* for less than 1 year, while 3 had worked in rural education 1-3 years, and 1 had worked in rural education for 4-6 years. In all, 17 respondents (26.56%) had worked in rural education between 7 and 15 years, while the majority of survey respondents, ( $n = 41$ , 64.06%) had worked in rural education for more than 15 years.

In response to the question, “How long have you *worked in a leadership position in education*, total?” All 64 school leaders responded to the question: 3 individuals (4.69%), had been in school leadership for less than 1 year, 6 (9.38%) for 1-3 years, 12 (18.75%) for 4-6 years, 18 (28.13%) for 7-15 years, and 25 (39.06%) reported over 15 years of school leadership experience. Of the 64 school leader respondents, 5 (7.81%) had *worked in rural education leadership* for less than 1 year, 8 (12.50%) for 1-3 years, 11 (17.19%) for 4-6 years. 19 (29.69%) between 7 and 15 years, and 21 (32.81%) for more than 15 years.

The data collected indicate a highly experienced group of educators in the sample overall, with a significant portion having extensive experience both in rural settings and in rural education setting leadership roles.

**Table 1**  
*Responses to the Survey, Frequency Count (and % of Respondents)*

| Question  | < 1 year     | 1-3 years     | 4-6 years      | 7-15 years     | > 15 years     |
|---|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| How long have you worked in education, total?                                       | –            | –             | –              | 12<br>(18.75%) | 52<br>(81.25%) |
| How long have you worked in a <i>rural</i> school?                                  | 2<br>(3.13%) | 3<br>(4.69%)  | 1<br>(1.56%)   | 17<br>(26.56%) | 41<br>(64.06%) |
| How long have you worked in a <i>leadership position</i> in education, total?       | 3<br>(4.69%) | 6<br>(9.38%)  | 12<br>(18.75%) | 18<br>(28.13%) | 25<br>(39.06%) |
| How long have you worked in a <i>leadership position</i> in a <i>rural school</i> ? | 5<br>(7.81%) | 8<br>(12.50%) | 11<br>(17.19%) | 19<br>(29.69%) | 21<br>(32.81%) |

Because focus group participants had already provided their demographic information in the survey, I did not collect demographic information from them again during the focus group, however, in their responses, focus group participants appeared to reflect similar years of experience as those reported in the demographic data collected via survey. Education veterans when responding to the question, “In your survey you indicated that you benefit from networking. Can you describe a recent experience where networking with colleagues from other rural schools has been beneficial to you?” mentioned their experiences in the western region of Oregon noting, “You know, the other 20 some years have been over in the Portland area” and “for me the six years I’ve had over here.” Many had crossed paths along the way, as they mentioned they were employed “together 20 years ago, well, a reunion here.” Another focus

group participant noted that, “I was a teacher in our, my district for 17 years before I became the principal.” Another said, “I’ve been here for 15 years.” As demonstrated by these quotations from the focus group, the majority of respondents had been in education for some time and most had been in rural school and rural school leadership for over 7 years.

### ***Professional Networking and Connectivity***

Survey respondents were asked their perceptions on different aspects of networking and connections in their role as a rural school leader. When respondents were asked about loneliness in school leadership or more specifically the degree to which they agreed with the statement, “Rural school leadership is a lonely position,” 14 (21.87%) *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with this statement while nearly a quarter, ( $n = 15$ ) answered that they *neither agreed or disagreed* with the statement, and 35 (54.69%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that school leadership is a lonely position.

When asked the degree to which they agreed with the statement, “Rural school leadership helps me feel connected to others in my community,” 11 (17.19%), *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the statement, 8 (12.50%), *neither agreed or disagreed*, 45 (70.32%) responded with *agreed* or *strongly agreed*. In other words, the majority of participants in this study indicated that rural school leadership helps them feel connected to others in their communities.

In response to the statement, “I find being a rural school leader is relaxing,” a majority of respondents ( $n = 36$ , 71.88%) *strongly disagreed* or *disagreed* while slightly more than a quarter of those surveyed ( $n = 17$ , 26.56%) *neither agreed or disagreed* with the statement and only 1 respondent *agreed* with the statement that rural school leadership was relaxing.

Responses to the question about whether they enjoyed engaging in professional networking with other rural school leaders were overall quite favorable. No respondents

indicated that they *strongly disagreed* with the statement. Only 2 (3.13%) *disagreed* with the statement and only 4 (6.25%) *neither agreed nor disagreed*. In contrast, 39 respondents (60.94%) *agreed* and 19 (29.69%) *strongly agreed* that they enjoyed professional networking with other rural school leaders. Table 2 presents these results.

**Table 2**  
*Responses to the Survey, Frequency Count (and % of Respondents)*

| Question   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree       | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree          | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Rural school leadership is a lonely position.                                | 5<br>(7.81%)      | 9<br>(14.06%)  | 15<br>(23.44%)             | 23<br>(35.94%) | 12<br>(18.75%) |
| Rural school leadership helps me feel connected to others in my community.   | 2<br>(3.13%)      | 9<br>(14.06%)  | 8<br>(12.50%)              | 34<br>(53.13%) | 11<br>(17.19%) |
| I find being a rural school leader is relaxing.                              | 12<br>(18.75%)    | 34<br>(53.13%) | 17<br>(26.56%)             | 1<br>(1.56%)   | –              |
| I enjoy engaging in professional networking with other rural school leaders. | –                 | 2<br>(3.13%)   | 4<br>(6.25%)               | 39<br>(60.94%) | 19<br>(29.69%) |

Focus group responses supported the quantitative results exhibited in Table 2. A number of comments centered around loneliness and isolation. For example, when asked “What specific advantages do you perceive in collaborating with colleagues from other rural schools, as opposed to within your own school community?” one participant shared, “I think a lot of times when you're out here in the middle by yourself, you can start to feel like you're in a vacuum.” When asked, “Can you describe a recent experience where networking with colleagues from other rural school has been beneficial to you?” one school leader summarized the thoughts of others with, “Every once a while, we go personal, we talk about our personal lives or whatever, but a lot of

times we just get some stuff together, or it's just good to know that we're in the same boat, because it is lonely as an administrator in a small rural area, right?"

Connection to the community was mentioned in focus groups when asked "From your perspective, what unique opportunities does networking with colleagues in rural settings offer compared to urban or suburban contexts?" and was supported with statements such as, "You wear a bunch of different hats, and you do a ton of different things, and you're in the community." Focus group participants also mentioned the relationships in a small rural community. One shared, "And that's, that's another thing, [name removed] about school districts, I guess is the level of trust is incredible. That you can build in a small community."

Although one survey respondent indicated that they *agreed* that rural school leadership was relaxing, this feeling was not shared in any of the focus group conversations. Most participants *disagreed* with this sentiment on the survey, and in the focus groups shared comments addressing stress such as, "I think one of the pieces you touched on the loneliness, stress and all that stuff, I think that really does come into play early on if you don't have those connections" and "just to kind of go through what I was thinking or when I was crying with such a huge thing that was so stressful." Examples of the stress of rural school leadership were seen in the focus groups responses to question, "Can networking assist in combating feelings of loneliness, isolation or stress in rural schools? How so?", with comments related to stepping into rural school leadership such as, "I 100% felt like I was alone, isolated and stressed to the max when I first stepped in on July 1." Other leadership stressors included the rural school budget. One rural administrator shared how stressful he found the budget, "And then there was lots of budget, lots of budget things happening at the end of the school year, which was stressful." The

participants mentioned various stressors from budget to relationships to preparedness and much more, which supported the quantitative results seen in Table 2.

Table 3 summarizes survey respondents’ answers when asked, “In the past two years, how often have you engaged in professional networking with other rural education leaders?” Responses varied, but 2 (3.13%) rural school leaders indicated they had never networked with other rural school education leaders, 8 (12.50%) had networked 1-2 times, and 9 (14.06%) had networked 3-4 times total in the last two years. In all, 27 respondents (42.19%) indicated they had networked with other rural school leaders approximately every month in the past two years, 13 (20.31%) every week, and 5 (7.81%) daily.

**Table 3**

***Responses to the Survey Question: In the past two years, how often have you engaged in professional networking with other rural education leaders?, # (%)***

| Never     | 1-2 times,<br>total | 3-4 times,<br>total | Approx.<br>every month | Approx.<br>every week | On a nearly<br>daily basis |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 (3.13%) | 8 (12.50%)          | 9 (14.06%)          | 27 (42.19%)            | 13 (20.31%)           | 5 (7.81%)                  |

Focus group results supported survey responses as related to professional networking consistency. One participant shared, when asked, “Can you describe a recent experience where networking with colleagues from other schools has been beneficial to you?”, and they found networking so positive that they initiated it when they realized that they missed the interaction. “We had this group that talked a little bit last year, off and on, and then it went away,” they said, “And so last December, I called my five buddies, and I said, “Hey, we guys, we gotta’ meet more often.”” During the focus group, participants consistently noted their participation with others in networking and many rural school leaders noted that they have moved to a small group monthly format. One noted when asked to share about “Additional information you’d like to

share around school leader networking?”, “Starting the small school monthly superintendent Zooms is so terrific!”

***Forms of Professional Networking***

Table 4 presents the survey results from the question, “What types of professional networking with other rural education leaders have you engaged in (select all that apply)?” The most selected response ( $n = 33, 51.56\%$ ), was professional networking through face-to-face opportunities, written electronic means and phone or online meetings. Only one respondent indicated that they had never professionally networked.

**Table 4**

***Responses to the Survey Question “What types of professional networking with other rural education leaders have you engaged in?”, Frequency Count (and % of Respondents)***

|   |    |          |
|---|----|----------|
| None. I have never engaged in professional networking with other rural education leaders. | 1  | (1.56%)  |
| Face to Face  | 6  | (9.38%)  |
| Written electronic means of communication (e-mail, text, instant messaging, etc.)         | 3  | (4.69%)  |
| Phone or online meeting (Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc.)                        | 6  | (9.38%)  |
| Face to Face & Written electronic   | 5  | (7.81%)  |
| Face to Face & Phone or online meeting  | 4  | (6.25%)  |
| Written electronic & Phone or online meeting  | 3  | (4.69%)  |
| Face to Face, Written electronic & Phone or online meeting                                | 33 | (51.56%) |
| Face to Face, Written electronic & Phone or online meeting, Other                         | 3  | (4.69%)  |

These results were supported by focus group participant comments. There was support throughout the focus group discussions for face-to-face networking, with a number of participants indicating that they felt it could not be replaced. One shared, “There's value in sitting

down face to face with a person and sharing a meal and just seeing, you know, talking to them in person that you know can't be replaced with electronics as great as they are.” Another focus group participant echoed this sentiment saying, “There's nothing quite like face to face, pseudo face to face. I mean, absolutely in the old days, when we used to get together more often, physically, in person, but now there's, it just feels like there's just, there's never been enough hours in the day.”

Focus group participants also discussed the value of online meetings through various means and also mentioned the usefulness of email and texting. One participant, when asked about challenges or barriers in networking, responded, “Zooms are nice, but they're just not quite... it's hard to convince a lot of people that they want to, like, hop on and do those phone calls. So I do text a lot of colleagues.” Others mentioned the ways in which they depend on phone conversations. One participant, when asked about additional items that they felt needed to be added, noted “In an emergency, I could also call her, and she would come, so, or have a phone conversation. And I, and I've done that with other people within the, you know, the Wide Open Spaces network as well.” A similar sentiment was echoed by another participant who noted, “But what I do have is I have a network, and I have relationships, and I have people, and I have a telephone.”

### ***Opportunity Satisfaction***

Overall, survey respondents reported being satisfied with the opportunities available to them to engage in rural school leader professional networking (see Table 5). No survey respondents were *strongly dissatisfied* with their opportunities for professional networking with rural school leaders. Only 10 (15.63%) were *dissatisfied*, while 22 (34.38%) provided a neutral

response, indicating that were *neither dissatisfied nor satisfied* with their opportunities, 29 (45.31%) were *satisfied*, and 2 (3.13%), were *strongly satisfied*.

**Table 5**

***Responses to the Survey Question, “How satisfied are you currently with your opportunities to engage in rural school leader professional networking?”, Frequency Count (and % of Respondents)***

| Strongly Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied | Satisfied   | Strongly Satisfied |
|-----------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| –                     | 10 (15.63%)  | 22 (34.38%)                        | 29 (45.31%) | 2 (3.13%)          |

Similar trends were noted in the focus groups. One respondent summarized his thoughts on the matter when responding to the focus group question, “How do you think networking with colleagues contributes to professional growth and development in the context of rural school leadership,” by saying, “I think the role of a role leader is so complex that it became necessary to have those opportunities to network to make sure that to, I guess, meet the demands of the job. So we found such value in our monthly superintendent meetings.” Others focus group members expressed a desire for increased opportunities focused on rural or small schools. One explained, “I would like to see more opportunities geared for like, professional development that is geared at small schools. Like, I mean, because I like going to the law conference, I will. Sometimes it’s a little much though, just because I do feel like sometimes it’s geared more at the big schools.”

One theme that emerged from the focus group discussion was that the limiting factor was not the availability of opportunity, but the decision to network. The opportunity is there, taking away time as an obstacle, but just deciding to network can be a barrier. This idea can be seen in this focus group participant’s statement to “Can networking assist in combating feelings of loneliness, isolation or stress in rural schools? How so?”:

I recently got together with a bunch of principals and from a regional aspect, and it was, I guess, the greatest feeling, because I kept putting it off. I hardly met with them. They've been meeting pretty regularly for the last two years, and I just started to go these last two months. And I was just because I was tied to the building I couldn't get out of here, um, I had too much going on to get go to the meetings. And then I finally went... the networking. It took, like, the weight of the world off my shoulders.

And so what I started to do is started to reach out to the other schools that were our similar size, but were successful. And then I started, I went and visited and try and see what they were doing. And then it just became a constant network with, like, about four or five different schools and just basically bringing their ideas back.

Another respondent, when asked about face-to-face professional networking expressed his dissatisfaction. He shared, "I've never been allowed to go because I was told I need to be in my building since then. And so that's been, that's been my biggest barrier or obstacle."

A key finding from the survey was that participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces both job loneliness and job stress. No survey respondents *strongly disagreed* with the statement about participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reducing job loneliness, and only 2 (3.13%) *disagreed*. Only 8 people (12.50%), *neither agreed nor disagreed*, while 35 (54.69%) *agreed* and 19 (29.69%) *strongly agreed* with the statement that participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces job loneliness (see Table 6). In terms of reducing job stress, respondents provided similar feedback. No school leaders selected that they *strongly disagreed* with the statement, 5 (7.81%) *disagreed* with the statement, while 12 (18.75%) *neither agreed nor disagreed*. Over 70% of the 64 respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces job stress, with 34 (53.13%) *agreeing* and 13 (20.31%) *strongly agreeing* with the statement (see Table 6).

**Table 6**  
***Responses to the Survey, Frequency Count (and % of Respondents)***

| Question   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree     | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree          | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|--------------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces job loneliness. | –                 | 2<br>(3.13%) | 8<br>(12.50%)              | 35<br>(54.69%) | 19<br>(29.69%) |
| Participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces job stress.     | –                 | 5<br>(7.81%) | 12<br>(18.75%)             | 34<br>(53.13%) | 13<br>(20.31%) |

These results were supported with focus group statements and themes. Throughout the focus group discussions, participants shared that loneliness and stress were reduced with professional networking. When responding to the question, “Can networking assist in combating feelings of loneliness, isolation or stress in rural schools? How so?” one participant noted that it was helpful, “To be able to talk to other people about the problems and situations that you’re having that are causing that stress and have them, you know, be a be a sounding board, to be able to talk to you about what they’ve done and what they’ve gone through, and just make connections.” Another responded, “I’m going to say so I 100% felt like I was alone, isolated and stressed to the max when I first stepped in on July 1.” The focus group participant then noted, “And I’ve I felt like that, and what networking has done is provide that safety net. And so that’s what networking has done for me personally, so, or assisted me.” These sentiments were continually echoed throughout the focus groups. In fact, one participant summarized the discussion, stating, “We’ve shared a lot of different stories around the table today. Of like, you get in with some folks and you’re not alone, because, like, they’re dealing with the same thing.”

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

The findings in this study were readily apparent in that over and over, focus group participants echoed the sentiments shared by survey respondents, as reported in the previous chapter. This triangulation adds to the confidence one can have in the findings from this study. In both survey and focus group data, some important common themes emerged:

**1. Rural School Leadership is an Isolated and Often Lonely Position:** Despite the strong connections rural school leaders feel with their communities, many reported feeling isolated in their roles. This loneliness was often attributed to the geographic isolation of rural schools and the unique challenges faced by leaders in these settings.

**2. Professional Networking is Valued by Rural School Leaders:** Participants emphasized the importance of professional networking for rural school leaders in mitigating loneliness, stress, and isolation. Participants found that connecting with other rural leaders provided valuable support, shared experiences, and practical advice.

**3. Opportunities for Professional Networking Are Generally Available but Underutilized:** Although I found that many opportunities for professional networking exist for rural school leaders, some participants shared that they experienced challenges in taking advantage of them due to time constraints and geographic isolation.

## **Rural School Leadership is a Lonely Position**

The majority of survey respondents indicated that leadership was a lonely position. These findings are illustrated throughout the literature on school leadership and supported by the focus group findings as well. Maxwell (2015) wrote that the job of the school principal is often referred to as the “loneliest position in K-12 education” (p. 2). Participants in my study represent a highly experienced group of rural school leaders, with a significant portion having worked in education for over 15 years and the majority having extensive experience in rural settings and rural leadership roles. This depth of experience provides a rich foundation for understanding their perspectives on rural professional networking. One respondent summed up multiple focus group comments noting that “Like [another focus group member’s name], I’ve never been in a big city since college, so I’ve been [in] a one stoplight town the majority of my life.”

The small-town culture so often associated with rural schools seem to enhance the loneliness and isolation felt by rural school leaders Wells et al. (2021) noted this isolation, writing, “Rural principals are so lonely... even if they don’t know it” (p. 52). Similarly, in my study an administrator noted, “it is lonely as an administrator in a small rural area, right?” Others quickly echoed the sentiment. This isolation is not new. Two decades ago, Southworth (2004) described the isolation of rural school principals in terms of resources, collegiality, and professional development opportunities. Despite the significant experience and expertise of the participants in this study, many reported feelings of isolation and loneliness as seen in this focus group summary statement from a focus group member who stated, “And it’s ... an irritation, and it’s kind of lonely too, being in [identifying school district name], you know, like I said, we’re surrounded by a sea of large districts, and so I have to travel kind of far to find somebody who’s in a very similar setting as I am.”

The importance of connecting with peers emerged in my study as a critical approach to combatting isolation. The comments of a rural educational leader in my study underscored the benefits of participating in professional networking opportunities. One focus group member shared, “I finally went to the networking. It took, like, the weight of the world off my shoulders, because, like, I thought I was by myself, thinking I’m the only one going through some of these battles lately, and then when I heard all these other principals, and it was like, ‘All right, I need to get some phone numbers and use them as resources of just sharing ideas and experiences’ and ... you know, it did take that, that loneliness and isolation away.”

### **A Variety of Networking Opportunities Exist for Rural School Leaders**

Additionally, this study explored the various ways that networking might take place. School leaders noted various ways that networking is taking place now and commented on the ease with which it can take place as opposed to in the past. Numerous participants noted the helpfulness of online communication tools, such as Zoom, which enable them to participate “face to face” with other rural school leaders without needing to drive many hours to attend meetings in person. One commented, “I started this small rural school admin a long time ago, and there wasn’t Zoom. And so, yeah, it was definitely lonely.” This comment was echoed by others, and the survey results indicated the majority of school leaders partake in various forms of school leader networking including online virtual meetings that might include programs such as Zoom. One school leader noted, “Zoom has definitely been a mental health survivor, for me to be able to Zoom with ... people and not have to drive three plus hours to get to ... people.” Survey data indicated that those networking did use several means of doing so including online means including Zoom to connect, and as noted in the above quote, this contributed to networking frequency, but did not take the place of the desire for face-to-face connections.

The survey and focus group statements confirm the findings of previous research on the isolation experienced by rural school leaders. Although technology has provided new avenues for networking, the unique challenges of rural schools, such as geographic isolation and small-town atmospheres, continue to contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation among these professionals.

### **Professional Networking Combats Feelings of Isolation**

Reducing loneliness is a key for rural school leaders as explored in the previous section. Loneliness can lead to job dissatisfaction and ultimately lead to school leadership turnover, which can cost school districts conservatively, \$75,000 in leader development, hiring and onboarding (School Leader Network, 2014). Findings from both the survey and focus groups suggest that professional networking plays a crucial role in mitigating the isolation often experienced by rural school leaders. While the position can be lonely, participants reported that their connections with other rural educators helped them feel more connected to their communities and provided a sense of support.

In addition to reducing loneliness, professional networking might also help mitigate stress, perhaps created by loneliness and isolation. A focus group member recounted what it felt like their first day in rural school by stating, “I 100% felt like I was alone, isolated and stressed to the max when I first stepped in on July 1.” Another shared how their professional network helped them deal with the incredible stress they encountered on the job:

“I reached out to quite a few different people that I've made connections with, either through Wide Open Spaces (a rural networking group) or through the Intermountain ESD, just to kind of go through what I was thinking or when I was crying with such a huge thing that was so stressful. I had multiple people that I

trusted that I could just call and say, ‘Hey, this is what I’m dealing with. What advice, what policies do I need to look at? What am I missing?’ Because, well, the police got involved as well, and they don’t deal with policies. And so it was just a super hard time, but I was very thankful that I had multiple people I could turn to.”

Stories similar to the one above were repeated by other focus group members, illustrating that stressful school leadership situations are combated with professional networking. For instance, one rural school leader explained, “There have been times that people have talked me off the cliff, or, like, ‘you need to say this more professionally. Have you thought about XYZ?’ And that’s totally helped me not sticking my foot in my mouth.”

Data collected during Phase I data provided evidence that rural school leaders in many cases felt connected to their communities. Fully 70.32% of respondents noted that they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that “Rural school leadership helps me feel connected to others in my community.” With the data supporting a desire for face-to-face networking opportunities and with rural school leaders being a key part of the local rural community, it illustrates how a connection with the community could take place. Additionally, 64.06% of respondents in Phase 1 had worked in rural education for more than 15 years. Connections in rural communities may take time, and it seems that respondents have spent their time in communities of rural status connecting.

These community connections are easier forged with relationships happening at the grocery store, the gas station, school events and more. Community connections with the school leader may reduce feelings of isolation and stress within the community; however, 35 respondents (54.69%) noted that they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that school leadership is a lonely

position. The focus group and survey responses provided convincing evidence that rural school leadership is stressful and that networking can help to limit this stress. This finding is similar to that reported by Klocko and Justis (2019), who found rural principals often felt isolated and lacked access to professional support networks, which contributed to their stress levels. Hansen (2018) noted that a lack of professional support and networking that increased principal turnover in rural areas, suggesting that the isolation can be a significant factor in job satisfaction and stress. Mette and Stanoch (2016) highlighted the challenges and stress faced by rural principals in meeting the demands of new education policies, particularly in the absence of strong support networks. Having access to a professional network that might help mitigate the negative impact of stress is important because stress may result in poor school leadership, lack of joy, and may prompt school leader turnover and potentially teacher turnover (Martin & Clemensen, 2022).

### ***Professional Networking Provides Essential Professional Development***

The continuous or lifelong career learner that is required in school leadership is amplified in rural school leadership. The same requirements that are placed on urban school leaders in large school districts with multiple staff to complete the well over 150 state reports the State of Oregon requires schools to complete each year are also placed on rural school leaders. In many of the rural and remote districts, there is but one individual to complete these responsibilities. Continually learning the new requirements is necessary for these leaders to keep their schools in compliance. Professional networking can provide a crucial support in the area of professional development for rural school leaders. In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, rural school leaders face unique challenges and opportunities. Staying abreast of the latest trends and best practices is essential for ensuring the continued success of their schools and districts. Professional networking offers a powerful avenue for achieving this goal.

Additionally, professional networking facilitates the exchange of ideas and ability to discuss emerging trends in education and share different approaches to meeting the needs of rural schools. The rural leader's professional development is crucial for school district—and ultimately school district employee and student—success. The collective intelligence generated through ongoing professional networking can offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities specific to rural schools through the sharing of best practices. By connecting with peers from other rural schools, leaders can efficiently learn about innovative approaches, successful strategies, and proven methods that are being adopted in similar settings. One school leader summarized what the rest of the focus group participants were saying, explaining, “I don't have time to research everything. And, you know, being able to pull ideas from schools where it's already working, and, you know, to share, and have that kind of brain trust, I think, is great as well. A time saver.”

Principals, superintendents and people in principal/superintendent dual roles are often tasked with burdensome paperwork that a specialist would handle in a larger district. The State of Oregon requires school districts to file over 150 state reports each school year. The number of reports does not decrease for rural school districts; however, the amount of people available for report completion is smaller and in many cases is limited to one individual, the rural school leader (Barret et al., 2015). One focus group participant noted, “The other piece of that is how many hats we wear in these small districts. Because, you know, if you're in Portland Public [the largest school district in the State of Oregon] you're one of how many principals, you have all the hats on if you live where we live.” The proportionally larger demands made on individual rural school leaders due to not having additional staff to share the burden of required tasks (reporting and the other duties of school leaders that range from teacher evaluation to lunch

recess duty), mean the time for professional networking is limited. One finding from this study that is worth repeating is that networking created a brain trust that rural school leaders could consult for advice and was essentially, “A time saver.” This time savings opens up opportunities for further networking or other tasks that make an impact on student learning such as teacher observations, teacher feedback, and fostering student connections. Hildreth et al. (2018) in professional literature summed what many in focus groups noted stating, “While the principals of small, rural schools recognize the importance of networking to enhance their own professional growth, most report that they have little, if any, time for such endeavors” (p. 46).

Without the ability to connect with other rural school leaders via professional networking, there may not be an identification of gaps in skills or knowledge. Networking allows rural school leaders to identify areas where their skills may be lacking, such as technology integration, curriculum development, human resources or special education. By connecting with others who have expertise in these areas, they can seek guidance, mentorship, or training to bridge the gap by enhancing their skills, exchanging services, or taking part in a consortium that may benefit the group as a whole. One school leader who summarized several focus group comments when referring to working together in a school district consortium to manage the rural school leader workload, “How the hell are we going to do this? There’s going to be a lot of reporting. There’s an email that came out yesterday or the day before, about all the reporting stuff we’ve got to do in November on that. And, you know, our group threw in, and we got a consortium going, so we got somebody that’s just going to do all that for the districts and go that route. And I actually think it’s going to be really good.”

Multiple school leaders talked about how professional networking can create a support network for school leaders and can foster collaboration for the benefit of all. One explained,

“And so if you're in [identifying school district name], you don't have an HR director. But if you go make, you know that relationship with a [identifying HR Director name] or, you know, one of those guys, then, actually, you really do have an HR director, and you're not even having to pay him. It's a free phone call.” Another school leader noted that, “I think that's the only way you can survive. You know, the larger districts have all the, all the pieces of the puzzle to just hand it off, and in the small rural areas, it really is. It's your cabinet. It can be your cabinet. If you get a good bunch of folks that you can really trust.” This finding echoes Hardwick-Franco's (2018) discussion of how professional networking can lead to rural school leaders collaborating and learning from each other. In essence, professional networking is a catalyst for continuous learning and professional development. By staying connected with job-alike peers and actively seeking out knowledge, school leaders can ensure that their skills and expertise remain current.

Thus, although school leader networking can be difficult for various reasons including isolation, distance and the like, Stewart and Matthews (2018) concluded that in the “isolated and overloaded position...principals might benefit from more formalized opportunities for networking and collaborating with other principals” (p. 11). This conclusion was echoed throughout my study, where results from both the survey and focus groups showed compelling evidence that professional networking is crucial for school leaders, particularly those in rural settings. By reducing loneliness, mitigating stress, enhancing professional development, building a support network, and fostering collaboration, professional networking plays a vital role in supporting school leaders and improving educational outcomes.

### **Opportunities for Professional Networking Are Generally Available but Underutilized**

Although some participants in my study reported challenges, the majority indicated that they found networking valuable and that they were supportive of it. As seen in the survey data, rural school leaders in Oregon are presented with a large number of avenues they could access to network professionally. This finding conflicts with Darling-Hammond's (2022) report that "nearly half of principals did not have regular access to a peer network" (p. 48). This difference in findings might be related to a difference in sample and setting. Much of Oregon is rural and the Oregon Department of Education has made a substantial effort to provide networking opportunities to educators working outside of urban centers. However, despite the various ways that Oregon rural school leaders engage in professional networking (face to face professional networking, written electronic means including e-mail, online chatting and texting, phone calls and online meetings such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams meetings), school leaders in my study determined that generally they still felt isolated and lonely.

One noted the paradox of loneliness in school leadership despite the multiple professional networking tools available to them. He noted, "So I think going on with the theme is you can be as lonely as you want to be, and in this day and age with the technology that is shame on you if you're not getting out and getting that support, because it's, it's easy, it's easy to do that." The literature supports this paradox. The tools are available to network, but many school leaders still report that they feel isolated or alone in their role (Preston et al., 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2018; Wells et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

As noted in the findings of a Tennessee school leader network, when online meetings were the norm, they were less desirable than face to face networking. The learning for school leaders was more meaningful when in person. Participating in an online meeting was not effective for many because school leaders may struggle to concentrate on the online meetings

due to being in their own school environment while attending the meeting rather than going to the meeting in-person (Partin & Hayes, 2024). This finding was mirrored in my focus groups, with one additional distinction. In my study, most of the participants indicated that face to face was desired, but not with urban school personnel. Rural school leaders desired to be with like colleagues from similar rural schools. One leader summarized for the group: “But I would say that I get more out of anything, just, you know, in these kind of meetings or Wide Open Spaces [a rural Oregon school administrator network], places where I can connect with people that have the same kind of job I have.” The others nodded agreement.

Perhaps the most useful is a combination of in person and long-distance networking. A common theme to emerge from my focus groups was that face-to-face networking allows for relationships to be built prior to having online or phone meetings that benefit the school leader. A focus group participant noted, “There’s value in sitting down face to face with a person and sharing a meal and just seeing, you know, talking to them in person that you know can’t be replaced with electronics as great as they are.” Unfortunately, for these rural school leaders, while face to face is the desired networking tool, geographic distance often makes traveling for in-person gatherings time prohibitive (Hansen, 2018). Rural school leaders often felt that they could not give up time that could be seen spent doing the never-ending job of the rural school leader to travel to meet with others face to face. Given that focus groups and survey data underscored the value in networking, particularly face to face, it might be worth trying to build the network face to face first, when strategically planning for how best to support rural school leaders. One school leader reflected on the value of face-to-face interaction. “It’s building those local networks so that you can you get somebody’s cell phone number that you can call them down the road or up the road or wherever, and you can make those calls.”

One unexpected finding was how proactive participants in my study were in engaging in professional networking. The focus groups took place via Zoom online meeting software, and in several meetings focus group participants either (a) interrupted the process to professionally collaborate and network, (b) stayed after the focus group concluded to network, or (c) politely asked other participants to collaborate during the group process. For example, one participant said to another, “I would be curious, [participant name], if I can have a second to ask you a quick question?” Another collaborative effort came when all members of one of the focus groups were invited to another region’s face-to-face school leader collaboration with, “We do our Superintendent’s meeting over here, third Wednesday of every month. You are more than welcome.”

Creating the time and space for rural school leaders to connect with one another seems to be important. It is a given that there will be work on the rural school leader’s desk or in their e-mail inbox at all times, but as one leader noted, on a daily basis they say, “They didn’t cover this in the admin classes.” Making opportunities available to network with others on the items not covered in college can be an essential part of providing support for rural school leaders. As one of my focus groups concluded, “And so to go be with people who know you know, who can network with and do some professional learning, reminds me of why I’m doing this, and makes me want to come back in August. And so I think it’s invaluable.”

### **Study Limitations**

Like all studies, this one has limitations. Because this study involved only a limited number of Oregon rural school administrators, the findings may not be representative of the entire population of rural school leaders in the state. Additionally, the sample is concentrated to Oregon alone and may not generalize outside the state. Despite these limitations, however, the

study adds to the literature on rural school leader networking in important ways. It provides evidence that—at least in Oregon—most rural school leaders do report having access to a variety of opportunities for professional networking. With no focus group input from those disagreeing that networking was important, or those feeling neutral towards networking importance, the focus group responses may be biased. Those who responded favorably to the networking importance question advocated for networking in focus groups, but there was not a voice in focus groups representing those who did not see the need for networking. Given the importance of professional networking to school leaders in my study and their expressed satisfaction with the number and variety of networking opportunities available, it is possible that Oregon could serve as a model for rural school leader networking in other parts of the country.

### **Further Exploration and Implications**

Although this study provides valuable insights into professional networking among rural school leaders, several areas deserve further exploration. Future research could delve deeper into the specific challenges and benefits of networking for rural school leaders, including the impact of geographic isolation, limited resources, and time constraints on their ability to engage in professional development activities. Furthermore, investigating the impact of different networking methods on school leader professional development, and exploring the role of technology in facilitating networking among rural educators could provide valuable insights for rural administrators seeking to enhance their professional growth and improve educational outcomes. With no respondents who disagreed or were neutral in seeing that networking was important in focus groups, further exploration into those feeling neutral or negative in towards networking should be explored. Additionally, examining the factors that influence the frequency and types of networking activities engaged in by rural school leaders could provide valuable

insights for policymakers, school boards and professional development organizations.

Information gathered on face-to-face professional opportunities versus online meetings and the effectiveness and preference of each would be valuable for both school leaders and those providing the opportunities.

With many school leaders isolated and geographically distant from other leaders of schools, perhaps a local network of leaders in and out of the education field should be explored. The possibilities are endless, but the mayor, the volunteer fire chief and the school principal gathering to discuss professional issues and leadership similarities may be worth exploring to combat the geographic distances and to assist in meeting the desire of professional networking face to face.

While the rural school leaders across Oregon desire collaboration amongst colleagues, it becomes important to advocate for this to take place amongst the school leaders and with the organizations which currently support these leaders. The Oregon Department of Education and Coalition of Oregon School Administrators along with the Oregon's Educator Advancement Council are currently supporting school leaders and with this information supports may improve for rural school leaders.

My role in impacting the networking of rural school leaders is similar to that of the parable that has been adapted by many but originates from a popular parable written by Eisely (1969) about making a difference, no matter how small. In the story, a boy is walking along a beach covered with starfish that have been washed ashore. The boy starts picking them up one by one and throwing them back into the ocean.

An adult sees the boy from afar reaching down and throwing starfish back into the ocean and questions his efforts, pointing out that there are thousands of starfish and that he cannot

possibly save them all or make a difference. The boy responds by throwing another starfish back into the water and says to the adult, “It made a difference for that one.”

My role in supporting rural school leaders mirrors the parable of the starfish. Just as the boy made a difference for each starfish he threw back into the ocean, I strive to make a difference for each rural school leader I encounter. Whether it's a simple question about transportation, human resources, or student learning, I'm committed to listening, learning, and providing assistance. By connecting leaders to resources and offering support, I aim to help them achieve success and thrive.

## **Conclusion**

Professional networking can be an important tool for supporting rural school leaders and addressing the unique challenges they face. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of these rural school leaders can help educators and policymakers develop strategies to foster a sense of community, provide opportunities for professional development, and promote collaboration among rural schools. By addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities presented by professional networking, rural school leaders can enhance their effectiveness and improve the quality of education in their communities.

APPENDIX A



**EXEMPT DETERMINATION**

May 3, 2024

Eric Nichols  
enichols@uoregon.edu

Dear Eric Nichols:

The following research was reviewed and determined to qualify for exemption.

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Type of Review:         | Initial Study  |
| Study Title:            | Oregon Rural School Leaders Engagement in Networking   |
| Principal Investigator: | Eric Nichols   |
| Parent Study ID:        | STUDY00001330  |
| Transaction ID:         | STUDY00001330  |
| Documents Reviewed:     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Informed consent focus groups 3, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• Informed consent survey 3, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• RAP-_exempt_determination_form.pdf, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Research Plan IRB 3, Category: IRB Protocol;</li></ul> |
| Approval Date:          | 4/25/2024  |
| Effective Date:         | 4/25/2024  |
| Expiration Date:        | 4/24/2025  |

**For this research, the following determinations have been made:**

- This study has been reviewed under **the 2018 Common Rule** and determined to qualify for exemption under **Title 45 CFR 46.104(d) ((2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk))**.

The research is approved to be conducted as described in the approved protocol using the approved materials. Approved materials can be accessed in the protocol workspace in the IRB module of the research administration portal (RAP).

All changes to this research must be assessed to ensure the study continues to qualify for exemption. Research Compliance Services has developed [specific guidance](#) to help you understand when a modification is required before a change can be implemented. It is your responsibility to ensure modifications are submitted when required and approval secured before implementing changes to the protocol

Continuing Review is not required for this study. **An institutional approval period has been established based on your application materials.** If you anticipate the research will continue beyond the approval period, you must submit a **Continuing Review Application** at least 45 days prior to the expiration date. A closure report must be submitted once human

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subject research activities are complete. Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes non-compliance.

With the submission of your request, you agreed to uphold the responsibilities of the Principal Investigator and have agreed to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB module of the RAP.

If you have any questions regarding your protocol or the review process, please contact Research Compliance Services at [ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu](mailto:ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu) or (541)346-2510. The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

***Please consider completing our [user satisfaction survey](#). It only takes a few minutes, and we would like to hear about your experience working with our office!***

Sincerely,

Research Compliance Services  
*on behalf of the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects*

cc: Julie Alonzo

## APPENDIX B

### Survey–PHASE 1

Thank you for taking a few moments to share your thoughts about rural educational leadership. This 16-question survey is expected to take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

#### Part 1: Basic Demographics

1. How long have you worked in education, total?
  - < 1 year
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-15 years
  - > 15 years
  
2. How long have you worked in a *rural* school?
  - < 1 year
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-15 years
  - > 15 years
  
3. How long have you worked in a *leadership position* in education, total?
  - < 1 year
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-15 years
  - > 15 years
  
4. How long have you worked in a *leadership position* in a *rural school*?
  - < 1 year
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-15 years
  - > 15 years

## Survey Part 2

Please select the answer that best captures your thoughts on the following statements.

1. Rural school leadership is a lonely position.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
  
2. Rural school leadership helps me feel connected to others in my community.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
  
3. I find being a rural school leader is stressful.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
  
4. I find being a rural school leader relaxing.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
  
5. I enjoy engaging in professional networking with other rural educational leaders.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree

6. In the past two years, how often have you engaged in professional networking with other rural educational leaders?
- Never
  - 1-2 times, total
  - 3-4 times, total
  - Approximately every month
  - Approximately every week
  - On a nearly daily basis
7. What types of professional networking with other rural education leaders have you engaged in (select all that apply)?
- None. I have never engaged in professional networking with other rural education leaders.
  - Face to Face
  - Written electronic means of communication (e-mail, text, instant messaging, etc.)
  - Phone or online meeting (Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc.)
  - Other
8. How satisfied are you currently with your opportunities to engage in rural school leader professional networking?
- Strongly Dissatisfied
  - Dissatisfied
  - Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied
  - Satisfied
  - Strongly Satisfied
9. Participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces job loneliness.
- Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
10. Participating in professional networks with other rural school leaders reduces job stress.
- Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree

11. What are some of the things you most appreciate about being a rural educational leader?  
(open-ended response).

12. What are some of the things you find most challenging about being a rural educational leader? (open-ended response)

13. If you would be willing to participate in a small focus group to further share your insights on this topic, please provide your name and email address here. (If you do not want to participate further, simply do not fill out this information) (open-ended response)

APPENDIX C  
Focus Group Questions

**Engaged in Professional Networking Questions**

1. In your survey you indicated that you benefit from networking. Can you describe a recent experience where networking with colleagues from other rural schools has been beneficial to you?
2. What specific advantages do you think come from collaborating with colleagues from other rural schools, as opposed to within your own school community?
3. How do you think networking with colleagues contributes to professional growth and development in the context of rural school leadership?
4. Can networking assist in combating feelings of loneliness, isolation or stress in rural schools? How so?
5. In what ways have you seen networking with colleagues positively impact the learning environment or your school environment in general?
6. Can you share any challenges or barriers you've encountered in networking with colleagues from other rural schools, and how you've overcome them?
7. From your perspective, what unique opportunities does networking with colleagues in rural settings offer compared to urban or suburban contexts?
8. How do you measure the success or effectiveness of networking with colleagues in other rural schools?
9. Have you observed any innovative practices or strategies in other rural schools through networking that you've implemented in your own school? If so, what were they and how have they influenced your school's operations?
10. Additional information you'd like to share around school leader networking?

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