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KEY FACTORS SURROUNDING THE SURVIVAL AND THRIVAL OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN NEBRASKA THROUGH THE EYES OF SUPERINTENDENTS: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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KEY FACTORS SURROUNDING THE SURVIVAL AND THRIVAL OF RURAL
SCHOOLS IN NEBRASKA THROUGH THE EYES OF SUPERINTENDENTS:
A MIXED METHODS STUDY

by

Sadie Nicole Coffey

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies
(Educational Leadership and Higher Education)

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

July, 2022

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SCHOOLS IN NEBRASKA THROUGH THE EYES OF SUPERINTENDENTS:
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Sadie Nicole Coffey, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2022

Advisor: Marilyn Grady

Rural school success is crucial for the Nebraska education system. Without rural schools, many students and families would be without access to high quality educational opportunities. Despite the importance of rural education, the number of rural schools in Nebraska continues to decline, and “one thing is clear from academic research on rural schools: closings and consolidations can drastically change the flavor of civic life in a rural community” (McCullum & Merrefield, 2019, p. 1). Identity loss and identity crisis theories may explain why these rural schools in Nebraska continue to survive and thrive. Without the rural school, a community and communities in which it serves, lose its identity. The rural school is a cultural hub for abundant social activities that play a vital part in the soul of community life and identity. This study identified necessary components for a rural school to survive and thrive in Nebraska and compared ideas across different geographical locations, sizes of schools, community locales, and types of schools. Participants for the study were 79 superintendents (or their designee) of rural Nebraska schools with a K-12 enrollment of 256 or less. In addition, eight individual superintendents were interviewed. All participants first completed a questionnaire. Then,

eight randomly selected individuals participated in an individual follow-up interview. Responses were compared across all participants within the questionnaire and interview process. An analysis of variance was conducted to examine the differences between surviving and thriving schools and schools by geographical location, size, locale, and type. Based on the results, rural Nebraska school districts are surviving and thriving across the state because of their community support and the state of their finances. Small rural schools in Nebraska have created unique partnerships, have student involvement expectations, and strong community support. Focuses such as local control and a sustainable solution to school funding were repeatedly recognized during superintendent interviews.

Acknowledgements

At age 35, I have been a formal student for the past 31 years, all of which have been in the wonderful state of Nebraska. I owe so much to the educators who helped me become the person I am today. Thank you to my education families of Teddy Bear University, Franklin Public Schools, Nebraska Wesleyan University, the University of Nebraska-Kearney, Doane University, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Throughout my professional years as an educator, I also owe a great deal of gratitude to my colleagues and staff along the way. Thank you to the school families of Holdrege Middle School, Heartland Community Schools, Shickley Public Schools, and Milford Public Schools.

As a student in a doctoral program, it was imperative to find a network of peers experiencing the same joys and pains as me. My fellow doctoral students, also known as “The Grady Babies,” thank you for being my sounding board, vent station, and voice of reason.

To my family that is no longer with us. Swede, thank you for your humor, love, and support. You always believed in me and knew I could do anything I put my mind to. Papa M.J., thank you for your Christ-like love and foundation. You always thought I should become a doctor; I just wish you could be here on earth to celebrate with us. Papo Max and Grandma Coletta, thank you for all of your support and encouragement along the way. I sure was a lucky kid to have had you so close to home all those years. The four of you supported me in so many ways throughout my life, especially so while I was

attending higher education. I honestly could not have done it without you. I just hope to have made you proud.

Dad, thank you for always seeing my stubbornness as a gift and not a curse. Mom, thank you for always being the cheerleader I needed in order to persevere. Suzy, without your support during my undergraduate years I do not know where I would be today; thank you for all the love and support throughout it all. Tower, you pulled me out of the muck and threw me into a cage! Thank you for allowing me to take life by the horns again.

To my best friend and husband Phil, thank you for your support throughout this entire time. It is not easy signing up to be the husband of a doctoral student, especially during a pandemic. There were several months spent holed up in the office. There were several trips and plans canceled. You were and always are my rock. What would I do without you!

To my four babies born during my pursuit of four different degrees. . .

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EmyJay, my master's degree baby, thank you for your creativity, spunk, and beauty. The light within you shines everywhere you go and in everything you do; you absolutely mystify me. You will continue to blow us all away.

Frankie, my education specialist degree baby, thank you for your love, laughter, and leadership skills. You know exactly what to do to lift the spirits of those around you. Your laugh is contagious and the most beautiful sound. Your sass, stubbornness, independence, and confidence are the perfect combination of toddler leadership skills. I can't wait to see where they all take you.

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This culmination of work is dedicated to Joel Sweet (March 18, 1993-July 10, 2022) and Jarad Robinson (April 7, 1983-July 16, 2022). Joel opened my heart to special

education and my cousin Jarad gave his everything to all he knew. May I continue to pour my heart into the area of special education and give back to Nebraska rural education in honor of Joel and Jarad!

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Chapter 1

Overview

Introduction

Rural Schools made me the person I am today; and I intend to give back in whatever way I can to keep rural education in Nebraska thriving.

As an administrator in Nebraska rural schools, I have been asked numerous times about certain aspects of our educational systems. These conversations, these ideas and aspects of rural school systems should be shared in order to continue to maintain and grow the rural education system right here in Nebraska!

Through this research, I intended to share rural Nebraska school stories in order for rural schools to not only continue to survive but thrive in Nebraska!

Statement of the Problem

During the last 42 years, the school districts in Nebraska have changed greatly. Since 1979, every 21 years, our state has seen an 11-13% decrease in total school districts, largely due to reorganization.

Friend and administrative colleague, Corey Worrell of Waverly Public Schools, published a dissertation entitled “The History of Nebraska Public School Reorganization Over the Past 30 Years and How This History Might be Used to Predict Nebraska School Reorganization in the Future: A Mixed Methods Study” in 2015.

Worrell (2015) stated, “In looking at information gained from the interviews, the depopulation of rural Nebraska will continue to impact enrollment in those school districts.” A larger question to discuss would be, how do we want schools to look in the

future? What offerings and programs should be available in schools? This should give districts a focus when discussing “*what their districts need to have in order to survive.*”

So now I ask, what do our rural school districts need in order to not only survive, but thrive? How can our rural school districts continue to be successful?

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Jay Brewer, a longtime rural school principal, stated “A town loses its identity when it loses its school” (Bukaty, 2014). Identity loss and identity crisis theories provide a conceptual framework for this study as we determine the why and the ability to survive and thrive in Nebraska as the smallest rural schools. A rural school serves as the epicenter of any small Nebraska community. Once a community is faced with shutting the doors of its school, it loses its identity.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve.

The Research Questions

Questionnaire

1. Which of the following two statements best describes your status as a Nebraska rural school?
 - Surviving: we are a rural school that anticipates a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years
 - Thriving: we are a rural school that does not anticipate a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years.
2. Identify and describe five methods, reasons, or programs that enhance your district’s ability to survive or thrive as a rural Nebraska school.

3. Select all of the following that your community or communities possess:

- Community pride
- Emphasis on quality in business and community life
- Willingness to invest in the future
- Active participation in community decision making
- Cooperative community spirit
- Realistic appraisal of future opportunities
- Awareness of its competitive positioning
- Knowledge of the physical environment
- Active economic development program
- Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders
- Celebration of diversity in leadership
- Strong belief in and support for education
- Problem solving approach to providing health care
- Strong multi-generational family orientation
- Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life
- Sound and well-maintained infrastructure
- Careful use of fiscal resources
- Sophisticated use of technology resources
- Willingness to seek help from the outside
- Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself

4. Select all of the following that your Nebraska rural school possesses:

- Full staff (no vacancies in any area)
- Sports and/or Activities cooperative
- Early childhood programming (daycare)
- Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)
- Shared staff with another district
- Use of ESU staff for providing special services
- Use of ESU staff for professional development
- Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance
- Use of ESU staff for providing technology services
- Use of ESU staff for OTHER services
- Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)
- and Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)

5. If you could have or implement ANYTHING (without negative consequence) that would allow you to always be a rural Nebraska school for your community or communities, what would it be.

Follow up interviews were conducted with eight superintendents (or designees) to garner further information in regard to specific rural schools (focusing on different locales, areas of the state, sizes, and types):

Questionnaire

1. What are the essential partnerships you currently have in place?
2. What are the essential programs you currently have in place?
3. Even though you are faced with _____ (interviewee may name others) _____ (limited resources, constrained tax base, demographic shifts, recruitment and retention, access to broadband, teacher shortage, population decline, available housing, no daycares . . .), you are still here, providing a rural Nebraska education to your students. How are you doing this?
4. If it wasn't for (interviewee names one reason), we wouldn't survive as a rural Nebraska school. Why is that?
5. What would better support rural schools in Nebraska? (What do we need as rural Nebraska schools).

Methods

A phenomenological mixed methods approach was used for this study.

Information was gathered from the Nebraska Department of Education on the enrollment size of all Nebraska school districts. School districts with an enrollment of 256 students or less were used.

Information was gathered through a questionnaire. A questionnaire was utilized to gather evidence by asking questions related to the type of school they are (surviving or thriving), successful programs in place, community/communities' aspects, district aspects, and ideas to assist rural Nebraska schools. This questionnaire was sent to the 79

smallest school districts in Nebraska. The questions centered on the important aspects of school districts that are thriving versus surviving.

Eight (8) schools, which completed the questionnaire, were randomly selected for follow-up interviews. Those interviewed represented different schools of size, locale, and geographical location.

Definition of Terms

Definitions of technical terminology used in this study include (in order of appearance in the study):

Surviving—A rural school that anticipates a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years.

Thriving—A rural school that does not anticipate a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years.

Superintendent's Designee—The appropriately authorized staff member, per school board policy, to act with authority in the Superintendent's place and stead.

Assumptions

Some of the research may be completed by incoming superintendents or superintendents that are relatively new to the district. Using the superintendent's designee may prove helpful if the designee has been a part of the district longer than the superintendent.

When randomly selecting eight individuals to interview, it will not be possible to assure there is representation of both surviving and thriving rural schools.

Delimitations

The study's major delimitating factor is that it is solely focusing on the 79 smallest rural Nebraska public school districts. The data and results examined in the study focused only on rural Nebraska public school districts. Therefore, no assumptions were made about how rural Nebraska public school results compare across the state with other sized districts, with rural and/or small private schools across the state, or across the nation.

Limitations

There were limitations to the study. First, the questionnaire's rate of return and completion was limited by school districts going through administrative turnover. created by the methodology used in this study. Second, the timing of the interviews, which occurred in early July, impacted who was available to be interviewed.

Significance of the Study

Of the current 244 school districts in Nebraska, 32% (79 schools) have an enrollment size (according to NDE's Nebraska Educational Profile) of 256 or less (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.). Approximately 19% (46 schools) enroll less than 200 students. How are they doing it? Will they continue to do it? What can we learn from these districts in order to stabilize and grow rural education in Nebraska?

Understanding the factors that stabilize and grow rural education in Nebraska will keep rural school doors open. Recognizing hurdles unique to education in rural will help rural school districts develop best practices to survive and thrive.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL, 2020), problems facing rural communities today are depopulation trends, broadband access or lack thereof, economic development surrounding jobs, housing, health care, and sustainability, and for schools in rural areas, the following nation problems are amplified in our rural areas: limited resources, constrained funding, demographic shifts, labor shortage and recruitment and retention of the workforce. NCSL was established in 1975 and is a "nonpartisan public officials' association composed of sitting state legislators" from the states, territories, and commonwealths of the United States.

I was raised on an Ostrich Farm and attended a K-12 rural Nebraska school with my older sister and younger brother. I was raised on strong rural Nebraska values. I met my husband, Phil, at a Bradshaw street dance and we got married one year later. We have 4 beautiful children. Tucker, who is a freshman in high school, EmyJay our 4th grader, Frankie in PK, and Hank who just turned 2. Rural Education opened my eyes to becoming an educator. Without rural education, I wouldn't have met Mr. Meyer, my fifth-grade teacher who taught me no matter what was happening in my homelife; his classroom was a safe space and he loved me unconditionally. Rural education gave me Mr. Rucker, my ag teacher and FFA advisor who was a strong father figure to me. My small-town Nebraska roots gave me the opportunity to care for a child with deaf-blindness and a severe mental handicap. Without rural education, I don't become a special education teacher for 5 years, a principal and SPED director for 4 years, or a Superintendent and SPED director for 3 years. I graduated from NWU in 2009 with 2 degrees and 3 minors, UNK in 2012 with my first of three master's degrees, Doane in

2018 with my Ed. Specialist degree, and now am progressing to 2022 for my PhD at UNL.

Summary

Rural schools across Nebraska have depleted over the years, mostly due to reorganization; nonetheless, these 79 have remained. It is imperative that we create an understanding amongst rural schools and their communities as to what it takes to continue to serve the community and communities we educate in our districts.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

An African proverb states, “It takes a village to raise a child.” A community must work with children in order for those children to live and grow in a safe and healthy environment, and one day live either within or outside that environment successfully. How is this accomplished in rural Nebraska schools? What does it mean to be a rural school? The proverb raises more questions than answers as does much of the rural education research that is available. First, let’s review and summarize the relevant research surrounding rural education. Then, let’s take a look at the gaps within the research. Finally, we will look at the topic of rural education and determine how this study fills in gaps that research to date has not yet filled.

Section I

First, let’s review and summarize the relevant research surrounding rural education. “How do we as rural advocates and scholars serve to acknowledge the inherent value of rural places while simultaneously striving to “improve them?” (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 9). One could argue that if rural education is as valuable as many advocates suggest, that further research and seeking to continuously improve may be contradictory. However, I argue that research can help other rural and non-rural schools learn how to create that value amongst their system; just like administrators learn from business leaders and vice versa. Also, you may have heard the phrase, “if you’re not growing; you’re dying,” and professional growth is no different. All school systems, including

valued rural school systems, should adhere to continual growth for the betterment of the system and most importantly, the students. What makes a school rural? “There is no right definition of rural because rural is a multifaceted construct that does not afford a single categorization” (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 9). During my research I found my frustration with the “unidentifiable” definition of rural; and the research out there supports my frustrations. “Due to the many theoretical perspectives and operational definitions of rural, rural researchers must shoulder extra responsibility” (Koziol et al., 2015, p. 11) throughout their research processes. Researchers must “fully communicate the rural nature of their study, from their theoretical perspective and choice of an operational definition to situating their research findings within the context of other rural definitions” (Koziol et al., 2015, p. 11).

“Researchers should (also) be “providing clear, detailed information to readers so they understand how the rural context is delineated from other contexts” (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 9). The inexactness of “rural” cannot be a reason a researcher or reader is unsure of whether or not a study is replicable or applicable to their definition of “rural.”

“Providing more detail about rural context will help advance the field by reducing the ambiguity behind the label of rural” (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 9). “By explicitly defining rural, researchers better operationalize their construct, thereby enabling future researchers to evaluate and critique the alignment between different conceptualizations of rural” (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 9). Once you have determined these factors, you can create your operating definition of “rural” to help future researchers and current “rural” schools understand what your study means to them. This research study will utilize NCEs.ed.gov

in order to define Nebraska Rural schools on the *Locale continuum* and also use NDE NEP data to determine the most current enrollment.

Section II

“Rural education research is complex and each study is unique” (Koziol et al., 2015, p. 11). Because of this, “informed and deliberate decision-making should always trump strict adherence to guidelines” (Koziol et al., 2015, p. 11). There are several rural education guidelines available for researchers to utilize, however, the research surrounding these guidelines proves the greater importance of whether or not to use them and how to use them varies greatly; again, the researcher “shoulders” this weight of determination.

“Collaboration is a promising solution to challenges in rural education” (Harmon, 2017, p. 1). There are several bodies of research on collaboration within rural education. “Collaboration appears to hold much potential as a new partnership solution to current and future challenges in rural education” (Harmon, 2017, p. 3). Throughout these bodies of research collaboration with multiple entities is explored; businesses, other schools, departments of education, community clubs, and colleges. Clusters, better known as cooperatives in Nebraska, are also discussed throughout the research that focuses on collaboration within rural schools. “Clusters create advantages through resource sharing, increased curriculum offerings, more professional development opportunities, and increased staffing and student enrollment” (Stelmach, 2011, p. 38). I am personally involved in a sports cooperative with a neighboring school. The BDS COOP allows both schools to share responsibilities across multiple sporting activities. “Shared responsibility

offers exciting alternatives for rural education, and in some instances, has made it possible” (Stelmach, 2011, p. 39). Without our sports cooperative, there would have been many instances where either one of our schools would not have been able to field a team for any particular sport season. With the cooperative, our sport activities have been made possible and have been very successful.

Summary

Even though there is a lot of research on rural education, there are still gaps within the research; leaving more areas yet to be explored. “Teacher staffing may be the biggest issue facing many rural schools in the U.S.” (Brenner, 2019, p. 94). Yet, the exact study stating that fact provided little to address the concern. Research done on considerations of The Department of Education has shown more input is needed from rural schools.

The Department commits to increasing listening sessions and improving communication but it is not clear that rural input is or will be “baked into” the system to ensure that rural communities are considered in every facet of the Department’s work, particularly rulemaking. . . . (Brenner, 2019)

and federal mandates “impact rural students and schools in ways that cannot be imagined from within D.C.” (Brenner, 2019, p. 94). This gap between “Washington” and “practitioners” has always been evident from the practitioner's view, and there are actual studies to prove that The Department of Education needs to continue to find more ways to, “meaningfully increase the consideration and participation of rural schools” (Brenner, 2019, p. 94). The question of “how” the Department can do that successfully is still a gap within the current research. Who better to ask than our rural Nebraska schools? It is imperative that through this study we determine the key factors keeping our rural

Nebraska schools surviving and thriving in the community/communities in which they serve.

Within research on rural schools' collaboration efforts, five questions are posed, "that if answered could demonstrate the potential value of collaboration to advance research, innovation and practice in rural education" (Harmon, 2017, p. 1). However the questions have yet to be fully researched within the rural contexts:

What knowledge, skills and dispositions must principals possess in rural settings to create a school culture of collaboration that supports innovation in teaching and learning? What online collaboration strategies work best for teachers in rural settings to innovate solutions to their own problems of practice as a networked improvement community? What policies, programs or practices facilitate collaborative actions among school district, school, and community leadership in rural locales that result in mutually beneficial outcomes for students and the community? How might a team of scholars from different disciplines function as a research Collaboratory to address critical rural education issues, such as workforce development in high poverty rural settings and what methods, strategies and tools are most appropriate to evaluate if and how a collaboration in a rural setting was effective or achieved key elements of success?" (Harmon, 2017, p. 4).

These questions pose continued gaps in rural education research.

With gaps therein lies opportunity. Utilizing the past research and these gaps to guide this study, provided an opportunity to make a valuable contribution to Nebraska rural education research. In a 1985 research study conducted by Helge, "rural practitioners and researchers across the country were in agreement in prioritizing the importance of . . . research issues to the field of rural education" (Harmon, 2017, p. 9). The highest priority identified in the study was rural school effectiveness; how it is best measured, what makes a rural school effective, and it differs from non-rural schools, and qualitative and quantitative measures of effective rural school leadership and how that

differs from non-rural schools. Effectiveness for rural schools has been a very high topic of interest for my future research. With the area still needing to be addressed, this body of research will be able to assist Nebraska rural schools in determining what makes an effective rural school and how they can make changes in order to become a more established Nebraska rural school now and for the years to come.

We may still not know what type of “village” it takes to raise a child, but hopefully after analyzing and encapsulating the relevant research surrounding rural education and taking a closer look at the gaps within the research, this study will help others understand what it takes for Nebraska rural schools to survive and thrive in Nebraska.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

A phenomenological, mixed methods design was utilized. The researcher garnered quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data from the 79 Nebraska school districts' superintendents. Qualitative interviews were conducted as a follow-up with eight of the superintendents based on school locale, type, geographical location, and size.

Research Questions

Questionnaire

1. Which of the following two statements best describes your status as a Nebraska rural school?
 - Surviving: we are a rural school that anticipates a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years
 - Thriving: we are a rural school that does not anticipate a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years.
2. Identify and describe five methods, reasons, or programs that enhance your district's ability to survive or thrive as a rural Nebraska school.
3. Select all of the following that your community or communities possess:
 - Community pride
 - Emphasis on quality in business and community life
 - Willingness to invest in the future
 - Active participation in community decision making
 - Cooperative community spirit
 - Realistic appraisal of future opportunities
 - Awareness of its competitive positioning
 - Knowledge of the physical environment
 - Active economic development program
 - Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders
 - Celebration of diversity in leadership
 - Strong belief in and support for education
 - Problem solving approach to providing health care

- Strong multi-generational family orientation
 - Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life
 - Sound and well-maintained infrastructure
 - Careful use of fiscal resources
 - Sophisticated use of technology resources
 - Willingness to seek help from the outside
 - Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself
4. Select all of the following that your Nebraska rural school possesses:
- Full staff (no vacancies in any area)
 - Sports and/or Activities cooperative
 - Early childhood programming (daycare)
 - Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)
 - Shared staff with another district
 - Use of ESU staff for providing special services
 - Use of ESU staff for professional development
 - Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance
 - Use of ESU staff for providing technology services
 - Use of ESU staff for OTHER services
 - Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)
 - and Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)
5. If you could have or implement ANYTHING (without negative consequence) that would allow you to always be a rural Nebraska school for your community or communities, what would it be.

Follow up interviews will then be conducted with eight superintendents (or designees) to garner further information in regard to specific rural schools (focusing on different locales, areas of the state, sizes, and types):

Questionnaire

1. What are the essential partnerships you currently have in place?
2. What are the essential programs you currently have in place?

3. Even though you are faced with _____ (interviewee may name others) _____ (limited resources, constrained tax base, demographic shifts, recruitment and retention, access to broadband, teacher shortage, population decline, available housing, no daycares . . .), you are still here, providing a rural Nebraska education to your students. How are you doing this?
4. If it wasn't for (interviewee names one reason), we wouldn't survive as a rural Nebraska school. Why is that?
5. What would better support rural schools in Nebraska? (What do we need as rural Nebraska schools).

Population and Sample of Participants

Schools that meet criteria for this body of research: McPhearson, Loup County, Sandhills, Keya Paha, Sioux County, Wheeler Central, Litchfield, Arthur County, Arcadia, Elba, Hayes Center, Thedford, Chambers, Leyton, Verdigre, Hyannis, Banner County, Allen Consolidated, Eustis-Farnam, Maywood, Exeter-Milligan, Cody-Kilgore, Shickley, Sargent, Mullen, Minitare, Crawford, Arnold, Stuart, Lewiston, Bruning-Davenport, Brady, St. Edward, Elgin, Potter Dix, Niobrara, Newman Grove, Calloway, Wynot, Osmond, Wallace 6SR, Schribner-Snyder, Ansley, Hampton, Stapelton, Creek Valley, Paxton, S-E-M, Hay Springs, Meridian, Elwood, Giltner, Emerson Hubbard, South Platte, Sterling, Osceola, Medicine Valley, Wilcox-Hildreth, Wauneta-Palisade, Garden County, Deshler, Diller-Odell, Wausa, Friend, Clarkson, Winside, Dorchester, Harvard, Rock County, Bertrand, Silver Lake, River Side, Santee, Red Cloud, Kenesaw, High Plains, Anselmo-Merna, McCool Junction, and Loomis. A participant from each school will be limited to superintendents and his or her designee.

Study Design and Collection of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

This study utilized a descriptive research design by completing questionnaires and in-depth interviews in order to obtain the information needed to systematically describe

the surviving and thriving rural school phenomenon in Nebraska; as well as the situation that surrounds each. We know why our state's rural schools are closing but we need to better understand how the ones still serving their communities are able to do so.

Questionnaires gathered data about each of the various subjects and the data was gathered to compare and contrast the differences among the schools. Eight (8) interviews were completed to determine the essential partnerships and programs within Nebraska rural schools. Interviews also provided data surrounding the necessary components of rural education and ideas that would assist rural Nebraska schools now and into the future.

Data Sources

- Responses to the possible 79 questionnaires
- Responses to the eight interviews

Data Collection

- Qualtrics for the questionnaires
- Interview responses
- Otterai for transcription process
- Coding using Zotero
- Synthesize

Data Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

- Assumptions made about the nature of the data were stated
- Charts for each part of the questionnaire were developed

- Data from the mixed methods approach were synthesized in order to formulate trend data and analytical findings to assist current and future rural schools, specifically in the state of Nebraska.

Ethical Considerations

All participants completed necessary consent documents. All identifiable data was de-identified.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Participants were only selected from the 79 Nebraska school districts with a student enrollment size (according to NDE's NEP data) of 256 or less. Participants only included acting superintendents (or their designees) at the time of the questionnaire and interview.

Timeline

- IRB approval
- Proposal
- Questionnaire released to participants
- Questionnaire reminders completed
- Interviews set up
- Interview reminders shared
- Interviews completed
- Data analysis
- Data summarization
- Findings determined

- Defend

Other

Theories surrounding rural education are not exactly in surplus. However, there are several theories surrounding the definition of “rural” when it comes to rural education. These definitions and the research done in regard to “which definition serves ‘rural’ best,” was very helpful in creating definitions for surviving and thriving rural schools. “Rather than using existing definitions, researchers could create new definitions that are more comparable by fully crossing the levels of,” “indicators used to define rural, the geographic unit to which the definition was applied, or the way in which the codes were combined” (Koziol et al., 2015, p. 11). The theories of definitions and this research informed the study when these definitions were created for the research study.

There are several theories on rural implications with education, rural change, and the effect on the communities. However, some of these theories were derived from different countries; so, do they constitute potential theories to be used in Nebraska? They could be utilized to guide research in rural Nebraska.

Theories connected to rural school spending and outcomes exist. How do you encapsulate spending authority, land values, and such in order to keep rural schools open within theory?

Family involvement research provided theories for the link between family involvement and school success. If “family involvement” is the answer to the research question, what components are needed in order to create the thriving rural school?

Theories contributed to the meaning and utility of the study. Definitions of surviving and thriving rural were determined. Identity loss and crisis were explored within the questionnaire and follow-up interviews. Phenomena were distinguished from the current and constructed theories. They led to a hypothesis about the components that keep the doors of a rural school open. The theories were also incorporated throughout the process and findings of the study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. Utilizing a phenomenological, mixed methods design, this study garnered questionnaire data from the 79 Nebraska school districts with a student enrollment size (according to NDE's NEP data) of 256 or less. Superintendents (or their designees) of these districts completed a questionnaire and participated in an interview.

Chapter 4

Results

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. The results should be utilized for rural schools to continue to serve their constituents.

Research Questions

Questionnaire

1. Which of the following two statements best describes your status as a Nebraska rural school?
 - Surviving: we are a rural school that anticipates a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years
 - Thriving: we are a rural school that does not anticipate a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years.
2. Identify and describe five methods, reasons, or programs that enhance your district's ability to survive or thrive as a rural Nebraska school.
3. Select all of the following that your community or communities possess:
 - Community pride
 - Emphasis on quality in business and community life
 - Willingness to invest in the future
 - Active participation in community decision making
 - Cooperative community spirit
 - Realistic appraisal of future opportunities
 - Awareness of its competitive positioning
 - Knowledge of the physical environment
 - Active economic development program
 - Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders
 - Celebration of diversity in leadership
 - Strong belief in and support for education
 - Problem solving approach to providing health care

- Strong multi-generational family orientation
 - Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life
 - Sound and well-maintained infrastructure
 - Careful use of fiscal resources
 - Sophisticated use of technology resources
 - Willingness to seek help from the outside
 - Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself
4. Select all of the following that your Nebraska rural school possesses:
- Full staff (no vacancies in any area)
 - Sports and/or Activities cooperative
 - Early childhood programming (daycare)
 - Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)
 - Shared staff with another district
 - Use of ESU staff for providing special services
 - Use of ESU staff for professional development
 - Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance
 - Use of ESU staff for providing technology services
 - Use of ESU staff for OTHER services
 - Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)
 - and Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)
5. If you could have or implement ANYTHING (without negative consequence) that would allow you to always be a rural Nebraska school for your community or communities, what would it be.

Follow up interviews will then be conducted with eight superintendents (or designees) to garner further information in regard to specific rural schools (focusing on different locales, areas of the state, sizes, and types):

Interview

- 1, What are the essential partnerships you currently have in place?
2. What are the essential programs you currently have in place?

3. Even though you are faced with _____ (interviewee may name others) _____ (limited resources, constrained tax base, demographic shifts, recruitment and retention, access to broadband, teacher shortage, population decline, available housing, no daycares . . .), you are still here, providing a rural Nebraska education to your students. How are you doing this?
4. If it wasn't for (interviewee names one reason), we wouldn't survive as a rural Nebraska school. Why is that?
5. What would better support rural schools in Nebraska? (What do we need as rural Nebraska schools).

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive research design by completing questionnaires and in-depth interviews in order to obtain the necessary information needed to systematically describe the surviving and thriving rural school phenomenon in Nebraska; as well as the situation that surrounds each. We know why our state's rural schools are closing, but what we needed to better understand was how the ones still serving their communities can do so. Questionnaires gathered data about each of the various subjects and the data was gathered to compare the differences among the schools. Eight (8) interviews were completed to determine the essential partnerships and programs within Nebraska rural schools. Interviews also provided data surrounding the necessary components of rural education and ideas that would assist rural Nebraska schools now and into the future.

Quantitative Findings

Questionnaires were sent to 79 superintendents and 40 completed surveys were returned: creating a return rate of 51%. Table 1 shows the completion of surveys.

Table 1*Questionnaire Completion*

	Results
# of possible responses	79
# of responses	40
% of responses	51

Population

Schools that met criteria for this body of research were: McPhearson, Loup County, Sandhills, Keya Paha, Sioux County, Wheeler Central, Litchfield, Arthur County, Arcadia, Elba, Hayes Center, Thedford, Chambers, Leyton, Verdigre, Hyannis, Banner County, Allen Consolidated, Eustis-Farnam, Maywood, Exeter-Milligan, Cody-Kilgore, Shickley, Sargent, Mullen, Minitare, Crawford, Arnold, Stuart, Lewiston, Bruning-Davenport, Brady, St. Edward, Elgin, Potter Dix, Niobrara, Newman Grove, Calloway, Wynot, Osmond, Wallace 6SR, Schribner-Snyder, Ansley, Hampton, Stapelton, Creek Valley, Paxton, S-E-M, Hay Springs, Meridian, Elwood, Giltner, Emerson Hubbard, South Platte, Sterling, Osceola, Medicine Valley, Wilcox-Hildreth, Wauneta-Palisade, Garden County, Deshler, Diller-Odell, Wausa, Friend, Clarkson, Winside, Dorchester, Harvard, Rock County, Bertrand, Silver Lake, River Side, Santee, Red Cloud, Kenesaw, High Plains, Anselmo-Merna, McCool Junction, and Loomis. A participant from each school will be limited to superintendents and his or her designee. Table 2 outlines the 40 school districts that completed the questionnaire, their enrollment size, size by comparison within the total 79 smallest school districts in Nebraska, locale, and geographic location.

Table 2*List of Schools*

Enrollment	Size by 1/3	School	Locale	Geographic Location
193	Middle	Ansley	43	Great Plains
151	Bottom	Allen Consolidated	42	Dissected Till Plains
255	Top	Anselmo-Merna	42	Sandhills
177	Middle	Arnold	43	Sandhills
250	Top	Bertrand	43	Great Plains
178	middle	Bruning-Davenport	43	Great Plains
186	middle	Callaway	43	Sandhills
135	bottom	Chambers	43	Sandhills
240	top	Clarkson	43	Dissected Till Plains
168	middle	Crawford	43	Badlands
246	top	Dorchester	42	Great Plains
182	middle	Elgin	43	Sandhills
215	top	Emerson Hubbard	42	Dissected Till Plains
163	bottom	Exeter-Milligan	43	Great Plains
239	top	Friend	43	Great Plains
228	top	Garden County	43	Sandhills
194	middle	Hampton	42	Great Plains
248	top	Harvard	42	Great Plains
128	bottom	Hayes Center	43	Great Plains
255	top	High Plains	43	Great Plains
178	middle	Lewiston	43	Dissected Till Plains
256	top	Loomis	42	Great Plains
161	bottom	Maywood	43	Great Plains
256	top	McCool Junction	42	Great Plains
61	bottom	McPhearson	42	Sandhills
207	middle	Meridian	43	Great Plains
167	bottom	Mullen	43	Sandhills
186	middle	Newman Grove	43	Dissected Till Plains
184	middle	Niobrara	43	Dissected Till Plains

Table 2 continues

Enrollment	Size by 1/3	School	Locale	Geographic Location
223	top	Osceola	43	Great Plains
184	middle	Potter Dix	43	Sandhills
255	top	Red Cloud	43	Great Plains
90	bottom	Sandhills	43	Sandhills
193	middle	Scribner-Snyder	43	Dissected Till Plains
165	bottom	Shickley	43	Great Plains
195	middle	Stapleton	43	Sandhills
220	top	Sterling	42	Dissected Till Plains
178	middle	Stuart	43	Sandhills
228	top	Wauneta-Palisade	43	Sandhills
241	top	Winside	42	Dissected Till Plains

Source: Local Lookup (2019).

Valid Percent

Many of the questions were based on their responses using valid percent. Valid percent is the percentage without the number of survey questions that were left unanswered or were not completed. It determines percentage only on those superintendents, or the superintendent's designee, who responded. It does not determine percentage using the unanswered questions.

Questionnaire Results

Question #1: Surviving or Thriving Rural Nebraska School

Which of the following two statements best describes your status as a Nebraska rural school?

- *Surviving: we are a rural school that anticipates a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years*

- *Thriving: we are a rural school that does not anticipate a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years*

Table 3 indicates the number of schools that identified themselves as either surviving or thriving rural Nebraska schools. Over 30% of the 40 schools identified themselves as a surviving rural school, whereas over 65% identified themselves as a thriving rural school.

Table 3

Question 1 Table

Type Indicated	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Surviving	13	32.5
Thriving	27	67.5

Question #2: Reasons that Enhance the School District's Ability to Survive or Thrive

Identify and describe five methods, reasons, or programs that enhance your district's ability to survive or thrive as a rural Nebraska school Community and financial support were the strongest reasons noted by participants (see Table 4).

Table 4*Question 2 Table*

Themes Indicated	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Community Support	27	67.5
Land Base, Valuation, Levy, Strong Finances, Foundations, Etc.	26	65.0
Commendable Education and Extracurricular Programs	16	40.0
Option Enrollment	12	30.0
Encompassing Preschool and/or After School Programs	9	23.0
Location and/or Distance from Other Schools	8	20.0
Strong Board of Education	7	17.5
Educational Service Unit Support	7	17.5
Cooping with Neighboring Districts for Expanding Student Opportunities	6	15.0
Providing Extensive Transportation	3	8.0

Question #3: Community/Communities' Aspects

Select all of the following that your community or communities possess or possesses:

- *Community pride*
- *Emphasis on quality in business and community life*
- *Willingness to invest in the future*
- *Active participation in community decision making*
- *Cooperative community spirit*

- *Realistic appraisal of future opportunities*
- *Awareness of its competitive positioning*
- *Knowledge of the physical environment*
- *Active economic development program*
- *Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders*
- *Celebration of diversity in leadership*
- *Strong belief in and support for education*
- *Problem-solving approach to providing health care*
- *Strong multi-generational family orientation*
- *Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life*
- *Sound and well-maintained infrastructure*
- *Careful use of fiscal resources*
- *Sophisticated use of technology resources*
- *Willingness to seek help from the outside*
- *Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself*

Table 5 shows the breakdown of each area within the questionnaire.

Table 5

Question 3 Table

Community/Communities Aspect: All 40 Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Active economic development program	10	25.0
Active participation in community decision making	17	42.5
Awareness of its competitive positioning	11	27.5

Table 5 continues

Community/Communities Aspect: All 40 Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Careful use of fiscal resources	34	85.0
Celebration of diversity in leadership	5	12.5
Community pride	37	92.5
Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself	18	45.0
Cooperative community spirit	29	72.5
Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders	12	30.0
Emphasis on quality in business and community life	19	47.5
Knowledge of the physical environment	17	42.5
Problem-solving approach to providing health care	9	22.5
Realistic appraisal of future opportunities	14	35.0
Sophisticated use of technology resources	19	47.5
Sound and well-maintained infrastructure	23	57.5
Strong belief in and support for education	32	80.0
Strong multi-generational family orientation	29	72.5
Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life	18	45.0
Willingness to invest in the future	30	75.0
Willingness to seek help from the outside	15	37.5

Table 6 indicates specifically the results of surviving rural schools, whereas Table 7 indicates the results of the thriving rural schools.

A strong sense of community pride and careful use of fiscal resources were strong within the mass majority of communities. These communities also showed there is a strong belief in and for the support of education and a willingness to invest in the future.

Table 6*Question 3 Table: Surviving Schools*

Community/Communities Aspect: 13 SURVIVING Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Active economic development program	1	7.69
Active participation in community decision making	2	15.38
Awareness of its competitive positioning	3	23.08
Careful use of fiscal resources	10	76.92
Celebration of diversity in leadership	2	15.38
Community pride	11	84.62
Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself	4	30.77
Cooperative community spirit	8	61.54
Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders	1	7.69
Emphasis on quality in business and community life	3	23.08
Knowledge of the physical environment	2	15.38
Problem-solving approach to providing health care	4	30.77
Realistic appraisal of future opportunities	3	23.08
Sophisticated use of technology resources	4	30.77
Sound and well-maintained infrastructure	6	46.15
Strong belief in and support for education	8	61.54
Strong multi-generational family orientation	6	46.15
Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life	2	15.38
Willingness to invest in the future	6	46.15
Willingness to seek help from the outside	5	38.46

Table 7*Question 3 Table: Thriving Schools*

Community/Communities Aspect: 27 THRIVING Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Active economic development program	9	33.33
Active participation in community decision making	15	55.56
Awareness of its competitive positioning	8	29.63
Careful use of fiscal resources	24	88.89
Celebration of diversity in leadership	3	11.11
Community pride	26	96.30
Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself	14	51.85
Cooperative community spirit	21	77.78
Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders	11	40.74
Emphasis on quality in business and community life	16	59.26
Knowledge of the physical environment	15	55.56
Problem-solving approach to providing health care	5	18.52
Realistic appraisal of future opportunities	11	40.74
Sophisticated use of technology resources	15	55.56
Sound and well-maintained infrastructure	17	62.96
Strong belief in and support for education	24	88.89
Strong multi-generational family orientation	23	85.19
Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life	16	59.26
Willingness to invest in the future	24	88.89
Willingness to seek help from the outside	10	37.04

Surviving schools compared to thriving schools, showed a need for more economic development within their communities and a deliberate transition of power to the younger generation of leaders.

Question #4: School District Aspects

Select all of the following that your Nebraska rural school possesses:

- *Full staff (no vacancies in any area)*
- *Sports and/or Activities cooperative*
- *Early childhood programming (daycare)*
- *Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)*
- *Shared staff with another district*
- *Use of ESU staff for providing special services*
- *Use of ESU staff for professional development*
- *Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance*
- *Use of ESU staff for providing technology services*
- *Use of ESU staff for OTHER services*
- *Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)*
- *Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)*

Table 8 shows the breakdown of each area within the questionnaire.

Table 9 indicates specifically the results of surviving rural schools, whereas

Table 10 indicates the results of the thriving rural schools.

Table 8*Question 4 Table*

School District Aspect: All 40 Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)	36	90.0
Early childhood programming (daycare)	9	22.5
Full staff (no vacancies in any area)	26	65.0
Shared staff with another district	12	30.0
Sports and/or Activities cooperative	28	70.0
Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)	4	10.0
Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)	3	7.5
Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance	19	47.5
Use of ESU staff for OTHER services	22	55.0
Use of ESU staff for professional development	40	100.0
Use of ESU staff for providing special services	38	95.0
Use of ESU staff for providing technology services	29	72.5

Table 9*Question 4 Table: Surviving Schools*

School District Aspect: 13 SURVIVING Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)	11	84.62
Early childhood programming (daycare)	2	15.38
Full staff (no vacancies in any area)	9	69.23
Shared staff with another district	4	30.77
Sports and/or Activities cooperative	10	76.92
Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)	2	15.38
Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)	2	15.38
Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance	7	53.85
Use of ESU staff for OTHER services	8	61.54
Use of ESU staff for professional development	13	100.00
Use of ESU staff for providing special services	13	100.00
Use of ESU staff for providing technology services	9	69.23

Table 10*Question 4 Table: Thriving Schools*

School District Aspect: 27 THRIVING Districts	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)	25	92.59
Early childhood programming (daycare)	7	25.93
Full staff (no vacancies in any area)	17	62.96
Shared staff with another district	8	29.63
Sports and/or Activities cooperative	18	66.67
Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)	2	7.41
Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)	1	3.70
Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance	12	44.44
Use of ESU staff for OTHER services	14	51.85
Use of ESU staff for professional development	27	100.00
Use of ESU staff for providing special services	25	92.59
Use of ESU staff for providing technology services	20	74.07

Small rural schools in Nebraska are implementing early childhood for ages three and four and utilizing their Educational Service Units for special services and professional development across the board. However, there is a need for the expansion of early childhood, especially in the area of daycare for those districts described as surviving. Both surviving and thriving schools showed a need for more staff incentives for both certified and noncertified positions.

Question #5: Implementation Ideas

If you could have or implement ANYTHING (without negative consequence) that would allow you to always be a rural Nebraska school for your community or communities, what would it be? (See Table 11.)

Table 11*Question 5 Table: Implementation Ideas*

Themes Indicated	# of Districts Indicated	% of Districts Indicated
Financial Assistance	13	34.2
Teacher and Paraprofessional Expansion Opportunities	6	15.8
Expansion of Hands-on Experiences within the Area Businesses, Industry, and Local Labor Market	5	13.2
Facility Upgrades	3	7.9
Sharing of Extra Curriculars, Programs, and Facilities	3	7.9
Expansion of Early Childhood Programming (including daycare)	3	7.9
Available Housing	2	5.3
Economic Development	2	5.3

Percentages were calculated out of 38 participants instead of 40: due to no response from 2 respondents. Financial assistance was described in numerous ways. Responses included the need for a change in the state aid formula, legislative unfunded mandates to stop, for better assistance to teachers choosing to teach in rural areas, and loan forgiveness options. Many responses also stated different ideas to assist the

expansion of teachers and paraprofessionals within rural districts. Ideas in this area were described as “growing your own” programs, extensive recruitment and retention rural efforts, programming and training, and shifting away from the Praxis examinations in order to find other professional options when it comes to determining an individual’s ability to teach. Other ideas that were shared, that only had one response are not listed within the charts were: Upgraded Internet Access and Connectivity, Rule 10 Update, Better Roads, Opportunities that Allow Districts to Enhance the Education for All Students, Elimination of Option Enrollment, Expansion of Option Enrollment, Consolidation Benefits, Student Recruitment Efforts, and Promoting the Positive Rural Story of what rural Nebraska has to offer students and families.

Quantitative Results Summary

Without community support and available finances, rural Nebraska schools would struggle to continue to serve students and communities.

Qualitative Findings

Interview Participants

Table 12

Pseudo Names of Interviewees

Pseudo Names of Interviewees	Order in Which They Were Interviewed
Tucker	1
Swede	2
Max	3
June	4
Joel	5
Jarad	6
Cole	7
Chuck	8

Interview Question Responses

Question #1: What are the essential partnerships you currently have in place? One essential partnership that was discussed with each interviewee was the community or communities in which the district served. Strong relationships with the community, agricultural producers, families, businesses, and all constituents were noted by interviewees. The school is the hub of these communities.

Seventy-five percent (75%) of all interviewees discussed the partnership they have with their Educational Service Unit and other networking opportunities such as NRCSA, NCSA, NASB, and other area superintendents as well. Without the ESUs, many of these districts would not be able to provide needed services for students and staff. Networking opportunities assist in the area of leadership as well.

Some unique partnerships were also discussed. One school does not even own their track and football field. The land is owned by a family within the community, and they have leased the land to the school for many years. The school has lifetime ownership of the land. An annual fundraiser was noted as paying for significant building projects throughout the years, allowing the district to have no debt on these projects to date.

For 20 years, a private preschool, ages 3 and 4, has operated within the school walls for a minimal rental fee. This has allowed the school the ability to provide preschool opportunities while partnering with a private business owner.

Question #2: What are the essential programs you currently have in place? Tucker, Swede, Max, and June all spoke about the student expectation to be involved. Each superintendent touted participation rates between 95% and 100% and the junior and

senior high levels. Max explained that even though they are a small rural school, they have one of the larger Teammates programs in the state. Tucker explained the door-to-door service their bussing program offers. The school will pick up and drop off virtually anywhere, as long as it is feasible; given the route of the bus. The school is known to drop children off at grandma's house, dance class, or even a sport's practice in another town.

Question #3: Even though you are faced with _____ (interviewee may name others) _____ (limited resources, constrained tax base, demographic shifts, recruitment and retention, access to broadband, teacher shortage, population decline, available housing, no daycares...), you are still here, providing a rural Nebraska education to your students. How are you doing this? There is a solid understanding within these communities that without the school, the community goes away. Because of that notion, each superintendent spoke about the amazing community support their district receives. Two superintendents explained that distance from other schools and communities also played a factor in the reason they were still able to operate and provide educational opportunities. The tax base was another factor for fifty percent of interviewees. Without the tax base, some of these districts would not be able to survive.

Question #4: If it wasn't for (interviewee names one reason), we wouldn't survive as a rural Nebraska school. Why is that? Community support was the number one factor from the majority of interviewees. If the school does not have the community behind the district, the belief is that the district in turn does not survive. Some schools

noted they were the only school in the county, not only providing distance between them and other districts, but a very large tax base as well.

Question #5: What would better support rural schools in Nebraska? (What do we need as rural Nebraska schools). The overarching theme that was heard from every respondent was the need for a sustainable solution to school funding in order to do what is best for kids and maintaining local control. Other needs noted were housing, making sure there was not a “magic enrollment number” that rural schools must maintain in order to stay open, no threat of charter schools, daycare options, teacher recruitment and retention efforts, expansion of teacher certification efforts, and the need to share the rural educational opportunities and stories.

The way schools are funded in the future needs to be forward thinking and have a vision. Markets fluctuate and right now rural Nebraska schools depend too heavily on the landowners and producers.

There is a concern in the voices of each superintendent when it comes to the future of education in Nebraska. The teacher shortage is scary. The discussion of charter schools and vouchers is scary. The destruction of societal Nebraska values is scary.

As rural schools we need to share the rural way of life with others and find more ways to get people in our rural areas. The rural interviewees spoke of the unmatched relationships their district has with its students, staff, families, and communities. The need to grow our own, and on a larger scale, grow our own rural Nebraska teacher and professional pipeline is more important now than ever before.

Qualitative Results Summary

Small rural schools in Nebraska have created unique partnerships, have student involvement expectations, and strong community support. Focuses such as local control and a sustainable solution to school funding were repeatedly recognized during superintendent interviews as ways to better support rural schools across the state.

Summary of Questionnaires and Interviews

Community support and being financially sound are imperative in the rural school districts across the state of Nebraska. We are all in this together. Nebraska education needs to be looked at as an investment, not strictly just a cost. All schools are preparing their students to be productive citizens. Without community support, local control and a sustainable solution to school funding, the work becomes overwhelming, and more schools just merely survive instead of thrive.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve.

This included sending out questionnaires and conducting interviews.

Discussion

It is clear that financial stability and community support are imperative to rural school success. What is unclear is the particular aspects within the community and school district that create the necessary means in order for a district to continue to provide educational opportunities for its students.

Predictions

After interviewing June, I formulated a prediction based on her hopeful outlook on the future of rural education. Societal values are crumbling. The need for relationship-based connection and support is higher now than ever before. I, like June, am hopeful there will be a pendulum swing where society will want to be in the rural setting once again. The bigger concern is, will rural areas be ready for families seeking these rural opportunities? Will the economic development, or lack thereof, of a community create a barrier for this to occur?

Recommendations

This researcher would recommend research at the legislative and general public levels to determine the outlook, perspective, and duties of public education in the state of Nebraska.

Another recommendation would be to continue to work to find a sustainable solution to school funding in Nebraska.

A final recommendation is to find ways to build the “grow your own” model across all rural areas.

Future Research

This researcher would suggest that any further research completed on this topic focus on the aspects of the communities and districts, the legislative impact on school funding, and how to bring more people to our rural areas while preparing our rural areas for these families. Rural districts and the communities in which they serve must take a close look at the elements they currently possess, and systematically determine how to increase these essential elements in order to be a thriving community with a thriving school district.

Summary

Nebraska rural school districts are surviving and thriving across the state because of their community support and the state of their finances. Small rural schools in Nebraska have created unique partnerships, have student involvement expectations, and strong community support. Focuses such as local control and a sustainable solution to school funding were repeatedly recognized during superintendent interviews.

Rural Nebraska schools may see an influx of people wanting to raise families in the rural school setting. However, these areas may not be ready for an influx of students.

The school funding formula needs to be evaluated and modified to assist all schools in providing educational opportunities to their students. Local control must be maintained. The interviewer suggests research on school funding and the rural communities in order to better understand the unique needs of each rural Nebraska school and community or communities in which it serves.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Items

Questionnaire and Interview Questions

QUESTIONNAIRE:

Demographics: name, school, superintendent or superintendent's designee, years within this role, age, gender, years in education, administration, years at the school, and gender

1. Which of the following two statements best describes your status as a Nebraska rural school?

- *surviving: we are a rural school that anticipates a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years*
- *thriving: we are a rural school that does not anticipate a need for restructuring or closure in the next 20 years*

2. Identify and describe five methods, reasons, or programs that enhance your district's ability to survive or thrive as a rural Nebraska school.

- *Short answer response*

3. Select all of the following that your community or communities possess or possesses:

- *Community pride*
- *Emphasis on quality in business and community life*
- *Willingness to invest in the future*
- *Active participation in community decision making*
- *Cooperative community spirit*
- *Realistic appraisal of future opportunities*
- *Awareness of its competitive positioning*
- *Knowledge of the physical environment*
- *Active economic development program*
- *Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders*
- *Celebration of diversity in leadership*
- *Strong belief in and support for education*
- *Problem-solving approach to providing health care*
- *Strong multi-generational family orientation*
- *Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life*

- *Sound and well-maintained infrastructure*
- *Careful use of fiscal resources*
- *Sophisticated use of technology resources*
- *Willingness to seek help from the outside*
- *Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself*

4. Select all of the following that your Nebraska rural school possesses:

- *Full staff (no vacancies in any area)*
- *Sports and/or Activities cooperative*
- *Early childhood programming (daycare)*
- *Early childhood programming (ages 3-4)*
- *Shared staff with another district*
- *Use of ESU staff for providing special services*
- *Use of ESU staff for professional development*
- *Use of ESU staff for administrative assistance*
- *Use of ESU staff for providing technology services*
- *Use of ESU staff for OTHER services*
- *Staff incentives (beyond pay scale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR ALL STAFF)*
- *Staff incentives (beyond PayScale movement) to complete a degree program (DONE FOR SOME STAFF: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, or others)*

5. If you could have or implement ANYTHING (without negative consequence) that would allow you to always be a rural Nebraska school, for your community or communities, what would it be:

- *Short answer response*

Appendix B

Questionnaire Consent Form

IRB TEMPLATE

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTS FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH

IRB Project ID #: 21701

Participant Study Title: Key Factors Surrounding The Surviving and Thriving Rural Schools of Nebraska Through the Eyes of Superintendents

The purpose of this study is to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. There are 79 school districts in Nebraska with an enrollment of 256 or less; making up 32% of all Nebraska schools. The smallest school with an enrollment size of 61. Nebraska rural schools' stories of success must be shared in order to survive and thrive the rural school way of life in Nebraska. If you are 19 years of age or older, and currently the superintendent or the superintendent's designee of any of the schools selected you may participate in this research.

Participation in this study will require approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked to complete a short internet-based questionnaire and participation will take place in a quiet location of your choosing via internet-based means. Participants may be contacted for a follow-up interview, completed via a web-based or phone-based manner, in one visit, lasting no longer than 2 hours, with the principal investigator. Questionnaire participants are not guaranteed to participate in the follow-up interview.

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. Research records will be stored electronically through University approved methods and hardcopies of any research materials will be in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office. Records will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete.

Electronic records will be stored utilizing a secure, password-protected computer. Physical records will be kept in a locked safe; strictly made available to the principal investigator and the advisor/co-investigator, Dr. Grady. Data will only be transferred between investigators with each investigator present, utilizing the password-protected computer. Research will be reported in summary format for the survey data and as applicable the interview data. The interview data will also be reported individually. The data and results will be reported in a dissertation and as applicable conferences and journals. The data reported will all be de-identified information.

If you have questions about this project, you may contact Sadie Nicole Coffey at (308) 470-0547 and scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu or Dr. Marilyn Grady at (402) 450-2504 and mgrady1@unl.edu

If you have questions about your rights or complaints about the research, contact the UNL Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (402)472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the

investigator or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By clicking on the I Agree button below, your consent to participate is implied. You should print or save a copy of this page for your records.

I agree

I do not agree

Appendix C

Interview Items

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. What are the essential partnerships you currently have in place?
2. What are the essential programs you currently have in place?
3. Even though you are faced with _____ (interviewee may name others) _____ (limited resources, constrained tax base, demographic shifts, recruitment and retention, access to broadband, teacher shortage, population decline, available housing, no daycares...), you are still here, providing a rural Nebraska education to your students. How are you doing this?
4. If it wasn't for (interviewee names one reason), we wouldn't survive as a rural Nebraska school. Why is that?
5. What would better support rural schools in Nebraska? (What do we need as rural Nebraska schools)

Appendix D

Interview Consent Form

IRB TEMPLATE**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTS FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH
IRB Project ID #: 21701**

Participant Study Title: Key Factors Surrounding The Surviving and Thriving Rural Schools of Nebraska Through the Eyes of Superintendents

The purpose of this study is to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. There are 79 school districts in Nebraska with an enrollment of 256 or less: making up 32% of all Nebraska schools. The smallest school with an enrollment size of 61. Nebraska rural schools' stories of success must be shared in order to survive and thrive the rural school way of life in Nebraska. If you are 19 years of age or older, and currently the superintendent or the superintendent's designee of any of the schools selected you may participate in this research.

Participation in this follow-up interview portion of the study will require approximately 2 hours. The interviews will be audio and video recorded via zoom video conferencing. These interviews will be stored on a secure, password-protected computer. Pseudonyms will be utilized for each participant. You will be asked to complete it via a web-based or phone-based manner, in one visit, lasting no longer than 2 hours, with the principal investigator. Questionnaire participants are not guaranteed to participate in the follow-up interview. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed.

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. Research records will be stored electronically through university approved methods and hardcopies of any research materials will be in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office. Records will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete.

Electronic records will be stored utilizing a secure, password-protected computer. Physical records will be kept in a locked safe; strictly made available to the principal investigator and the advisor/co-investigator, Dr. Grady. Data will only be transferred between investigators with each investigator present, utilizing the password-protected computer. Research will be reported in summary format for the survey data and as applicable the interview data. The interview data will also be reported individually. The data and results will be reported in a dissertation and as applicable conferences and journals. The data reported will all be de-identified information.

If you have question about this project, you may contact Sadie Nicole Coffey at (308) 470-0547 and scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu or Dr. Marilyn Grady at (402) 450-2504 and mgrady1@unl.edu

If you have questions about your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (402)472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

By signing this form, you are providing your consent to participate. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

Participant Name:

(Name of Participant: Please print)

Participant Signature:

Signature of Research Participant
Date

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14 question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at:

<http://bit.ly/UNLresearchfeedback>.

Appendix E

Recruitment, Verbal, Follow-Up, and Reminder Scripts

RECRUITMENT, VERBAL, FOLLOW-UP, AND REMINDER SCRIPTS

Recruitment Email/Letter

Dear [Name]:

I am conducting a research study to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve.

The following Nebraska school districts are asked to participate: McPhearson, Loup County, Sandhills, Keya Paha, Sioux County, Wheeler Central, Litchfield, Arthur County, Arcadia, Elba, Hayes Center, Thedford, Chambers, Leyton, Verdigre, Hyannis, Banner County, Allen Consolidated, Eustis-Farnam, Maywood, Exeter-Milligan, Cody-Kilgore, Shickley, Sargent, Mullen, Minitare, Crawford, Arnold, Stuart, Lewiston, Bruning-Davenport, Brady, St. Edward, Elgin, Potter Dix, Niobrara, Newman Grove, Calloway, Wynot, Osmond, Wallace 6SR, Schribner-Snyder, Ainsley, Hampton, Stapelton, Creek Valley, Paxton, S-E-M, Hay Springs, Meridian, Elwood, Giltner, Emerson Hubbard, South Platte, Sterling, Osceola, Medicine Valley, Wilcox-Hildreth, Wauneta-Palisade, Garden County, Deshler, Diller-Odell, Wausa, Friend, Clarkson, Winside, Dorchester, Harvard, Rock County, Bertrand, Silver Lake, River Side, Santee, Red Cloud, Kenesaw, High Plains, Anselmo-Merna, McCool Junction, and Loomis

Participation in this study will require approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked to complete a short internet-based questionnaire and participation will take place in a quiet location of your choosing via internet-based means. Participants may be contacted for a follow-up interview, completed via a web-based or phone-based manner, in one visit, lasting no longer than 2 hours, with the principal investigator. Questionnaire participants are not guaranteed to participate in the follow-up interview.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

Sadie N. Coffey
(308) 470-0547

scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu

Other research staff member: Dr. Marilyn Grady at (402) 450-2504 and
mgrady1@unl.edu

Verbal Script: Recruitment First Contact

Hi! My name is Sadie Coffey, former Shickley superintendent and current PhD student with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am conducting a research study to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide

educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. You are one of the 79 districts asked to consider participating. Participation in this study will require approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked to complete a short internet-based questionnaire and participation will take place in a quiet location of your choosing via internet-based means. Participants may be contacted for a follow-up interview, completed via a web-based or phone-based manner, in one visit, lasting no longer than 2 hours, with the principal investigator. Questionnaire participants are not guaranteed to participate in the follow-up interview.

If you have any questions, please let me know. My cell phone is (308) 470-0547 and my email is scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu. Contact information for the other research staff member Dr. Marilyn Grady is (402) 450-2504 and mgrady1@unl.edu.

Verbal Script: Consent Following Recruitment

OPENING:

Hi! My name is Sadie Coffey, former Shickley superintendent and current PhD student with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am conducting a research study to determine key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. You are one of the 79 districts asked to consider participating. Participation in this study will require approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked to complete a short internet-based questionnaire and participation will take place in a quiet location of your choosing via internet-based means. Participants may be contacted for a follow-up interview, completed via a web-based or phone-based manner, in one visit, lasting no longer than 2 hours, with the principal investigator. Questionnaire participants are not guaranteed to participate in the follow-up interview.

Would you be interested in participating?

Do you have any questions you would like answered now?

My cell phone is (308) 470-0547 and my email is scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu. Contact information for the other research staff member Dr. Marilyn Grady is (402) 450-2504 and mgrady1@unl.edu.

If you prefer to speak with someone else, call the UNL Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 402-472-6965.

Reminder Message: Research involving participation to occur at a specific time/location.

This is a reminder that you have signed up to participate in a research study determining key factors that allow rural Nebraska schools to provide and continue to provide educational opportunities to the community and/or communities in which they serve. You are scheduled to complete the study on [date] at [time]. The study will be conducted via zoom at your quiet location of choice. If you have any questions, please contact Sadie

Coffey at (308) 470-0547 / email at scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu or Dr. Marilyn Grady at (402) 450-2504 / email at mgrady1@unl.edu.

Reminder message: Completion of a certain study step

This is a reminder that last week you received a survey link via email. The survey will be available for you to complete until [date survey is no longer available]. If you have already completed the survey, we thank you for your time. If you have not completed the survey, we would greatly appreciate any input you could provide.

If you have any questions, you may contact the research team at:
Sadie Coffey (308) 470-0547 or scoffey5@huskers.unl.edu
Dr. Marilyn Grady (402) 450-2504 or mgrady1@unl.edu

Thank you,

Sadie N. Coffey and Dr. Grady

Appendix F

IRB Approval

May 5, 2022
 Sadie Coffey
 Department of Educational Administration
 Marilyn Grady
 Department of Educational Administration
 TEAC 128 UNL NE 685880360
 IRB Number: 20220521701EX
 Project ID: 21701
 Project Title: Key Factors Surrounding The Surviving and Thriving Rural Schools of
 Nebraska Through the Eyes of Superintendents

Dear Sadie:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects at 45 CFR 46 2018 Requirements and has been classified as exempt. Exempt categories are listed within HRPP Policy #4.001: Exempt Research available at: <http://research.unl.edu/researchcompliance/policies-procedures/>.

- o Date of Final Exemption: 5/5/2022
- o Certification of Exemption Valid-Until: 5/5/2027
- o Review conducted using exempt category 2(ii) at 45 CFR 46.104
- o Funding: N/A

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 5/5/2022
 We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any protocol violation or protocol deviation
- * An incarceration of a research participant in a protocol that was not approved to include prisoners
- * Any knowledge of adverse audits or enforcement actions required by Sponsors
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Rachel Wenzl, CIP
for the IRB