The Impact of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Retention in Rural Schools in New York State

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The Impact of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Retention in Rural Schools in New York State

Abstract
Research has consistently shown that the quality of teachers working with students has a greater impact on academic achievement than any other school-related factor. Despite years of study, however, close to a third of new teachers continue to leave the profession within their first 5 years of employment. In particular, hard-to-staff rural schools in New York State have struggled to attract and retain promising educators. While many factors appear to influence these troubling rates of retention, experts have consistently identified administrative support to be of unique importance. Yet a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific leadership behaviors that new teachers interpret as supportive. Using Herzberg's two-factor theory, this study adds to the research involving teacher retention by providing insight into the behaviors needed to decrease attrition. Using a qualitative research design, this study collected data from three separate focus groups composed of superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators. By analyzing themes that emerged in the coding process, three findings surfaced. First, skilled leaders recognize the need to purposefully establish authentic relationships with new teachers. Second, support for novice educators must be viewed as a collective responsibility. Third, ongoing affirmation lays the groundwork for future empowerment. Confirming that school leaders can indeed leverage specific leadership behaviors in order to better retain talented teachers, the findings provided the basis for recommendations involving superintendents, principals, K-12 educators, and leadership preparation programs.

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The Impact of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Retention in Rural Schools in New York State

By

Matthew T. Frahm

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Marie Cianca

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St. John Fisher College

August 2020
Dedication

As the following pages will show, good teachers improve academic outcomes. However, as we all know, great teachers change lives. For me, Ann Smith, Chris Finn, Letha Henry, Tom Lynch, Bill Cook, and Mike Ford are the teachers who have guided my development as both an educator as well as a human being. I dedicate this dissertation to these extraordinary teachers—they have enriched my life in ways I can never repay.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Marie Cianca and Michael Wischnowski. For the past 2 years, these educators have pushed as well as supported me, and in the process, facilitated my development as a leader, a scholar, and as a researcher. Throughout the DEXL program, I have also been fortunate to be part of a cohort with bright, motivated, and fun-loving colleagues. I will forever treasure the laughs and conversations that we have shared, and I can only hope that our friendships continue once the dissertation journey is complete. In particular, I would like to express my thanks to Jennifer Fay. I am a believer that certain friends come into our lives for a reason, and her kindness has helped me grow as a person during my time at Fisher.

Without the support of the Naples Board of Education members, this endeavor would never have been possible. Their encouragement has been unwavering during my time as superintendent, and I owe Margo Ulmer and Jacob Hall a special note of thanks. It is a rare gift to find two board presidents who believe it is their responsibility to “protect the quarterback,” and I consider myself lucky to have them both in my life. Additionally, to my colleague Mitch Ball—thank you for your support and brotherhood. I
am a better leader and human being because of our work together, and I look forward to our continued friendship.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents—Dave and Sue Frahm. They have devoted their lives to their four children, and we have been blessed with their abiding love, guidance, encouragement, and their personal sacrifices on our behalf.
Biographical Sketch

Matthew Frahm is currently the Superintendent of the Naples Central School District. Mr. Frahm attended the State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History with a minor in Political Science. He earned his Master of Science Degree in Secondary Social Studies from SUNY Geneseo, and then completed a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Administration at SUNY Brockport. In the summer of 2018, Mr. Frahm began the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. Mr. Frahm pursued his research on the leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural schools in New York State under the guidance of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Michael Wischnowski and received the Ed.D. degree in 2020.
Abstract

Research has consistently shown that the quality of teachers working with students has a greater impact on academic achievement than any other school-related factor. Despite years of study, however, close to a third of new teachers continue to leave the profession within their first 5 years of employment. In particular, hard-to-staff rural schools in New York State have struggled to attract and retain promising educators. While many factors appear to influence these troubling rates of retention, experts have consistently identified administrative support to be of unique importance. Yet a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific leadership behaviors that new teachers interpret as supportive. Using Herzberg’s two-factor theory, this study adds to the research involving teacher retention by providing insight into the behaviors needed to decrease attrition. Using a qualitative research design, this study collected data from three separate focus groups composed of superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators. By analyzing themes that emerged in the coding process, three findings surfaced. First, skilled leaders recognize the need to purposefully establish authentic relationships with new teachers. Second, support for novice educators must be viewed as a collective responsibility. Third, ongoing affirmation lays the groundwork for future empowerment. Confirming that school leaders can indeed leverage specific leadership behaviors in order to better retain talented teachers, the findings provided the basis for recommendations involving superintendents, principals, K-12 educators, and leadership preparation programs.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As far back as the 1980s, researchers have predicted the potential scarcity of public school teachers due, in part, to rising student populations and professionals nearing retirement age (Ingersoll, 2002). Since that time, experts have estimated that “approximately half a million teachers leave their schools each year” (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 304), with close to a third of new teachers exiting the field within their first 5 years of employment (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Although similar rates of attrition may be found in other occupations, having to regularly replace new teachers—especially those in low-performing school systems—can have undesirable effects on student achievement as well as on the health of the organizations (Boyd et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

When examining factors influencing teacher attrition, research in the field of K-12 education has identified several issues that cause individuals to leave the teaching profession. While some can be shaped to a certain degree by school leaders, others tend to be more fixed in nature. By gaining additional clarity around what can be shaped and encouraged by administrators, districts can better implement the policies and training needed by leaders to support novice educators (Boyd et al., 2011).

Among the potential causes of teacher turnover, administrative support, induction programs, and a collegial work environment are three aspects that continually emerge. In their research focused on teacher retention in New York City, Boyd et al. (2011) found that administrative support had a significant impact on whether an educator would consider leaving the profession. Borman and Dowling (2008) reached a similar
conclusion when conducting a meta-analysis on the issue of teacher retention, and Ladd (2011) concluded that schools can better keep effective educators when leaders provide opportunities for input and ownership. When examining the role that principals play in slowing attrition, some researchers have indicated that supporting mentoring and induction programs can be of significance (Brown & Schainker, 2008). Citing increased demands for educators as well as changes involving technology and student needs, experts have argued that robust mentoring and professional development can play a critical role in the success of new as well as veteran educators (Bressman, Efron, & Winter, 2018). This assertion is not universally accepted, however, and other individuals have questioned the degree to which induction programs have any measurable impact on turnover (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Citing the complexity of new teacher mentoring, Waterman and He (2011) maintained that additional study is necessary given the inconsistencies that exist regarding the structure and supports offered by different induction programs. Aside from administrative assistance, experts have also noted that the quality of staff relationships affects job satisfaction and whether teachers might choose to leave the field (Boyd et al., 2011). Because the profession has become increasingly collaborative, since the 1980s, the literature shows that collegiality has a significant impact on teacher perceptions relating to their work environments and whether they will make a long-term commitment to their positions (Ladd, 2011).

While administrative support, teacher induction programs, and levels of collegiality can all be shaped to a certain degree by professionals working within school organizations, other factors regularly identified in the literature are not as easily influenced. Limits on available resources restrict what schools can offer concerning
salary, benefits, supplies, and facilities; and geographic locations often impact the desirability of certain teaching positions. Approaching the issue from an economic perspective, Loeb and Myung (2010) maintained that individuals go into education when it makes comparative financial sense regarding wages. Building on this idea, other researchers have claimed that teachers might consider other professions if they are not satisfied with the economic terms of their employment (Colson & Satterfield, 2018; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). Along with wages, experts have also explored the degree to which available resources and the quality of school facilities influence rates of turnover. Citing data from several studies, experts have suggested that educators lacking the needed access to teaching materials, texts, and technology may become frustrated with their positions and consider employment elsewhere (Boyd et al., 2011). Likewise, if teachers do not feel safe or satisfied with their existing school facilities, they might be more likely to resign or seek a transfer (Ladd, 2011).

Finally, fixed circumstances relating to geographic location also seem to impact teacher retention. As previously mentioned, the research suggests that teachers working in urban school systems are more likely to leave education (Guarino et al., 2006). While studies have implied that individuals may be inclined to depart for reasons involving more lucrative job possibilities or to pursue opportunities in higher achieving districts, Loeb and Myung (2010) suggested an additional explanation. Conducting research on teacher retention, the researchers provided data showing that just over a quarter of the teachers who left their positions did so for family reasons or to move closer to where they grew up. Unlike perceptions concerning leadership behaviors, induction programs, or
collegiality, realities related to salary, resource availability, and geography seem to be every bit as impactful—but significantly more difficult to modify.

Regardless of the motivating factors, teacher turnover can prove problematic for any school district. Yet research has shown that attrition occurs more frequently in urban schools characterized by higher rates of poverty, minority enrollment, and lower levels of academic achievement (Guarino et al., 2006). Similarly, while little evidence suggests that suburban schools are faced with comparable challenges involving teacher turnover, certain studies have shown that it can also be difficult for rural schools to recruit and retain talented teachers (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley, 2010; Guarino et al., 2006). In a study focused on rural high schools in central United States, Beesley et al. (2010) found that:

Rural schools experience many of the same challenges as urban schools, such as high concentrations of children in poverty, but often [they] face additional obstacles to teacher recruitment and retention. These include lower salaries, small school population, and remote locations.” (p. 1)

It should also be noted that distinctions must be made between small and rural schools. One does not necessarily imply the other, and Beesley et al. (2010) highlighted this difference when examining regions in the central U.S. states. Building on this aspect, Monk (2007) asserted that rural communities are often characterized by, “small size, sparse settlement, narrowness of choice (with regard, for example, to shopping, schools, and medical services), distance from population concentrations, and an economic reliance on agricultural industries” (p. 156). Monk (2007) quickly pointed out, however, that although rural areas can be distinguished by poverty, unemployment, and more senior
populations, they often have natural beauty and educational work environments that can lead to increased desirability for teachers. Unlike many researchers who simply highlight the drawbacks associated with working in rural settings, Monk (2007) suggested that many educators “tend to report satisfaction with their work environments and relatively few problems with discipline” (p. 155) when they find satisfactory conditions for employment.

Regardless of district size or setting, research consistently highlights the work of supportive school administrators when it comes to the creation and maintenance of positive work environments. When new teachers feel supported, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction, and as a result, choose to remain in their current positions (Ladd, 2011). Consequently, while many school leaders have found effective methods for “building a sense of community, establishing school routines, providing teachers with necessary resources, and advocating for the school to stakeholders” (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 307), there exists a lack of clarity focused on the specific leadership actions that are most effective when recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. Although significant in nature, this problem is not new to the field of K-12 education. Conducting a review of the impact principals can have on student achievement in the late 20th century, Hallinger and Heck (1996) envisioned a day when research would be able to unpack the multifaceted role of school leadership and its impact on students and staff. More than a decade later, however, Boyd et al. (2011) wrote that “follow-up studies are necessary to investigate why administrative support is important to teachers and what in particular the administration does or does not do that influences a teacher to stay or leave” (p. 329).
Ensuring that every classroom has a highly effective teacher is critical to the immediate academic success, as well as to the long-term financial earnings, of students. Nonetheless, decades of research have shown that numerous obstacles prevent school districts from recruiting and retaining gifted educators, and that shortages and rates of attrition do not impact every region to the same degree. Urban and rural areas tend to experience unique difficulties when it comes to securing talented educators, and Hammer, Hughes, McClure, and Reeves (2005) suggested that compensation, location, working conditions, and federal requirements tend to present specific obstacles to smaller schools. Compounding this predicament, Beesley et al. (2010) wrote that “there is limited empirical research on what strategies are best for recruiting and retaining teachers, especially research that is rural-specific” (p. 2). Until experts develop a body of knowledge relating to actionable methods leaders can leverage to better attract certified educators, rural schools will continue struggle to secure the teachers needed to increase student achievement (Beesley et al., 2010).

Problem Statement

Over the years, school leadership positions have evolved in terms of scope as well as complexity. In particular, school principals have been expected to develop as instructional leaders, and in the process, oversee the systems and structures needed for organizational success (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Of all the factors influencing academic achievement, the quality of the teacher in the classroom has the most significant impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Even with a lack of consensus on what makes an effective educator (Guarino et al., 2006), some research has shown that student scores in math and English language arts (ELA) tend to increase with lower rates of
teacher attrition (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). While this has been disputed in high-performing schools by Hanushek, Rivkin, and Schiman (2016), the researchers did find that the loss of experienced teachers tended to have a negative effect on student performance in “lower-achievement schools” (p. 145). Beyond the immediate challenges with lower test scores, data also suggest that above-average teachers—in low- as well as high-achieving schools—have a positive long-term effect on the lifetime financial earnings of their pupils. Although it can be complex to separate the impact of teachers from the influence of personal characteristics or social supports, students do benefit when schools can recruit and retain quality educators (Hanushek, 2011). Because research has consistently shown that administrative support plays a critical role in teacher turnover, it becomes imperative that schools find ways to develop aspiring administrators who are capable of encouraging and retaining inexperienced educators (Boyd et al., 2011).

Aside from the positive effects that low rates of teacher turnover have on student achievement, there is also evidence suggesting that the retention of effective educators can enhance the financial, as well as the collegial, well-being of school systems. At a basic level, attracting, hiring, and training new teachers involves an investment of time and money (Brown & Schainker, 2008). If individuals leave after a short period of time, districts lose their initial financial outlays, and they most likely must dedicate similar resources to hiring and developing replacements. Furthermore, Ronfeldt et al. (2013) asserted that high rates of turnover can have undesirable effects on the culture of organizations when collegial relationships are disrupted, and instructional expertise is lost (2013). Because teaching tends to be relatively collaborative in nature, attrition can “make it difficult to build learning communities and sustain reform” (Brown &
Schainker, 2008, p. 13). Without an experienced group of teachers working together, performance can be interrupted and needed initiatives are often postponed or abandoned altogether (Brown & Schainker, 2008).

While a lack of talented teachers can negatively impact student achievement in any school system, it has been suggested that special attention must be given to rural districts. Despite the existence of inconclusive data from state and national sources relating to whether rural schools have larger problems with turnover than urban or suburban systems, Beesley et al. (2010) suggested that attrition may have a more profound impact in places where single teachers make up larger portions of departments or teams. Similarly, Carver-Thomas, Darling-Hammond, and Sutcher (2016) wrote that issues, such as funding mechanisms, preparation, and certification requirements, differ by region and argued that teacher shortages at the state level do not align to national comparisons.

As an example, Heiser (2017) reviewed multiple data sources to better understand the state of the educational workforce in New York State. After considering information collected by the Department of Education on the topic, Heiser (2017) determined the data did not indicate an overall scarcity of qualified professionals. However, after examining survey feedback from school superintendents in New York State, Heiser (2017) found that over half the chief school officers who responded claimed experiencing a teacher shortage in their districts. Similarly, the New York State Council of School Superintendents collected comparable information after surveying members in the summer of 2018 (Lowry, 2018). The results show concerns regarding teacher shortages, with larger percentages of superintendents from rural areas characterized by low
enrollment and higher rates of poverty identifying the issue as a *significant problem* (Lowry, 2018). The situation is not unique to New York State, and Monk (2007) claimed that data involving teacher experience suggest “the smallest schools face the greatest hiring and retention challenges” (p. 159). Because most of the characteristics that define a school as rural cannot be easily changed, it appears that there is a need to enhance local practices to recruit and retain qualified teachers. For example, when writing about the impact of mentoring and induction programs on teacher retention, Strong (2005) cautioned that:

> Most studies have limitations that are liable to compromise the implications one is able to draw from them. Either they do not specify the level of mentoring or the nature of the induction program under investigation, or, more likely, they combine results from a range of different programs. (p. 192)

Without a more precise understanding of how districts can effectively support new educators, many rural districts will continue to struggle with issues involving teacher turnover (Beesley et al., 2010).

Compounding inconsistent levels of support for new teachers in rural districts, a lack of specificity involving administrative behaviors has proven problematic. Recognizing this reality, Hammer et al. (2005) cited *leadership development* as one of their recommended practices for retaining teachers in rural districts. Yet it should be noted that the literature tends to focus solely on the role of the principal when discussing the impact of administrative support. Rarely do researchers discuss the potential impact that central office personnel, as well as aspiring administrators, might have the decision of educators to stay in a district—especially in rural schools where educators might have
regular contact with a variety of school leaders. In addition, while researchers like Carver-Thomas et al. (2016) have continued to assert that teachers are drawn to principals who are skilled in instruction, there is room for improvement when it comes to better equipping future leaders with the managerial, instructional, and decision-making skills that studies have identified as essential. By developing a more comprehensive understanding of the administrative behaviors new teachers recognize as supportive, rural schools might be able to better retain instructors capable of increasing student outcomes (Hammer et al., 2005).

Theoretical Rationale

Researchers have estimated that students receiving instruction from highly qualified teachers can demonstrate an additional year of growth when compared to peers taught by less effective educators (Hanushek, 1992). Recognizing the important impact that talented professionals have on student achievement, an extensive body of literature has been created on the topic of teacher retention (Perrachione, Petersen, & Rosser, 2008). Despite this detailed study, data continue to show that close to a third of new teachers leave education during their first 5 years of employment (Darling-Hammond, 2003). This persistence of attrition in schools signifies both the complexity of the issue as well as the need for a comprehensive framework in order to better understand the different factors at play.

Building on Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs model, Herzberg (1966) developed his two-factor theory, or motivation-hygiene theory, to better understand the different characteristics that impact worker satisfaction. After conducting interviews with engineers and accountants, Herzberg (2003) suggested that separate factors need to be
considered when examining job satisfaction as opposed to job dissatisfaction. Viewing the two as separate and distinct, Herzberg (2003) classified aspects such as “achievement, recognition for achievement, the work itself, responsibility, and growth or advancement” (p. 7) as intrinsic motivators capable of satisfying workers. Furthermore, he carefully posited that a lack of these motivators did not lead to dissatisfaction but, instead, to the absence of job satisfaction (Herzberg, 2003). When applying this concept to education, Perrachione et al. (2008) identified instructing students as a motivator, and Bogler (2001) described autonomy, open communication, and shared decision-making to be intrinsic influences capable of improving teacher satisfaction. Yet, according to Herzberg (2003), even if employees worked in environments where intrinsic motivators were present, they might continue experiencing high levels of dissatisfaction if other basic needs were not met.

Operating separately from intrinsic motivators, Herzberg’s (2003) two-factor theory submits that problems relating to certain hygiene factors can lead to worker dissatisfaction. Categorizing them as extrinsic influences, Herzberg (2003) wrote that, “company policy and administration, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, salary, status, and security” (p. 7) each had the capability of impacting the way employees felt about their positions. Recognizing the implication of hygiene factors on teacher retention, Perrachione et al. (2008) strongly advised leaders of school systems to invest in the professional development, resources, wage conditions, and class sizes needed to mitigate dissatisfaction. Additionally, Bogler (2001) found that principals had a unique ability to impact the levels of satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction experienced by
teachers, and as a result, influence whether certain instructors decided to stay in the profession.

While Herzberg’s (2003) two-factor theory “has been widely used and has influenced studies examining K-12 teacher satisfaction” (Perrachione et al., 2008, p. 3), certain aspects have been challenged over the years. Beginning with criticisms relating to Herzberg’s (1966) methodology and data collection, the evolving field of motivational theory has led some to question whether his ideas concerning motivators and hygiene factors continue to have validity decades after their initial publication (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005). Regarding education, one challenge, in particular, has provoked disagreement among researchers. Because Herzberg (1966) conducted his initial interviews in an industrial age characterized by hierarchical organizations, individuals, like Nias (1981), maintained “that teachers’ identities are a complex social construction where work and self are not readily separable” (Draper, Fraser, & Taylor, 1998, p. 70). Attempting to determine whether motivators and hygiene factors do indeed impact certain professions differently, Maidani (1991) conducted a study in which he explored worker satisfaction in the public versus private sector work. Although Maidani (1991) ultimately concluded that hygiene factors seemed to have a stronger impact on workers in the private sector, he found that both intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, influences mattered to both groups. Supporting this assessment, researchers examining public education also found that motivators and hygiene factors impacted teachers in profound ways, and Perrachione et al. (2008) concluded that “satisfied teachers were more likely to remain in the teaching profession” (p. 11).
Responding to early criticisms of his work, Herzberg (2003) argued that although his initial interviews had been conducted with engineers and accountants, subsequent studies had involved diverse groups of professionals. Echoing this sentiment, experts have maintained that “most research on teacher job satisfaction is rooted in the pioneering work of Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959) who identified the satisfying and dissatisfying factors” (Bogler, 2001, p. 665). Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory serves as the most effective framework for this study because it continues to be used in research relating to teacher satisfaction as well as retention (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005; Draper et al., 1998, Perrachione et al., 2008), and it provides a comprehensive framework for exploring why educators might choose to leave their positions. In addition, while the complex nature of education might prevent experts from universally accepting a single framework, individuals using Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) work to examine teacher satisfaction observed that motivators and hygiene factors tend to influence instructors in unique ways at different points in their careers (Draper et al., 1998). At a time when close to a third of new teachers continues leaving the profession within their first 5 years of employment (Darling-Hammond, 2003), Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory provides researchers with a reliable and nuanced method of assessing worker satisfaction.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine leadership behaviors that positively influence teacher retention in rural school districts. Studies have consistently shown that administrative support significantly impacts decisions relating to teacher retention, but a lack of clarity surrounds the specific actions school leaders should take to better retain
effective educators (Boyd et al., 2011). With enhanced behavioral recognition and training, experts have suggested that school leaders can develop the competencies teachers interpret as accommodating (Boyd et al., 2011). While educators across the country continue to leave their positions at alarming rates (Hackman & Morath, 2018), the problem presents unique challenges for rural schools already experiencing labor shortages (Little, 2019). In addition to facing elevated rates of teacher turnover, Fuller and Pendola (2018) highlighted the fact that rural districts also have a more difficult time attracting and retaining highly qualified principals who are skilled in supporting educators who are new to the profession. Because studies show “that a teacher’s decision to stay at a school largely depends on the principal and his or her leadership in the school” (Brown & Wynn, 2018, p. 668), administrators must be able to consistently exhibit the precise behaviors new educators recognize as supportive. Consequently, uncertainty relating to the specific leadership actions that increase teacher job satisfaction makes it increasingly difficult for practicing school leaders, as well as aspiring administrators, to deliberately develop those competencies.

**Research Questions**

Because research shows that quality teachers improve academic outcomes for students, it is imperative that schools recruit and keep talented educators (Darling-Hammond, 2000). However, a variety of factors have led to vastly different rates of teacher attrition in regions, as well as school systems, across the country (Carver-Thomas et al., 2016). While “various conditions, such as higher salaries, teacher collaboration and networking, and administrative support” (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 398) have allowed some districts to retain newer educators, others have seen inexperienced teachers
leave with alarming frequency. Given that some factors influencing teacher retention remain relatively fixed in nature, it becomes crucial for school systems to focus on enhancing practices as well as systems that may be controlled on a local level. Because administrators can impact teacher retention, as well as develop their skills with proper training, experts recommend that additional research be conducted on the specific leadership behaviors that newer teachers view as supportive (Boyd et al., 2011). By concentrating on the experiences of leaders in rural organizations, the following questions helped to provide additional insight:

1. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?
2. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?
3. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

**Potential Significance of the Study**

Knowing that administrative support plays a pivotal role in determining whether teachers decide to pursue other career opportunities, the further investigation of specific leadership behaviors appreciated by educators has the potential to effectively direct administrative training in the future (Hammer et al., 2005). Alarmed by low rates of student achievement on standardized tests, the federal government has used both legislation, as well as grant programs, to raise the levels of accountability at both the state
and national level in recent years. Requiring schools to reach high rates of proficiency in certain subject areas, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002), and Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) have amplified the need for districts to retain qualified teachers who are capable of increasing student learning (Peterson, 2016). These policies have presented unique challenges for rural schools, and Barley and Beesley (2007) maintained that, “The longevity of the teaching staff was repeatedly identified by teachers as a contributor to high student achievement, because it makes it easy for teachers to work together for the success of students” (p. 8). As a result, rural schools continue to experience higher rates of attrition than those in more suburban districts, and experts have emphasized the need for developing further strategies aimed at retaining talented educators (Monk, 2007).

When surveying the various factors believed to impact teacher retention, researchers have identified administrative support to be of unique importance (Boyd et al., 2011). In particular, the leadership style of principals has been shown to dramatically influence whether teachers decide to leave their positions (Brown & Wynn, 2007). Yet, despite this information, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific leadership behaviors that consistently impact teacher turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Given the complex roles principals play in both instructional leadership, as well as the routine management of their buildings, this absence of information has presented an unneeded obstacle for districts focused on retaining newer hires (Kilmer, Sheng, Wolff, & Yager, 2017). Additionally, compounding this problem in rural districts is the reality that principals also tend to leave more frequently. Citing concerns relating to “organizational culture, information structures, interpersonal trust, and faculty agency” (Fuller &
Pendola, 2018, p. 1), experts have warned that inconsistent leadership can negatively influence a range of issues in smaller systems. Lacking specific guidance and the assistance of large administrative teams, Manard and Wieczorek (2018) suggested that many rural school principals learn through “trial and error” (p. 1) as opposed to any targeted leadership development. With a more precise understanding of administrative behaviors that are interpreted by teachers to be supportive, schools and leadership preparation programs will be better able to establish the policies and training protocols needed to develop aspiring administrators as well as practicing school leaders (Beesley et al., 2010; Hammer et al., 2005).

**Definitions of Terms**

When using terms that are technical, emerging, or vague in nature, Joyner, Rouse, and Glatthorn (2013) recommended providing clear definitions. The following section offers the definitions of the key terms that regularly appear in this work as well as in the literature related to teacher retention.

*Hygiene Factors* – external aspects of a work environment that involve items such as compensation, policy, relationships with colleagues, and supervision. If removed, Herzberg (1966, 2003) argued that job dissatisfaction would be decreased (Draper et al., 1998).

*Induction* – a comprehensive system for supporting and developing new teachers. Components might include coaching, mentoring, and professional development (Strong, 2005).

*Job Satisfaction* – the level of contentment an individual derives from his or her work duties or experiences. Research has indicated that this is a reliable predictor of
professional performance as well as whether an individual chooses to pursue other job opportunities (Perrachione et al., 2008).

Motivator Factors – a concept used by Herzberg (1966, 2003) to identify internal influences that lead to job satisfaction. Examples would be, “achievement, recognition for achievement, the work itself, responsibility, and growth or advancement” (Herzberg, 2003, p. 70).

Rural – used to identify communities often characterized by low population density, distance from more populated areas, limited economic activity, and a dependence on agriculture (Monk, 2007).

Teacher Retention – field of study examining reasons why educators transfer to similar positions within the same district, pursue teaching opportunities in other schools, or who leave the professional altogether (Boyd et al., 2011).

Chapter Summary

With persistent concerns of teacher shortages in school systems across the country, experts have emphasized the need for the recruitment and retention of highly qualified educators (Ingersoll, 2002). Despite the existence of detailed research on the subject, approximately one-third of teachers continue to leave their positions within the first 5 years of employment (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Recognizing that factors, such as administrative support, teacher induction programs, levels of collegiality, wages, and geography, impact levels of attrition, numerous studies have attempted to provide guidance regarding how to improve the job satisfaction of talented teachers. Although the literature consistently highlights the importance of specific factors, a lack of clarity continues to persist around certain influences. For example, while experts regularly cite
administrative support to be critical when retaining teachers, limited guidance exists pertaining to the specific leadership behaviors that are seen as helpful by newer faculty members (Boyd et al., 2011).

While high rates of attrition can negatively impact the student learning, as well as the collegiality of any school, research shows it tends to be more prevalent in districts characterized by poverty, minority enrollment, and low levels of academic achievement (Guarino et al., 2006). Regularly highlighting the struggles faced by urban districts, a leaner body of research exists relating to similar experiences in rural areas (Beesley et al., 2010). Given that rural districts have also been associated with lower levels of teacher retention, it remains critical to better understand the complex influencers that contribute to favorable working conditions (Monk, 2007). Among the factors in need of further exploration lies the issue of administrative support. Because rural districts also tend to encounter difficulty when attempting to hire and retain skilled principals (Fuller & Pendola, 2018), additional clarity is needed in order to better guide administrators who are attempting to care for new teachers.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature involving the specific leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural school districts. Following the review of the literature, the research design and methodology are discussed in Chapter 3. The results of the research are disseminated in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings and recommendations based on the analysis of the data collected.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

While researchers have identified many factors impacting teacher turnover, administrative support has consistently been recognized as a critical component in retaining effective educators (Ladd, 2011). However, despite decades of study on the various ways leaders impact school systems, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific behaviors that new teachers perceive to be supportive (Boyd et al., 2011). In order to gain a more precise understanding of how administrators can intentionally express care and encouragement, it is critical to examine the different ways in which school leaders may influence factors related to teacher retention in K-12 environments.

The review of the literature begins with an overview of job satisfaction. To explore the complexities of this concept, studies are presented that examine the interactions between employee competency, work environments, and leadership in both private as well as public sector organizations. Because Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory has proven to be a reliable framework for examining job satisfaction, literature was surveyed on several different organizations before an examination of studies related specifically to the experiences of teachers. In addition, given that job satisfaction is closely aligned with working conditions, the chapter then examines ways in which school leaders, student demographics, and levels of collegiality impact the experiences of teachers in their places of employment.
Recognizing that inexperienced educators require a great deal of support, the chapter then explores ways in which districts provide new teachers with induction programs, mentors, and specialized professional development. Throughout the section, special attention is given to the various ways in which school leaders coordinate and ensure that novice teachers receive the assistance needed for their professional growth (Watkins, 2005). Because administrative support has regularly been identified as a factor capable of influencing rates of teacher retention, the review then details leadership behaviors that are commonly recognized to be caring and supportive. To better understand the ways in which these abilities are systematically developed, two different studies are discussed that provide insight into how exemplary programs structure their curricula to prepare principals for the rigors of instructional leadership (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Finally, the chapter concludes with a general overview of employee retention before detailing the unique experiences of schools. In particular, the section examines the distinctive role played by managers and school leaders in establishing positive relationships, as well as providing needed support, to members of their organizations. Throughout the research study, the following questions will be used to guide relevant inquiry and analysis:

1. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?

2. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?
3. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

A study answering these questions could be helpful for leadership preparation programs and school districts intent on helping aspiring administrators, as well as practicing administrators, develop the skills needed to support teachers. Additionally, by providing encouragement and assistance to novice educators, schools could better hope to increase student achievement by retaining talented teachers capable of improving outcomes for learners.

**Job Satisfaction**

In order to remain competitive in environments with limited resources, both public, as well as private, organizations have focused on finding ways to retain high-functioning employees (Hausknecht, Rodda, & Howard 2009). Because turnover typically involves financial costs, as well as losses related to workplace experience, experts have sought to better understand the various factors involved with worker job satisfaction (Yarbrough, Martin, Alfred, & McNeill, 2017). Despite limited research on why individuals choose to stay with specific organizations (Hausknecht et al., 2009), studies have indicated that satisfied workers demonstrate different behaviors than those of dissatisfied employees. Associated with higher rates of attendance, long-term commitment, and performance, satisfied professionals seem more likely to produce desirable outcomes and, in the process, yield results valued by complex organizations (Babalola, 2016; Wang & Brower, 2019). Yet as research into employee competence and retention has expanded, intricacies related to performance, personal values, workplace
characteristics, and managerial support have all presented challenges to adequately understanding what leads to job satisfaction (Babalola, 2016; Hausknecht et al., 2009; Yarbrough et al., 2017).

**Private and public sector organizations.** To better understand reasons why employees choose to remain with hospitality-related organizations, Hausknecht et al. (2009) conducted a study in which 24,829 private sector employees were asked to respond to an online survey. Based on a series of retention factors developed in previous research, employees were asked to explain why they had opted to stay with the same companies. Representing a variety of positions, ethnicities, and levels of seniority, the respondents collectively produced over 500 pages of qualitative information (Hausknecht et al., 2009). Ultimately, a distinction emerged between high- and low-performing employees. While the high-performing employees highlighted the importance of intrinsic factors relating to the nature of the work, opportunities for advancement, and connections with colleagues, the low-performing employees reported being motivated by extrinsic influences involving the financial terms of their employment (Hausknecht et al., 2009). Because of this distinction, the researchers suggested the need for organizations to differentiate their strategies for encouraging job satisfaction in hopes of increasing employee retention.

While Hausknecht et al. (2009) identified differences relating to levels of performance when examining retention in hospitality-related organizations, Hayes, Bonner, and Pryor (2010) conducted a literature review to better understand job satisfaction in acute health care facilities. Motivated by an international nursing shortage, the researchers noted the importance of job satisfaction in a profession affecting both the
well-being of employees and the patients under their care. To explore the potential factors involved with job satisfaction in nursing, Hayes et al. (2010) established a set of criteria before reviewing 17 articles published between 2004 and 2009. The researchers found that nursing job satisfaction appeared to be impacted by a combination of “intra-personal, interpersonal or extra-personal factors” (Hayes et al., 2010, p. 808). Rather than being shaped by a single aspect of a work environment, Hayes et al. (2010) maintained that job satisfaction had to do with an intersection of factors connected to the personal experiences and skills of employees, the quality of their interactions with patients, as well as with colleagues, and factors outside the immediate control of the hospitals. However, when identifying the implications of their findings, Hayes et al. (2010) wrote that “nurse managers cannot be underestimated as they are in a pivotal position to increase the job satisfaction of nurses” (p. 812). Because nurse managers are uniquely positioned to impact collegiality, task assignments, and needed support, the researchers highlighted the importance of leadership when exploring the aspects of job satisfaction in acute health care facilities (Hayes et al., 2010). Multiple studies conducted in the same field have indicated that authentic leadership styles, in particular, might have the possibility of nurturing improved working conditions, employee empowerment, and retention (Giallonardo, Wong, & Iwaasiw, 2010; Spence Laschinger & Fida, 2015; Spence Laschinger, Wong, & Grau, 2012).

Shifting from private organizations to the public sector, Wang and Brower (2019) explored how aspects of work environments influence the thoughts and feelings of federal employees regarding job satisfaction. Maintaining that limited research has been conducted on rates of turnover in the federal government, the researchers observed that
attrition can be both destabilizing for the completion of needed work as well as threatening to the desirability of public sector occupations (Wang & Brower, 2019). After articulating three separate hypotheses, the researchers examined data collected from the 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). The responses came from individuals employed in over 80 federal agencies of different sizes, and the data ultimately highlighted the importance of linking the talents of workers with the needs of organizations. In addition, Wang and Brower (2019) concluded that “supervisors significantly influence a wide range of organizational phenomena,” (p. 16) and that they play key roles in strengthening aspects of perceived job satisfaction. Echoing a similar sentiment, Reid, Riemenschneider, Allen, and Armstrong (2008) wrote that leadership in the public sector is strongly associated with high levels of job satisfaction and retention. They based their findings on 109 electronic survey responses from information technology (IT) workers in an unidentified state, and Reid et al. (2008) determined that the levels of support and supervision offered by managers significantly influenced the levels of job satisfaction in public sector positions that were threatened by opportunities in private organizations.

**Herzberg (1966, 2003) two-factor theory and job satisfaction.** After carefully examining the literature relating to job satisfaction, Herzberg et al. (1959) spoke with approximately 200 engineers and accountants about positive, as well as negative, occurrences they had experienced in the workplace (Maidani, 1991; Sachau, 2007). Once they had collected data from the individuals, the researchers began to group the responses thematically. Herzberg et al. (1959) quickly found motivators to be separate from hygiene factors, and they also discovered that the effects from positive experiences seemed to last
longer than those brought about by unwanted happenings (Sachau, 2007). Herzberg et al. (1959) also noticed that, “the motivator factors all involve psychological growth; the hygiene factors involve physical and psychological pain avoidance” (Sachau, 2007, p. 380). Because of its universal concepts, Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory has remained relatively unchanged since its publication—despite significant global transformations relating to organizational culture, psychology, and technology (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005).

Recognizing that the concept of employee satisfaction has historically appeared on a single continuum, Maidani (1991) conducted a quantitative study focused on identifying potential differences between public and private sector employees. After administering a survey to over 480 employees in Florida, Maidani (1991) determined that issues relating to satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction could be applied to individuals holding a range of professional positions. His results indicated that public sector employees were more likely than private sector workers to be influenced by both motivator and hygiene factors (Maidani, 1991).

Supporting the notion that both of Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) categories can be applied to the field of education, Perrachione et al. (2008) distributed a survey to a random sample of Grades K-5 teachers in Missouri. Attempting to understand how different variables can impact job satisfaction, the researchers also focused on the degree to which the factors influenced decisions involving retention. After examining the information collected from the 34-question survey, Perrachione et al. (2008) concluded that intrinsic and extrinsic variables “appear to influence teacher job satisfaction” (p. 10), while “only extrinsic factors were found to influence teachers’ dissatisfaction” (p. 10).
Complicating this finding, Draper et al. (1998) relied on quantitative data from two different studies to explore the levels of teacher satisfaction after 5, 10, and 15 years of teaching. After some discussion regarding the unique ways in which teachers construct their professional identities, Draper et al. (1998) concluded that the ways in which educators experience job satisfaction changes over time. Echoing many of the same sentiments expressed in previous research, Bogler (2001) used quantitative survey data obtained from 930 teachers to illustrate the powerful impact that principals can have on the levels of job satisfaction possessed by the teachers in their buildings.

**Job satisfaction in K-12 environments.** Similar to employees working in vocations outside of education, job satisfaction has been shown to have a significant impact on the rates of turnover in school settings (Koedel, Li, Springer, & Tan, 2017). Studies have routinely shown teachers indicating troubling rates of unhappiness. Koedel et al. (2017) and Mertler (2002) asserted that low levels of job satisfaction were the primary reason new teachers leave the profession. However, aside from concerns surrounding the connection between job satisfaction and attrition, experts have also noted the potentially negative impact displeasure can have on attracting new professionals to the field or motivating teachers currently working with students in classrooms across the country (Shen, Leslie, Spybrook, & Ma, 2012). To better understand the complexities associated with job satisfaction, experts have examined variations within schools, as well as the influence held by leaders—primarily principals—working in educational organizations.

Recognizing the harmful impact job dissatisfaction can have on student learning, as well as the experiences of educators, Mertler (2002) sent out an electronic “Teacher
Motivation and Job Satisfaction” survey to instructors through a series of listservs. Collecting information from just over 700 secondary teachers, the questions asked respondents to assess their personal levels of satisfaction and those of their coworkers. After analyzing the quantitative data using SPSS, Mertler (2002) found levels of dissatisfaction to be comparable to what researchers had discovered in previous studies. Worthy of note, while Mertler (2002) highlighted the fact that just over three-quarters of the participants reported an overall sense of job satisfaction, he cautioned that alarming numbers of teachers had negative workplace perceptions. In addition to noting that early and late career teachers tended to exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, Mertler (2002) also emphasized that “one important role of the school administrator—at the building or district level—is the responsibility for the professional morale of teachers” (p. 51).

Similar assertions relating to school leadership have repeatedly appeared in the literature concerning teacher retention, and experts have sought to better understand both the direct and indirect ways in which administrators influence job satisfaction.

Interested in probing variations involved with job satisfaction, Shen et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative study based on data from the School and Staffing Survey (SASS). Although the researchers noted that elementary educators tended to report higher levels of job satisfaction than their secondary counterparts, Shen et al. (2012) found limited evidence to suggest that the background experiences of principals had statistically significant effects on teacher fulfillment. Additionally, the researchers observed that when it came to job satisfaction, administrative support and working conditions appeared to outweigh principal preparation, class size, and salary increases (Shen et al., 2012).
Bolstering the notion that school leaders were well positioned to influence variables associated with job satisfaction, Davis and Wilson (2000) added to the literature by examining indirect ways in which school administrators increased teacher satisfaction through empowerment. Postulating that the establishment of supportive school environments characterized by shared decision-making would lead to heightened levels of job satisfaction, Davis and Wilson (2000) conducted a study with elementary school teachers and principals in Washington State. After analyzing quantitative data collected from the confidential surveys returned by employees in 31 schools, the researchers found that “the more principals engaged in behaviors that were personally empowering, the more teachers saw that they had choices they could make in completing their work and the greater the impact they perceived they were making through their efforts” (Davis & Wilson, 2000, p. 352). Although Davis and Wilson (2000) did not find enough evidence to support a correlation between teacher empowerment and job satisfaction, they did speculate that school leaders could increase levels of fulfillment indirectly by motivating educators.

**Working Conditions**

In recent years, researchers have consistently identified working conditions to be of importance when attempting to explain issues involving teacher retention (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Because working conditions are typically a somewhat general term used to summarize different components of an educational environment, experts have tried to provide a degree of specificity to the factor (Podolsky, Kini & Bishop, 2017). After examining the literature associated with working conditions, Johnson (2006) identified a series of predictive benchmarks that
were connected with whether a teacher would choose to remain in the field of education. While some of the items had to do with details relating to teaching assignments, others involved available resources, collaborative peer relationships, and administrative support (Johnson, 2006). Recognizing the potential significance connected with many of these same factors, subsequent researchers attempted to better understand the connection between school leadership and working conditions as well as the importance of student demographics on teacher turnover (Ladd, 2011; Loeb et al., 2005).

**Impact of principals on working conditions.** The importance of school leadership on shaping working conditions has been well established in the field of education (Ladd, 2011). In particular, Johnson (2006) emphasized the special significance of building principals because of their responsibilities involved with creating schedules, providing resources, facilitating collaborative interactions, and establishing community partnerships. Hoping to better understand how principals influence working conditions in schools, Burkhauser (2017) studied the perceptions of teachers in North Carolina by reviewing quantitative data collected over a 6-year period. Beginning with responses compiled after the 2005-2006 administration of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, Burkhauser (2017) focused on 34 items that she grouped into four distinct measures. The areas involved, “teachers’ ability to focus on teaching (teacher time use), the physical environment is well maintained and conducive to teaching (physical environment), teacher empowerment/school leadership, and teacher professional development” (p. 130), and the responses were gathered biannually through the 2011-2012 school year.
Reinforcing previous research completed on school leadership and teacher retention, Burkhauser (2017) found that principals had a significant impact on how teachers viewed each of the four general measures identified in the longitudinal study. However, while Burkhauser (2017) used her findings to highlight the need for schools to improve working conditions when attempting to improve teacher retention, she also acknowledged that principals had varying levels of involvement in the four measured areas based on the organization of their individual schools.

When conducting a similar 1-year study utilizing data obtained from the same survey, Ladd (2011) reached a comparable conclusion. Ladd (2011) argued that the size and diversity found in North Carolina made it an ideal location for securing representative data, and the researcher determined that, “among the working conditions factors, the dominant factor, by far, is the quality of school leadership” (p. 256). Ladd (2011) also noted variations between different levels of school systems. While secondary teachers, who worked for poor leaders tended to leave the field of education altogether, similar situations led elementary and middle level educators to remain in the profession but seek like positions in alternate settings (Ladd, 2011).

**Student demographics and working conditions.** Aside from examining the impact that school leaders have on shaping teacher perceptions of working conditions, the literature routinely cites additional factors that are less easily controlled by district administrators (Johnson, 2006). Among the most common is the assertion that teachers are more likely to leave school systems with high rates of poverty and minority populations (Loeb et al., 2005). Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals a complicated relationship between rates of teacher retention and districts located in low-income,
diverse areas characterized by varying levels of student achievement (Johnson, 2006). Recognizing that previous research had failed to separate working conditions from student demographics when analyzing teacher turnover, Horng (2009) surveyed over 500 elementary school teachers in California. Yet rather than simply inquire about workplace preferences, Horng (2009) asked participants to make tradeoffs relating to 10 different characteristics commonly associated with education. Additionally, Horng (2009) used employment data to study the retention patterns of the individuals who had completed the survey. After analyzing the collected information, Horng (2009) found positive working conditions to be critical when attempting to retain talented teachers. More specifically, the researcher identified “school facilities, administrative support, and class size” (Horng, 2009, p. 706) as the top three contributors to favorable working conditions. Conversely, after separating working conditions from student demographics, Horng (2009) found that when teachers leave positions, they tend to do so because of negative school settings as opposed to the characteristics of their students. Although Horng (2009) noted the need for additional study, she also emphasized the positive policy implications involved with data that suggested decisions made by local school districts had greater significance than the less easily controlled demographics of the student body.

In related research regarding working conditions and student demographics, experts have sought to examine low rates of teacher turnover in successful schools characterized by poverty and diverse populations (Johnson, 2006). Focused primarily on the impact administrative support and professional development had on working conditions in Arizona, Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study involving over 1,400 educators working in schools associated with the Teacher
Advancement Program (TAP). After analyzing data collected over a 3-year period, the researchers observed that “teachers in high-performing schools were significantly more satisfied with all aspects of working conditions than teachers in low-performing schools” (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018, p. 616). Although Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) categorized this finding as somewhat expected, they failed to uncover a meaningful relationship between rates of teacher retention and levels of poverty and diversity characterizing enrolled students. Additionally, Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) noted the positive impact of mentoring, administrative support, and professional development on retaining teachers. While these factors are all routinely associated with high-performing schools, they can also be controlled to a large degree by policies and local decision-making.

**School culture and collegiality.** While most public schools across the country have a similar purpose, each organization contains a unique culture based on “a pattern of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness” (Schein, 2010, p. 6). In addition to developing their instructional capabilities, beginning teachers must also find ways to navigate complex school cultures and build positive relationships with their colleagues as well as their supervisors (Hasselquist, Herndon, & Kitchel, 2017). Although this can often prove to be a lonely and challenging experience for first-year teachers, Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu (2001) asserted that principals have a special role when it comes to creating collegial work environments. In hopes of providing the social connections needed to support inexperienced educators, many school administrators have
focused on establishing professional learning communities to increase levels of job
satisfaction (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

Aside from providing insight on how leadership behaviors can impact teacher
retention, Brown and Wynn (2007) collected data from 12 school principals in an urban
district that highlighted the need for school cultures capable of nurturing desired levels of
collegiality. Interested in exploring the same topic from the perspective of first-year
teachers, Charner-Laird, Szczesiul, Kirpatrick, Watson, and Gordon (2016) conducted
semi-structured interviews with 17 educators. The conversations each lasted roughly 60
minutes in length, and they provided opportunities for beginning professionals to detail
the collegiality they experienced once they had secured their initial teaching positions.
Correspondingly, Kardos et al. (2001) conducted a similar study in which 50 first- and
second-year teachers from districts in Massachusetts had the chance to discuss the ways
in which their principals had helped to foster collaborative work cultures. Interested in
surveying a diverse range of professionals, the researchers intentionally sought out
individuals with different backgrounds that related to demographics, preparatory
programs, and work experiences.

When reviewing the verbal responses offered by school principals, Brown and
Wynn (2007) noted an emphasis on building a culture in which veteran educators would
“wrap their arms around [new teachers] and support them” (p. 48) because a “family-like
atmosphere motivates and helps new teachers feel positive about being at their school
site” (p. 48). Consequently, the researchers noted a symbiotic relationship that emerged
when they used professional learning communities to foster collegiality around
instruction. While the interactions enabled beginning educators to form meaningful
connections with colleagues, they also provided opportunities for first-year teachers to share their existing pedagogical strategies with those around them. By encouraging collaboration as opposed to competition, principals found that the interactions fostered professional growth as well as strengthened caring relationships (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

Charner-Laird et al. (2016) also documented the importance of professional learning after reviewing the transcripts of interviews conducted with beginning teachers. Integrating themes found in the literature, the researchers noted that most inexperienced educators reported having engaged in critical conversations relating to instruction. But rather than emphasize the reciprocal nature of the interactions as reported by Brown and Wynn (2007), the teachers described the sharing to be relatively one sided. Rather than contribute to the ideas being discussed, the inexperienced educators talked about receiving information and then having to make decisions regarding implementation in isolation (Charner-Laird et al., 2016).

Adding a distinctive perspective to the subject, Kardos et al. (2001) employed multistaged coding to dissect the responses offered by first- and second-year educators. After reviewing the themes that emerged, the experts noticed that beginning teachers tended to work in either “veteran-oriented professional cultures,” “novice-oriented professional cultures,” or “integrated professional cultures” (Kardos et al., 2001, pp. 260-261). In the first stage of coding, Kardos et al. (2001) asserted that new teachers could expect to experience interactions ranging from warm to unfriendly, and that veterans might appear indifferent to their presence. Novice-oriented professional cultures, on the other hand, tended to be energetic and idealistic. However, a lack of experience invariably led to unrefined instructional methodologies, and a certain degree of
competitiveness frequently accompanied a sense of community (Kardos et al., 2001). Yet the researchers also identified school cultures that appeared similar to the organizations discussed by Brown and Wynn (2007). Integrated professional cultures were “characterized as integrated, respondents described schools organized so that teachers could realize their strongly held beliefs about the importance of collegiality” (Kardos et al., 2001, p. 274), and they seemed to benefit both new and experienced educators alike. Complementing the information unearthed by the different researchers relating to levels of collegiality, two of the three studies explored the roles played by school leaders in determining preferred organizational cultures.

While both Brown and Wynn (2007), as well as Kardos et al. (2001), emphasized the need for administrators to provide desired professional learning, mentoring, and induction for new teachers, they also focused on regular interactions that were interpreted as supportive. Speaking with urban principals, Brown and Wynn (2007) shared that a participant commented on serving as a figurative “marriage counselor, town lawyer, sounding board, financial advisor” (p. 54) and patriarch for the organization. In addition, the researchers collected data suggesting that principals tried to maintain high levels of visibility as well as provide regular encouragement in order to communicate support to newer teachers (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

Although not a major focus of their study, Charner-Laird et al. (2016) mentioned an administrator who would periodically provide assistance to inexperienced educators, and Kardos et al. (2001) reviewed in detail ways in which school leaders impacted building-level culture. Reinforcing many of the themes identified by Brown and Wynn (2007), Kardos et al. (2001) noted that in addition to being present and providing regular
reassurance, principals in integrated professional cultures tended to be engaged in typical school happenings. In contrast, administrators working in veteran-oriented professional cultures or novice-oriented professional cultures either appeared removed from students and staff, or if present, viewed their roles as superior to those of the educators around them (Kardos et al., 2001). In both cases, new teachers often felt ignored, and they commented that the limited relationships made it harder for them to establish connections with more veteran colleagues.

**New Teacher Support**

Despite fears of teacher shortages and relatively high rates of attrition, many schools in the United States have historically failed to provide new teachers with meaningful levels of consistent support (Felsher, Shockley, & Watlington, 2013). Consequently, in recent years, an increased emphasis has been placed on implementing induction programs, mentoring opportunities, and professional development for faculty in order to retain promising educators (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). According to Ingersoll (2012), by 2008, just over 90% of new teachers reported receiving some sort of formal support relating to induction, often prompted by state or local requirements. Yet, as programs offering support for new teachers have expanded, inconsistencies relating to uniform expectations, actual follow through, and the collection of longitudinal data have all presented obstacles to accurately assessing levels of effectiveness (Felsher et al., 2013; Strong, 2005).

**New teacher induction.** When examining different ways in which school districts support new teachers, Strong (2005) highlighted the differences that exist between induction and mentoring. While the former involves a comprehensive system of support,
the latter focuses specifically on the formal assistance that is offered by veteran educators to inexperienced teachers (Wong, 2004). Recognizing the expansion of induction programs in schools over the past 20 years, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) published an empirical study in which they examined data obtained from the 1999-2000 SASS as well as the 2000-2001 Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS). Unlike previous studies, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) sought to compare findings from individuals who participated in induction programs to those who did not, and they also attempted to account for additional factors that may have had an impact on the levels of attrition. For their study, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) used a weighted sample of 3,235 surveys from new teachers at both the primary and secondary levels.

As expected, the information obtained from the SASS and the TFS showed that close to 80% of educators new to the field had received some sort of induction support from their districts (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Nevertheless, the data also indicated that little consistency existed when it came to the types of induction activities offered by organizations. When examining their findings, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) concluded that induction programs did appear to increase the rates of teacher retention. However, they also found that some elements of induction programs appeared to positively impact levels of teacher turnover while others did not. For example, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) discovered that “having a mentor from the same field, having common planning time with other teachers in the same subject or collaboration with other teachers on instruction, and being part of an external network of teachers” (p. 706) increased the likelihood that new teachers would stay in their original positions. In addition, they also found that providing inexperienced teachers with a combination of supports seemed to bolster their
overall level of job satisfaction (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Conversely, the researchers determined that other supports—such as reduced course loads—amplified the probability that newer teachers would leave their positions (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Although many subsequent studies, including Kang and Berliner (2012) have reiterated the findings of Smith and Ingersoll (2004), others have reached contradictory conclusions. Perhaps most notably, Glazerman et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative investigation involving more than 1,000 teachers in 17 school districts. After collecting data from teachers who received targeted induction support as well as those who did not over a 4-year period, the researchers determined that not only did the additional assistance fail to increase student achievement, it did not impact the rate of teacher retention (Glazerman et al., 2010). In addition, Glazerman et al. (2010) found that even by providing new teachers with mentoring, veteran observations, and professional development, the comprehensive induction support did not lead to higher levels of reported teacher job satisfaction.

It is worth noting that an extensive, although inconsistent, body of literature was conducted by Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) regarding the potential impact that induction supports have on new teacher retention. Numerous quantitative, as well as qualitative, studies have been conducted, and while some have examined information collected over a single year, others have focused on longitudinal data assembled over multiple years. For example, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) attempted to advance the methodology of previous studies by surveying a group of 2,340 first-year teachers once a year over a 5-year period. Although they found that most induction supports did help to lower levels of new teacher turnover, they also learned that educators receiving multiple types of
assistance seemed to be much less likely to leave the profession or migrate to another position (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Finally, although Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) found that most inexperienced teachers received similar types of support, the researchers discovered that Black educators and individuals working in districts with high levels of students for whom English was a second language received more intensive help during their first years of employment.

**New teacher mentoring.** As a component of many induction programs throughout the United States, mentoring has emerged as a common practice for supporting new teachers (Strong, 2005; Vierstraete, 2005). Yet while state and local regulations often drive the implementation of mentoring programs, school leaders—mainly principals—are often the ones responsible for the selection, as well as the training, of new teacher mentors (Pogodzinski, 2015). Because administrative oversight can vary widely between schools, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) determined the need for additional study in order to better comprehend the implications involved with the specific details involved in mentoring programs after examining SASS and TFS data.

To better understand the complex relationship between new teacher mentoring and retention, Waterman and He (2011) conducted a review of 14 studies that satisfied their criteria relating to abstracts, citations, and publications. Focused primarily on “(a) mentor characteristics, (b) facilitative administrative structures, (c) frequency of support, and (d) professional development and training” (Waterman & He, 2011, p. 141), the researchers ultimately determined the data to be inconclusive. For example, several of the studies found that with the proper training, compensation, and backing from school leadership, mentoring programs led to lower rates of teacher turnover—especially in
more challenging school environments and special education teaching positions (Waterman & He, 2011). In contrast, conflicting research indicated that no discernible association existed between the intensity and support involved with mentoring and the likelihood that new teachers would leave the field of education (Waterman & He, 2011). Yet, even in these instances, it is worth noting that the studies “determined that mentoring increased or had the potential to increase the level of support to novices” (Waterman & He, 2011, p. 149).

In a similar study, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) conducted a research review after consulting both respected educators and individuals working in governmental capacities. After identifying 500 potential reports involving teacher induction and mentoring, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) limited the scope of their work to 15 empirical studies that relied on quantifiable data. The researchers found positive correlations between mentoring programs and teacher retention, and Ingersoll and Strong (2011) emphasized the particular importance of mentoring for elementary school teachers when it came to addressing educator attrition. After examining information from mentoring programs in the Chicago Public Schools, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) highlighted the work of Kapadia, Coca, and Easton (2007), when stressing the significance of selecting and training qualified mentors as well as stressing the need for providing opportunities for ongoing collaboration. Although Ingersoll and Strong (2011) ultimately noted that the studies reviewed each contained certain limitations, they argued that at a general level, the data showed mentoring to be uniquely effective when it came to the retention and job satisfaction of new teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Also, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) provided evidence that by delivering mentoring opportunities for first-year teachers, the
support tended to improve pedagogical practices as well as student achievement—both desired qualities in teachers choosing to stay in the field of education.

**Professional development for new teachers.** Regardless of the preservice training individuals may have received prior to obtaining employment, new teachers face a range of challenges once they have secured their initial instructional positions (Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008). Mastering learning standards, understanding school culture, and dealing with difficult student behaviors can each prove to be problematic, and research has shown that professional development has increasingly been used to help new educators develop essential instructional skills (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011; Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). While professional development may take on many forms, Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2002) maintained that it “should be ongoing, outcome-based, and foster continuous improvement (p. 58). In many systems, the school principal is the individual responsible for ensuring that new teachers receive the support they need to help them develop professionally (Watkins, 2005).

Although school districts have increasingly relied upon professional development to help new educators meet the multifaceted demands of the vocation, limited research has been conducted with a focus on examining the relationship with teacher retention (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Holland, 2005). Recognizing the potential impact ongoing learning might have on the future plans of novice teachers, Anderson and Olsen (2006) conducted a qualitative study involving 15 graduates from the University of California-Los Angeles’ Center X Teacher Education Program. After randomly selecting the participants, Anderson and Olsen (2006) gathered information through interviews, classroom observations, and visits relating to professional development opportunities.
Throughout the process, the researchers focused on better understanding the perceptions teachers had regarding why they entered the profession, their current work responsibilities, professional development, and the future (Anderson & Olsen, 2006). Ultimately, Anderson and Olsen (2006) grouped many of the responses thematically and concluded that well-defined, differentiated professional development had the potential to help new teachers see education as a lifelong vocation in which they could learn and make a difference.

Shifting from urban to rural settings, Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, and Farmer (2012) wrote about the need for providing special education teachers with focused professional development in hopes of decreasing teacher turnover. Highlighting the fact that rural schools have historically struggled to attract certified special education teachers, Berry et al. (2012) also noted that smaller schools often require educators to meet a range of complex learning needs. To explore the situation surrounding professional development in rural settings, Berry et al. (2012) developed a qualitative telephone survey that was administered to 203 certified special education teachers from 33 states. After reviewing data from the series of open-ended questions, Berry et al. (2012) found professional development to be critical when attempting to better understand the issues of teacher retention. Because many rural schools are forced to hire noncertified special education teachers who are required to support diverse students’ needs in a range of content areas, the researchers found professional development to be an important way of improving the success of new faculty members. Although Berry et al. (2012) maintained that “professional support may increase teacher confidence when providing services to students with disabilities in rural area and support teachers in remaining in their positions
in rural schools” (p. 10), they did not use actual retention data and Berry et al. (2012) acknowledged the need for further study.

**Teacher leadership and retention.** In recent years, districts have begun to increasingly embrace teacher-leader programs as ways of supporting novice educators (Dauksas & White, 2010). While the concept has emerged as a practical way to complete educational tasks, research has indicated that distributed leadership also has the potential to strengthen instructional practices and increase levels of teacher ownership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, York-Barr and Duke (2004) acknowledged that it can be difficult to provide a clear definition of what it means to be a teacher leader, Nolan and Palazzolo (2011) argued that these teacher leaders work collaboratively to improve instruction. Whether holding formal or informal roles, teacher leaders support those around them by offering professional guidance, collegial relationships, or supplies to those in need of support (Nolan & Palazzo, 2011). While teacher leader programs can influence retention by providing valuable assistance as well as by offering growth opportunities for veteran educators, Kohm and Nance (2009) highlighted the fact that the model rarely works without support from school principals. If administrators value hierarchy over collaborative models of leadership, schools will often lack the culture needed to support effective programs involving teacher leadership.

Focused on better understanding the relationship between distributed leadership and job satisfaction, García Torres (2019) extracted data relating to U.S. educators from the 2013 administration of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). After analyzing information from just under 2,000 full-time teachers, García Torres (2019) found that “actions characterized by a distributed leadership framework were
significantly associated with organizational commitment” (p. 119). Moreover, García Torres (2019) also concluded that, overall, districts in the United States had lower levels of distributed leadership than those found in international schools. The researcher also discovered that when teachers perceived the presence of distributed leadership, their levels of job satisfaction increased. Yet, when school leaders reported the presence of distributed leadership, García Torres (2019) noted that the observations did not necessarily correspond with the identified levels of teacher job satisfaction. Ultimately, García Torres (2019) concluded that although teachers and administrators might have discrepant views of school culture, distributed leadership did have the potential to slow rates of attrition.

While researchers have explored the potential impact teacher leadership can have on teacher retention, individuals have also examined the ways in which principals might strengthen collaborative decision-making in schools (Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009). Interested in better understanding how principals can develop and empower teacher leaders, Maxfield and Flumerfelt (2009) mailed a 30-question survey to administrators and teacher leaders in a Midwestern state. After collecting roughly 150 completed surveys from respondents, the researchers used a qualitative method of analysis to examine the information. Ultimately, Maxfield and Flumerfelt (2009) found that both administrators and teachers believed that principals needed to find “authentic, relevant, and contextual” (p. 46) ways of supporting teacher leaders. Maxfield and Flumerfelt (2009) argued that when principals provided coaching, professional development, and daily opportunities for educators to participate in decision-making, they enabled teachers to develop as leaders. Additionally, Maxfield and Flumerfelt (2009) also discovered that
when principals supported teacher leaders in their schools, they also recognized improvements relating to the culture in their buildings.

**School Leadership and Teacher Retention**

While researchers have identified many factors that impact teacher turnover, administrative support has consistently been recognized as a critical component in retaining effective educators (Ladd, 2011). However, despite decades of study on the various ways leaders impact school systems, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific behaviors that new teachers perceive to be supportive (Boyd et al., 2011). Although educators like Young (2018) have assembled practical action items for administrators working in the field, limited scholarly research has unpacked the complex ways in which leaders communicate meaningful levels of encouragement. Complicating this absence of information, positions involving school leadership have evolved in terms of scope as well as complexity. In particular, school principals are expected to develop as instructional leaders, and in the process, they must oversee the systems and structures needed for organizational success (Boyce & Bowers, 2018).

**Administrative support.** To gain a more precise understanding of how administrators can intentionally express care and encouragement, three studies of particular importance were examined: Boyd et al. (2009), Brown and Wynn (2007), and Urick (2016). Interested in addressing three research questions relating to the perceptions of first-year teachers,attrition, and the components of school environments that most influence turnover, Boyd et al. (2009) distributed a survey to all New York City educators in their first year of service. Completed by more than 4,300 teachers, the questionnaire contained 300 of thematically grouped questions. Although the instrument
was constructed for a population in a defined area, many of the questions were based on the nationally administered SASS and TFS. Using data from the actual SASS administered in 1999-2000, Urick (2016) designed a study to “understand how different types of principal and teacher leaders interact in shared leadership” (p. 439) as well as to “test the extent that the interaction between different types of teachers and principals influences” (p. 440) rates of attrition. While Boyd et al. (2009) and Urick (2016) relied on quantitative measures, Brown and Wynn (2016) designed a qualitative set of interviews in which 12 school principals verbally responded to a series of questions in loosely structured interviews. Although modest in size, the relatively small study took place in an urban district in an unnamed Southeastern state, and it focused on the specific styles and traits principals used to increase teacher retention (Brown & Wynn, 2016).

Using a multinomial logistic regression, Boyd et al. (2009) isolated six different contextual factors that were potentially connected to levels of dissatisfaction among first-year teachers. While some involved influences largely out of the control of school leaders, the researchers noted that “the administration factor is the only one that significantly predicts teacher retention decisions after controlling for other school and teacher characteristics” (Boyd et al., 2009, p. 323). If teachers had a positive view of their school administrator, the likelihood that they would choose to remain in their current position increased significantly. When asked why they chose to leave the profession, more than 40% of former teachers identified administrative support, while fewer than 5% of the respondents acknowledged colleagues, autonomy, or facilities as playing a part in their decision-making. Acknowledging that instructional leadership has been established as a predictor of attrition in previous studies, Urick (2016) relied on latent class analysis
to unpack the relationship between principal and teacher types in different contexts. Devising terms for identifying different categories of teachers and principals, the researcher asked educators to indicate how often they had the ability to participate in school-related initiatives that were associated with items such as safety, instruction, and collegiality (Urick, 2016). When inclusive instructors were paired with principals who shared similar values, Urick (2016) emphasized that beginning teachers appeared much less likely to pursue other professional opportunities, due in part to their level of influence over school-related issues. Coming at the subject from a different angle, Brown and Wynn (2016) analyzed interview data from school principals using a constant comparative analysis. Although their study did not enhance the understanding of teacher retention from the perspective of faculty members, it did provide detailed insight from school principals regarding how to concretely express support.

**Leadership behaviors and teacher retention.** Although Boyd et al. (2009) presented compelling data indicating that administrative support could significantly impact rates of teacher retention, it provided little insight on specific ways in which leaders can demonstrate encouragement. In fact, the limited detail that Boyd et al. (2009) uncovered came not from teachers who had chosen to remain in their positions but, instead, from educators who had left to pursue alternate possibilities. When asked to reflect on the levels of administrative support they had received while teaching, many former educators reported receiving inadequate levels of communication, appreciation, and encouragement while in the classroom (Boyd et al., 2009).

Although not directly aligned to the work of Boyd et al. (2009), Urich (2016) did establish that teachers and principals have different perceptions regarding what is needed
in supportive school systems. Urich (2016) also highlighted the need for administrators and members of the faculty to find shared ways of interacting around decisions involving mission, community, and instruction to create desirable work environments. Toward the end of the study, Urich (2016) commented that future research could further illuminate ways in which a deeper understanding of leadership behaviors could both strengthen administrative development and improve teacher hiring practices. Relatedly, qualitative data collected by Brown and Wynn (2016) also stressed the importance of selecting teachers with dispositions that aligned with organizational values and priorities.

Building on the Urich’s (2016) assertion that a synergy must exist between school leaders and members of the faculty, Brown and Wynn (2016) interviewed principals who emphasized the need for being “strategic in their recruitment efforts, in their interview questions, and in their classroom placements (p. 50). Because the administrators reported being focused on retaining teachers who shared similar beliefs regarding a range of school-related issues, they each acknowledged the need for providing inexperienced educators with the time, teaching materials, and development opportunities that are required for success. Admitting that providing the comprehensive layers of support could prove challenging, the respondents accepted the fact that beginning teachers could not be “treated as ‘finished products,’” (Brown & Wynn, 2016, p. 52), and they recognized the need for helping educators enhance their instructional skills through ongoing feedback and professional learning opportunities (Brown & Wynn, 2016). To accelerate this process, leaders talked about the need to integrate first-year teachers into the school community as quickly as possible, and several interviewees outlined their use of learning communities (Brown & Wynn, 2016). While the study presented a variety of honest and
practical reflections from a collection of experienced administrators, it did not go so far as to offer a concrete plan for developing future school leaders. Instead, the information collected reminded practitioners and policymakers alike about the unique needs of new teachers, and they reinforced the importance of developing systems for supporting inexperienced educators.

Similarly, recognizing that principals play a critical role in determining workplace trust and engagement, Wang and Bird (2011) surveyed close to 1,000 teachers and 60 principals working in a southeastern state to explore the importance of authentic leadership. Ultimately, the researchers found that when dealing with complex situations on a regular basis, principals who prioritized positive relationships, transparency, and integrity connected with educators in positive ways. Although the study did not specifically address issues relating to teacher retention and student achievement, it did recommend that organizations prioritize hiring individuals with authentic leadership styles when filling key vacancies (Wang & Bird, 2011).

**Principal training programs.** Once viewed as primarily responsible for managing student behaviors and attending to the daily operations of school buildings, modern principals have increasingly been called upon to serve as instructional leaders tasked with enhancing student outcomes (Lynch, 2012). In fact, research has suggested that when it comes to school factors that are capable of increasing student achievement, the role of leadership is exceeded only by the quality of teachers working directly with the learners (Miller, 2013). Yet, as the complex role of principals has evolved to include culture building, visioning, budgeting, and improving instructional practice (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Pannell, Peltier-Glaze, Haynes, Davis, & Skelton, 2015), experts warn
that school leaders are too often inadequately prepared for the demands of their positions (Miller, 2013). Recognizing the need for improving administrative training programs, many universities have begun to adjust their learning standards, while school districts have bolstered the support they offer to new principals by investing in mentoring as well as professional development (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013).

Interested in exploring the connection between administrative preparation and effective leadership practices, Orr and Orphanos (2011) conducted a study comparing graduates from four model universities to a national sample of certified principals. Orr and Orphanos (2011) asked participants to complete a 48-question survey administered electronically and by mail. The study focused on exploring the relationship between principal preparation and leadership performance as well as school improvement. Although limited to the perceptions of the participants, over 600 individuals responded to the questions, allowing the researchers to complete a three-step examination of the data collected (Orr & Orphanos, 2011). While the results show a modest relationship between attending an exemplary training program and exhibiting highly effective leadership behaviors, the data suggest a significant increase in professional practice when university-based learning was combined with meaningful internship experiences. In addition, while Orr and Orphanos (2011) found that attending model preparatory programs enhanced the ability of school leaders to improve their organizations, they also concluded “that the quality of the program features—focus, content, faculty, and internships—is more important for a candidate’s success than simply enrolling in an exemplary program” (p. 50).
Interested in further probing the specific elements of innovative training plans, Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) compared the essential components of five distinct university-based leadership programs. Selecting the particular programs after reviewing details provided by the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute (SELI), the researchers used a variety of data sources—including telephone interviews—to create profiles examining the “context,” “key design features,” and “outcomes” (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012, pp. 29-31) associated with each of the organizations. After comparing the distinct programs, Davis and Darling-Hammond found several key similarities. First, the programs each combined rigorous admissions requirements that were focused on instructional leadership, practical problem solving, and internship experiences based in locations different that the locations the candidates had been employed as teachers (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Second, the programs each utilized a cohort model in which the same group of leadership students completed a series of performance-based requirements for certification. Finally, the innovative organizations each clearly articulated the abilities their future administrators needed to master. While they all centered on the importance of instructional leadership, the programs emphasized the need for principals to enhance the culture, satisfaction, collaboration, and professional development of the teachers in their school communities (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

**Role of the superintendent.** Increased expectations relating to academic performance have required school principals to evolve as instructional leaders in past years (Lynch, 2012). Subsequently, Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, and Kowalski (2018) argued that recent educational reforms have led to an evolution in the responsibilities
held by school superintendents. Traditionally charged with establishing an academic vision, supervising teachers, and managing daily operations in local districts, changing expectations have required superintendents to respond to a variety of external pressures as well (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). Whether they have been asked to meet state or federal mandates, work with elected boards, advocate for needed funding, or communicate with various stakeholders, superintendents have had to focus much of their times on “launching and sustaining large-scale systemic reform” (Björk et al., 2014, pp. 459-460).

This is not to say, however, that new global pressures have eliminated the need for superintendents to provide desired support for teachers. On the contrary, Peel and McCary (1999) cited expectations that schools ensure the social, emotional, and health-related well-being of students—with essentially the same resources—as sources of potential burnout for educators. With concerns about creating overwhelming expectations for teachers, experts have suggested that superintendents have important roles to play in providing the vision, collaboration, shared decision-making, and positive cultures schools need to retain effective instructors (Peel & McCary, 1999).

Interested in learning more about the perceptions the superintendents had regarding the different factors impacting teacher turnover, Kelly, Tejeda-Delgado, and Slate (2008) conducted a quantitative study involving school leaders in Texas. After initially inviting 200 superintendents to complete a digital questionnaire, the researchers secured responses from 98 individuals who detailed their observations relating to compensation, signing bonuses, health insurance, and the nonfinancial support required to recruit and retain effective educators. After reviewing the responses, the researchers
concluded that while few districts offered signing bonuses, almost all participating superintendents recognized the need to provide compensation packages and salaries that exceeded the state base pay in Texas. With regard to nonfinancial incentives, the superintendents reported providing professional development, needed supplies, mentoring, and participatory decision-making opportunities for new teachers (Kelly et al., 2008). Worthy of note, the researchers did not compare the impact of the financial and nonfinancial incentives offered by participating districts on their rates of teacher turnover. Additionally, the study did not probe the specific roles played by superintendents in actually delivering the identified supports.

The reality that the majority of public school students in the United States attend urban or suburban districts (Copeland, 2013) perhaps helps to explain the limited information available regarding the direct impact superintendents have on teacher retention. While the literature consistently highlights the importance of school principals encouraging inexperienced educators (Burkhauser, 2017; Johnson, 2006; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Pannell et al., 2015), it rarely cites specific ways in which superintendents provide needed administrative support. Consequently, this lack of information might be explained by relatively limited contact between new teachers and central office administrators in larger districts, Copeland (2013) suggested that rural school superintendents occupy hugely different roles. As opposed to their counterparts in urban or suburban districts, Copeland (2013) asserted that superintendents in rural areas typically have daily contact with students as well as with teachers. Furthermore, the researcher maintained that rural superintendents interacted with parents and community
members on a regular basis due in large part to the prominent positions the schools held in community endeavors.

Hoping to learn more about the various roles held by rural superintendents, Copeland (2013) conducted a small qualitative study in which he interviewed a total of six individuals in Colorado. While three of the participants worked as superintendents in rural districts, the other three served as board members for schools in the same region. After analyzing the data collected in the semi-structured interviews, Copeland (2013) found that “five major hats for the rural superintendent emerged from the rural ‘community haberdasheries:’ manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community life” (p. 11). While Copeland (2013) did not comment specifically on how rural superintendents impacted teacher retention, he indicated that they typically provided needed support rather than delegating the tasks to others. Whether the behaviors involved greeting staff in the morning, making themselves available whenever needed, or communicating essential information, Copeland (2013) concluded that rural superintendents had vastly different responsibilities than their colleagues working in larger systems. Furthermore, when highlighting the limitations of the study, Copeland (2013) acknowledged the need for experts to conduct additional research with a greater number of superintendents working outside the limited region in rural Colorado.

**Employee Retention**

Although high rates of teacher retention can negatively impact student achievement as well as the organizational health of school districts (Boyd et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2013), attrition is not a phenomenon unique to education. Emphasizing the competitive nature of private industry, Younge and Marx (2016) maintained that the
loss of training and knowledge involved with employee turnover harmed the long-term financial success of companies. Moreover, while troubling rates of worker retention have proven problematic for decades (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011), human resource experts have identified attrition as a top concern in recent years, and studies have indicated that employees are more likely than ever to seek alternative professional opportunities (Lee, Hom, Eberly, & Li, 2018). When suggesting ways that leaders might better retain talented employees, Lee et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of constantly gauging levels of job satisfaction, and they argued that “managing turnover is the responsibility of every single manager, no matter how small their unit might be” (p. 97).

Interested in a better understanding of how relationships between workers and managers impact rates of employee retention, Covella, McCarthy, Kaifi, and Cocoran (2017) collected 402 completed questionnaires from individuals working in a variety of private organizations. Based on the tenets of social exchange theory (SET), the survey instrument used a 7-point Likert scale to probe levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and the perceived quality of relationships that employees had with their leaders. After confirming the reliability of the instrument, the researchers noted a predictive association between turnover and the relationships that existed between workers and managers. When attempting to explain this connection, Covella et al. (2017) wrote that “when a leader provides perceived support to their employee, that employee feels psychologically obligated to return a like response, such as active engagement in their work” (p. 8). Furthermore, the researchers emphasized the need for employers to recruit and retain individuals uniquely suited for their defined positions. Rather than simply hire individuals to fill inconvenient vacancies, Covella et al. (2017) found evidence that
suggested by matching work with skills and preferences of the employees, leaders could effectively increase rates of retention.

**Teacher retention.** While turnover in the private sector can lead to losses in revenue, low levels of teacher retention can harm student achievement and divert limited resources to the recruitment and training of inexperienced educators (Brown & Schainker, 2008; Hanushek, 2011). Recognizing, however, that teachers leave the profession for a wide variety of reasons, Guarino et al. (2006) conducted a broad review of the literature in order to better understand the personal characteristics, as well as the organizational factors and policies that lead to high rates of attrition. After establishing guidelines relating to the quality of studies selected as well as the databases used, the researchers ultimately examined 46 different reports focused on elements such as gender, levels of education, student demographics, and preservice offerings. While Guarino et al. (2006) noted differences relating to teacher retention that involved factors outside the control of educational institutions, they also found evidence indicating that induction programs, collegial work environments, administrative support, and higher levels of autonomy had the potential to limit rates of attrition.

Yet, even though experts have produced data linking characteristics of work environments and the behaviors of school leaders with levels of teacher retention, the literature on the topic can, at times, present as somewhat discrepant (Guarino et al., 2006; Hughes, 2012). For example, citing information suggesting that close to 15% of teachers leave the profession each year at a collective cost to districts of over $2 billion, Hughes (2012) distributed a survey to randomly selected teachers in an unidentified southern state. Using a comprehensive questionnaire that considered a range of teacher...
characteristics and organizational factors, Hughes (2012) ultimately received completed surveys from 789 individuals. After putting the data into SPSS and conducting a multiple regression analysis, the researcher found that “experienced and veteran teachers were more likely to remain in teaching until retirement than teachers who had less than 10 years’ experience” (Hughes, 2012, p. 252). In addition, Hughes (2012) also discovered that rather than choose to leave the field of education entirely, many teachers indicated vacating their positions in order to pursue career advancement opportunities within the profession. Unlike previous studies, Hughes (2012) did not find a meaningful connection between teacher retention and administrative support. Focused primarily on the role of the principal, Hughes (2012) acknowledged that the findings did not coincide with conclusions reached by other researchers and suggested that the results may have been connected with the relatively high levels of satisfaction the respondents reported with regard to their school principals.

**Principal retention.** Second only to the value of teachers working directly with students, research has consistently shown the quality of school leadership to be a critical factor in raising levels of academic achievement (Williams & Welsh, 2017). Yet, as state and federal mandates have called for increased accountability, studies have shown that approximately 25% of principals “leave their schools each year” (School Leaders Network, 2014, p. 1) and “fifty percent of new principals quit during their third year in the role” (p. 1). Because modern principals need time to master the skills needed to manage the daily operations of buildings as well as develop the competencies required to excel as instructional leaders, this level of turnover has proven problematic for improving outcomes for students (School Leaders Network, 2014). Recommending that
organizations support intensive professional development, networking, and coaching opportunities for novice principals, experts have suggested that by increasing leadership capacity, districts could slow disruptive rates of administrative turnover (School Leaders Network, 2014). However, while troubling levels of principal retention can limit improvement for any system, experts have indicated that special attention must be given to rural school administrators. Citing isolation, limited support, and close community connections, Beesley and Clark (2015) argued that a lack of research on rural school administrative turnover has further complicated the success of organizations when often faced with intensive student needs.

Hoping to build on an existing body of research dedicated to the topic of principal retention, Boyce and Bowers (2016) constructed a quantitative study with data obtained from the 2007-2008 SASS as well as from the Principal Follow-Up Survey. Rather than focus on broad reasons why principals might choose to leave their positions, the researchers sought to examine the possible differences between types of principals and the degree to which separate variables influence decisions relating to turnover. Relying on latent class analysis, Boyce and Bowers (2016) scrutinized data from 1,470 principals who had either taken other administrative positions in education or left the field altogether. Their findings ultimately led to the identification of two different groups that they termed “satisfied principals” and “disaffected principals” (Boyce & Bowers, 2016, p. 256). While the subgroups reinforced the findings of previously conducted studies, Boyce and Bowers (2016) discovered an unusually high percentage of satisfied principals (68%) and a relatively low number of dissatisfied individuals (32%). Yet regardless of principal type, Boyce and Bowers (2016) found that factors relating to “salary increases,
more opportunities, more challenges, and more retirement benefits” (p. 257) gave incentive to leaders to remain in their positions, while influences involved with “politics, interpersonal conflict, poor working relationships, and personal or family issues” caused individuals to pursue other professional opportunities (p. 257).

Although Boyce and Bowers (2016) relied on principal retention data collected from nationally administered surveys, researchers like Pendola and Fuller (2018) maintained that the schools with the highest level of turnover often receive the lowest level of formal attention. Referring to literature indicating that it takes at least 5 years to establish the trust and relationships needed for stability and growth, Pendola and Fuller (2018) argued that special attention must be given to rural districts. Citing higher rates of principal turnover and more limited pools of administrative applicants, Pendola and Fuller (2018) conducted a longitudinal study of rural school principals working in the state of Texas between 1995 and 2012. Using logistic regression analysis to unpack data collected by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the researchers learned that rural school principals left at an alarming rate, with fewer than one third staying in their positions beyond a 5-year period of time. Additionally, Pendola and Fuller (2018) found that although Texas had fewer numbers of female principals working in rural schools, they were less likely to leave their positions than their male counterparts. Regarding salary, the study showed higher rates of retention for principals making more money, but the researchers also speculated that limited opportunities for skilled employment in rural communities reduced the rates of attrition for school leaders. Most interesting, perhaps, Pendola and Fuller (2018) discovered that individuals with limited classroom experience or extensive employment as assistant principals decreased the likelihood that they would
remain in rural principalships for extended periods of time. Although unable to
definitively explain this occurrence, the authors did speculate that factors involving age,
timing, and preparation may have impacted the tenure of principals (Pendola & Fuller,
2018). Citing a regular reliance on locally identifying and developing school principals,
the researchers highlighted the finding as a consideration for superintendents inclined to
promote from within (Pendola and Fuller, 2018).

**Chapter Summary**

More than any other school-related factor, teacher quality has been shown to
profoundly impact levels of student achievement in public schools (Hanushek, 1992;
Miller, 2013). However, despite the rich literature devoted to better understanding the
multifaceted causes of teacher turnover, approximately one-third of all novice teachers
continue to leave education within their first 5 years of employment (Ronfeldt et al.,
2013). When looking holistically at the literature relating to teacher retention, certain
themes began to emerge. Job satisfaction and working conditions have proven to be
highly predictive of whether teachers intend to remain in school systems.

Correspondingly, it has become imperative for researchers and policymakers to better
understand the various ways in which leadership, student demographics, and
organizational support impact rates of attrition (Koedel et al., 2017; Loeb et al., 2005).
Furthermore, the steep learning curve faced by novice teachers has emphasized the need
for districts to provide inexperienced educators with comprehensive induction programs,
mentors, and professional development opportunities in order to help them develop their
instructional methodologies (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). With this relatively new focus
on enhancing levels of learning as opposed to simply managing the daily operations of
buildings, school administrators—especially principals—are being asked to develop leadership traits that are perceived to be supportive (Boyd et al., 2009; Brown & Wynn, 2007; Urick, 2016).

Despite the existence of an extensive body of research relating to the impact of administrative support on teacher retention, three specific gaps have emerged. First, most of the studies relating to teacher retention appear to be quantitative in nature. Although quantitative studies can help to increase accuracy and collect information from large populations, they have the potential to fall short when asked to probe the complexities and subtleties of the subjects. In order to precisely understand the lived experiences and social contexts of teachers, as well as of administrators, researchers must embrace paradigms—such as constructivism—that allow for the true comprehension of social meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, although much of the literature that is related to teacher retention involves representative data collected at the state or national level, few studies focus specifically on rural school districts. Because studies can be costly, Sparks (2019) maintained that most educational research has been conducted in urban or suburban centers where funding can be more easily accessed. Given that many of the proposed solutions have been based on research performed within these systems, experts have suggested that programs regularly fail to recognize the complexities of rural areas, and therefore, they yield little progress relating to improved academic outcomes (Sparks, 2019). Reinforcing the idea that rural districts face unique challenges involving teacher shortages, the U.S. Senate recently introduced the Rural Educator Support and Training Act (CBS19News, 2019). Designed to provide targeted support to schools in sparsely populated regions, the legislation has offered evidence that effective solutions for
retaining teachers in rural areas may be different than programs designed for urban or suburban districts (CBS19News, 2019).

Finally, while studies have shown that administrative support has the potential to positively impact rates of teacher retention, a lack of precision surrounding specific leadership behaviors continues to prevent school administrators from developing the competencies needed to demonstrate care and encouragement (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2005). Furthermore, while researchers have focused on the ways in which principals can support the instructional and managerial needs of novice educators, little attention has been given to roles played by other types of administrators serving in rural systems (Kilmer et al., 2017). Because these gaps continue to endure, an opportunity exists to better understand the ways in which school leaders can communicate support in hopes of retaining talented teachers. Since Creswell and Poth (2018) have maintained that qualitative research has the potential to probe the complexities and subtleties of subjects, conversations with focus groups will be used to explore the ways in which leaders can provide meaningful levels of assistance for inexperienced faculty members. The methodology used to explore the relationship between leadership behaviors and teacher retention in rural districts is described in Chapter 3 of this work.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Research has consistently shown that the quality of teachers working with students has a greater impact on academic achievement than any other school-related factor (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek, 2011). Recognizing the importance of recruiting, developing, and keeping talented educators, experts have created an extensive body of literature relating to teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2002). Despite years of inquiry, inexperienced educators continue to leave the profession at alarming rates (Boyd et al., 2011). With more than 30% of new teachers resigning from their positions within 5 years of being hired, high rates of attrition have proven costly for schools in terms of student learning as well as the financial resources needed to support new educators (Brown & Schainker, 2008). Yet, while issues involving teacher retention have continued to negatively impact districts across the country, schools characterized by poverty, minority enrollment, and low achievement have been disproportionately affected (Guarino et al., 2006). In particular, hard-to-staff urban and rural schools have been forced to hire unqualified or ineffective educators because of teacher shortages largely resulting from unwanted teacher turnover (Beesley et al., 2010; Carver-Thomas et al., 2016; Monk, 2007).

In hopes of reversing undesired levels of attrition, researchers have identified a variety of factors causing inexperienced educators to leave the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas et al., 2016). While limitations related to salary,
available resources, and geographic location have proven difficult to modify (Boyd et al., 2011; Guarino et al., 2006; Ladd, 2011), influences involving administrative support have been shown to be effective as well as more easily controlled (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Yet, despite a widespread recognition that certain leadership behaviors have the potential to enhance working conditions and therefore increase teacher retention, a lack of specificity continues to surround ways in which administrators can communicate support (Boyd et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2005). Given the absence of information on explicit ways school leaders can help new teachers, there is limited guidance available for rural school leaders hoping to retain talented educators (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

Additionally, because much of the research conducted on teacher retention has been quantitative in nature, there have been inadequate opportunities “to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between researcher and the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). For this research exploration, a phenomenological study was conducted to holistically examine the common experiences of school leaders in a defined region (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). By asking a limited number of open-ended questions, researchers prompt study participants to share their personal observations and reflections relating to the identified issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Throughout the process, the exchanges produce valuable information, and give the researchers the chance to guide questions, explore themes, and note the insightful observations that are offered (Saldaña, 2013). To better understand the shared experiences of rural school administrators focused on lowering teacher turnover, this study focused on answering the following three questions:
1. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?

2. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

3. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

The need for all classrooms to be staffed with highly effective teachers requires that administrators possess the specific skills needed to support and retain promising educators. As such, this qualitative research study relied on focus group sessions with rural school superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators that explored ways in which the leaders had attempted to retain teachers new to the field. This chapter outlines the methodology that was used in this study, and it provides essential information relating to its general perspective, research context, research participants, and procedures. Additionally, it details the instruments and procedures that were used for collecting and analyzing the data involving teacher retention.

**Research Context**

The setting for this research study involved a shared service area in New York State encompassing 2,269 square miles. Home to 25 public school districts located primarily in four counties, the shared service area is predominately rural and agrarian, distinguished by a variety of towns, villages, and small cities. A tourist destination for both in-state as well as out-of-state visitors, the region contains lakes, ski slopes, hiking
trails, museums, shopping centers, and multiple institutions of higher learning. For residents who need regular access to more urban or suburban regions, the centralized location of the area and the easily accessible state highway system allow for daily commutes to work or recreation. Additionally, recently collected economic information indicates that the four counties encompassed by the shared service area have unemployment rates ranging from 3.3-3.6% (New York State Department of Labor, 2019a).

Despite relatively low rates of unemployment, however, the shared service area has seen a loss of professional employment opportunities associated with business, finance, and manufacturing in recent years (New York State Department of Labor, 2019b). With limited prospects for securing high paying jobs, the region has experienced increased rates of poverty as well as a population decrease over the same period of time (Murphy, 2017). While school officials cite a lack of desirable jobs as the key reason for why people have left the area, they have also highlighted challenges related to “housing, addressing the opioid crisis, [and] providing more access to social services” (Durso, 2019). As families have moved out of the shared service area, rural schools in the region have experienced declining enrollments that have often led to reductions in academic as well as cocurricular experiences for students (Durso, 2019). Additionally, school administrators and labor leaders in the area report a shortage of qualified applicants when attempting to fill instructional vacancies (Champagne, 2018). The limited number of candidates has presented a staffing challenge for schools, and experts have emphasized that “new teachers need to be nurtured and supported to remind them why they got into the profession” (Champagne, 2018).
The 25 component public school districts in the shared service area educate close to 35,500 students in Grades UPK-12. With the largest district serving approximately 4,500 students, the smallest has an enrollment of just over 400 students. On an annual basis, parents are invited to self-report their income levels to determine whether their students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The free or reduced-price meal status is generally regarded as the standard data set for identifying levels of economic need. Of the 25 schools located in the shared service area, 18 districts have percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price meals that are greater than 40% (Forecast5 Analytics, 2019). With regard to ethnicity, public schools are required to provide the State Education Department (SED) with enrollment data each year. During the 2017-2018 school year, 20 of the 25 districts in the shared service area had at least 80% of their students labeled as White/Caucasian, with the low end of the range at 43% and the high end at 97% (Forecast5 Analytics, 2019). Additionally, all 25 public school districts have special education classification rates greater than 10%, while just over half of the districts have rates greater than 14% (Forecast5 Analytics, 2019).

**Research Participants**

Although the shared service area contains 25 component public school districts, leaders from four of the organizations were not invited to participate in this study. In two of the cases, the rationale for the exclusions involved official district designations as city schools, and the third has to do with a fairly large student enrollment of just under 4,500 students. Additionally, the school district in which the researcher is currently employed was omitted in order to prevent potential bias. After eliminating four schools from involvement in the focus groups, the list of potential participants included 21
superintendents, 77 building principals, and approximately 20 aspiring administrators (Forecast5 Analytics, 2019). To be invited to participate in this study, the aspiring administrators needed to be cohort members of a specific leadership program coordinated by the shared service area. In addition, the aspiring administrators needed to have completed a common introductory class relating to school leadership as well as completing at least two semesters of coursework in educational administration at an accredited institution. Because of their unique professional positions, the aspiring administrators had the potential to provide insight into the administrative support they experienced as practicing teachers as well as the training they received in their formal preparation to become school leaders.

All eligible participants in the shared service area received written invitations, distributed electronically via listservs that were maintained by the shared service area, and contributors were offered $25 gift cards for their time and participation. In addition, the researcher ensured that the groups were representative of the region, and that the focus group involving principals included administrators from elementary as well as secondary schools. To encourage open and honest dialogue, three separate focus groups were conducted—one for superintendents, one for principals, and one for the identified group of aspiring administrators. The focus groups were separated by job title to avoid potential imbalances of power.

**The Researcher**

When conducting a qualitative study, the researcher plays a key role in both collecting as well as analyzing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consequently, researchers moderating focus groups must be aware that certain limitations can influence
the outcomes of their work (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). For example, if the researcher poses leading or unclear questions, the participants may feel pressured to give certain answers or withhold crucial information altogether. Additionally, researchers must recognize that their personal preferences and experiences have the potential to introduce unwanted bias into the collection of information. Without an awareness of their own attributes or levels of training, moderators can limit the accuracy as well as the usefulness involved with their focus group research (Stewart et al., 2007). To help mitigate bias, it can be helpful for researchers to acknowledge their own background and experiences through a brief narrative.

The researcher who conducted this focus group study has been a public educator for 18 years. Beginning his career as a teacher in a rural high school, the researcher taught social studies for 8 years in the same organization before accepting an administrative position in a different small district in Upstate New York. After serving as the high school principal for 4 years, the researcher was appointed school superintendent in the same district. During his time in education, the researcher has been both the recipient of administrative support as well as a leader tasked with recruiting, hiring, developing, and retaining talented teachers. The experiences have allowed him to view leadership, as well as teacher turnover, from several different perspectives, and in the process, develop a unique awareness of the challenges many rural schools have in retaining dynamic educators. Although the researcher received formal training in conducting qualitative research, he remained an insider to the phenomenon under examination. As such, the researcher was able to both empathize with the participants but
also remain intentional about approaching the conversations with the objectivity characteristic of an outsider (Stewart et al., 2007).

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

When conducting research in schools, qualitative studies provide experts with opportunities for learning more about the rich experiences of participants in natural settings (Hatch, 2002). While focus groups have historically been used as qualitative methods for collecting information in marketing and health related fields (Puchta & Potter, 2004), educational researchers have increasingly brought small groups together to share common experiences (Hatch, 2002). By asking open-ended questions to focus groups of 5-10 participants, researchers encourage individuals to honestly share their thoughts and experiences relating to mutual topics. However, while interviewers seek to promote interaction in focus groups, they do not guide participants toward agreement or shared understandings. Additionally, researchers typically conduct multiple focus group sessions with different participants in order to recognize and categorize emerging themes or observations (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

To adequately examine a variety of ideas from the principals, superintendents, and aspiring administrators on leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural schools, this study involved three separate focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009). After signing the informed consent forms (Appendix A), the participants were asked to share basic demographic data (Appendix B) involving the number of years they had spent in their leadership positions as well as the grade level configurations of their current organizations. To ensure that the focus groups were conducted in a consistent manner, the researcher developed a protocol outlining the purpose of this study, the process that was
followed, and how confidentiality was to be maintained. Because no standard qualitative focus group survey instrument existed on the topic, the researcher created a set of questions with accompanying probes that elicited responses from the participants (Appendix C). Based on themes appearing in the literature involving teacher retention, as well as Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory, the open-ended questions prompted comments from the participants on the importance of administrative support in their schools. Finally, to ensure the validity of the survey instrument, the researcher conducted a pilot session with a group of administrators from a neighboring, nonparticipating district (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition to providing the researcher with opportunities for using a recording device, clarifying directions, and estimating the time needed for the focus group sessions, the pilot was used to enhance the quality of the questions to maximize their effectiveness.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College, an email (Appendix D) was sent via listservs maintained by the shared service area to approximately 21 superintendents, 77 building principals, and 30 aspiring administrators who were enrolled in a specific leadership program. The email provided an introduction, background information on the researcher, and an overview regarding the purpose of this study. To thank the participants for their participation and time, they were offered $25 gift cards. Once the interested individuals responded to the initial email, a second email (Appendix E) was sent to the study participants with an informed consent form, along with needed dates, times, and locations for the focus group sessions. In addition, reminder phone calls were made to the study participants the day before the
focus groups were held to ensure that the desired number of leaders were present for the conversations. Because the participants were coming from different locations within the shared service area, the focus groups were held in a centralized location that offered a comfortable environment for discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Each of the three focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes. After thanking the participants for their willingness to take part in the focus groups, the researcher collected the signed consent forms (Appendix F) and asked that the participants identify in writing their current positions, the number of years they had worked as school leaders, and the grade level configurations of their current buildings or districts. Additionally, the researcher asked if there were any questions related to this study that the participants would like answered. During the focus groups, the participants were asked to verbally respond to a series of open-ended questions involving leadership behaviors impacting teacher retention in rural school districts. The researcher explained that there might be times when follow-up questions would be posed to the whole group or to specific participants. Before beginning the focus groups, the importance of confidentiality was stressed, and the participants were assured that although they might be identified by position, their names and school districts would not be associated with any specific comments. Furthermore, the coding system used would not have any connection to real names. Finally, the researcher shared that the focus groups would be recorded for the purpose of transcription, and that field notes would be taken by a scribe throughout the sessions. The researcher also explained that the audio recording, as well as the field notes, would be kept secure in a locked cabinet in an office with access only to the
researcher for a period of 3 years before they would be destroyed after the publication of this study.

Once the researcher started the focus groups, the process of data collection and analysis had begun. Although there are several established approaches for examining qualitative information, Creswell and Poth (2018) maintained that the process is dynamic and often circular in nature. To capture key quotations, details related to body language, and general items of agreement, a scribe took field notes throughout each of the focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Information collected through the field notes was reviewed multiple times in conjunction with the transcriptions from the recordings, and key words and concepts were categorized by the researcher. As certain themes emerged, a cycle of open coding was used to categorize specific segments of information (Miles et al., 2014). After organizing key chunks of data with initial codes, the researcher collapsed the information into a smaller number of overarching patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To capture the reflections of the researcher throughout the coding process, field notes were used to highlight key insights shared by the focus group participants (Saldana, 2013). Finally, to help display the data collected and analyzed throughout the coding process, a matrix was developed to better organize essential information (Miles et al., 2014).

While certain measures were taken throughout the focus group process to ensure accuracy, securing valid and reliable information remained critical when conducting this qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To strengthen the credibility of this study, the researcher employed two main strategies during the coding process. First, the researcher asked a colleague to review and open code a defined section of the text from a
focus group interview during the initial cycle of coding. By comparing the coding results of the researcher with those of the peer, a desired degree of inter-rater reliability was established (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Second, triangulation was used to draw consistent themes from the three different focus groups (Miles et al., 2014). By comparing what was shared by aspiring administrators, principals, and superintendents, a clear set of common themes was established (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Procedures**

The following steps were used to collect and analyze qualitative research data:

1. **Preliminary Steps**
   a. Secured IRB approval from St. John Fisher College.
   b. Sent initial email to aspiring administrators, principals, and superintendents using established listservs maintained by the shared service area (Appendix D).
   c. Confirmed participation with focus group members using an email (Appendix E) with an attached Informed Consent Form (Appendix F).
   d. Reserved a room in the designated conference center of the shared service area, as well as arranged for refreshments and $25 gift cards to be provided.
   e. Made reminder phone calls to the participants one day before the focus groups were conducted.

2. **Data Collection**
   a. Piloted focus group questions (Appendix C) with a group of educational leaders from a neighboring school.
b. Revised and finalized questions based on feedback from the pilot.
c. Secured a scribe to be present for all three focus group sessions.
d. Asked participants to share, in writing, their current positions, the number of years they had spent in leadership positions, and the grade level configurations of their current buildings or districts.
e. Conducted and recorded focus groups.

3. Data Analysis
   a. Had recordings of the focus groups transcribed through rev.com.
   b. Conducted an inter-rater reliability process.
   c. Conducted an open coding cycle to categorize certain segments of information.
   d. Collapsed information into a smaller number of overarching patterns or themes using a final cycle of coding.
   e. Triangulated the data from the separate focus groups involving aspiring administrators, principals, and superintendents from the shared service area.

By following the identified process, the information gathered provided the type of detailed information needed to help school leaders more clearly identify specific ways to better retain effective educators.

Summary

Talking with practicing, as well as aspiring, school administrators located within a shared service area provided rich insights relating to the leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural districts. By conducting focus groups with participants from a
carefully selected research context, the qualitative study probed the specific ways in which school leaders provided support to inexperienced educators. However, to maximize the value of the focus groups, a great deal of intentionality went into developing the research instrument and processes that were used for collecting and analyzing the data. By carefully aligning a sound methodological approach with the research problem, this study provided insight for school leaders attempting to retain talented teachers. Chapter 4 will detail the findings of the study, and explore the different themes and subthemes that emerged from focus group conversations involving superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators.
Chapter 4: Results

School administrators have the unique opportunity to influence whether inexperienced teachers choose to leave their positions or the profession altogether (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011). Although the issue has proven to be problematic in school systems across the country, high rates of attrition have had a more pronounced impact in rural districts (Beesley et al., 2010; Guarino et al., 2006). While the literature indicates that administrative support can positively impact rates of teacher retention, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific behaviors that new educators interpret to be encouraging (Boyd et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2005). To provide insight into the precise ways rural school administrators can offer better support to new teachers, this study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?

2. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

3. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?
Demographics of Focus Group Participants

This study collected data from three separate focus groups, conducted over a 1-month period. Each of the focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes in length, and the sessions comprised participants holding similar professional roles. The focus groups each took place at the same centralized facility. At no point did the participants interact with their supervisors during the focus groups. The first focus group involved eight superintendents from rural districts located within the same shared service area. Each of the participants had worked in public education for at least 20 years, with three of the individuals holding their superintendent positions, at the time of this study, for 0-4 years; four superintendents holding their positions for 5-9 years; and one superintendent holding the position for 10-14 years (Table 4.1). The second focus group comprised eight school principals from different rural districts, each with at least 10 years of experience working in public education. To ensure that each school level had representation in the conversation, the second focus group involved principals from three elementary schools, two middle schools, and three high schools. The final focus group consisted of seven aspiring administrators from two separate cohorts of a specific leadership program coordinated by the shared service area. While one aspiring administrator had spent 0-9 years working in public education, the other six had 10-19 years of experience in the profession.
Table 4.1

Demographic Information for Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group (Level – if applicable)</th>
<th>Years in K-12 Education (n)</th>
<th>Years in Current Position (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29 (7)</td>
<td>0-4 (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 (1)</td>
<td>5-9 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Superintendents (N)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Elementary School</td>
<td>10-19 (4)</td>
<td>0-4 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Middle School</td>
<td>20-29 (3)</td>
<td>5-9 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 High School</td>
<td>30-39 (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Principals (N)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring Administrators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-9 (1)</td>
<td>0-4 (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19 (6)</td>
<td>5-9 (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14 (1)</td>
<td>15-19 (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Aspiring Administrators (N)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By including school leaders with differing titles, levels of leadership experience, and years working in education, the focus groups sought to probe a range of perspectives. To encourage the natural exchange of ideas, a qualitative study protocol was used to help collect key concepts and opinions.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

To guide the focus group conversations, a series of protocol questions and corresponding probes (Appendix A) were used to prompt discussions relating to administrative support in schools. After securing transcriptions of the focus groups, a cycle of open coding was used to categorize specific segments of information (Miles et al., 2014). As key words and concepts emerged, 84 separate codes were ultimately
identified across the three focus group transcripts. To ensure interrater reliability during the initial coding cycle, the researcher’s colleague was asked to review and open code an identified section of text from the first focus group interview for comparison purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After reviewing the initial coding information, key chunks of information were collapsed into several themes and subthemes, which emerged across all of the focus group transcripts during a second cycle of coding. After making connections by triangulating the information shared by the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators (Miles et al., 2014), ultimately 11 themes were identified with a total of 13 subthemes. Because each of the three groups provided commentary on many of the same concepts, the transcripts were labeled “S,” “P,” and “AA” to correspond with the focus groups consisting of superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators. To provide clarity regarding the particular groups offering specific insights, the labels are used with corresponding line numbers at the end of quotations in the citations.

**Research Question 1 Results**

Research Question 1 asked: What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?

Before identifying specific leadership behaviors the school administrators used to communicate support to inexperienced teachers, the focus group participants were asked to comment on challenges they perceived to retaining talented educators in rural districts. An examination of the focus group transcripts revealed four common themes related to obstacles preventing desired rates of teacher retention. The first theme was “none of them lives near us,” drawing attention to the challenges that come with geographic location, (Table 4.2). This theme was broken into two separate subthemes, given the complex
barriers associated with both undesired commutes for teachers living in suburban or urban areas and the limited opportunities for those choosing to reside within the boundaries of rural districts. The second theme was “it comes down to relationships,” drawing attention to the matter of human connection for inexperienced educators. Because of key differences having to do with establishing relationships with colleagues as well as supervisors, the theme was broken down into two subthemes. The third theme, “it’s our culture that drives people away,” highlights the issue of shared organizational norms and values. Finally, the fourth theme, “I don’t know if we would ever be able to offer enough money,” signifies the importance of contractual provisions concerning salary, benefits, and incentives.

Table 4.2

Research Question 1—Themes, Key Concepts, and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Key Concept</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 None of them lives near us.</td>
<td>Location is a powerful barrier.</td>
<td>1.1a. I’m moving closer to where I’m from, where my family is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1b. It’s, by nature, a little bit isolating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 It comes down to relationships.</td>
<td>Human connections are critical.</td>
<td>1.2a. The staff is tight, and they embrace the young and the new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 It’s our culture that drives people away.</td>
<td>Shared norms and values should not be taken for granted.</td>
<td>1.2b. People don’t leave their jobs; they leave their bosses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 I don’t know if we would ever be able to offer enough money.</td>
<td>Contractual provisions matter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

82
The four themes, along with their corresponding concepts, are presented in Table 4.2. Subthemes are also shown for the first and second themes. Beginning with the topic of geography, the data highlights the challenges associated with distance and lengthy daily commutes for new employees.

**Theme 1.1: “None of them lives near us.”** More than any other factor, the focus group participants cited geography as an obstacle to retaining talented teachers. In particular, the superintendents emphasized the complex ways that location impacts teacher turnover, bringing up the topic at numerous points during the conversation. One male superintendent remarked that “if they actually move into the district and buy a house, they’re probably going to stay with us” (S, 49-50). However, he went on to say that while most support staff members lived close to the school, only 30% of the teachers actually resided within the boundaries of the district. When asked to comment further on the impact of location, the participant stated that “none of them lives near us” (S, 381), and he added that the lengthy commutes present challenges for faculty members considering long-term employment commitments.

Lamenting a similar situation, a female superintendent said that a lack of rental opportunities and starter homes prevented new teachers from moving into the area. Building on this concept of limited housing, a first-year superintendent from a neighboring district described a situation in which homes either “needed to be completely renovated,” or cost so much that new teachers could not afford the “million-dollar houses on the bay” (S, 133-135). Although the aspiring administrators did not comment as frequently on the impact that location had on attrition, one participant noted that the majority of teachers who had left lived outside the area. A high school principal shared a
similar experience and observed that “the reasons are proximity” (P, 61) when it came to whether a teacher chose to leave the district.

While each of the focus groups mentioned location as a challenge to retaining new teachers, two subthemes emerged that helped to further explain why geography played such an important role in understanding the causes behind attrition. First, reasons relating to family and moving home provided incentives for new teachers to find positions with shorter commutes. Second, when inexperienced teachers did choose to reside within the boundaries of rural school districts, limited social and economic opportunities proved to be isolating.

**Subtheme 1.1.a: “I’m moving closer to where I’m from, where my family is.”**

The participants from each of the focus groups commented on the challenges new teachers experienced when trying to balance family with undesirable commutes. Indicating that many new teachers were unmarried at the time of their hiring, a superintendent stated that nontenured individuals would often leave if their “spouse moved out of the area or they got married out of the area” (S, 170-172). At a later point in the same focus group, another superintendent expressed a similar frustration, having lost six nontenured teachers over the past year when they accepted positions in schools located closer to their long-term romantic partners. Joking with the rest of his colleagues, the superintendent said that he was “strongly considering adding a question into our interviewing process about the stability and quality of their relationships” (S, 341-343). The remark elicited laughter from the group, and a short while later, a colleague shared that even if nontenured teachers initially stayed after getting married, the situation often changed once they began having children.
Perceiving the same issue in her district, an elementary school principal observed that once new teachers began having families, “they either stayed home longer or found a job closer to their home” (P, 78-79). An aspiring administrator discussed a similar situation and talked about the reality that lengthy commutes not only took teachers away from their children but also from their needed support systems. Toward the end of the same focus group, another participant came back to the same concept and described a teacher who had left once her daughter enrolled in a kindergarten class near their home. Relatedly, a male superintendent shared a similar story and said that even if educators wanted to move closer to work, they typically avoided moving once their children had started school and had established connections with teachers and students.

Throughout each of the focus groups, the concept of “home” emerged when the participants talked about the different dynamics involved with family and geography. While certain individuals referenced the term when speaking about the locations where new teachers lived and raised families, multiple superintendents suggested that it had as much to do with where the employees had originally grown up. Interestingly, a veteran superintendent explained that while many nontenured teachers left for positions closer to home, he noted that they were often “going back to sort of wealthier and easier suburban districts” that were closer to where they “grew up and what they were used to” (S, 433-435). When speaking about the same obstacle in his rural district, another superintendent shared that as a matter of course, he asked exiting teachers what he could have done to have enticed them to stay. In each of the instances, the superintendent said the replies had been, “nothing, unless I could transplant the school closer to their home” (S, 203-204).
Subtheme 1.1.b “It’s by nature a little bit isolating.” In addition to the challenges geographic distance presented for retaining new teachers, the focus group participants also maintained that many rural communities offer limited opportunities for inexperienced educators and their families. Aside from housing, a superintendent talked about the fact that her district was the largest employer in the county. Consequently, she maintained that the spouses of teachers lacked the range of employment opportunities that others enjoyed when living in more urban or suburban communities. She went on to say that new teachers had to “have a viable reason to stay, like how it was impacting their family and they’re whole situation, not just their work situation” (S, 122-123). A high school principal highlighted the limited social connections that existed in many rural areas when he said that it was “by nature, a little bit isolating” (P, 372), and he added that small schools offered fewer opportunities for professional collaboration. When explaining what he meant, the principal said that without large academic departments, new teachers did not have sizable groups of close colleagues with whom they could share experiences. This concept of social connection emerged repeatedly over the course of the focus group discussions, and it emphasized the importance of understanding the role relationships play in teacher retention.

Theme 1.2: “It comes down to relationships.” Although the participants in each of the focus groups accepted that they had little control over the geographic barriers that led to teacher turnover, they routinely acknowledged their ability to impact the quality of the adult relationships in their organizations. A male superintendent reported having a “reputation of longevity” in his district, and he said that “as with anything in the people business, it comes down to relationships” (S, 157-160). An aspiring administrator
provided a similar position and maintained that the “relationships in the building” (AA, 25) helped new teachers navigate the complexities that came with understanding classroom expectations, union dynamics, and even details associated with selecting appropriate health insurance policies. However, the participants also conceded that supportive connections did not always occur naturally, and they provided instances in which negative collegial, as well as supervisory, relationships had accelerated unwanted levels of attrition.

**Subtheme 1.2.a: “The staff is tight, and they embrace the young and the new.”**

When talking about the potential that positive relationships had in better retaining new teachers, an aspiring administrator outlined how, in her building, “the staff is tight, and they embrace the young and the new, and they’ll take you in. I think that’s what helps us keep people and retain people even if they’re driving an hour to work every day” (AA, 106-110). In particular, the administrator stressed the influence of strong departmental relationships, citing the daily contact that new teachers tended to have with colleagues sharing the same grade levels or content areas. Yet, when conducting interviews with teachers leaving his district, a superintendent with more than 10 years of experience said the reasons often had to do with “new staff not being accepted by other team members, and the culture of inflexibility” (S, 457-458). He posited that there appeared to be a direct correlation between teacher turnover and the quality of relationships between the general education and the special education teachers, and he reported having to confront high rates of turnover at the secondary level in his district. Relatedly, another superintendent added “that the number one reason teachers exited” from his district involved instances in which they were “not clicking with staff” (S, 438-440). When asked to talk in more detail
about explanations as to why certain new teachers failed to connect with colleagues, members of the focus groups described barriers involving performance, peer pressure, and co-teaching relationships between general and special education teachers.

Detailing the excitement that can come when students learn they will have a “dynamic teacher who’s really solid” in a small community, a middle school principal said performance was a way of “establishing a rapport with colleagues and establishing a reputation within the community” (P, 198-202). Surprisingly, a superintendent from a similar-sized district described an instance in which a teacher was outperforming her peers. Rather than support the talent of the new teacher, she was told by her colleagues to “sort of tone it down” (S, 424). Using similar phrasing, a second superintendent talked about a fourth-grade teacher who “set the bar so much higher,” and reported that “she actually got a lot of peer pressure to kind of tone it down a little bit” (S, 354-356).

Although most instances noted by focus group members involved educators working within the same departments or grade levels, one aspiring administrator spoke in detail about the role dysfunctional co-teaching relationships played in teacher turnover. When it became apparent that colleagues were having difficulty establishing supportive relationships with members of the special education department, he said that administrators began to implement new guidelines for co-teaching and co-planning. Yet, while the school leaders were able to nurture collegial relationships in certain situations, the participants also spoke candidly about the need for administrators to form meaningful connections with inexperienced teachers as well.

**Subtheme 1.2.b: “People don’t leave their jobs; they leave their bosses.”**

Throughout each of the three focus group sessions, the participants provided countless
examples of how caring leaders had impacted their professional experiences. Reflecting on his own situation, an aspiring administrator with a lengthy commute stated, “the thing that keeps me there is the support from the administration.” He went on to say, “I feel like I can ask for anything, and if I have a reason behind it, they’re going to try their best to make sure that I get it, and that’s wonderful” (AA, 1,023-1,026). In contrast, two superintendents offered frank observations relating to the connection between supervisors and teacher turnover. The first commented that “people don’t leave their jobs; they leave their bosses” (S, 821-822), and the second underscored the point by adding, “I think we can all say that there’s a job we left because of a boss sometime in our career” (S, 916-917).

Relatedly, the participants provided different interpretations as to why poor relationships between administrators and inexperienced teachers typically accelerated attrition. On one hand, an experienced superintendent talked about tracking why teachers left his district. He shared that, for years, teachers left because of an unaccommodating principal who worked in their secondary building. The superintendent indicated that once they made a change in leadership, the rate of turnover immediately slowed. A second explanation offered by the superintendents, however, centered on the reality that school leaders ultimately had the responsibility of removing ineffective teachers before granting them tenure. When commenting on this dynamic, a female superintendent maintained that if they had “a vacancy, it’s usually because we’ve moved them along, rather than the other way” (S, 444-445). A male superintendent described a similar situation, and he disclosed that they would let teachers go if they displayed an inability to connect with their supervisor, their colleagues, or the culture of the organization.
Theme 1.3: “It’s our culture that drives people away.” Throughout the focus group conversations, the participants regularly referred to the importance of school culture. In their responses, the participants talked often of fit and shared norms and values. They emphasized a family-feel on multiple occasions. When referencing obstacles to teacher retention, the superintendents focused on the potential of healthy cultures when it came to retaining teachers. Yet while principals and aspiring administrators spoke about how negative cultures pushed people away. Illustrating this difference in perspective, a male superintendent said he believed that, “if there was a way to make our culture so wonderful, or a little bit better” (S, 882), they might be able to keep teachers “as opposed [them] to going” (S, 897). In contrast, an aspiring administrator offered the following critique in a striking assessment:

And we’re the complete opposite. It’s our culture that drives people away because you can pretty much walk in and negotiate what you want, and we don’t keep them. When they put in their notice, they’ll say, “it’s because of commute,” but when you really stop and ask them, they’ll tell you the truth, “It's the culture.” It’s a negative environment, and it drives people out. I mean, we’ve had people, even 15, 16 years in, be willing to start all over again. And that’s sad in a way. (AA, 1,013-1,017)

This assertion highlighted the importance of including aspiring administrators into the conversation, and it hinted that they might have the ability to identify certain realities that are not easily detected by sitting principals or superintendents. Additionally, the responses suggested that future leaders perhaps lack a certain level of ownership relating to school culture, and they might view managing shared values to be the work of school
officials. In a more diplomatic appraisal of culture, a second aspiring administrator reminded colleagues that it could differ between buildings located within the same district, and he noted that “a strong leader can be a factor in shaping that climate and culture” (AA, 70).

Theme 1.4: “I don’t know if we would ever be able to offer enough money.”

Aside from geographic location, relationships, and culture, all three focus groups referenced salary when asked to identify obstacles to retaining teachers. While only one aspiring administrator raised compensation as a potential barrier toward the end of the conversation, multiple superintendents and principals identified income as critical early on when responding to prompts. A high school principal shared that teachers would typically look for a higher paying job once they had gained a certain level of experience, and one of his colleagues added that new teachers would “generally leave the county to go to a different county to get a raise” (P, 67-68). Recognizing the same trend in a neighboring district, a third-year superintendent commented that “people can jump 10 miles east of us” and “make $10,000 more a year. We still can’t compete with that, so I don’t know if we would ever be able to offer enough money if someone was really driven by that” (S, 99-101). Although the participants did not talk about trying to match salaries during the focus groups, they did acknowledge the importance of contractual provisions in attempting to slow troubling rates of teacher turnover. Furthermore, two superintendents shared that while exploratory in nature, they had recently raised ideas relating to moving incentives and residency stipends for teachers living within the district’s boundaries with their boards of education.
**Research Question 1 Summary**

When comparing observations and beliefs from the three separate focus groups, four themes emerged in response to questions involving obstacles to teacher retention in rural school districts. While superintendents and principals immediately identified geography as a powerful barrier to retention, aspiring administrators only touched on that factor toward the end of their focus group conversation. Additionally, superintendents were the only participants who referenced limitations on housing and economic opportunities when commenting on residency, while principals emphasized the personal and professional isolation that could often accompany working in rural organizations.

When speaking about the importance of relationships, all three groups noted the value in connecting with colleagues as well as supervisors. However, while principals and aspiring administrators described how relationships could encourage retention, several superintendents also identified instances in which toxic interactions had accelerated turnover. Regarding culture, participants from each of the focus groups acknowledged the role it played in teacher retention. Yet, while the superintendents focused on the ability of organizational culture to moderately increase job satisfaction, aspiring administrators were much more direct in identifying job satisfaction as a primary driver of attrition.

Finally, while principals and aspiring administrators raised compensation as an obstacle, the superintendents spoke in much more detail about the issue, and two participants indicated exploring contractual incentives relating to teacher residency with their boards of education. To better understand specific ways in which administrators might influence teacher turnover, the subsequent section presents four themes that emerged as a result of analyzing the data collected in probes aligned with the second research question.
Research Question 2 Results

Research Question 2 asked: What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

After detailing obstacles to retaining teachers in rural districts, the focus group participants shared specific leadership behaviors they used to express support for inexperienced educators. During the analysis of the participant responses, four predominant themes surfaced (Table 4.3). The first theme, “come grow with us. This is a journey together,” emphasized the need for organizations to select professionals with specific skills and dispositions. The second theme, “part of our job is just to make sure that we give them those connections they might not have,” stressed the importance of building social relationships as well as creating a familiarity with the larger community. Because of important differences concerning connections with colleagues, supervisors, as well as with the region, the theme was separated into three subthemes. The third theme, “take this program and make it what you want it to be,” called attention to the need for new teachers to experience a degree of empowerment, both in their classrooms as well as in their buildings, after beginning their employment. Finally, the fourth theme, “the whole school came together,” detailed how leaders found ways to leverage the power of celebration when supporting inexperienced faculty members.

To best illustrate the specific ways the school leaders encouraged new employees, the data collected in response to the second research question are presented in a way that mirrors the career paths of the new employees. Beginning with the hiring process and
culminating with meaningful celebrations, the themes, concepts, and subthemes are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Research Question 2—Themes, Key Concepts, and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Key Concept</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Come grow with us. This is a journey together.</td>
<td>Hire with intentionality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Part of our job is just to make sure that we give them those connections they might not have.</td>
<td>Connection is critical.</td>
<td>2.2.a. We’re not just a team, but we’re a community, a family.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.b. You are someone, and you’re noticed and appreciated.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.c. People usually aren’t familiar with the town.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.3. Take this program and make it what you want it to be.</td>
<td>Empower teachers from the start.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4. The whole school came together.</td>
<td>Celebrate early and often.</td>
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Theme 2.1: “Come grow with us. This is a journey together.” The participants from each of the focus groups spoke about specific ways they structured the hiring process in order to identify teachers who would embrace their organizations. Beginning with preparation for the actual interviews, a high school principal shared that he was very intentional about determining which faculty members served on the hiring committees. After talking about wanting to energize certain departments by “planting a new type of seed in there” (P, 675), he said that he purposefully scheduled interviews on days when he knew specific staff members would be available. Nodding in agreement, another high
school principal built on that response by revealing that he would look at the addresses and social media posts of applicants. Although he acknowledged that using residency as a factor to determine fit was inappropriate, he went on to say, “if they live in the city, yeah, they’re going to be gone within the first 3 years of being here. It’s almost automatic” (P, 696-697).

After discussing how they selected candidates for interviews, both the principals and superintendents talked about using the hiring process as a way of determining potential alignment between the skills and dispositions of the candidates with the characteristics of their school districts. A veteran superintendent stated that establishing fit “starts with the interview process” (S, 554), and he went on to say that he used it as an opportunity to communicate the expectations he had for potential employees. Relatedly, an experienced elementary principal signaled an increased focus on the targeted selection of teachers when she said:

I think there has been an intentional focus on hiring for fit, like people who are aligned with mission, faith, and core beliefs. And those have become a huge part of our hiring process. I think we’re in a place where we’re finding people who are the right fit, and we’re very willing to say, “Come grow with us. This is a journey together.” (P, 121-125)

Although the school leaders consistently highlighted the importance of hiring teachers they believed would flourish in their organizations, the focus group participants reported quite different methods of determining fit. For example, a high school principal said that he would ask open-ended questions or “joke back and forth” (P, 428) with candidates in hopes of helping them feel more comfortable when interviewing. A
colleague of the principal from a neighboring elementary school expressed a similar focus on putting educators at ease, and she described how she would ask candidates about their favorite books or authors when meeting them for the first time. In a response that elicited laughter from the group, another principal described how he had asked applicants to play the game Connect 4 during interviews in hopes of encouraging more relaxed responses. Conversely, a high school principal noted that he wanted to make candidates “a little bit uncomfortable” when he asked questions so that they would “expose themselves a little bit more” (P, 599-600). While no other participants expressed the same specific desire, an aspiring administrator detailed a much more formal process that committee members used to analyze applicants who interviewed in her district:

We have [a] rating scale; its three pages long. So, it’s asking you the different questions based on the questions that were asked, “do you feel like this candidate would be able to apply curriculum, on a 1 to 5 scale, what would you rank them?” And then that’s only your ranking. Everybody’s gets tallied by an impartial person, and then that’s a successful candidate who might be going forward to the next step of the process. So, it’s something that I feel like is more impartial as opposed to, “Oh, I think they answered this one question well.” (AA, 415-420)

After describing how they would use interview questions to determine fit in the hiring process, the participants went on to identify additional steps they took to ascertain whether candidates could connect with students. An aspiring administrator explained that her district asked interviewees to teach mock lessons in front of learners, and she reported that it often helped teachers show a less nervous side of themselves. While multiple principals described using similar processes in their schools, one secondary administrator
told colleagues that, “instead of having a model lesson, [candidates] come in, and they have a box. And they have to create something for the kids that are in front of them” (P, 605-606). Equally concerned with having an opportunity to assess how potential employees interacted with students, an elementary principal detailed how she would ask members of the Student Council to give applicants building tours. When they returned, the administrator said she would “intentionally talk to the kids, like, ‘How’d your tour go? How do you feel about the person?’ And then she would also intentionally ask the applicant, “What’d you think?’” (P, 573-575).

**Theme 2.2: “Part of our job is just to make sure that we give them those connections they might not have.”** After extending offers of employment, the focus group participants talked in detail about the ways they went about connecting new teachers with colleagues, supervisors, and the larger community. Acknowledging the isolation and work-related challenges that inexperienced educators often go through, an elementary school principal stressed that she felt part of her job was “just to make sure that we give them the connections they might not have” (P, 478-479). Echoing the same sentiment, an aspiring administrator talked about the need for school leaders to go out of their way to establish relationships with teachers in order to bring about a sense of belonging. More than once, the focus group participants used the word “family” when describing meaningful connections for new teachers, and in a moving statement, a primary principal declared “I feel that they stay because it’s a sense of community. It’s a sense of family” (P, 103-104). A short while later, another principal extended the point when he talked about how a skilled administrator had made him feel like he “wasn’t just another anonymous face in the crowd” (P, 283-284) when he started his career. However,
while the participants in each of the focus groups conceded that relationships played a powerful role in retaining talented educators, they articulated different sets of strategies for connecting new teachers with their peers, administrators, and the surrounding region.

**Subtheme 2.2.a: “We’re not just a team, but we’re a community, a family.”**

Toward the end of the second focus group, an elementary school principal emphatically stated that, “the underlying theme is if you don’t have good relationships, you’re not going to retain teachers. Once again, I would write relationships as the number one thing you need to keep teachers” (P, 1,160-1,162). The sentiment was reiterated by several focus group participants, and the individuals discussed the importance of nurturing relationships between new teachers and their colleagues after onboarding employees.

At a basic level, two principals, as well as an aspiring administrator, talked about the importance of designing faculty meeting activities that placed educators in different groups as a way of establishing new collegial connections. In addition to using faculty meetings as a time to pair new educators up with “different buddy teachers” (P, 768-769), a high school principal described beginning every faculty meeting by asking, “anybody have any news to share?” (P, 338). He said the prompt helped to facilitate the creation of a “big family type atmosphere” (P, 340-341), and added that it gave colleagues an opportunity to learn more about one another. Building on the concept of using faculty meetings as a time to connect educators, an elementary school principal talked about a simple strategy she had developed early on as an administrator. The participant described how she “simply painted a rock blue. I put an orange U on it. It was, ‘U Rock.’ And they passed it around, and they would write little notes to each other”” (P, 452-454). More
than anything, the elementary principal stated that it helped to improve adult relationships in the school.

In addition to helping new teachers establish personal connections with their peers, the focus group participants also talked about bringing educators together around issues of professional practice. While a middle school principal observed that departmental structures and co-teaching relationships provided natural opportunities for instructional conversations, an aspiring administrator highlighted the success she had witnessed relating to peer coaching. After noting that “people would flock to new teachers or inexperienced teachers and take them under their wing” (AA, 370-371), the participant reported that peer coaching helped to strengthen relationships between new and veteran educators. For example, when the aspiring administrator heard that new teachers were struggling with issues related to classroom management, she described asking experienced teachers to “hang out in their class and give them some tips or pointers” (AA, 376-377). She went on to say that when the teachers worked at the same grade level, the peer coaching provided opportunities to discuss shared students and to “set up consistent expectations” (AA, 378). By coming together around instructional issues, the aspiring administrator maintained that peer coaching helped to accelerate the creation of a school environment in which colleagues would “take care of their own” (AA, 379).

**Subtheme 2.2.b: “You are someone, and you’re noticed and appreciated.”**

While the focus group participants emphasized the importance of facilitating the establishment of collegial relationships, they also shared specific strategies they used to personally connect with new teachers. Four separate participants used the phrase “my
“The door is always open,” and they each highlighted the importance of being accessible to new teachers. To help make inexperienced educators more comfortable, an aspiring administrator explained how she would keep her office stocked with coffee and snacks, and she said that, over time, it was surprising how many people started “coming for a cup of coffee.” She added that they would “sit down and they’re like, ‘listen, I got this kid, I just don’t know what to do with him’” (AA, 506-508). While members of the same focus group nodded in agreement as the aspiring administrator detailed the benefits of creating a comfortable space for new teachers to connect with administrators, a superintendent provided a note of caution about leaders staying in their offices for prolonged periods of time. He acknowledged the need for leaders to make themselves accessible, but he went on to say that in his building, with the highest rate of teacher turnover, the “principal is the one that spends the most time in their office, and the least amount of time out in classrooms” (S, 474-475).

Maintaining that effective administrators balanced being accessible with being visible, time and again, the focus group participants reiterated the importance of finding proactive ways of building relationships with inexperienced educators. When reflecting on his first year as a teacher, a high school administrator shared that his “principal was a big hallway person.” He went on to say that during passing periods, his principal was always “popping in” and asking “how are you? How’s it going? Do you need anything?” (P, 355-357). A female superintendent shared a similar experience, and she recalled how having a principal who prioritized visibility “made it feel like they cared that I was in the building” (S, 309-310). Interestingly, both principal and aspiring administrator participants referred to “check-ins” when probed about visibility. While two building
principals discussed periodically scheduling formal “check-in meetings” to review goals and focus areas, other participants described more informal approaches. In particular, a high school principal said that he would regularly check-in with new teachers “to help them understand, or let them know, that they’re not alone.” He went on to say that in “small districts, you’re the only teacher teaching the subject area,” and he noted that inexperienced educators “need to, at least, feel like they’re not on an island, even though they are in lot of ways” (P, 760-764).

When talking about building relationships with new teachers, the focus group participants emphasized the need to provide frequent validation to the novice teachers as opposed to instructional advice. A high school principal mentioned that “you don’t get a ton of affirmation and feedback, and when you do and it’s positive, it becomes memorable” (P, 322-323). As an example, an elementary school principal recalled having a supervisor early on, who told her, “you just keep doing what you’re doing. You’re doing great things, and you’re making the right moves” (P, 249-251). In addition to boosting her confidence, the participant commented that “I think I hung in there because of that” (P, 252), suggesting that positive affirmations might influence decisions related to retention. While the participants provided multiple examples of encouraging verbal feedback, they had either received or provided, they also referenced written comments given to them by previous administrators. For instance, a middle school principal mentioned a note a principal had left after a walkthrough that said, “Love the start to the year. What a great way to set the tone. Keep up the great work” (P, 276-278). Others nodded in agreement, and two colleagues from neighboring districts shared that
they had kept the written observations from their first years of teaching because they contained written praise.

When reflecting on accessibility, visibility, and positive affirmation, participants from each of the focus groups observed that authentic human relationships emerged when school leaders took the time to share who they were away from work. As soon as new teachers were hired, a female superintendent said that she personally took them out to lunch. Rather than focus on work, she remarked that “it’s just a time for us to connect as humans and find some commonalities” (S, 566-567). At a more collective level, an aspiring administrator commented on the impact it had on him when his superintendent, at the start of each school year, told the faculty about how his family spent the summer months. It communicated a sense of who the leader was outside of his or her profession, and it gave all educators permission to share personal details about themselves.

On an ongoing basis, principals as well as the aspiring administrators highlighted the importance of engaging new teachers in personal conversations. While the focus group participants reported asking inexperienced faculty members questions like, “How many kids do you have? What’d you do over vacation? What’ll you do for this week?” (P, 741-743), an aspiring administrator noted that regular interactions with leaders helped her “realize they were human” (AA, 247). Affirming a related belief, a high school principal asserted that when leaders took the time to speak honestly with new teachers, they made them “feel like you’re not just someone. You are someone, and you’re noticed and appreciated” (P, 287-288). Extending the point, a high school principal told a moving story about losing a family member during his first year of teaching. When a building principal showed up at his house to express concern, the participant remarked that “it felt
like I mattered, like my life mattered for the building. It was huge. You know what I mean?” (P, 340-342).

Subtheme 2.2.c: “People usually aren’t familiar with the town.” While the participants from all three focus groups talked in detail about the need to strengthen human relationships as a way of combatting the isolation often felt by first-year teachers, they also referenced the need to connect educators with the community at large. After noting that most new hires lacked familiarity with the surrounding region, an aspiring administrator said he would often take colleagues out to lunch on staff conference days in order to highlight popular eateries or local businesses in the area. On a more formal level, two superintendents said they organized bus tours of their school districts for new teachers each summer. While one said that she had fun acting as a tour guide, another maintained that the trips were “beneficial in a lot of different ways, just so that they understand the unique make up of your district” (S, 612-613). The superintendent went on to add that he always took the time to point out houses that were for sale, hoping that newer faculty members might consider living within the boundaries of the district. Furthermore, a superintendent described how she took new teachers to a Rotary luncheon within the first month of the school year. She indicated that the trips helped new teachers to make connections with members of the community, and she also reported that the Rotarians enjoyed the interactions as much as anyone each fall.

Theme 2.3: “Take this program and make it what you want it to be.” After hiring with intentionality and finding ways to connect new teachers with colleagues, as well as with the surrounding region, the focus group participants detailed ways in which they sought to empower inexperienced educators. At a basic level, both the
superintendents and the aspiring administrators highlighted the need to support new teachers, but also to give them the professional space needed to take chances and to make mistakes. When reflecting on his first year in education, an aspiring administrator recounted how his supervisor had told him to “take this and make the program what you want it to be” (AA, 74-75). The statement supported a comment shared by a male superintendent who expressed his desire to foster a sense of autonomy among recent hires. The experienced leader went on to say that he actively “encouraged people to take risks and try new things,” and added that it was “really, really important as far as bringing people along” (S, 217-219). At a more structural level, the school principals mentioned either creating or scheduling course assignments that aligned with the interests articulated by the new employees. For example, a high school principal stated that he tried to “make sure that, at least, there’s one period that is their dream period. It’s like their oxygen” (P, 904-905). In addition to providing new teachers with a sense of ownership, the principal indicated that it allowed them “to go home and tell their family that, ‘I teach that there. They created it just for me’” (P, 918-919). By giving “newcomers the sense that it’s okay to handle the reins a little bit” (S, 191-192), the focus group participants signaled that intentional professional autonomy they provided fostered important levels of confidence and pride.

Outside of direct instructional responsibilities, current and emerging school leaders both asserted that new teachers needed opportunities to participate in school-wide decision-making. In order to empower inexperienced educators, the participants shared a variety of ways they encouraged new colleagues to develop their voices within their respective organizations. Beginning with survey participation, an aspiring administrator
said that his school would constantly solicit input from all members of the faculty. At a more involved level, the focus group participants stated that they made sure to include first-year educators on committees dedicated to issues such as scheduling, assessment, and professional development. In one district, a superintendent added that he would invite brand-new educators to accompany him to job recruitment fairs, giving them a direct chance to participate in the hiring process. Although, another superintendent noted the importance of finding ways to “steadily increase responsibilities” (S, 272-273) for inexperienced teachers, he also cautioned against “dumping everything on the handful of people that you can rely on in your organization” (S, 281-282). In addition to overwhelming new teachers, he also emphasized the importance of distributing leadership and obligations among employees at different stages in their careers.

**Theme 2.4: “The whole school came together.”** Along with hiring, connecting, and empowering, the participants brought up celebrating as a way of supporting new teachers once they had accepted job offers. Stressing the need for leaders to constantly encourage inexperienced members of the faculty, an elementary school principal proudly shared that when handing out superlatives at the end of the year, his staff had given him “biggest cheerleader in the building” (P, 835-836). The recognition highlighted the need for administrators to provide positive support, and the focus group members outlined a number of ways in which they celebrated staff accomplishments over the course of a school year.

Beginning by organizing parties for teachers once they had been hired, one principal detailed how students and staff put together surprise celebrations on the first day of school. Complete with hugs, customized water bottles, and positive comments, the
veteran leader described how the school community prioritized welcoming new members of the faculty. Relatedly, a superintendent talked about hosting a “meet and greet” at the first board meeting, so “all the new teachers have time to sort of mingle, and they usually bring their spouses” (S, 782-784). She went on to say that she also worked with the union to put together a luncheon for new teachers, and that she provided gift bags and framed certificates. At the appropriate points in the year, an aspiring administrator shared that she kept a list of birthdays, and helped new teachers celebrate with cards, banners, cake, and lottery tickets. Although some celebrations did not happen on an annual basis, a grateful aspiring administrator talked about when he and his wife were “getting ready to have our first child, the whole school came together with over probably $300 worth of stuff. That says something to me” (AA, 306-308). Comparing the probationary period of new teachers to an “engagement,” an experienced superintendent indicated that he spoke “frequently about cheering for our candidates” (S, 745). Furthermore, he said that school leaders in his organization tried to highlight the importance of receiving tenure, and that they celebrated the “marriage” between new teachers and the district with cake, flowers, and a public presentation.

**Research Question 2 Summary**

After analyzing the answers from the participants in the three focus groups, four themes surfaced in responses regarding the specific leadership behaviors the individuals employed in hopes of retaining talented teachers. When commenting on the hiring process, the participants from all three focus groups emphasized the importance of selecting with intentionality. However, while the superintendents viewed interviewing as a chance to communicate organizational priorities, the principals and aspiring
administrators tended to focus more on finding ways to put candidates at ease in hopes of learning more about who they were as individuals. After extending offers of employment, all three focus groups detailed different ways they went about connecting new teachers with colleagues as well as the larger community. Yet, while the principals and aspiring administrators shared numerous behaviors having to do with everyday interactions, the superintendents provided a fewer number of specific examples, and one participant focused, instead, on the shortcomings of a principal in his district.

After detailing ways in which they helped new teachers establish relationships, the participants across all three focus groups referred to the need for empowering inexperienced educators. Consequently, while the superintendents commented on the importance of empowerment from a conceptual perspective, the principals and aspiring administrators shared concrete examples they had either provided or experienced. Finally, when discussing the role of celebration in their organizations, the principals and aspiring administrators generally highlighted personal experiences having to do with birthdays, weddings, and the births of children. In contrast, the superintendents detailed more formal ceremonies with boards of education or community groups, and they tended to focus on professional accomplishments having to do with hiring and tenure. Recognizing that superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators are often the ones responsible for coordinating structural supports for new teachers, the subsequent section presents the data that emerged in response to the third research question.

**Research Question 3 Results**

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Research Question 3 asked: What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

Designed to explore the programs or support systems offered in rural districts, the third research question probed structural ways that leaders attempt to retain new teachers. During an analysis of the focus group transcripts, three key themes became apparent (Table 4.4). The first theme, “we put a lot of time and money into our new teacher development program,” highlighted the investment organizations make when developing inexperienced educators. Because of differences relating to instructional coaching and new teacher mentoring, the theme was divided into two subthemes. The second theme, “it’s about growing them as teachers,” accentuated the need for administrators to provide meaningful feedback during the observation cycle. Finally, the third theme, “it’s just who we are to have people sharing instructional practices,” indicated that new teachers have both much to learn as well as much to share.

Table 4.4

Research Question 3—Themes, Key Concepts, and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Key Concept</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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| 3.1. We put a lot of time and money into our new teacher development program. | Induction supports matter. | 3.1.a. We can talk about whatever the teacher wants to talk about.  
3.1.b. Just call me, text me, email me. I’m always available. |
| 3.2. It’s about growing them as teachers. | Feedback is essential in the observation process. | |
| 3.3. It’s just who we are to have people sharing instructional practices. | Professional development is a symbiotic endeavor. | |
Throughout this section, the data is organized to present the layers of structural supports that leaders often provide for new teachers in rural districts. With a blend of mandated, as well as locally selected methods, the themes and subthemes highlight the programs that administrators employed to meet the technical as well as the relational needs of new employees.

Theme 3.1: “We put a lot of time and money into our new teacher development program.” Throughout the focus group conversations, the participants talked about the various challenges that new teachers faced. In addition to expressing encouragement through specific leadership behaviors, the participants detailed a variety of induction supports they employed to help develop inexperienced educators. Although one aspiring administrator commented that “I’ve worked in other districts where there’s nothing; people are just left in the wind” (AA, 608-609), the consensus among each of the focus groups was best summed up by a superintendent who noted that “we put a lot of emphasis and time and money into our new teacher development program” (S, 53-54). Despite differences regarding levels of involvement, the participants consistently emphasized the importance of both instructional coaching as well as mentoring in their districts.

Subtheme 3.1.a: “We can talk about whatever the teacher wants to talk about.” Midway through the first focus group, a veteran superintendent stated that they had “allocated a fair amount of resources towards expanding our instructional coaching model” in recent years (S, 490-491). While the participants nodded in agreement, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators expressed differing levels of
involvement depending on their districts as well as their positions. For example, an experienced elementary school principal shared that she provided the coaching support herself. She detailed how she held a “coaching meeting with every teacher once a month,” and said that they could “talk about whatever the teacher wants to talk about” (P, 415-417). Similarly, a high school principal spoke about directly coaching new teachers, and discussed how he “tried to coach people in terms of anything you do, if you look at it a different way, you can be very positive about it” (P, 522-533). Yet most of the participants indicated that rather than providing the induction support themselves, they, instead, focused on the establishment or oversight associated with the coaching models that existed in their organizations. For example, while talking about the curricular challenges new teachers often face, a superintendent said that he had “just hired some external coaches” to work with inexperienced educators “directly, to get them up and running” (S, 630-632). Relatedly, a neighboring superintendent indicated that he had secured “one or two instructional coaches per building that work with staff on developing practice,” and he went on to say that he had witnessed “some pretty good results of people feeling supported in that way” (S, 494-497). Rather than directly supervising the coaches, however, the same superintendent said that he sat “in on a monthly meeting” with them, and suggested that his “involvement and participation, I think in itself, sends a pretty significant message” (S, 840-842). An elementary school principal noted the difficulties that often came when attempting to provide coaching support for rural educators in need of content-specific assistance. Because of limits relating to departmental size and organizational capacity, the principal shared that her district had recently contracted with an online coaching service. In addition to working with new
teachers, the principal said that veteran educators had also taken advantage of the service, and that it had been embraced by “the whole culture of our district” (P, 996).

Subtheme 3.1.b: “Just call me, text me, email me. I’m always available.” Along with instructional coaching supports, the participants from all three focus groups addressed the mandated mentoring programs that existed in their organizations. At a basic level, multiple aspiring administrators talked about how they currently served as new teacher mentors. When probed to describe their involvement in more detail, an aspiring administrator said that she was in her third round of mentoring new staff. She went on to say that it was “95 hours for the school year,” and that it was “a chance for us to get together to have open dialogue of, ‘What’s going well for you right now? Does anybody have any questions on what we can help you with?’” (AA, 614-619).

Reinforcing the bond and commitment associated with mentoring relationships, another aspiring administrator commented that “we’re in it together. And just call me, text me, email me. I’m always available. You’re never bothering me. It’s part of that relationship” (AA, 628-631). In addition to serving as mentors, two aspiring administrators also noted that they coordinated the new teacher mentoring programs in their districts. Both participants reported having revamped their mentoring programs in recent years, and one stressed the importance of training all mentors. She went on to say that once they had created a pool of mentors in her district, they would “match them up with new teachers, not necessarily the same grade level or subject area, but we try to do it by personality and needs” (P, 644-646).

Although none of the participating principals or superintendents reported directly serving as mentors or coordinating the programs in their districts, they did indicate...
meaningful levels of involvement. For example, a high school principal stated that he was “part of the process of matching who goes with who[em],” and added that he would also “facilitate sessions with the new teachers” (P, 946-948). Building on the idea of connecting with first-year faculty members as well as mentors during formal sessions, two experienced superintendents talked about the importance of summer orientations. While one shared that he would use the time for celebration, a second described taking “at least half a day to talk about culture and expectations in those spaces” (S, 733). The second superintendent also explained how the group would “then do monthly mentor meetings with the director of curriculum” (S, 732-734). The practice of meeting with groups of new teachers and mentors on a regular basis was voiced consistently in all three focus groups, and four different aspiring administrators reported helping to shape the agendas for those interactions. By adding similar levels of structure to the mentoring program in his district, a superintendent noted that they had “seen a pretty significant increase of cultural shift, you know, feeling like they belong to the building” (S, 527-528).

Theme 3.2: “It’s about growing them as teachers.” Along with coaching and mentoring, the focus group participants referred to observations and walkthroughs when commenting on the structural ways they supported new teachers. Rather than view the interactions as formal mechanisms for evaluation, the participants spoke about observations as opportunities for feedback and strengthening relationships. Directly addressing this point, an elementary school principal maintained that with “observations, it’s not a ‘gotcha,’” but that it was instead “about growing them as teachers and helping them develop the skills and strategies they need to move forward” (P, 424-426). Using
similar language, an aspiring administrator provided a more extreme example when she shared a directive issued by a superintendent from her previous district:

I had a superintendent who mandated that all his administrators give all the teachers all fours on their observations. And the rationale was, “I can’t control your state test scores,” because, back then, that still counted. “But we can control this, and we want you to grow, and we want you to develop, and we don’t want it to be a gotcha, we want it to be a conversation.” And it immediately changed the climate of any observation I ever had. (AA, 229-234)

Although somewhat unique, the comment paralleled the belief from the superintendents in the focus group that they saw observations as a chance for providing feedback, and “post observation conferences [are seen] as a time to try and continue to build the relationship and the connection with the teachers” (S, 648-649). Combined with other induction supports, an elementary principal went on to say that observations encouraged growth, and in the process, “created a new professional network within the building” (P, 807).

Theme 3.3: “It’s just who we are to have people sharing instructional practices.” Despite providing new teachers with coaches, mentors, and meaningful feedback, the focus group participants indicated that inexperienced educators still faced obstacles relating to professional practice. To build the instructional skills of new employees, an aspiring administrator said that it was “a big part of my job, as a team leader and mentor, getting them acclimated to the curriculum” (AA, 135-136). Relatedly, a superintendent extended the point about pedagogical growth when he claimed that the more focused the professional development was in his district, “the longer teachers were
there” (S, 163-164). In order to establish schools capable of supporting educators, the participants talked about the importance of both providing new teachers with ongoing professional development as well as capitalizing on the energy and skills they brought to the organization.

At a general level, a high school principal noted the importance of using faculty meetings as a time to participate in professional development. Despite an initial reluctance on the part of teachers to engage, the participant detailed how he would ask teachers to share model practices he had witnessed while conducting observations. “If I saw something amazing,” the individual remarked, “then I ask those people to share that stuff at the next staff meeting. They’ll set up shop in their rooms, and teachers will sign up to go into those rooms and see whatever it was that I saw” (P, 394-397). Further developing the concept of having educators impart craft knowledge, two principals talked about taking new teachers on “learning walks” to observe their veteran colleagues. When describing the classroom visits, an elementary principal said, “when I enlist people, we talk about where you want to grow. I have an amazing staff, so I’m like, ‘Hey, look. Here are the three people. I’ll get you a sub. I’m going to set your schedule’” (P, 799-802). A female superintendent reinforced the importance of building cultures where faculty members were comfortable “popping in and sharing instructional practices, or having conversations about instructional practice” (S, 680-682), and two of her colleagues added that conference days could also provide regular opportunities for professional development.

Although the focus group participants talked at length about supporting inexperienced educators with professional development, they spent an equal amount of
time emphasizing the importance of learning from new teachers. Early on each year, an elementary school principal said that she would ask new teachers “about their strengths” so that she could “connect them in other ways to the rest of the staff” (P, 1,140-1,141). Two superintendents mentioned a similar approach, and one superintendent said that “we certainly encourage and welcome our new staff being involved with that and sharing differing ideas” (S, 1,064-1,065). Although the focus group participants talked on a general level about leveraging the skills of inexperienced faculty members, the principals and aspiring administrators both referenced technology as a specific area in which new teachers provided helpful support. “I think, a lot of times, the younger teachers have a strength, especially that our colleagues on the team don’t have, of this technology right now” (P, 1,110-1,111) remarked an elementary school principal. After referencing a particular teacher, the principal went on to say that the individual “taught them so much, and they love her. Knowing she was coming in with that skill was a huge opening” (P, 1,118-1,120). Multiple aspiring administrators also referenced the ability of new teachers to share strategies relating to technology, and one individual said that she would often ask first-year educators to share professional practices in faculty meetings. By empowering new teachers, the aspiring administrator indicated that there was a “joy that comes from that, that they’ve been recognized for doing something great and [we/re] starting to tap them early, because they’re those future teacher leaders” (AA, 863-865).

Research Question 3 Summary

When examining the responses from the focus group participants involving programs or support systems for new teachers, three consistent themes emerged. While coaching and mentoring came up as reliable ways for leaders to assist new teachers, the
superintendents typically reported providing programmatic, as well as financial support, rather than immediate oversight. The principals and aspiring administrators, meanwhile, shared specific instances in which they directly planned or delivered the support systems. During discussions concerning observations, the participants stressed the need for growth-producing feedback as opposed to formal evaluation. Each of the focus groups communicated consistent messages, and one superintendent indicated that the interactions also provided opportunities for building professional relationships. Finally, when commenting on the importance of professional development in their organizations, the participants, across all three focus groups, highlighted the symbiotic nature of collegial learning. However, while superintendents spoke about the values and concepts associated with professional development, the principals and aspiring administrators talked in detail about faculty meetings, “learning walks,” and conference day sessions.

**Summary of Results**

This chapter examined the results of three separate focus group sessions conducted with superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators working within the boundaries of a shared service area. When probed about challenges relating to retaining talented teachers in rural schools, four consistent themes emerged. First, participants talked about the barriers associated with geography and distance. In addition to creating difficult daily commutes, the rural nature of the districts provided limited options for establishing personal, as well as professional, networks. Building on the desire for connection, the second theme emphasized the importance of relationships within the schools. Prioritizing positive interactions with colleagues, the participants highlighted the need for new teachers to establish relationships with both colleagues as
well as supervisors. Third, the theme of organizational culture surfaced. While the participants spoke about the advantages of shared norms and values, they also cautioned that negative cultures could push new teachers to seek employment in other districts. Finally, the participants identified salary and benefits as a potential obstacle to teacher retention, and the superintendents reported considering possible contractual provisions to incentivize teacher residency.

After considering the obstacles to teacher retention in rural districts, the focus group participants shared leadership behaviors they employed to support new faculty members. An analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed four predominant themes, the first having to do with the hiring of specific individuals. By creating deliberate interview processes, the participants detailed precise ways in which they used questions, activities, and mock lessons to identify educators well-suited for their organizations. Interestingly, the focus group participants consistently emphasized the need to provide a welcoming culture, and they articulated a commitment to helping new teachers develop and grow. Directly aligned with an obstacle identified as a barrier to teacher retention, the theme of relationships also emerged in response to the second research question. The participants spoke often of trying to create a family atmosphere, and they outlined specific steps for connecting new teachers with colleagues, supervisors, and the larger school community. In addition to relationships, the theme of empowerment appeared. Along with giving inexperienced educators a certain degree of professional autonomy, the focus group participants highlighted the need for engaging individuals in school-wide decision-making processes. Finally, all three focus groups detailed the importance of celebrating. Whether connected with personal or professional milestones,
superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators described different ways they went about recognizing special events.

In addition to exploring the leadership behaviors the participants used to encourage new teachers, the final research question centered on investigating the existing programs and support systems offered by rural districts. During the conversations, three consistent themes emerged across each of the focus groups. Because of the steep learning curves associated with the mastery of curriculum as well as pedagogy, the participants stressed the need for instructional coaching and mentoring. Despite identifying differing levels of involvement, the participants repeatedly highlighted the need for investing in meaningful induction systems. Building on the support offered through coaching and mentoring, a second theme concerning observations also emerged. However, rather than concentrate on the performance evaluation of new teachers, the participants detailed the benefits that came with providing feedback through formal observations and periodic walkthroughs. Relatedly, a final theme involving professional development surfaced. While the focus group members provided examples of ways in which they supported the learning of inexperienced educators, they also emphasized the importance of capitalizing on the skills and insight offered by new teachers.

Chapter 5 concludes this study by identifying and interpreting the findings presented in Chapter 4. Connections are made in relation to the current literature, and a limitation is discussed. Last, the chapter ends with both recommendations for future research, as well as suggestions for superintendents, principals, and K-12 educators for administrative training programs positioned to influence the rate of teacher retention in rural settings.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

For years, experts have consistently identified administrative support to be a significant factor in determining whether new teachers decide to leave their positions (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ladd, 2011). Nonetheless, despite the existence of rich literature focused on the topic of teacher retention, research has yet to identify the precise leadership behaviors that inexperienced educators interpret as encouraging (Boyd et al., 2011). While this lack of clarity has proven to be problematic in K-12 systems across the country, it has had a more profound impact on rural school districts struggling to recruit and retain talented educators (Beesley et al., 2010; Guarino et al., 2006). The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership behaviors that rural school superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators have used to support new teachers in their organizations. Using a qualitative approach, the inquiry prompted the participants to respond to the following research questions:

1. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?
2. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?
3. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

By asking small groups of participants to reflect on the behaviors they had used to communicate support, the focus groups provided insight into specific ways rural school leaders have attempted to improve the experiences of new teachers. Further, because novice educators often encounter a range of challenges, this study relied on Herzberg’s (2003) two-factor theory as a lens for better understanding the complexities associated with employee happiness. By breaking with the conventional belief that professional pleasure occurs on a single continuum, Herzberg posited that distinct factors need to be considered when understanding job satisfaction as opposed to job dissatisfaction. In the context of this study, Herzberg’s two-factor theory was used to separate intrinsic motivators associated with achievement and growth (Bogler, 2001) from hygiene factors involving interpersonal relationships and supervisor quality (Herzberg, 2003). When examined holistically, the results from the analysis established the foundation of the study findings.

**Implications of Findings**

When analyzing the qualitative data collected in the focus group study, the research produced three key findings. First, while relationships are critical for new teachers working in rural settings, those relationships must be authentic in nature and actively pursued by school leaders. Second, supporting inexperienced educators must be viewed as a collective responsibility. Although school leaders have critical roles to play when it comes to providing assistance, establishing supportive school cultures must be
embraced as a shared endeavor by all educators. Finally, although new teachers have much to learn, administrators can lay the groundwork for empowerment by regularly affirming and encouraging the efforts and talents of inexperienced faculty members. In addition to further exploring the major findings that emerged from this study, the results are connected with the literature and aligned with Herzberg’s (2003) two-factor theory.

**Finding 1: Relationship development must be authentic and purposeful.**

Because positive human connections are typically accepted as essential in educational settings, it was not surprising that the focus group participants routinely cited relationships as critical to retaining new teachers. However, the participants in this study did highlight the unique importance of building authentic connections with inexperienced employees. Referring to the personal and professional isolation that can often come with working in rural organizations, the school leaders reinforced the need to develop genuine relationships with new teachers based on common human experiences. Additionally, while the participants indicated that certain relationships could develop naturally, their responses also suggested that the most effective administrators used active strategies for connecting with novice educators. Rather than relying on passive approaches, the skilled leaders purposefully nurtured positive adult relationships in their schools, and they went out of their way to connect new teachers with key individuals and organizations in their communities.

Given that many new teachers in rural schools live outside the region, they often have less familiarity with the area, and they have fewer opportunities for establishing social connections. As a result, new teachers are more likely to experience isolation, and they have a greater need for relationship building within their districts. Additionally,
because novice educators typically face a wide range of professional challenges, they need to feel comfortable both seeking, as well as receiving, support. To accomplish this, the successful administrators saw it as their responsibility to establish authentic relationships by nurturing trust and vulnerability. By seeking regular opportunities for engaging new faculty members in conversations centered on family, personal interests, and leisure activities, leaders build personal connections with individuals and foster a greater sense of belonging within their schools. Even when engaging in professional undertakings, such as observations, the administrators leverage the interactions as chances to check in with their new teachers and, in the process, deepen their existing relationships. While these authentic connections are meaningful in all K-12 settings, they are especially vital in rural districts characterized by smaller faculties and more modest administrative teams.

Relatedly, because rural schools generally employ a fewer number of school leaders, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators are repeatedly asked to assume a wider range of professional responsibilities. From managing daily operations to providing long-range organizational leadership, individuals are often pulled in variety of directions. As a result, it is easy for school leaders to take passive approaches to connecting with new teachers. Because of this, skilled administrators focus on relationship building with novice educators, and they pursue the endeavor with high degrees of intentionality. Instead of waiting for connections to organically occur, the participants employed active strategies for supporting faculty members. For example, the talented leaders prioritized visibility in the hallways, stopping by classrooms, and making themselves available by phone, text, or email after school hours. Furthermore, in addition
to their personal relationships with new teachers, the administrators saw it as their duty to facilitate positive interactions between coworkers. Recognizing that friction between colleagues can accelerate attrition, these purposeful leaders viewed it as their responsibility to help create collegial work environments. By carefully planning faculty meetings and professional development sessions with paired or small group activities, the leaders thoughtfully provided openings for faculty members to interact in meaningful ways.

Corresponding with Herzberg’s (2003) assertion that interpersonal relationships are important hygiene factors in determining levels of worker dissatisfaction, studies conducted in the field of nursing (Giallonardo et al., 2010; Spence Laschinger & Fida, 2015; Spence Laschinger, Wong & Grau, 2012), as well as with teachers and school principals (Wang & Bird, 2011), have reinforced the importance of authentic leadership styles. Recognizing the need to prioritize trust and engagement, researchers have suggested that leaders can increase job satisfaction and empowerment through authentic relationship building (Giallonardo et al., 2010; Wang & Bird, 2011). Additionally, understanding that novice educators often experience unwanted isolation (Kardos et al., 2001), experts have found that the quality of the connections they established with their school administrators helped determine if they would remain in their positions (Boyd et al., 2009; Brown & Wynn, 2007; Perrachione et al., 2008). In particular, the literature notes the important role played by school principals in determining new teacher satisfaction (Bogler, 2001; Kardos et al., 2001), and it provides a broad justification for the specific ways in which study the participants reported connecting with inexperienced members of the faculty. Additionally, although not prevalent in the research, a study
performed by Copeland (2013) suggested that rural school superintendents could find daily ways to interact with new teachers, and that they could serve as important connectors between novice educators and parents in the community.

Working with nurses as opposed to educators, Hayes et al. (2010) found that employee job satisfaction involved relationships with supervisors as well as with coworkers. Previously conducted research indicates that school administrators can facilitate the creation of organizational cultures in which veteran educators embrace new teachers (Brown & Wynn, 2007). Recognizing that established colleagues could give the impression of being cold or indifferent, Kardos et al. (2001) maintained that school leaders could purposefully enhance relationship building by leveraging the connective potential of professional learning and induction supports. The findings align with the practical suggestions offered by the study participants, and they also revealed the need for school communities to find collective ways of supporting new teachers. While it was critical for the administrators to intentionally establish positive relationships, meaningful support for novice educators was only maximized when it was embraced as a shared endeavor.

Finding 2: Support must be embraced as a collective responsibility. For years, studies have indicated that administrative support can have a powerful impact on the rate of teacher retention. In particular, research has shown that school principals hold unique positions when it comes to influencing the levels of job satisfaction experienced by novice educators (Bogler, 2001). However, the focus group participants in this study revealed that support must be embraced as a shared endeavor. As the participants detailed the various ways in which they encouraged new teachers, it became apparent that support
must not be viewed as a solitary undertaking, but rather as a collective responsibility. Beginning with the hiring process, the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators each stressed the importance of creating welcoming environments in which veteran educators collaboratively nurtured the growth of inexperienced colleagues. Ranging from informal interactions to more structured systems of support, the participants indicated that they each had important roles to play when it came to providing the necessary levels of encouragement.

Inexperienced educators who accept positions in rural schools often require significant amounts of support for the technical, as well as the relational, challenges that they encounter. Because new teachers must simultaneously build new relationships, master course content, and navigate complex cultural norms, they typically require a great deal of assistance from established colleagues. Consequently, because many new teachers enter the profession with high levels of energy and dynamic instructional practices, their methodologies can threaten the more traditional approaches of veteran educators. Because of this, the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators saw it as their collective responsibility to help new teachers gain acceptance within their organizations. In order to meaningfully impact the success of new teachers, effective school leaders work in concert with one another to provide informal support. While some participants offered daily assistance to new teachers in their departments or at their grade levels, others had to be more intentional about checking in or facilitating opportunities for interaction. By working alongside one another, school leaders blanket their colleagues with needed support, and in the process, create warm environments for novice educators.
Aside from finding informal ways to collectively meet the needs of new teachers, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators working in smaller districts are often asked to take on a variety of roles when delivering structural supports. Because rural schools must generally provide the same layers of assistance as those offered by larger urban or suburban organizations, they are forced to leverage the collective contributions of skilled educators. Rather than depend on the talents of a few isolated individuals, high-functioning rural districts typically ask members of the faculty to serve as mentors, to organize orientations, and to schedule professional learning opportunities. Although members of administrative teams might not have the time needed to offer the same degree of direct involvement, they regularly find other ways of expressing their commitment. By securing funding, offering program oversight, and endorsing the efforts of teacher leaders, effective school administrators provide the direction, as well as the resources needed, for programs to function properly. When considered holistically, the complementary efforts put forth by educators often amplify the levels of support experienced by new teachers, and in the process, lead to higher rates of teacher retention.

The importance of relationships and working conditions in determining job dissatisfaction is consistent with the tenets outlined in Herzberg’s (2003) two-factor theory. In particular, when applied specifically to K-12 education, Bogler (2001) found that principals have a unique ability to influence novice educators choosing to leave the profession. While the belief appears regularly in the literature that leaders have a special role to play in shaping culture and morale (Kardos et al., 2001; Mertler, 2002), researchers also have found that educators have a shared responsibility in creating collegial atmospheres (Brown & Wynn, 2007). By encouraging collaboration and
supportive work environments, Kardos et al. (2001) detailed the types of organizational cultures identified as essential by superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators. Furthermore, studies relating to teacher leadership have suggested that by involving others in decision-making, administrators can positively influence the levels of job satisfaction (García Torres, 2019; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009). The observation gives credence to the finding that supporting new teachers must be viewed as a collective responsibility, although experts, like Kohm and Nance (2009), have suggested that the model rarely works without the backing of school administrators.

While acknowledging that general levels of encouragement from K-12 leaders impact teacher retention (Bogler, 2001), some researchers have also found that formal induction supports help to determine the success experienced by new educators (Strong, 2005; Wong, 2004). Moreover, rather than supporting a single method, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) conducted a review of the literature that suggests layers of support prove most beneficial when hoping to retain talented faculty members. The assertion that new teachers benefit from the coaching, mentoring, and professional development offered by a range of colleagues aligns with the finding that support must go beyond the contributions of select school administrators. Furthermore, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) used quantitative data from both elementary, as well as secondary, educators to reveal the benefits of developing collaborative networks. By connecting new teachers with a variety of colleagues to help with instructional planning, the researchers determined that providing a combination of supports could heighten perceived levels of job satisfaction (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, the participants in this current study suggested that
collective assistance had to go beyond meeting the pedagogical needs of new teachers and provide the affirmation required to inspire confidence and growth.

**Finding 3: Affirmation lays the groundwork for empowerment.** Since new teachers have much to learn when beginning their careers, it was somewhat expected that superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators would highlight the structural supports offered by their organizations. Surprisingly, the participants repeatedly detailed how affirmation and encouragement helped to heighten the confidence and risk-taking needed for professional empowerment. As the study participants lamented the limited amount of positive feedback they had received during their first years in education, multiple participants referenced written notes, glowing observation comments, and verbal compliments that their supervisors had given them. Many shared that they still had the positive documents, and the participants rarely referenced the benefits they had received from formal observations or corrective remarks. Furthermore, the members of the focus groups said that when given the space to make mistakes, they had used the workplace autonomy to take chances and experiment with innovative instructional approaches.

Many novice educators in rural districts accept positions with little or no formal teaching experience. Because of this, new teachers typically have much to learn when it comes to establishing relationships with peers, mastering instructional skills, and managing student behaviors. Although they might receive helpful corrective feedback from administrators in their organizations, they also need to experience a sense of mastery regarding their work with students. As a result, skilled school leaders see it as their responsibility to affirm and validate the efforts of new teachers in the hope of building their confidence levels. By providing regular praise and opportunities for
vocational success, superintendents, principals, and aspiring leaders can better create the conditions in which novice educators find their professional voices. Once that occurs, new teachers can realize an important sense of empowerment and begin contributing to larger organizational activities. From serving on hiring committees to developing innovative programs to providing professional development opportunities for colleagues, supported new teachers can better assume ownership of important responsibilities. While these notions of belonging and contribution are valuable in larger urban or suburban systems, they are especially important for smaller, rural districts with fewer employees to fill needed leadership roles.

While the first two findings of this study more closely align with the hygiene factors identified by Herzberg (2003), the connection between affirmation and empowerment involves key concepts associated with intrinsic motivators. The validation and encouragement identified as essential by the focus group participants highlighted the importance of achievement, recognition, and growth (Herzberg et al., 1959), and they emphasized the tendency for public employees, in particular, to be influenced by job satisfaction (Maidani, 1991). Although a study not conducted in schools, Hausknecht et al. (2009) made an interesting observation when analyzing survey results from employees working in hospitality-related organizations. Recognizing the difference in motivating high- and low-performing employees, the data suggest that talented professionals respond positively to intrinsic motivators, while less skilled workers react more favorably to pay and other external hygiene factors (Hausknect et al., 2009). This discovery highlights the importance of affirmation for skilled new teachers, and it raises questions about whether
the approach would be beneficial in enhancing the effectiveness of below-average educators.

Although the literature makes little mention of affirmation and validation being used by school leaders, Covella et al. (2017) did find that employees in the private sector tended to engage in their work more actively when encouraged by their supervisors. The researchers suggested that employers could increase the rate of retention when they matched job responsibilities with the skills and preferences of their workers. (Covella et al., 2017). The observation acknowledged the need for individuals to experience mastery in professional settings, and it connected with observations made by Davis and Wilson (2000) regarding the importance of empowerment in schools. Although unable to definitively establish a correlation between empowerment and job satisfaction, the researchers did find that when K-12 administrators gave teachers a choice in their work, individuals experienced increased levels of fulfillment (Davis & Wilson, 2000). While similar notions of autonomy were voiced by this current study’s participants, the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators tended to focus more heavily on laying the foundation for empowerment by providing opportunities for new teachers to showcase their skills. However, research conducted in rural districts has more often focused on the skill deficits of novice educators and has highlighted the role of professional development in increasing levels of confidence as well as of empowerment (Berry et al., 2012; Brown & Wynn, 2016).

After analyzing the qualitative information shared by the participants, this current study indicates that school leaders should actively seek to establish authentic relationships with new teachers. Additionally, the participants accepted the responsibility
to help facilitate a sense of connection for inexperienced educators, and they detailed specific ways in which they encouraged collegial work environments. This study also revealed that while administrators have critical parts to play in supporting newly hired faculty members, nurturing positive work cultures must be embraced as a collective endeavor. Finally, although new teachers typically have much to learn, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators should provide ongoing affirmation in the hope of encouraging future empowerment. Yet while this study produced a good deal of qualitative information, the particular nature of its design presents a notable limitation.

**Limitations**

By asking open-ended questions, qualitative researchers have the ability to provide focus group participants with opportunities to share common experiences (Hatch, 2002). The narrow nature of the approach, however, often presents limitations relating to if the results can be universally applied to other individuals or diverse situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To be invited to take part in this particular study, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators had to be working in a select number of districts identified because of their geography and rural qualities. Because this study was limited to three focus groups of educators working in the same rural shared service area, the findings may not be generalizable to the experiences of all school leaders including those in larger urban or suburban settings.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study reveal two potential ways in which future research might contribute to the literature relating to teacher retention in K-12 settings. Both qualitative in nature, the first study could involve participants holding similar positions in
urban and suburban districts for comparison, while a second study might explore how additional groups, such as first-year teachers, experience the phenomenon of turnover.

Because this study examined the perceptions of superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators working in rural districts, future research could use the same format to explore the observations of school leaders employed in urban or suburban systems. By asking parallel questions, researchers would have the opportunity to collect and analyze data from a broader range of organizations. Ultimately, the findings might be used to construct a wider continuum of unique leadership behaviors that might be applicable in rural settings.

Additionally, because public school systems involve numerous stakeholders, similar research could be conducted to better understand the various ways in which different groups experience teacher turnover. Beginning with first-year teachers, future studies could ask novice educators to identify the specific leadership behaviors they interpret to be supportive. Although focus group participants from this study often reflected on the beginning of their careers, engaging new teachers in open-ended conversations focused on their current situations could prove beneficial. Furthermore, while the researcher probed the strategies used by this study’s superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators to support educators, rural districts often employ additional groups of school leaders. For example, future research might ask assistant principals, business officials, and special programs directors the same set of questions in the hope of determining whether support differs by position. Finally, it is recommended that researchers consider how rural school board members experience teacher turnover. Elected to serve by the residents of their school communities, board members regularly
have children or grandchildren who are enrolled in their districts. Therefore, when talented teachers leave, these board members often feel—firsthand—the disruption that accompanies turnover. Additionally, because school board members are solely responsible for adopting district policies, approving spending plans, and appointing school personnel, they are uniquely positioned to direct the resources and structures that influence rates of retention.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The three findings from this study reveal specific leadership behaviors that are capable of impacting the rate of teacher retention in K-12 education. The following four recommendations have, at their core, the touchstones of authentic relationship building, shared ownership of new teacher support, and empowerment through ongoing validation and affirmation. The first recommendation is for superintendents to establish personal connections with novice educators and to engage district-level teams in work directly aligned with improving teacher retention. Relatedly, the second recommendation is for principals to actively build genuine relationships with new teachers, involve inexperienced faculty members in decision-making, and encourage the collective efforts of colleagues in supporting one another. The third recommendation is for K-12 educators to establish groups focused on celebrating inexperienced colleagues, while also embracing programmatic opportunities to provide structural support. Finally, because school administration is both an art and a science (Deal & Peterson, 1994), the fourth recommendation is that leadership preparation programs that emphasize topics relating to relationship building, organizational culture, and the unique challenges faced by rural schools when it comes to teacher retention.
Recommendations for Rural Superintendents

The findings of this study highlight the important role played by school superintendents in retaining new teachers. Unlike their counterparts in larger or more suburban districts, rural school superintendents typically have regular occasions to interact with novice educators (Copeland, 2013). However, because their work responsibilities might limit daily contact with new employees, superintendents should purposefully seek out opportunities to build authentic relationships. By taking inexperienced teachers out to lunch at the start of the year, stopping by their classrooms to check in on how they are doing, or sending encouraging notes or emails, superintendents can communicate care to new members of their organizations.

Additionally, because superintendents often represent their districts in community endeavors (Björk et al., 2014), they should find ways to connect novice educators with local civic organizations or key individuals in the region. Aside from providing residents with opportunities to meet new members of their school communities, the introductions have the potential to foster a greater sense of belonging for faculty members.

While the size of rural districts often gives superintendents the ability to build personal relationships with new educators, they should also engage key district-level teams in work related to improving the rate of teacher retention. In particular, superintendents should leverage the collective influence of their administrative teams and their boards of education to limit turnover. For example, when working with certified school leaders, superintendents should not assume that administrators instinctively know how to communicate support to employees. Because many school leaders begin their careers in rural organizations, much of their learning happens through trial and error.
(Manard & Wieczorek, 2018). By taking the time to help administrators build stronger relationships, strengthen school cultures, and celebrate the successes of others, superintendents can better develop individuals who are intentional about encouraging inexperienced educators (Peel & McCary, 1999). Furthermore, administrative teams should approach the issue of teacher retention like they would any other organizational initiative or challenge. Rather than accepting attrition to be a naturally occurring phenomenon, they should develop specific plans for limiting turnover and increasing workplace satisfaction.

Finally, superintendents should work with local boards of education to organize celebrations and negotiating contractual provisions aimed at limiting teacher turnover. Because of their formal positions within school districts, superintendents and board members are uniquely positioned to organize symbolic celebrations for new employees. From making personnel appointments to granting tenure, boards have natural opportunities each year to create special moments for inexperienced educators. By hosting introductory luncheons, giving out school apparel, and expressing appreciation when making long-term commitments to teachers, board members can foster more supportive organizational cultures. Moreover, when working with board members on negotiating collective bargaining agreements, superintendents should prioritize reasonable salary and benefit packages for first-year teachers. While rural schools might not be able to match the levels of compensation offered by more affluent suburban schools, they do need to make sure their contractual provisions are competitive (Kelly et al., 2008). By addressing key motivators and hygiene factors, superintendents and boards
of education can better hope to retain skilled teachers, and in the process, improve levels of success for their students as well as for their districts.

**Recommendations for Rural Principals**

Experts have repeatedly found that principals are uniquely positioned to impact the levels of support felt by new teachers as well as the collective morale experienced by school faculties (Brown & Wynn, 2018; Hasselquist et al., 2017; Kardos et al., 2001; Mertler, 2002). The findings of this current study align with previous research (Brown & Wynn, 2018; Kilmer et al., 2017) and provide the basis for three recommendations that principals should pursue in order to slow the rate of teacher retention. First, because of their proximity, principals should establish purposeful plans for connecting with inexperienced educators. Rather than passively prioritizing availability by staying in their offices, effective school principals should embrace active strategies for relationship building. By making themselves visible in hallways, stopping by classrooms on a regular basis, and asking new teachers about their families and personal interests, principals can intentionally build authentic relationships with new staff members (Kardos et al., 2001). Additionally, principals should look for specific opportunities to validate the efforts of novice educators. Because of the varied challenges faced by new teachers when beginning their careers, principals should use well-placed handwritten notes, emails, and phone calls to build relationships and communicate support. While appreciated by educators at the time of delivery, the actions also have the potential to accelerate the development of confident and empowered educators.

Second, although novice teachers have much to learn, principals should immediately go about involving them in collective endeavors (Davis & Wilson, 2000).
Because inexperienced educators often enter the profession with enthusiasm and innovative instructional ideas, principals should seek to include their voices when making key decisions. By asking new teachers to serve on hiring committees, provide professional development opportunities (Burkhauser, 2017), and create personalized academic programs, principals can quicken the rate at which new teachers become invested in rural districts. Finally, principals should encourage the collective efforts of staff members in supporting inexperienced educators (Johnson, 2006). At an informal level, principals should recognize that established instructors might feel threatened by new teachers, and they should encourage their veteran colleagues to communicate patience and care. Furthermore, principals need to understand that their encouragement can significantly influence the effectiveness of formal new teacher support structures. Although often implemented by faculty members in rural organizations, principals have the ability to influence the oversight and resources associated with instructional coaching, mentoring, professional development, and teacher leadership in powerful ways. If it is clear to others that principals do not value supporting new teachers, it is unlikely that districts will realize their full potential when it comes to retaining skilled employees (Kohm & Nance, 2009; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009).

**Recommendations for Rural K-12 Educators**

As indicated by the findings of this study, new teacher support must not be seen solely as the work of school administrators, but it must, instead, be embraced as a collective responsibility of all K-12 educators (Brown & Wynn, 2007). For that reason, this study provides two recommendations for faculty members. First, experienced teachers should establish committees focused specifically on welcoming and celebrating
inexperienced colleagues. While the groups could be created by buildings, collective bargaining units, or loose associations of caring coworkers, their efforts should be centered on finding practical ways to express support. For example, by taking new teachers out to lunch, stopping by their classrooms, and celebrating life events like birthdays, weddings, or the birth of children, colleagues can better hope to nurture warm work environments (Kardos et al., 2001).

Second, K-12 educators should embrace structural opportunities to assist newly hired faculty members. While certified administrators working in rural schools might provide the formal oversight of induction systems, practicing teachers are often asked to supply the actual coaching, mentoring, and professional development services. Rather than to view the opportunities as additional work responsibilities, veteran educators should see them as chances to hone their own leadership skills, and more importantly, to share their craft knowledge with instructors new to the profession (Nolan & Palazzo, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). When examined collectively, the two recommendations for K-12 educators highlight the reality that while administrators can impact the climate of organizations, culture is ultimately co-constructed by all members of a school community (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

Recommendations for Leadership Preparation Programs

Because there are specific skills school administrators can acquire to better support new teachers, this study produced two recommendations for leadership-preparation programs. Acknowledging that it can be difficult to prepare leaders for the complex range of challenges they will face in K-12 education (Lynch, 2012), the findings, nevertheless, suggest that training programs should prioritize both learning that
is related to culture and relationship building (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), as well as give special attention to the needs of rural organizations. First, because research has consistently shown that teacher quality impacts student achievement more than any other school-related factor (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek, 2011), leadership preparation programs should emphasize topics involving teacher retention (Hammer et al., 2005). By engaging individuals in conversations and field periods centered on the experiences of novice educators, certifying colleges and universities should provide the explicit instruction future leaders need to better communicate administrative support. While the learning should not minimize the importance of topics like teacher evaluation, budgeting, and education law, the topics would give aspiring administrators practical strategies for retaining teachers, and in the process, provide meaningful ways of improving student outcomes (Carver-Thomas et al., 2016).

Finally, because educational research is typically conducted in more urban or suburban settings (Sparks, 2019), administrative training programs regularly highlight the needs of larger school systems. Even when problems are widely apparent in districts of all designations, solutions might differ based on factors such as size, resource availability, and geographic location. However, because a significant number of school leaders secure their first administrative positions in rural districts, increased attention should be given to the unique needs of smaller organizations. Additionally, because rural schools tend to have smaller leadership teams and higher rates of administrative turnover (Fuller & Pendola, 2018; Manard & Wieczorek, 2018), it becomes increasingly important that individuals secure the training they will need in K-12 settings while they are enrolled in college or university preparatory programs (Beesley et al., 2010; Hammer et al., 2005).
Conclusion

For years, studies have shown that teachers play a critical role in improving outcomes for students. More than any other school-related factor, experts have demonstrated that skilled educators dramatically increase levels of academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000), and they have even suggested that teacher quality influences the long-term earning potential of pupils (Hanushek, 2011). Despite, however, a general consensus that recruiting and retaining skilled teachers is essential to guaranteeing student success, an alarming number of novice educators continue to leave the profession within their first 5 years of employment (Boyd et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). While the unwanted turnover can negatively affect learners, it has also proven costly for K-12 districts that are tasked with attracting and developing certified professionals (Brown & Schainker, 2008). Aside from diverting valuable resources from academic programs to fund hiring practices, retention issues have also been shown to disrupt instructional expertise, collegial relationships, and healthy organizational cultures (Boyd et al., 2011; Brown & Schainker, 2008; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Moreover, it should not be assumed that attrition impacts all school systems equally. Research has indicated that hard-to-staff urban and rural districts are unduly impacted, and research has further suggested that turnover can reinforce existing levels of poverty and low achievement (Beesley et al., 2010; Carver-Thomas et al., 2016; Monk, 2007).

In hopes of improving the rate of teacher retention, experts have long explored the various factors influencing why novice educators choose to leave their positions (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas et al., 2016). While some findings have noted the significance of geography, compensation, and available resources (Boyd et al., 2011;
Guarino et al., 2006; Ladd, 2011), others have highlighted the need for new teachers to experience positive professional relationships and collegial work environments (Boyd et al., 2011). Furthermore, research has consistently shown that administrative support has the unique ability to limit teacher turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Of concern, however, is the lack of specificity that continues to surround the precise leadership behaviors new teachers interpret to be encouraging (Boyd et al., 2011; Brown & Wynn, 2007; Hammer et al., 2005). Compounding the ambiguity associated with administrative support, rural school leaders often lack the same levels of experience enjoyed by their counterparts in larger, more affluent organizations (Fuller & Pendola, 2018; Kilmer et al., 2017). Frequently assuming their roles with little formal experience, many rural administrators are forced to grow in relative isolation, often developing their leadership skills without the assistance of larger leadership teams (Manard & Wieczorek, 2018).

Because issues related to turnover have disrupted K-12 settings for decades (Ingersoll, 2002), rich literature has been developed around teacher retention, administrative support, and leadership development. Drawing on studies conducted in both public as well as private settings, researchers have explored the general ways in which leaders personally encourage employees (Boyd et al., 2009; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Kardos, et al., 2001; Mertler, 2002). Researchers have also outlined the approaches administrators often use to oversee programs designed to develop inexperienced colleagues (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kohm & Nance, 2009; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Yet while experts have probed the complexities associated with workplace motivators as well as hygiene factors (Herzberg, 1966, 2003; Maidani, 1991; Sachau, 2007), their efforts have, thus far, proven incomplete when
detailing the explicit ways in which school leaders can communicate support to new teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Specifically, when examining relevant studies in detail, three noticeable gaps in the literature appear.

First, when examining issues relating to teacher retention, studies have typically relied on quantitative methods for gathering and analyzing data. In particular, researchers have utilized information collected from different administrations of the SASS/TFS (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Shen et al., 2012; Urick, 2016). While the studies have been able to provide insight from broad populations, the nature of the methodology suggests that the literature might benefit from the more conceptual and descriptive approach of qualitative explorations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, because the majority of K-12 students attend urban or suburban districts (Copeland, 2013), few studies have committed the resources required to understand the needs of rural schools. Without acknowledging the unique characteristics of rural settings (Sparks, 2019), it is unlikely that the literature will be able to adequately guide administrators hoping to better assist inexperienced educators. Finally, although administrative support has been shown to slow unwanted rates of attrition, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific behaviors new teachers interpret to be encouraging (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2005). In order to better prepare future rural school administrators, leadership preparation programs would benefit from additional detail relating to how individuals can effectively nurture novice educators.

To investigate the leadership behaviors associated with educator turnover in rural schools, this study relied on a qualitative methodology to engage three separate focus groups in conversation. Using a series of open-ended questions with corresponding
probes, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators were asked to share how they had attempted to retain teachers new to the profession. With the literature relating to teacher retention as well as to the concepts associated with Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory as its foundation, this study was guided by three separate research questions. After collecting data on the challenges to retaining new teachers as well as on the leadership behaviors and support systems employed by rural school leaders, two cycles of open coding were used to categorize key words and concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). Ultimately, 11 themes, with a total of 13 subthemes emerged, each detailing priorities associated with limiting attrition in schools.

Acknowledging that rural settings often present distinctive challenges to retaining skilled educators, the participants regularly identified geography as a barrier to longevity. Stressing that isolation and limited opportunities could come with working in small schools, the participants emphasized the need to surround inexperienced faculty members with supportive colleagues and warm work cultures. Additionally, the participants from each of the focus groups identified compensation as a barrier, and the superintendents reported working with their local boards of education on offering contractual incentives connected with residency. After outlining obstacles to teacher retention, the participants talked about specific behaviors they had employed to communicate support. Beginning by making upfront investments in the hiring process, the participants discussed the importance of selecting with intentionality. Once new teachers had accepted offers of employment, the school leaders shared ways in which they encouraged relationship building, involved colleagues in meaningful organizational endeavors, and celebrated both their personal as well as their professional accomplishments. Finally, the
superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators detailed their involvement in existing programs and support systems designed to assist novice educators. From coaching to mentoring to professional development, the participants reinforced a commitment to nurturing growth and mastery. While feedback was identified as essential, the leaders repeatedly stressed the need affirm and validate the efforts of new teachers during their first years of employment.

In analyzing the themes and subthemes that arose from the coding process, three key findings emerged. First, skilled school leaders recognize the need to establish authentic relationships with new teachers. However, rather than passively wait for connections to occur, supportive administrators use active strategies for engaging with novice educators. Second, support must be viewed as a collective responsibility. Because new employees are faced with challenges relating to interpersonal relationships, instructional methodologies, and complex cultural norms, encouragement must be embraced as a shared endeavor. Although certified school administrators have important roles to play in supporting new teachers, efforts are magnified when all educators invest in the success of inexperienced colleagues. Third, ongoing affirmation and validation lay the groundwork for future empowerment. While it can be tempting for leaders to focus on providing corrective feedback to new teachers, the participants repeatedly drew attention to the power of praise in encouraging novice educators to innovate, take chances, and find their professional voices. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized to represent the experiences of all school leaders working in K-12 settings, they do provide recommendations for both future research as well as for practice.
To further explore the literature relating to teacher retention, individuals might consider conducting research using the same methodology in urban and suburban districts. By analyzing data from additional school leaders, researchers would have the opportunity to compare findings across a wider range of systems. If distinct themes emerged, experts might be able to construct a collection of leadership behaviors specific to rural settings. Further, because schools are complex organizations, future research could engage first-year educators, additional groups of administrators, and school board members in open-ended conversations that are related to teacher retention. Because each of the groups have particular roles to play in academic settings, similar studies could probe the different ways in which the different stakeholders influence teacher turnover.

Research has consistently shown that administrative support is essential when enhancing job satisfaction and increasing rates of teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Ladd, 2011). Yet, beyond general conceptions of new teacher support, school leaders need specific, actionable strategies for providing encouragement and assistance to novice educators. Ultimately, the findings of this study produced separate sets of recommendations for superintendents, principals, K-12 educators, and leadership preparation programs. Recognizing that rural school superintendents enjoy a proximity to new teachers that is often absent in larger organizations, chief school officers should find ways to establish personal relationships with new employees (Copeland, 2013). Additionally, superintendents should use their unique positions to connect novice educators with other individuals (Björk et al., 2014), and engage leadership teams in conversations centered on intentionally supporting inexperienced instructors (Peel & McCary, 1999).
Working in concert with superintendents, principals should develop purposeful plans for limiting attrition. By prioritizing visibility, performing frequent check-ins, and immediately involving new teachers in collective endeavors (Davis & Wilson, 2000), principals can nurture work environments that embrace new members (Johnson, 2006). Relatedly, K-12 educators should welcome the opportunity to foster collegial school cultures. In addition to adopting the mindset of shared support (Brown & Wynn, 2007), educators should go a step further by involving themselves in committee work and support systems dedicated to celebrating and assisting new teachers (Kardos et al., 2001; Nolan & Palazzo, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Finally, because evidence suggests that expressing encouragement does not occur by happenstance, leadership preparation programs should overtly prioritize instruction focused on culture and relationship building (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). While the learning would prove useful for any educator, it would be of particular importance for rural administrators honing their craft as members of smaller teams in rural districts with higher rates of administrative turnover (Fuller & Pendola, 2018; Manard & Wieczorek, 2018).

It is hard to imagine a time when schools did not occupy central positions in developing children and youth. Recent mandates at the state and federal level, however, have only increased pressure on K-12 organizations, and in the process, raised expectations relating to academic achievement. With limits on available resources, schools have had to make difficult choices regarding personnel, programs, and services to meet their desired outcomes. While a wide range of factors have been shown to influence rates of accomplishment, nothing has proven more important than retaining skilled teachers who are capable of boosting student learning. When studying the significance of
educator effectiveness, Hanushek (2014) found that, “good teachers will get a gain of 1.5 grade level equivalent while a bad teacher will get 0.5 year during a single academic year” (Hanushek, 2014, p. 24). He went on to assert that “family background is not fate and good teachers can overcome deficits that might come from poorer learning conditions in the home” (Hanushek, 2014, p. 24). In short, the difference between having a skilled versus an inadequate teacher is staggering. It is unlikely that rural districts will fully overcome the established patterns of achievement without finding ways to better recruit and retain novice educators. By better supporting new teachers, executive leaders can provide the environments needed for rural schools to realize their full potential.
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Appendix A

Focus Group Protocol and Demographics Form

My name is Matt Frahm, and I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group today. I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College, and the purpose of this focus group is to learn more about the specific leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural school districts. During our conversation, I will ask several questions to the whole group in order to prompt discussion. However, there may be times when I pose follow-up questions to the whole group or to specific individuals. I anticipate that the focus group will last approximately 60 minutes.

Before we begin, I want to assure you that everything you say will remain confidential. You may be identified by position, but your name and school will not be associated with any specific comments. With your permission, I will be recording our focus group for the purpose of transcription and taking notes during our conversation. However, the recording and notes will be securely stored, and they will be destroyed 3 years after this study has been completed.

In order to facilitate an open and honest dialogue, I would ask that we respect everyone’s opinions, and that we commit to honoring the confidentiality of what is shared here today.

Are there any questions before we begin?

1. There are a lot of factors that contribute to whether teachers remain in a school district or leave the district.

Tell me about teacher retention in schools where you have worked.

a. Can you share your thoughts on any effects teacher retention has on school or student success?

b. What factors, if any, helped some teachers choose to stay or choose to leave?

2. Think back to when you were first starting out as a teacher.

a. Tell me about a school administrator, if you had one, who did or said something that made you wonder if the school was a good match for you.

b. Tell me about a school administrator who helped you feel supported. What do you remember about that support?

3. Why might inexperienced teachers choose to leave their positions in rural districts?

a. Potential follow-up prompts:
i. Salary
ii. Professional advancement
iii. Family or personal reasons
iv. Materials and supplies
v. Relationship with colleagues
vi. Support from supervisor
vii. Working conditions or school culture

4. How is a collegial or supportive atmosphere developed in your school? Can you give examples?

a. How do you determine “fit” in the hiring process?
b. How do you encourage staff members to support new teachers?
c. How do you help colleagues build positive relationships?
d. How might you support a new teacher who appears to be isolated from his/her colleagues?

5. How are new teachers supported? Tell me about ways you personally try to provide support for new teachers.

a. Potential follow-up prompts:
   i. Regular communication
   ii. Informal check-ins
   iii. Support for student misbehavior
   iv. Adequate teaching materials
   v. Smaller class sizes
   vi. Reduced course load or limited number of preps
   vii. Feedback on performance
   viii. Public or private encouragement or affirmation

6. What are some formal systems that are in place in your district? What is your involvement in providing the supports?

a. Could you describe the mentoring or induction activities that are offered to new teachers?
b. What professional development is provided for new teachers?
c. Is instructional coaching offered in your school?
d. What formal structures do you have for promoting collaboration? (E.g. Co-planning time, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), academic departments, grade-level teams, etc.)

7. Are there ways for new teachers to participate in school-wide decisions? How are new teachers empowered?

a. Potential follow-up prompts:
   i. Setting performance standards
ii. Establishing curriculum
iii. Professional development
iv. Hiring new full-time teachers
v. Setting discipline policy
vi. Deciding how the school budget will be spent

8. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked about?

Thank you very much for participating in a focus group today. If I have any questions when the transcripts of our conversation come back, I will give you phone call to clarify.
Appendix B
Demographics Form

Name: __________________________________________________

Which of the following best describes your current position?

☐ Aspiring Administrator
☐ Principal
☐ Superintendent

How many years have you spent working in K-12 public education?

☐ 0-9
☐ 10-19
☐ 20-29
☐ 30-39
☐ 40 +

How many years have you spent in your current position?

☐ 0-4
☐ 5-9
☐ 10-14
☐ 15-19
☐ 20-24
☐ 25 +
If you are a principal, what grades are offered in the building that you currently lead? Please select all that apply:

- [ ] Pre-K
- [ ] K
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3
- [ ] 4
- [ ] 5
- [ ] 6
- [ ] 7
- [ ] 8
- [ ] 9
- [ ] 10
- [ ] 11
- [ ] 12
Appendix C

Alignment of Research Questions and Theoretical Domains Framework to Focus Group Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory</th>
<th>Focus Group Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1</strong>&lt;br&gt;What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?</td>
<td>• Achievement&lt;br&gt;• Work itself&lt;br&gt;• Work conditions</td>
<td>1. There are a lot of factors that contribute to whether teachers remain in a school district or leave the district.&lt;br&gt;Tell me about teacher retention in schools where you have worked.&lt;br&gt;a. Can you share your thoughts on any effects teacher retention has on school or student success?&lt;br&gt;b. What factors, if any, helped some teachers choose to stay or choose to leave?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ2</strong>&lt;br&gt;What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?</td>
<td>• Recognition&lt;br&gt;• Supervision&lt;br&gt;• Relationship with supervisor&lt;br&gt;• Work conditions</td>
<td>2. Think back to when you were first starting out as a teacher.&lt;br&gt;a. Tell me about a school administrator, if you had one, who did or said something that made you wonder if the school was a good match for you.&lt;br&gt;b. Tell me about a school administrator who helped you feel supported. What do you remember about that support?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1</strong>&lt;br&gt;RQ2</td>
<td>• Advancement&lt;br&gt;• Relationship with supervisor&lt;br&gt;• Work conditions&lt;br&gt;• Salary&lt;br&gt;• Relationship with peers&lt;br&gt;• Personal life</td>
<td>3. Why might inexperienced teachers choose to leave their positions in rural districts?&lt;br&gt;a. Potential follow-up prompts:&lt;br&gt;   i. Salary&lt;br&gt;   ii. Professional advancement&lt;br&gt;   iii. Family or personal reasons&lt;br&gt;   iv. Materials and supplies&lt;br&gt;   v. Relationship with colleagues&lt;br&gt;   vi. Support from supervisor&lt;br&gt;   vii. Working conditions or school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>What leadership behaviors, if any, have resulted in higher rates of teacher retention in rural school districts?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td>What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Relationship with supervisor
- Relationship with peers
- Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4.</th>
<th>How is a collegial or supportive atmosphere developed in your school? Can you give examples?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>How do you determine “fit” in the hiring process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>How do you encourage staff members to support new teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>How do you help colleagues build positive relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>How might you support a new teacher who appears to be isolated from his/her colleagues?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Recognition
- Growth
- Supervision
- Work conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.</th>
<th>How are new teachers supported? Tell me about ways you personally try to provide support for new teachers.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Potential follow-up prompts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.</td>
<td>Regular communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii.</td>
<td>Informal check-ins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii.</td>
<td>Support for student misbehavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv.</td>
<td>Adequate teaching materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v.</td>
<td>Smaller class sizes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi.</td>
<td>Reduced course load or limited number of preps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii.</td>
<td>Feedback on performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii.</td>
<td>Public or private encouragement or affirmation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Work itself
- Growth
- Relationship with supervisor
- Work conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.</th>
<th>What are some formal systems that are in place in your district? What is your involvement in providing the supports?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Could you describe the mentoring activities that are offered to new teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>What professional development is provided for new teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Is instructional coaching offered in your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>What formal structures do you have for promoting collaboration? (e.g., co-planning time, professional learning communities (PLCs), academic departments, grade-level teams, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| RQ2 | Work itself  
Responsibility  
Growth  
Company policy and administration |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------|
| RQ3 | 7. Are there ways for new teachers to participate in school-wide decisions? How are new teachers empowered?  
a. Potential follow-up prompts:  
i. Setting performance standards  
ii. Establishing curriculum  
iii. Professional development  
iv. Hiring new full-time teachers  
v. Setting discipline policy  
vi. Deciding how the school budget will be spent |
|     | 8. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked about? |
Appendix D

Initial Email to Potential Participants

Dear _____:

As you may be aware, rural school districts across the country are experiencing difficulties retaining quality teachers. While there are a number of reasons why novice educators choose to leave their positions, one involves the support they receive from their school administrators.

To better understand the specific leadership behaviors that influence teacher retention, I will be conducting research as part of a dissertation toward an Ed.D. in Executive Leadership through St. John Fisher College. As a (principal/superintendent/aspiring leader) in the shared service area region, I was hoping you might consider sharing your experiences in an upcoming focus group on (date).

The focus group will involve 5-10 (principals/superintendents/aspiring leaders), and it will last for approximately 60 minutes. It will take place in the _________ room of the shared service area conference center, and you will receive a $25 gift certificate as a token of appreciation for your participation.

If you work for a central school district with a total enrollment of fewer than 3,500 students and you are willing to participate in the focus group, please contact me via cell phone (___-___-____) or email (__________@sjfc.edu) by __________. I appreciate your consideration and hope that you are having a great school year.

Sincerely,

Matthew T. Frahm
Educational Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY
Appendix E

Final Email to Focus Group Participants

Dear _____:

Thank you for your interest in agreeing to participate in a focus group involving leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural school districts. The focus group will last for approximately 60 minutes, and it will involve 5-10 (principals/superintendents/aspiring administrators) from the region. Participation in the focus group is completely voluntary, and the privacy of individuals will be maintained throughout the process.

The focus group will take place at (time) on (date) in the __________ room of the shared service area conference center. As a token of thanks for your time and participation, you will receive a $25 gift card.

Finally, I would ask that you read and sign the “Informed Consent Form” that I have attached and either email it back or bring it to the focus group session. If you have any questions about the document, please do not hesitate to call (___-___-____) or email (________@sjfc.edu).

Thank you again for your participation. I will give you a reminder phone call a day before the focus group, and I look forward to seeing you on (date).

Sincerely,

Matthew T. Frahm
Educational Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY
Appendix F

Informed Consent Form for Focus Group Participants

St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS ON TEACHER RETENTION IN RURAL SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK STATE

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural schools in New York State. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to explore the specific leadership behaviors exhibited by aspiring administrators, principals, and superintendents that impact teacher retention in rural K-12 school settings.
- Approximately 25 people will take part in this study. The results will be used in writing a dissertation to obtain an Education Doctorate (Ed.D.) in Executive Leadership from St. John Fisher College.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in one focus group session expected to last approximately one hour. The focus group will involve 5-10 participants and it will take place at the shared service area conference center in City, NY. Additional information regarding the focus group study has been provided in the body of this consent form. Once the focus group session is finished, no follow-up information will be collected.
- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk.
- You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study will help identify specific leadership behaviors administrators might use to better retain effective teachers in rural school districts in New York State.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION:

You are being asked to be in a research study of specific leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention in rural schools in New York State. This study is being conducted at the shared service area conference center (Street, City, NY ZIP). This study is being conducted by Mr. Matthew Frahm who is being advised by Dr. Marie Cianca in the Executive Leadership Graduate Program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently a superintendent, principal, or aspiring administrator in the shared service area region.
Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

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

You will be asked to attend one focus group lasting approximately one hour. The focus group will take place at the shared service area conference center in City, NY, and it will involve approximately 5-10 participants sharing a similar job title. During the focus group, several questions will be asked to prompt discussion. There may be times when follow-up questions are posed to the whole group or to specific individuals. The focus group will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription, and a scribe will be taking notes during the conversation. If participants do not agree to having the focus group recorded, it will not be possible for them to participate in the study. Once the focus group session has concluded, no follow-up activities will be asked of research participants.

We believe this study has no more than minimal risk.

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study will help identify specific leadership behaviors administrators might use to better retain effective teachers in rural school districts in New York State.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will receive a $25 Amazon gift certificate for participating in the focus group study.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included. Please be advised that although the researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researcher would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet or on a password-protected laptop in the researcher's office. All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researcher conducting this study is Mr. Matthew Frahm. If you have any questions, you are encouraged to contact the researcher at Street, City, NY ZIP: _____-_____: _______@sjfc.edu. In addition, you are also encouraged to contact the researcher's advisor with any questions: Dr. Marie Cianca, Associate Professor and Interim Chair, Ed.D. in Executive Leadership: _____-_____: _______@sjfc.edu.
The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature:________________________________________ Date: _________________

Signature of Investigator:____________________________ Date: __________________

I agree to be audio recorded/transcribed _____ Yes _____ No. If no, I understand that no alternative is available, and that I will no longer be able to participate in the study.

Signature:________________________________________ Date: _________________

Signature of Investigator:____________________________ Date: __________________

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

Letters/Emails of Support

Hi Matt,
Below is my letter of support.

I am in support of Matt Frahm’s study. The urgency of retaining qualified candidates in rural school communities is an issue for our region of counties. It is my hope that this study will provide guidance and insight into best practices that will result in teacher retention for our rural communities. Leadership behaviors are at the core of all successful organizations, and the opportunity for us to gain an accurate understanding through Matt Frahm’s research will be a benefit to our educational communities. I look forward to learning the results of the study.
If you are in need of any further information, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Mr. Seaker,

I am happy to support this study. As the Superintendent of only struggle to recruit a stable pool of candidates, but we often lose teachers to locations at too frequently. Just this summer, we hired approximately 15 new teachers, psychologists and social workers. Through this most recent round of hiring, it has caused me to reflect on what we are doing well and what areas upon which we might improve to help retention. We cannot change our location, which is centrally located between there several institutions of higher education exist along with other amenities that we do not have in Seneca Falls. We can however change practices, which this study may provide significant insight into best practices that we would adopt. I am optimistic some of these best practices will help us promote our strengths to draw and retain high quality educators.

As the President of the can report that many of my colleagues are grappling with similar issues and could benefit in the same way from a systematic look at what we can do in rural school districts to retain quality teachers. Looking forward to learning more and to assisting in any way that I can.
Matt,

I am happy to support this study. As the Superintendent of [redacted], we lose teachers to [redacted] and other suburban areas on an all too frequent basis. Just this summer, we hired over 30 new teachers, psychologists and therapists, which has caused us to reflect on what we are doing well and what areas upon which we might improve to help retention. This study may provide significant insight into best practices that we would adopt.

As the [redacted], I can report that almost all of my colleagues are grappling with similar issues and could benefit in the same way from a systematic look at what we can do in rural school districts to retain quality teachers. Looking forward to learning more and to assisting in any way that I can.

---

Matt

As Coordinator of the Leadership Institute for the [redacted], you have my full support for this study. The area Superintendents report having difficulty finding and keeping quality teachers. It is a wide spread issue. All school districts could benefit from a systematic look at what they can do in rural school districts to retain quality teachers. Looking forward to learning more and to assisting in any way that I can.

Let me know if I can support you in any way.