

Leading Rural Schools: Looking to the Literature for Evidence to Inform Principal Preparation Programs

Brenda Mendiola, Yvette Bynum, and Philip Westbrook
University of Alabama

Abstract

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify challenges faced by rural school principals, strategies to address the challenges, and how the challenges and strategies can be addressed through the implementation of the 2018 National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs). The review yielded 42 studies conducted between 2006 and 2018. Major themes emerging from the literature include issues related to leadership, enrollment, teacher recruitment and retention, and school improvement/student achievement. Major challenges and strategies are aligned with the NELP standards and PSELs for use by those teaching principal preparation courses or developing curriculum for principal preparation courses.

Keywords: rural, principal, leadership

The purpose of this paper is to identify: (1) challenges to school leadership encountered by rural school principals, (2) strategies to address these challenges, and (3) how the knowledge of these challenges and strategies can inform principal preparation programs and better prepare future principals. Themes are identified through a systematic review of peer-reviewed published studies from the years 2006-2018. These themes are aligned with the 2018 National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs) adopted by the Alabama State Department of Education to show how rural education leadership issues can be embedded throughout the curriculum in principal preparation programs.

Perspectives

Perhaps no population in the United States can more readily identify with the dreams and possibilities offered by public education than the children attending our nation's rural schools. For many of these children, the only possibility for an education is through the local public school – often a single school located miles from a neighboring town or city. According to the 2013-2014 NCES Report, slightly more than half of the schools in the United States are categorized as rural with large concentrations in Texas, North Carolina, Georgia, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Alabama, Indiana, and Michigan. Many of the schools have small enrollments of less than 500 students. In Texas, for example, 459 districts meet the Texas Education Agency (2015-2016) definition of rural which includes enrollments of less than 300 students. In Alabama, approximately 599 of the 1,315 schools attended by 39.7% of the state's students are classified as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As shown in the 2017 report on *The Condition of Education*, approximately 36% of rural school children are attending schools with mid-low levels of poverty with 25.1% to 50% of the children eligible for free or reduced lunch, 34% are attending schools with mid-high levels of poverty with 50.1% to 75% eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 14% are attending schools identified as high poverty schools with more than 75% eligible for free or reduced lunch (McFarland, et al., 2018, p. 135).

Principals in rural schools encounter many of the same challenges and opportunities as their non-rural counterparts; however, research suggests that for rural school principals, the challenges are intensified due to location, size, and limited community resources (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016). Rural school principals may also face negative cultural and stereotypical characterizations often promoted in the media (Surface, & Theobald, 2014). Female principals may face even greater challenges due to gender discrimination (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). Although fewer in numbers, Pendola & Fuller (2018) found that females hired to lead rural schools in Texas tended to stay longer than their male counterparts. Overall, the challenges associated with rural schools often lead to higher turnover rates and shorter school-level leadership stability (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). As professors of educational leadership in one of the ten states with the highest enrollment of rural students, we recognize the need to apply what is known about the challenges rural school principals are likely to face and effective strategies to overcome them in the preparation of future school leaders.

Methods

The research method for this study follows Hallinger's (2013) framework for conducting systematic reviews of research in educational leadership and management. Based on a rigorous review of educational leadership and management research reviews conducted over a period of five decades, Hallinger proposed a high-quality framework with the potential to reduce "the gap between research and practice" (Hallinger, 2013, p. 126). We followed a series of structured steps closely aligned with Hallinger's framework.

Steps Followed and Data Sources

The steps followed in the method of inquiry along with the data sources used are described below.

1. Based on our stated purposes, three questions were developed to guide our review:
 - What unique challenges do rural school principals face?
 - What strategies address the challenges faced by rural school principals?
 - How can principal preparation programs address the needs of rural school principals?
2. The selection of studies for inclusion is guided by the realization that rural school principals face challenges and opportunities that may differ from those faced by principals of non-rural schools and that those designing principal preparation programs should be aware of these differences and seek ways to address them throughout leadership preparation programs.
3. We initiated our research utilizing the online search system Scout. Using the "advanced research tool" our search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2006 - 2018 selected because they include the period leading up to the 2008 revision of PSELS and through the development of the 2018 NELP standards currently being adopted by leadership preparation programs across the nation. Combinations of terms including "rural", "school", "leadership", "principal", "administration", "education", "challenges", "problems", "obstacles", "school", and "opportunities" were used in the searches. The SmartText feature was used to find similar results once articles were selected. In addition, we utilized the Google search engine and we searched specific rural education journals including the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and *Peabody Journal of Education* special issues devoted to rural education. Due to the variations on how rural is defined and characterized in different countries, our review was limited to those studies that include rural education in the United States of America. Dissertations, whitepapers, policy briefs, essays, grant, and project reports were not included in the review.
4. Studies were reviewed for design and rigor and entered into a table where date, author, study type, study content, and results (including challenges and strategies) were systematically mapped for each.
5. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included; however, an effort was made to limit studies to those focusing on school level leadership rather than the superintendency.
6. The data mapped in Step 4 were synthesized into themes and associated with corresponding NELP standards and PSELS (See Table 1).

Results

The systematic review yielded 42 studies including 18 qualitative studies (primarily semi-structured interviews); one ethnography; three literature reviews; 11 mixed-method studies using combinations of survey, interview, observation, and document reviews; and nine quantitative studies. The major challenges identified from our review along with evidence from research indicating strategies school principals utilize to overcome them are included in this section. A selection of studies from the summary table representing the major findings are detailed in this section:

- Rural school principals often play multiple roles, superintendent/principal for example, (Canales, Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Horst & Martin, 2007) and may lead multi-level schools (Parson et al., 2016). With little administrative support, some principals focus their professional development on cultivating their ability to make decisions without the input of a leadership team (Parson et al., 2016). This strategy gave school principals the chance to view their supervisory roles and responsibilities in light of their school's distinctive dynamics. Others shared leadership (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) and allowed their followers to take initiative and make decisions (Canales et al., 2008). One system designed and provided its own professional development for new assistant principals to socialize them into the rural context (Enomoto, 2012). Miller et al., (2016) reported some promising growth in principal's sense of efficacy, school climate perceptions, and leadership behaviors in a group of rural school principals participating in McREL International's Balanced Leadership Professional Development Program.
- Management is often the primary focus of the position leaving little time to focus on instruction (Browne-Ferrigno, & Allen, 2006; Parson et al., 2016). However, Beesley and Clark (2015) reported rural principals felt they had more influence over curriculum in their school than nonrural principals and less influence on the school budget. Targeted professional development is one strategy for changing the focus of work from manager to instructional leader (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Rural principals can benefit from professional development focused on building team commitment (Parson et al., 2016) with less emphasis on management (Salazar, 2007).
- Rural school principals often face geographic isolation (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Parson et al., 2016; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013) and the school may be located miles from the nearest town (Horst & Martin, 2007). Successful school principals built collaborative relationships with the school and community (Preston & Barnes, 2017), utilized place-based education (Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011), used cultural norms to form relationships with community stakeholders, and shaped a communal attitude among the students (Klar & Brewer, 2013). A tripartite approach beginning with specific training for rural school leaders followed by induction of new rural school leaders that includes mentoring and ongoing professional development is being utilized by one university to support rural school leaders (Hildreth, Rogers, & Crouse, 2018).
- Rural school principals face declining populations and low enrollments (Howley,

- Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Parson et al., 2016). Community economics may force graduates to leave rural communities for employment (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014) contributing to the cycle of population decline. Student transfers to cyber charter schools affects enrollment and shifts funding away from rural public schools (Mann, Kotok, Frankenberg, Fuller, & Schafft, 2016). Budge (2006) encouraged rural school principals to nurture a "critical sense of place" in students (p. 9). Linking student learning with actions to preserve the rural community's environment through place-based stewardship education showed potential for increasing student commitment to the community (Gallay, Marckini-Polk, Schroeder & Flanagan, 2016). Low student enrollment may change community demographics resulting in an increase in minority populations and tension over cultural norms within the community spilling into the school (Howley et al., 2009). Principals can utilize regional service centers to provide professional development on multiculturalism (Howley et al., 2009).
- Low enrollment creates challenges for school principals in their efforts to provide a wide-range of course offerings (Howley et al., 2009). Distance learning and dual enrollment offerings were two initiatives implemented to increase students' access to courses. School funding is often tied to enrollment and rural principals may see a greater percentage of the budget allocated to non-instructional expenditures such as transportation (Lindhahl, 2011). To prevent consolidation due to low enrollments, principals implemented collaborative strategies including shared services, shared administrators, traveling teachers, and distance learning (Howley et al., 2012). School principals should promote the positive aspects of smaller schools. For example, in a large-scale Texas study, students in high poverty small schools (primarily rural) had greater success on state assessments than their larger school counterparts, possibly due to the sense of "family" and community they offered (Lee, 2009).
 - Attracting and retaining high quality teachers is a major concern (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley, 2010; Howley et al., 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Monk, 2007) especially in math and science and for the most disadvantaged populations (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Persistently low performing rural schools may have even more difficulty attracting and retaining teachers (Rosenberg, Christianson, & Angus, 2015). Azano & Stewart (2016) assert that efforts should start in teacher education programs by preparing teachers for work in rural schools through cultural responsiveness to place and by providing experiences in rural settings. Other recruitment strategies include: alternative licensure, grow-your-own programs, relocation assistance, and financial incentives (Beesley et al., 2010; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).
 - Masumoto & Brown-Welty (2009) emphasize the importance of hiring the right people, placing them in the right classrooms, and providing frequent feedback and observations. Building the capacity of the current faculty (Barrett, Cowen, Toma, & Troske, 2015) through targeted and intensive teacher training is another retention strategy. Haar (2007) recommends low cost retention strategies such as being aware of teachers' needs, promoting a culture of trust and support, providing growth opportunities, and empowering experienced teachers through listening and the sharing of expertise. In Alaska, retention rates have improved over a period of six

years after the implementation of a state mentor project (Adams & Woods, 2015). Biddle & Azano (2016) identify a need for adequate training for all contexts (rural and urban) and a need to understand similarities and differences in urban and rural schools along with the diverse needs of each, in the context of place.

- School improvement efforts in rural schools may be hampered by misalignment between principal and teacher perceptions, failure to focus on the positive aspects of the school, and feelings by principals that they are alone (Sanchez, Usinger, Thornton, & Sparkman, 2017). Willis and Templeton (2017) cite teacher buy in, creating mutual trust, and limitations on time for collaboration as issues to overcome when establishing and sustaining PLCs in rural schools. Empowering teachers to do their jobs and arranging time during the day for collaborations are techniques used to overcome the problems encountered (Willis & Templeton, 2017). Rural school principals may find it particularly difficult to implement change necessary to turn around a low-performing school. Mette (2014) provides evidence that communication and support from turnaround specialists, strong district support of the initiatives, and highly interpersonal leaders able to change the school culture by using shared leadership and accountability can lead to successful turnaround in rural settings.

The evidence provided in these studies indicates that principal preparation programs structured around the newly adopted NELP standards and PSELs cannot approach leadership training with a one-size-fits-all approach. The challenges faced by rural school principals along with strategies for overcoming them should be supported by the curriculum. For example, preparing a leader for multiple roles requires a high level of competency in relation to NELP Standard 6: Operations and Management along with a strong focus on Standard 4: Learning and Instruction and Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms. The isolation of rural schools provides a unique opportunity for the development of an appreciation of place, a connection to the environment, and the creation of a school culture that reflects community norms (Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness). Rural school principals, in spite of the struggles they encounter, are challenged with helping their students achieve their dreams by creating possibilities for success through school improvement (Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement). See Table 1 for the complete summary of challenges and strategies aligned with the NELP standards and PSELs. The standards crosswalk can be found in the National Policy Board for Educational Administration NELP Building-Level Standards (2018).

In summary, from the literature we synthesize the challenges faced by rural school principals and identify strategies used to address them. These findings should be considered in conjunction with the NELP standards and PSELs in programs preparing aspiring school principals.

Limitations

This study represents a review of literature from 2006-2018. The researchers acknowledge that there may be research prior to 2006 that would inform the study and that there may be recently published literature that may not have been discovered. Search terms and parameters utilized for searches may limit the findings and other search terms and combinations of terms might yield different results. Including international studies, dissertations, and other published documents and reports would further expand the study.

Determining the alignment of results from the literature with the NELP Standards and PSELS was based on key terms and concepts surfacing from the literature that were also identifiable in the standards; however, the backgrounds and teaching experiences of the researchers also informed the alignment. Rural was not clearly defined in some studies and given that there are many definitions for rural, this was a limiting factor. Finally, the researchers recognize that the challenges identified in the study may not be unique to rural school leaders; however, how the challenges are manifested and the resources available for dealing with them are unique to rural school leaders.

Significance

With the increased emphasis for principal preparation programs to align curriculum and coursework to national standards for the purpose of meeting accreditation requirements, it would be easy to overlook the importance of studying leadership in the rural context. This study uses a structured literature review process to gather the findings from previous studies to identify challenges faced by rural school principals along with potential strategies for overcoming them. It is the first to relate the specific needs of rural school principals to national educational leadership standards and should prove useful for those designing principal preparation programs based upon the NELP standards and the PSELS. Since university preparation programs may not have specific courses devoted to rural school leadership, this study proposes an option for embedding rural school issues throughout the curriculum, mitigating the need for a specialized course if one is not possible.

It can be argued that principals in schools that are not rural face many of the same challenges as their rural counterparts and use some of the same strategies to overcome them. Does this diminish the need to focus specifically on the rural school principalship? Based on the challenges revealed in the literature, the researchers would say no. Instead, it is recommended that similar reviews be conducted examining the challenges principals face in other settings, urban or suburban perhaps. Common themes could be identified, and divergent themes noted. These discoveries could prompt rich discussion and dialogue in university courses. It is further recommended that in-depth interviews and observations of rural school principals be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of rural school leadership. Visits to rural school could shed light on contextual factors such as school size and distance from urban or suburban centers. An effort could be made to include only those studies where rural is clearly defined or the rural context is clearly described.

Each of the themes identified warrant more in-depth study. For example, studies about the impact on the community when schools close due to low enrollment would provide insight into the critical role rural schools play in sustaining the community. Studying the efforts school leaders make to prevent or delay consolidation of schools would shed light on the unique role of the principal in schools with dwindling populations. Expanding the study to include challenges faced by rural school superintendents could further add to the knowledge base, particularly since principals and superintendents are likely to work closely together in rural schools, especially those that are small. The literature suggests that rural school leaders face many challenges attributed to school location. The literature also reveals strategies that can be utilized to mitigate the challenges. The researchers suggest that these can be addressed through leadership preparation courses aligned with the NELP standards and the PSELS.

Table 1

Challenges and Strategies with Literature Sources Aligned with NELP Standards and PSELs

Theme: Leadership		Sources
NELP: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3		
PSELs: 2 (a-f); 3(b, h, g); 4 (e); 8 (a-e, h-j); 9 (b-d, f-h)		
Challenges	Isolation; geographic location; management demands leaving limited time for instruction; limited influence on the budget; serving dual roles such as superintendent/principal; expected to be an instructional expert in all subject areas; heavy workload; pressure to be visible and involved in the community; difficult to balance professional and personal life in small communities; stress placed on the family; loss of self-efficacy for principals moving from teacher to leader; relations with superintendent/school board; lack of professional support	Beesley & Clark, 2015; Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Canales, Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Hansen, 2018; Horst & Martin, 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Parson, 2016; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Versland, 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013
Strategies	Professional development focused on teaching and learning, culture change, and leadership skills; focused training on school-level responsibilities (Balanced Leadership Program); system designed in-servicing for assistant principals; freedom for others to take initiative, make decisions, and take action; time management training, stress management workshops; university partnership to support specialized preparation, induction, and professional development; self-evaluation and self-awareness programs, developing a support network; strong mentors; using technology for mentoring; using shared leadership; building collaborative relationships with parents, school, and community; using place based education; building relationships based on cultural norms of the community; practicing context-responsive leadership; placing emphasis on positive school culture and climate	Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Budge, 2006; Canales et al., 2008; Enomoto, 2012; Goddard et al., 2016; Hildreth et al., 2018; Howley et al., 2011; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Masumoto, Brown-Welty, 2009; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Salazar, 2007; Versland, 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Wood et al., 2013
Theme: Enrollment		Sources
NELP: 3.1, 3.2, 3.3; 4.1, 4.2; 5.2; 6.2		
PSELs: 3 (a-e, g, h); 4 (c-e); 5 (a-f); 7 (b), 8 (b-e, j); 9 (c, d,)		
Challenges	Facing consolidation; diminishing resources; graduates leave to find jobs and do not return; competition from cyber schools; tension over cultural norms due to changing demographics; limited	Howley et al., 2009; Howley et al., 2012; Lindahl, 2011; Mann et al., 2016; Parson, 2016;

	availability of course offerings; decreased funding for instruction; competing for students	Petrin et al., 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018
Strategies	Nurture a critical sense of place; provide multiculturalism training; utilize distance learning and dual enrollment; seek opportunities for shared services i.e. shared administrators and traveling teachers; promote positive aspects of smaller, rural schools; increase efficiency; help students create positive connections to school and community so they will want to return	Budge, 2006; Gallay et al., 2016; Howley et al., 2011; Howley et al., 2012; Lee, 2009; Petrin et al., 2004; Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018
Theme: Teacher Recruitment and Retention NELP: 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4 PSELs: 3(h); 4(e); 6 (a-g); 7 (a-g)		Sources
Challenges	Recruiting teachers; staffing high quality teachers; small applicant pool; large percentage of disadvantaged populations; difficult to attract and maintain math and science teachers; hard to attract outsiders; hard to attract and retain teachers in schools with a history of low performance	Barret et al., 2015; Beesley et al., 2010; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Howley et al., 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Monk, 2007; Rosenberg et al., 2015; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018
Strategies	Start by being more culturally responsive to place in teacher education programs and by providing more rural school experiences; conduct studies to determine rural equity gaps and develop equity plans; offer longevity bonuses and fees waivers for certification; develop grow your own programs, develop communities of practice and capacity building; provide intensive teacher training in math and science; offer frequent feedback and observations; practice deliberate hiring and placement of teachers; implement shared leadership; implement low cost strategies i.e. promote a culture of trust and support, provide opportunities for growth, and empower experienced teachers; provide mentoring for early-career teachers; involve teachers in the community; offer higher pay or incentives; promote positive aspects of the school and community i.e. relationships with students, safe environment, small class size; recruit teachers with rural backgrounds; listen to teacher suggestions for items such as competitive insurance packages, competitive salaries, flexible	Adams & Woods, 2015; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Barrett, et., 2015; Beesley, et al., 2010; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Haar, 2007; Musumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Ulferts, 2015

scheduling and flexible personal days, and state funded salary bonuses

Theme: School Improvement/Student Achievement		Sources
NELP: 1.1, 1.2, 4.3, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 7.2		
PSELs: 1(a-g); 3(b, g, h); 4(a, b, f, g); 6(a, b); 8 (a-e, h, i, j); 9(a-b, d, g, h, j); 10 (a, b)		
Challenges	Misalignment between principal and teacher perceptions, failure to focus on the positive aspects of the school; principal isolation; persistent low achievement, deficit attitudes, shifting demographics; student and parent apathy; resistance to change; high poverty, limited fiscal resources, funding cuts, accountability demands; difficulties in establishing initiatives like PLCs due to lack of teacher buy in, lack of; mutual trust, limited time for collaboration	Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Maxwell & Huggins, 2010; Preston et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2017; Willis & Templeton, 2017
Strategies	Improve school perception, provide targeted professional development, make necessary changes (staff and logistical), implement professional learning communities; set direction/vision, developing people, redesign the organization, manage the instructional program, provide recognition for students and staff, manage instruction by aligning resources and goals, establish trust with parents; communication and support from turnaround specialists, strong district support of the initiatives, and highly interpersonal leaders able to change the school culture by using shared leadership and accountability; demonstrate integrity and courage, focus and vision, expectations and data evaluation, resources and empowerment, role modeling, and collaboration	Horst & Martin, 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Maxwell & Huggins, 2010; Mette, 2014; Willis & Templeton, 2017

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