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JEFFREY S. BEYER

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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Daniel Hamlin, Chair

Dr. Curt Adams

Dr. Timothy Ford

Rodger Randle

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Abstract

Sociologists have long documented how social capital may activate resources that undergird collective efforts to achieve positive educational and community outcomes. However, many rural communities across the United States are in decline and have struggled with generating social capital to address school and community needs. In the literature, schools are often described as vital to generating social capital in rural communities, but few researchers have empirically investigated rural school leaders' perceptions of social capital. This gap in the literature is significant because rural school leaders are thought to have a central role in facilitating social capital in rural communities. This study investigated rural principals' perceptions of social capital by focusing on how principals describe the mechanisms underlying social capital availability in their communities, the quality of the social bonds between the school and community, and the level of closure between the school and community. The primary source of data was qualitative interviews ($n = 24$) with principals from different school districts in Oklahoma who were selected based on a stratified random sample of rural schools in the state. Findings suggested that linkages between schools, school families, and nonparent community members contribute to the availability of social capital. Differences in these community attributes also appeared to be consequential. In settings where school leaders indicated elevated levels of existing social capital, schools had social resources that could be leveraged to support school and community initiatives. By contrast, low purported levels of social capital were coupled with eroding interconnectedness and possible acceleration of declining conditions. Despite these differing characterizations, schools were consistently understood to have a primary role in generating social resources within the community. This study contributes to existing literature by using qualitative methods to advance knowledge of social capital from the

perspective of rural school leaders who are considered at the epicenter of many rural communities. It also sheds light on the interplay of school and community attributes that may contribute to differences in social conditions and resources in rural communities.

Chapter One: Introduction

The high school principal at JoDavis High School was surprised to learn that the annual homecoming parade would not travel down Main Street.¹ For the past 20 years of her career as an educator in this rural Oklahoma town of approximately 5000 residents, the homecoming parade was a community-wide event, and this news came as a surprise. Upon reflection, the principal commented on how she remembered elementary-age students lining the street to watch the high school band, football team, and homecoming court travel down Main Street surrounded by what seemed like the entire town. The annual homecoming parade was a town tradition that seemed as reliable as the brick pavers on which it traveled. However, this year, the route would change for the first time in the rural town's history. The parade course change was considerable because homecoming had long represented an important social event that joined the school and community in celebration of their small-town public school.

For this year's seniors and graduating classes in the foreseeable future, the homecoming parade's new route would be a brief circling of the high school parking lot. Even though the pathway change did not drastically affect the school's homecoming celebration itself, the route's alteration signaled a loosening of the relationship between the school and town. The parade's fundamentals would be present—the band would still play the school's fight song, student groups would march together, and the homecoming court would be honored. However, instead of community-lined streets, spectators would line the high school parking lot's perimeter, and the band, parade floats, student groups, and athletic teams would circumnavigate the asphalt lot. According to the principal at JoDavis, the location change was not because of road closures or

¹ A pseudonym is used for confidentiality. The information in the introduction chapter originated from a pilot qualitative study I conducted in 2019.

downtown construction but instead represented an eroding level of cohesion between the school and the town. The ostensive separation between the school and community was underscored by the new route, which no longer traveled through the heart of the town. Once the fall semester's *marque*, the community's involvement in the homecoming parade had been reduced to a level that no longer justified the city's closure of Main Street.

The principal of JoDavis High School described that over her 20 years as a teacher and administrator in her hometown, the way parents and the school interacted changed. She recalled times when, as a teacher, they accessed in-community resources from families and described a sense of direct partnership between her students' families, nonparent community members, and her efforts as a classroom teacher. However, similar to participants in this study, the environment around JoDavis Public School was not the same. In a rural town with a history of shared bonds with the school, the principal of JoDavis felt that changes in social cohesion hindered the school's ability to educate students by separating the school from desperately needed in-community social and material resources.

The new location of the homecoming parade appears to be emblematic of shifts within the rural town that reveal a diminishing of relational interconnectedness between the school and community. The weakening of public support mirrored the overall conditions of the town's downtown. Most of the once-prosperous businesses were gone, leaving behind two- and three-story brick and rock buildings boarded up and abandoned. The adjacent streets, lined with older homes, were as dilapidated as the Main Street buildings. The community decline and the loosening of links between school and community observed in the case of JoDavis is emblematic of many rural communities across the United States. The empty downtown buildings and dilapidated neighborhood homes around Main Street reflect ongoing transformations that have

become commonplace in rural locales. However, rural areas are not monolithic, and social conditions are not the same everywhere. While some communities experience decline, other rural communities remain strong, maintaining close ties among schools, families, and communities.

Rural Schools and Communities

Given such divergent trends, some scholars have argued that public schools are the lifeblood of rural towns across the United States (DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2002; Lyson, 2005). Homecoming parades, Friday night football games, school banquets, concerts, musicals, plays, and other activities are not only school-wide events but are extensions of the local community (Reynolds, 1999). The interwoven nature of this relationship creates an affiliation that produces a shared community identity (Lyson, 2005; Reynolds, 1999). For example, even the discussion of separating the local public school and community can create controversy, and the consequences of school district consolidations are wide-ranging and have a multi-layered effect on individuals and communities (Brummet, 2014; Green, 2013; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sipple et al., 2019).

Many rural schools, detached from metropolitan areas, are situated within fractured and declining communities (Bushnell, 1999; Porter, 2018; Rural America at a Glance, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018). In these rural areas, children and adults confront challenges created by pervasive poverty, lack of health care resources, food insecurity, limited mental health support, reduced access to employment opportunities, and inadequate educational opportunities (Meit & Knudson, 2017; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Porter, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018). Surprisingly, mounting evidence on social and economic trends indicates that residents in rural areas experience these challenges at higher rates than those who live in urban and suburban areas (Rural America at a Glance, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018).

For example, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2018), in 2017 the rural poverty rate was 16.4% compared with 12.9% for urban centers (Porter, 2018; Rural America at a Glance, 2018). Progress toward reducing poverty in rural areas remains flat compared to other sectors, and as a result, rural communities face the nation's highest poverty rate (Rural America at a Glance, 2018). In comparison, urban poverty declined at a faster rate between 2013 and 2017, which increased the gap between rural and urban poverty rates. Another indicator of rural economic stagnation is flat employment growth. From 2010–2018, in rural and nonmetropolitan areas, employment grew 0.4%; however, employment grew at 1.5% in urban areas (Rural America at a Glance, 2018). In contrast, larger urban areas with populations over one million represented 72% of the employment growth between 2010 and 2017 (Hendrickson et al., 2018).

The economic stagnation in rural areas may result in decreased available financial resources and a contraction in nonfinancial resources (Mayer et al., 2018; Meit & Knudson, 2017). Moreover, when combined with reductions in rural populations, rural communities have experienced a subsequent drop in human and social capital. Human and social capital can be important for improving areas experiencing downward trending social and economic indicators. While attention has been given to human capital, social capital is also vital in rural settings. Social capital, which is embedded in the nature, content, and function of social relationships, serves a vital role in community development, school performance, and civic engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Coleman, 1988; Daly et al., 2014; Daly et al., 2010; Leana & Pil, 2006; Moolenaar et al., 2014; Pil & Leana, 2009; Portes, 1988; Putnam, 1993).

Further emphasizing the challenges facing rural communities, rural areas have lower percentages of adults with bachelors and advanced degrees (Sherman, 2011). Between 2000 and

2015, the urban-rural educational attainment gap grew from 11% to 14% (Rural Education at a Glance, 2018). This difference is compounded by the outmigration of young adults who tend to relocate away from rural communities (Gibbs, 1998; Sherman, 2011). Unfortunately, in most cases, these out-migrating individuals often possess the skills and characteristics that may be desperately needed within specific rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). As outmigration occurs, human capital—acquired and maintained by formal and informal education, work experience, and essential physical health drains from the community (Gibbs, 1998; Lin 2001). In economically depressed areas, developing and maintaining human and social capital is thus reduced because of limited access to education, employment, and health care.

Public schools are at the epicenter of many declining rural areas (Irwin et al., 2010; Porter, 2018). The economic transformation and outmigration of rural residents have led to changes in demographic concentrations as populations shift to urban and suburban areas (Irwin et al., 2010; Johnson, 2006). For example, the U.S. Census Bureau (2016) reported that 49% of the population lived in rural communities in 1920 compared with 14% in 2016. The shift in the rural economy, combined with a reduction in community populations, creates many social, political, and economic implications for rural communities and rural public schools (Hendrickson et al., 2018; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002). Rural schools are not isolated from their deteriorating context. Instead, theorists' reason that rural schools both shape and are shaped by the broader community (Allcott et al., 2007). Schools with limited access to social capital resources may accelerate the community's erosion in declining areas because of reduced social cohesion between the school and town. Conversely, social capital may be a tool for thwarting the problems of rural decline (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Green, 2013; Putnam, 2007; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006).

Theoretical Foundation and Prior Empirical Work

The theory of social capital can be explored from different perspectives. Although wide-ranging descriptions exist, the theory has been described as social properties that result in reciprocal actions. This description includes social structures through which individuals can access resources for social action or benefit from shared norms and values (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Dika and Singh, 2002; Lin, 2001). These social bonds strengthen opportunities to exchange social capital resources (Burt, 2000; Lin, 2001; Moolenaar, 2012). Both strong and weak social ties within relational social connections may enable knowledge transfer and facilitate collaborative problem solving ((Granovetter, 1973; Hansen, 1999; Uzzi, 1997). These resources may be material or immaterial (Erin et al., 2003). Bourdieu (1986) contended that these social resources are accessed through within-group membership and are used by individuals to leverage advancement.

Although scholars have held different perspectives on social capital, James Coleman (1988a), who sought to explain social capital's influence on the creation of human capital, provided one of the most influential explanations of social capital (Coleman, 1988, as cited in Foley & Edwards, 1999). Coleman (1988a) argued that social capital comprises three broad constructs: obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures. Directly, social capital is within the nature of a particular social structure, and it enables specific actions within individual members who are a part of the network (Coleman, 1988a; Foley & Edwards, 1999). Prominent social capital theorist Robert Putnam (1995) suggested that social capital is an aspect of communities, cities, and nations. According to Putnam (1995), social capital consists of social interactions, networks, norms, and trust. All these elements enable individuals and groups to achieve common goals. Putnam's (1995) perspective developed mass appeal because it provided

possible explanations for America's reported declining civic engagement (Dika & Singh, 2002; Putnam, 1995). Building on these foundations, Lin (2001) summarized different theoretical perspectives as social relationships with an expected return that may activate political, economic, and community resources.

Compared with other social capital research areas, research into school-level social capital in the rural context has not been extensive. Studies of school-level social capital include examinations of social capital's role in organizational performance (Leana & Pil, 2006; Pil & Leana, 2009). These studies suggest that social capital activates resources within relationships that increase organizational effectiveness by creating close professional ties, leveraging organizational knowledge, and building relational trust. Understanding social capital's role at the school and community levels may be helpful for rural school leaders seeking to address the challenges present in deteriorating rural communities. Rural communities facing economic deterioration may benefit from social resources for action and reciprocal norms and values. In these settings, schools still must achieve academic progress; however, degrading social structures may adversely affect advancement.

Among others, Forsyth and Adams (2004) underscored the apparent lack of the social capital's definitional and operational consensus (see also Glaseser et al., 1999). Forsyth and Adams (2004) found that shared trust was a valuable measure of social capital; however, they asserted the need to explore further the structural aspects of social capital and its contextual aspects within the school community. Social capital's conceptualization as a network structure with schools may not be well understood because of the complexity of the social environment. However, rural communities may enable more in-depth investigation because of the core role of the school within the community. The social structure of rural communities is distinctive in that

size and geographic isolation may contribute to the development of close-knit network ties, according to Allcott et al. (2007), who further found that community size may affect educational outcomes by causing interlinking. In some rural communities, social capital, as understood through closure network ties, may be a diminishing resource, which, in turn, could hinder rural schools' educational work and ability to generate social resources in their broader communities.

Existing empirical literature examining social capital in rural areas focuses on social capital measurement, civic engagement levels, or social capital influences on community attributes, such as physical and mental health, education levels, and community response to transforming rural characteristics (Besser, 2009; Boyd et al., 2008; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Fowler, & Etchegary, 2008; Liu, & Besser, 2003; Ziersch et al., 2009). Much of this literature is derived from survey analyses and community-wide case studies. Findings from this prior research indicate that close relational networks characterize rural communities, and to a certain degree, that this linkage is vital to both the communities and the school (Putnam, 2007; Reynolds, 1999). In some of these rural settings, scholars report that linkages exist that produce shared social bonds and other collective benefits. These reciprocal social resources are considered to have a multifaceted effect on the schools and communities. For example, research has consistently found interrelationships among social capital, educational outcomes, community cooperation, civic engagement, and relational trust (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Dika and Singh, 2002; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Lin, 2001). However, findings from previous scholarship offer suggestive evidence that social capital is rapidly declining in many rural areas in spite of its potential benefits to schools and communities (Besser 2009; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; DeYoung, 1989; Putnam, 1993; Putnam, 2007; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006).

Although a small body of empirical literature explores social capital in rural areas, few researchers have sought to understand the interplay between school and community in sustaining social capital in rural communities. This knowledge gap is worth addressing because public schools tend to be uniquely positioned in rural communities. Decreases in social capital in declining rural communities may negatively affect student outcomes, community engagement, and cooperation, and this situation may reflect a fracture in the interconnection between the school and community. In addition, school leader roles within the community may facilitate social capital as well as leverage existing capital. However, very few researchers have sought to understand how school leaders in rural communities view the availability of social capital in their communities.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

This purpose in undertaking this study was to investigate rural principals' perceptions of social capital, focusing on how principals understand the mechanisms supporting social capital resources, the characteristics of the social bonds between the school and community, and the level of closure between the school and community. Oklahoma is an ideal setting for exploring social conditions in rural communities. Fifty-two percent of Oklahoma's public schools are classified as rural according to the U.S Census Bureau; however, the national average is twenty-nine percent (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). Twenty-nine percent of public-school students attend a rural school in Oklahoma, compared with 15% nationally (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019). Consequently, more than half of Oklahoma's public schools are within rural communities, and these rural schools serve almost 200,000 students. In settings with diminished financial resources, social capital may play a role in supporting rural public schools. In general, analyses of rural schools are lacking in the

scholarly literature in this area of inquiry (Coladarci, 2007; Nugent et al., 2018; Sherwood, 2000).

To address principals' understanding of social capital, this study analyzed social capital availability and school and community closures in rural communities by exploring how rural principals explain network ties, social bonds, and partnerships within their communities. The study explored the following questions:

Research Question 1. *In rural-remote and rural-distant communities, how do school-level leaders understand the mechanisms underlying social capital availability?*

Research Question 2. *How do school-level leaders in rural-remote and rural-distant communities describe closure between the school and the community?*

A qualitative research design was selected because the existing literature on social capital in rural areas is largely derived from survey analyses, which may limit the ability of prior research results to describe complex mechanisms underlying social capital in rural locales. Furthermore, existing case studies generally have not investigated social capital at the school level. To explore the social conditions of rural areas in Oklahoma, semi-structured interviews with school leaders are performed to examine the relationships between specific rural school and rural community pairings in Oklahoma. The study randomly selected school-level leaders from different school districts for semi-structured interviews from the list of stratified rural school districts. From the database, twenty-four school principals were identified to participate in qualitative interviews ($n = 24$). Rural school principals were chosen for interviews because their roles within the school and community offer a distinct vantage point (Mette, 2014; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018;). As primary members of the community, principals are more likely to understand community expectations, interact with community members, and be accessible to parents and nonparent community members (Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014). Also, principals were

selected because limited research exists leveraging their perspective on complex social phenomena within rural communities. Principals from school districts within the rural-fringe classification were excluded because the classification includes suburban schools located on the edges of urban metroplexes.

Study Limitations and Contributions

Exploratory research into rural schools and their communities may highlight essential questions about the characteristics of rural communities in Oklahoma. However, the dissertation has limitations related to data collection and data analysis. As a result, the findings may have limited transferability to other rural, urban, or suburban educational settings or other types of communities. The information provided by the school-level leaders could be affected by response bias and recall ability. The participants' information may also be subject to possible limitations created by their understanding of the schools' roles in the broader community. Specifically, school-level leaders' responses may be influenced by preexisting expectations of their community's role in supporting the school's mission. It is important to note that social capital embeds social networks, and a particular individual may not desire to develop relational ties, which would limit their ability to provide insight into the social structures of the community. The development of social capital between a school and its community seems, to some extent, dependent upon school leaders with a facilitative governance style and the civic capacity of the community (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). This study does not review or evaluate the school leaders' capacities to develop and maintain social networks among community members. Importantly, this research does not attempt to explain why a specific community may experience adequate or inadequate levels of social capital.

Notwithstanding the study's limitations, the research may provide a glimpse into the social capital available within rural school communities. As critical community organizations, schools may play a central role in community re-engagement and economic development. When considering this facet of schools' positions within their communities, developing insight into social capital may illuminate influences behind stable and declining rural communities and create future research opportunities. Also, because there is a literature gap related to rural school-level leaders' understanding of community-level social capital, this study may develop an understanding of the quality of social structures in some rural communities in Oklahoma. This study's results may reinforce the relevance of developing reciprocal social networks at the school level, which may be necessary to pass capital improvement bond issues, improve academic outcomes for students, and increase community engagement within the school district. Finally, by interpreting the social capital conditions of specific rural communities, the research can help to launch a line of inquiry into potential steps to advance practices that increase social capital creation opportunities and possibly offset reductions in human and financial capital experienced within some rural communities.

Overview

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first three chapters provide the framework. Chapters two and three examine previous research on school-level social capital, rural schools in Oklahoma, and the study's theoretical framework. The ends of these chapters describe the gap in the existing literature and how the research may advance further understanding of rural communities. Chapter four presents the qualitative research methods and summarizes data sources, participants, interview protocol, and analysis. Chapter five reviews findings and groups them into four major themes. The first examines rural schools as the center

of the community and local identity. The second and third themes review school access to social capital and how schools contribute to the regenerative cycle of community attributes and social capital availability. The fourth explores the theme of declining in-community social capital. Chapter six concludes the study and includes a discussion of findings, limitations, future research, and potential ways the study may advance the existing literature.

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework

Social capital theory falls within the broader strand of capital theory (Farr, 2004; Lin, 2001). Rooted in classical capital theory and advanced by the neo-capital model, social capital is a form of capital like human and cultural capital (Lin, 2001). The term *social capital* first appeared within the context of education (Farr, 2004). Fostered within the pragmatism of progressivism, John Dewey (1900) included the phrase within his writings on school improvement (as cited in Farr, 2004). Although John Dewey's use of the term was not defined within his writing, the phrase encompassed his theme of advocating for the reconceptualization of schools as centers of community (Farr, 2004). Building on the concept of the school as a social and community center, the term *social capital* was explained in a 1916 text when L. J. Hanifan, State Supervisor of Rural Schools, published an article outlining achievement within a rural West Virginia community (as cited in Farr, 2004). Hanifan's call for a recommitment to rural education came when rural areas were under assault as cities contended for social and economic influence (Leuchtenburg, 1993). In this setting, Hanifan's (1916) *Rural School Community Center* cataloged how a school district leveraged the social outcomes of in-community interactions to improve one rural community's wellbeing.

While the theory of social capital has evolved considerably since 1916, it continues to situate well within the rural context. Rural communities and rural schools are distinctive because of their size and geographic positioning compared to suburban and urban populations. In these settings, the relationships between rural schools and rural communities creates an opportunity to investigate schools and communities' interrelated contexts. The study positioned the research within the conceptual framework of social capital to explore the nature and content of the association between schools and communities. Different perspectives theorize social capital, and

although consensus does not exist amongst scholars, the theoretical range of social capital may illuminate the relationship between rural schools and rural communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman 1988a; Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993).

The concept of social capital is not without criticism, and as a theory, scholars have outlined it with varying definitions and conceptual frameworks (Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Portes, 1998). This may be in part because it is a broad theory that attempts to explain complex social actions, which includes concepts like trust, community obligations, reciprocity, networks, closures, and norms (Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Leonard, 2004; Portes, 1998). Even though the social capital theory can be viewed through different theoretical perspectives, it can be understood to represent transactional exchanges developed through social relationships. Much like financial capital, social capital operates in the marketplace of social relationships and expects a return on its investment (Lin, 2001).

Studying the accumulated advantages of within-group membership and social structures, Bourdieu, Coleman, and others suggested that these social mechanisms explained individual and collective access to resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Farr, 2004; Portes, 1998). By developing concepts that sought to explain how the social economy affected other forms of capital, social capital became one of the most accessible and transferable sociological theories (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Farr, 2004; Portes, 1998). Advanced by the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Bourdieu (1986), and Coleman (1988a), the theory generated broad application and integration across many social science disciplines (Burt, 2000; Hawe & Shiell, 2000; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Citing widespread evidence indicating changes in participation and social linkages in the United States, Putnam (1995) advanced the theory of social capital as a measure of declining social cohesion. His research expanded the theory's

general definition beyond seeking to explain complex human relationships and gained appeal as a possible antidote to many challenges facing American society (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Burt, 2000; Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998).

Within the field of education, Coleman's (1988) publication, *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*, influenced the theory's application to educational research. Through his work, Coleman provided a theoretical framework for education theorists and school practitioners to begin viewing social capital as a possible contributor to school success and student academic outcomes. Also, as a possible component of improving student academic achievement, social capital's emergence coincided with increasing emphasis on high stakes testing and accountability (Goddard, 2003). National- and state-level education reform policies have emphasized human capital, such as educational attainment, content-specific professional development, and pedagogical training; however, developing substantial social capital at the school level has received less attention (Pil & Leana, 2009).

The Theory of Social Capital

Scholars have already done extensive work regarding the development of social capital theory (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Dika & Singh, 2002; Foley & Edwards, 1999; Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998). However, a brief definitional framework from the work of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam was typically included to provide connections to social capital research. Although social capital has grown in popularity since the 1980s, its foundation is based on the work of Durkheim, Marx, and others (Foley & Edwards, 1999; Lin 2001; Portes, 1998). As noted by Portes (1998), Bourdieu (1980) created the first comprehensive study seeking to examine social capital (Lin, 2001).

Chart 1

Definitional Framework of Foundational Theorists

Theorist	Definitional Framework
Pierre Bourdieu (1980)	Social capital is the compilation of actual or potential resources within group membership that individuals leverage to maintain power and enable advancement within a specific social context.
James Coleman (1988a)	Social capital is an attribute of social structure consisting of three constructs: obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness, enabling actions and resources unique to individual members.
Robert Putnam (1995)	Social capital is the aggregate of community or organizational social attributes like networks, norms, and trust that contribute to beneficial community outcomes

In his work, Bourdieu (1980) identified three sources of capital: economic, cultural, and social. His definition summarized social capital as the compilation of real or potential resources within group membership. In within-group membership, individuals gain access to social capital for individual advancement (Foley & Edwards, 1999; Portes, 1998). Coleman (1988a), who sought to explain social capital's influence on human capital creation, provided one of the most influential explanations of social capital (Foley & Edwards, 1999). Coleman argued that social capital was composed of three constructs: obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures. Directly, social capital was within the nature of a particular social structure, and it enables specific actions within individual members who are a part of the structure (Coleman, 1988a; Foley & Edwards, 1999).

Even though Coleman's and Bourdieu's theories differ, Lin (2001) summarized that both scholars held social capital as a representation of embedded resources within social relations and social structures that individuals can leverage to increase a specific action's success. Bourdieu (1980) contended that social capital, like other forms of capital, was developed based on exchanges of material resources or cultural knowledge. Based on its fungibility, social capital

was held by the affluent classes, which enabled them to maintain control of all forms of capital (Portes, 2000). However, Coleman (1988a) viewed social capital as less fungible because it exists in relationships between individuals and manifests as social norms that anyone can acquire. However, even though the two sociologists differed in meaningful ways, both hypothesized that social capital yields unique benefits that individuals and groups accumulate through connections to others (Portes 2000). Separate from accumulated benefits for individuals, Putnam (1993, 1995) suggested that social capital was an aspect of communities, cities, and nations. According to Putnam (1995), social capital consists of social life, networks, norms, and trust. Social capital characteristics have important implications for school-level leaders facing challenges linked with diminishing human and financial capital in rural communities. Putnam (1995) and Lin (2001) asserted that social capital's products enabled individuals and groups to achieve common goals; however, efforts to attain common objectives in rural communities may be hindered in fundamental ways when communities are in decline.

Rural Areas and Rural Schools

Rural schools and communities may also be experiencing a reduction in social capital (Besser, 2009; DeYoung, 1989; Putnam 1993; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006). By examining school and community social linkages within rural areas, information may emerge related to social attributes that describes the nature of the social bonds within some rural communities. Coleman (1988a) summarized the concept of closure as social networks that frame shared norms. For example, Coleman (1985, 1988a) explained closure among parents and children by stating that intergenerational closure exists when a child's friends in school are the children of their parent's friends. This alignment of social relations creates a network structure that forms the foundation of shared norms and results in an intentional community (Coleman 1985). Also, these

social relations develop forms of social capital within the community. When considering rural school-level leaders' positions within the community, they represent a possible conduit to understand the nature of social ties among families, nonparents, and public schools.

Network closure among school-level leaders and the community may be understood by the presence of social ties with families, civic leaders, clergy, and other members of the rural context. In these instances, school-level closure is achieved through obligations shared between the school-level leaders, students, families, and nonparent affiliates in the community. Having investigated the shared activity and bonds between rural schools and rural community members, the findings may contribute to the understanding of the fundamental mechanisms of social capital within rural communities. In rural communities, close-knit ties may be necessary to facilitate social capital resources and collective action (Browne, 2001). The absence of school-level closure may reflect fissures within the social structures of some rural communities. If disconnects exist, the gaps may result in reduced social capital resource availability for school-level leaders and insufficient shared education-centric norms between the school and community.

Like Lin's (2001) summation, Putnam described social capital as resources for community action. In some rural communities, social resources for community development may be critical. However, the possibility of declining social capital is not a new theoretical proposal. Garnering mass attention, Putnam (1995) declared that social capital was waning, as evidenced by dropping participation rates in civic and social organizations. Importantly, Putnam was not the only scholar to suggest this decline. Coleman (1988b) held this perspective, as well. Significantly, Putnam's (2001) view developed mass appeal because it concentrated on providing possible explanations for America's seemingly decreasing civic engagement (Dika & Singh, 2002; Putnam, 1995).

Rural Schools and Community Social Capital

Rural schools and school-level leaders are uniquely positioned within the rural community, which may provide a distinctive vantage point for exploring school-level social capital within specific rural communities. The concept of social capital was identified because scholars have theorized that social relationships at the individual and structural levels of organizations have reciprocal effects. Collective returns on embedded social resources may directly benefit rural schools that face multiple challenges. Specifically, understanding the nature and content of social connections between the school and the community may explain some of the reasons behind the conditions in some communities and illuminate the function of reciprocal social relationships between schools and rural communities (Coleman, 1988a). Coleman's concept of closure between individuals may extend to the organizational level as possession of cities and organizations (Putnam 1995). Putnam's understanding of social capital as possessions of cities and nations, as evidenced by civic engagement, may represent a vehicle to understanding the relationship between rural schools and rural communities. Coleman's concept of closure connects with Putman's concept of aggregating attributes of individuals to more extensive social organizations like schools.

Rural areas can be defined differently (Koziol et al., 2015). Using a place-based conceptualization of the term rural, schools for the study were selected using the U.S. Census Bureau's categorizations for rural areas in the United States (Koziol et al., 2005). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as fringe, distant, and remote. However, challenges exist within these classifications, which use population size, population density, and distance from urban centers to organize census-defined areas into categories and subcategories. For example, within the rural category's subgroups of rural, remote, distant, and fringe, consequential differences in

population, school size, academic outcomes, and poverty exist between the similar rural-distant and remote and the fringe subcategory. (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Koziol et al., 2005).

Furthermore, rural-fringe schools are similar in total enrollment to schools in urban and suburban areas, and rural-remote and rural-distant students have comparable poverty rates to students who attend schools within urban cores (Greenough & Nelson, 2015).

In distant and remote rural communities, the availability of social capital resources may be more prevalent because of school-affiliated relationships. Scholars describe rural schools as a critical organization in rural communities that may, in rural settings, provide a unique bonding agent to facilitate social structures that develop social capital (DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2002; Lyson, 2005). From this community standing, school leaders would have access to adequate social capital to advance educational initiatives through shared norms, expectations, trust, and material resources acquired through social relationships. Undergirded by social capital, some rural communities would seem better equipped to address challenges resulting from declining economics. In a community with prevalent social capital, school leaders may describe a unified approach to issues and challenges and a shared sense of community identity. They may also describe linkages between school, families, and nonparent community members that foster a collective understanding that the school and community provide an education for students together.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

Bourdieu (1980) and Coleman (1988a) used educational achievement to frame their social capital theories, and as a result, helped to connect social capital to educational research (Dika & Singh, 2002). Dika and Singh (2002) noted that much of the early work conceptualized social capital as norms rather than access to groups or organizational resources. The focus on norms and social resources led to studies that investigated the differences in outcomes among special populations like family, ethnic backgrounds, genders, and social classes (Dika & Singh, 2002). Research assessing social capital and rural communities typically measured social capital using survey analyses, self-reports, and community-wide case studies (Besser, 2009; Boyd et al., 2008; DeYoung, 1989; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Fowler, & Etchegary, 2008; Liu & Besser, 2003; Ziersch et al., 2009). Studies found that social capital is tied to community and individual identities, shared resources and information, community social networks, norms, information sharing, and trust. These social resources—the outcomes of social bonds—are essential to educational organizations.

This focus resulted in specific social capital studies within family and community structures. In addition to attention to subgroups and special populations, social capital within education has been viewed from an organizational level (Holme & Rangel, 2012). Specifically, researchers have sought to explain social capital's role in school organizational performance (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Holme & Rangel, 2012; Pil & Leana, 2006). Researchers have used social capital as an organizational performance element to explore factors that influence the effectiveness of teacher turnover, policy implementation, and information sharing (Chung & Koo, 2016; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Holme & Rangel, 2012). Research examining rural schools and academic outcomes, social capital and human capital, and rural school leaders and social

capital is included in this chapter to better elucidate the nuances of social linkages in rural communities.

Rural Schools and Academic and Educational Outcomes

Accurately identifying rural public schools and rural areas in educational research is complex and multifaceted because rural areas are frequently inaccurately identified, defined, and oversimplified (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Koziol et al., 2015). As a result, researchers examining rural academic achievement sometimes lack consideration of the complex landscape of rural areas, making accurate discernment of academic outcomes associated with rural schools challenging (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). In addition, Howley et al. (2005) contended that rural, as distinct from poverty and race, does not exist as a unique variable or, at best, wields limited influence when measuring differences between urban and rural. Notwithstanding the definitional and conceptual hurdles, studies continue to utilize available data to identify unique characteristics that may influence the academic outcomes of rural students.

Johnson et al. (2021) found that little peer-reviewed research exists that examines academic achievement in rural public schools in the United States. Although a small sequence of studies examined rural students' National Education Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, there is a noticeable absence of studies that measured academic growth in rural locales (Johnson et al., 2021). Howley and Gunn's (2003) review of research on rural mathematics achievement revealed that the gap in mathematics outcomes between urban and rural students ceased to exist after 1975, and literacy rates between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan students coalesced by the end of the 20th century. In a recent research study of rural educational achievement, Johnson et al. (2021) utilized achievement data of approximately 840,000 students in public schools in the United States, of which 180,000 students attended a

rural school. Johnson et al. (2021) found that rural kindergarten students start slightly ahead of nonrural students; however, the same rural students were behind their nonrural counterparts by middle school.

Whereas Johnson et al. (2021) identified evidence of learning loss during extended school breaks, recent NAEP data shows rural students outperforming urban and suburban students. Based on the 2015 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 35.6% of rural fourth-grade students scored as proficient compared with 34.8% overall. Similarly, rural eighth-grade students scored 32.2% compared with 32.7% overall. Notably, Johnson et al. (2021) stated that in mathematics, 39.7% of rural fourth graders and 31.4% of eighth graders scored as proficient; however, these scores differed by less than one percentage point compared with the other locales. Nonetheless, the comparison of NAEP scores broken down by urban vs. rural fails to account for suburban schools grouped within the rural-fringe category. More importantly, such standard descriptive comparisons do not account for sociodemographic background differences among students, such as supplemental education services, parental education, race, and other factors, that may be needed to derive valid estimates of rural achievement (Koziol, et al., 2015). Also, it is important to note that only 12% of NAEP test takers live in areas outside urban centers (Shakeel & Peterson, 2020).

Byun et al. (2012) discovered that 30% of rural students earned bachelor's degrees or higher compared with 40% of students living in suburban areas and 43% of urban students. In addition, they found that rural graduates were less likely to attend highly selective universities when compared with urban and suburban graduates and delayed entrance into postsecondary education when compared with urban students. Like other studies analyzing rural issues, Byun et al. (2015) found that SES mainly explained college attendance; however, they also found that

high school curriculum intensity contributed to postsecondary attendance. The findings emphasized that rural students who live in areas of high poverty may have less access to resources and college preparation opportunities (Byun et al. 2015). However, Schmitt-Wilson et al. (2018) suggested that studies investigating rural educational attainment may fail to consider rural students' postsecondary occupation aspirations. Schmitt-Wilson et al. (2018) found that rural students' occupational goals influenced their decisions about postsecondary education. As a result, studies reviewing educational attainment may need to consider rural areas' unique contexts before making comparisons between suburban, urban, and rural locations.

The Relationship Between Social Capital and Human Capital in Rural Areas

Carr and Kefalas' (2009) ethnographic study identified local public schools as a prime actor in the outmigration of rural young people. Carr and Kefala (2009) found that teachers, school counselors, and administrators engaged in a systematic process of encouraging young people they identified as potential achievers to leave the community. According to Carr and Kefala, the departures created reoccurring human capital reduction. As the process repeats, human capital within the rural community diminishes in significant ways. This is particularly difficult in specific rural communities experiencing deterioration. In splintered and declining rural communities, understanding social capital's role in creating human capital may enhance community outcomes.

The availability of social capital within the rural school context is critical to understand because research suggests a relationship between social capital and the creation of human capital (Coleman, 1988; Goddard, 2003; Spillane et al., 2015). In schools, social capital's role in creating human capital can be understood through academic achievement. Pil and Leana (2006, 2009) focused their research on human and social capital in organizational performance and

student achievement. Leana and Pil (2006) contended that social capital influences organizational performance by enhancing the relationships among members of the organization and the connections between the organization and external stakeholders (Leana & Pil, 2006). Continuing to question social capital within the context of education, Pil and Leana's (2009) empirical findings provided insights into explaining the multilevel and mutual relationships between human and social capital. These findings are important because they elucidate social capital's connection to human capital development in the educational setting. However, in environments where social capital is waning, efforts to advance human capital may be undermined by deficient social capital concentrations. Scholars have noted declining social capital levels (Besser, 2009; Coleman, 1987; DeYoung, 1989; Putnam, 1995; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006). However, conflicting findings exist for rural areas. Putnam (2007) and Rupasingha and Freshwater (2006) found that rural communities may contain greater civic engagement than urban communities because of similar community characteristics. For example, lower population density in rural locations may require collective behavior to provide community-level essential services like volunteer fire departments (Browne, 2001).

While some studies identify that close social linkages may be more likely in rural areas, rural areas are positioned within the national trend of declining social capital (Coleman, 1987; Putnam, 1995; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006). For example, Besser (2009) found that in 99 rural communities in a midwestern state, social capital, as measured as bridging and bonding social capital, waned from 1994 to 2004. Additionally, Besser (2009) established that bridging social capital advanced as economic indicators dropped between these two dates. The finding possibly indicated that increased reliance among community members might increase during difficult times (Besser, 2009). The conflicting studies heighten the need for additional

exploration of closure within rural communities. Also, this information is crucial when considering the level of social capital within rural areas and schools' roles within these communities. However, scholars have done little research to explore social capital within diminishing rural settings from the perspective of those embedded within a rural community.

Rural Schools and Social Capital

Understanding the nature and quality of organizational- and community-level social capital was vital to this study because schools hold a critical place in communities (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). In rural and other settings, schools function as places where people build collective constructs, provide means of civic and social connection, and possibly serve as sources of social capital development (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Green, 2013). One reason for these attributes is that school districts symbolize intangible features of their communities (DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2005). The interconnected nature of schools and communities is intricate, and schools may contribute to individual and community understandings of place and identity (Bushnell, 1999; DeYoung & Howley, 1990). For example, Hummon (1990) described how communities shape individuals' understanding of themselves and others.

Based on this understanding, schools embedded within communities may be among the predominant actors informing community and individual identities. This perspective reflects arguments against school consolidation. For example, district consolidation may be experienced as a forfeiture of group identity and belonging. Surface's (2011) qualitative study of a school district consolidation described how community members shared a sense of a weakening in community cohesion and social connectedness after the merger. Ward and Rink's (1992) case study explained how members of the town shared a loss of identity, local control, and proximity to the community's social center.

Similarly, Duncomber and Yinger (2007) reported reductions in shared trust, community interaction, and quality of life after school consolidation. However, it is essential to add that other studies listed positive social implications of school district consolidation (Nitta et al., 2010; Saxi, 2017; Self, 2001; Sell et al., 1996). However, regardless of the projected outcome of school consolidation, schools are central to the community and are critical to social bonds and community linkages. Another example of schools' unique placement in the rural community can be observed through research focused on school-level leaders.

School Leaders and Social Capital

Research indicates that rural school principals hold unique positions within their communities and are considered central members of their broader communities (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Consequently, rural principals are expected to be in tune with community expectations, be visible, and maintain an elevated level of accessibility to families and nonparent community members (Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014). As prime citizens in the broader community, they are also ideally situated for building strong professional relationships with the school and broader community. For example, small staff sizes allow for frequent interaction and involvement, which can, in turn, develop social and professional networks. Chance and Secura (2009) found that small populations and dense networks provided the antecedents of trusting relationships in specific rural settings, ultimately developing social capital resources. Even though school-level leaders are positioned in a critical role, scholars have done little research to leverage their perspectives to understand rural communities' social capital resources.

Rural school leaders are positioned to develop more trusting relationships because of the size and nature of rural communities (Chance & Secura, 2009; Preston & Barnes, 2017). In addition, rural schools, like other educational institutions, require multifaceted relationships with

the numerous stakeholders linked to public schools (Schafft, 2016; Zuckerman, 2020). For example, like in other educational settings, rural school leaders must rely on partnerships with families and other community members (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bauch, 2001; Irvine et al., 2010). However, few studies examine the nature of the social conditions within the school community.

The relevance of the in-community relationships is critical for student academic achievement; however, the absence of dependable relational bonds or social resources may have an unraveling effect on rural schools and communities. Understanding the nuances and distinctions of the social capital resource availability from the principals' perspective presents an opportunity to understand rural communities in more detail and explore social capital in rural, remote, and distant areas. As stated in Chapter One, the following questions guided the research:

Research Question 1. *In rural-remote and rural-distant communities, how do school-level leaders understand the mechanisms underlying social capital availability?*

Research Question 2. *How do school-level leaders in rural-remote and rural-distant communities describe closure between the school and the community?*

Chapter Four: Methods

Social capital in the rural areas may be important to understand because scholars have made connections between social capital and educational outcomes, community cooperation, civic engagement, relational trust, and the creation of human capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Dika and Singh, 2002; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Forsyth & Adams 2004, Goddard, 2003; Lin, 2001; Spillane et al., 2015). However, some scholars theorized that social capital's presence is fading, which may have implications for rural schools and communities (Besser, 2009; DeYoung, 1989; Putnam 1993; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006). Existing research on rural public schools and social capital at the school level in rural areas is narrow. Scholars have explored social capital resources using survey analyses and community-wide case studies (Besser, 2009; Boyd et al., 2008; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Fowler, & Etchegary, 2008; Liu, & Besser, 2003; Ziersch et al., 2009).

Building upon the existing literature, this study observed principals' perspectives on some of social of the mechanisms supporting social capital availability and school and community bonds in rural communities through qualitative methods. To investigate the nature of the relationship between rural schools and rural communities, a qualitative research design to possibly uncover the school-level leaders' perspectives on multifaceted social phenomenon in rural communities (Aurini et al., 2016; Martin, 2017). This study drew from qualitative interviews ($n = 24$) conducted with rural school administrators to record the ways in which they understand social capital resources and how closure manifests between schools and communities.

Study Setting

Oklahoma is a state with a sizable rural presence. Of Oklahoma's total public-school enrollment, 29% of the students attended a rural school (Oklahoma State Department of

Education, 2021; Showalter, et al., 2019). Compared to national attendance data, Oklahoma's percentage of students who attend rural schools is distinctive. For example, throughout the United States, only 15% of students attend a rural public school (Showalter, et al., 2019). However, Oklahoma stands out nationally and is at the forefront of rural school enrollment when aligned with surrounding states. Comparatively, rural students constitute 25% of students in Arkansas, 23% in Kansas, 14% in New Mexico, and 13% in Texas (Showalter, et al., 2019). The number of students attending rural schools in Oklahoma positioned this research study and provided context for exploring social capital within Oklahoma's rural communities. While most Oklahoma students do not attend a rural public school, more than half of Oklahoma's school districts are in rural communities (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021; Showalter, et al., 2019). Additionally, Oklahoma ranked forty-eighth in per-pupil expenditures, and Oklahoma's per-pupil funding may affect rural schools' ability to address academic and social outcomes (Showalter, et al., 2019). Depressed per-pupil funding combined with reducing economic resources may create unique challenges for geographically isolated schools and communities in Oklahoma (Mayer et al., 2018; Meit & Knudson, 2017).

In 2020, 15.2% of Oklahomans lived below the federal poverty line of \$26,200 for a family of four (Phillips, 2022). However, the poverty rate for rural areas in Oklahoma in 2020 was 16.8% (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2022). Compared with Oklahoma's 2020 urban poverty rate of 13.1% and the national poverty rate of 11.9%, rural areas in Oklahoma face a dramatically different economic landscape. In addition, 13.3% of rural residents do not hold a high school diploma, compared with 10.5% of Oklahoma's urban population (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2022).

Data Sources

To generate a descriptive study of rural public schools and their surrounding communities, participants were identified using a stratified random sample of rural schools created by using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, NCES, and the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Using a place-based conceptualization of rural, schools were selected study using the U.S. Census Bureau's categorizations for rural areas in the United States (Koziol et al., 2005). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural using three categories: fringe, distant, and remote. However, only rural-distant and rural-remote classifications were used because of the inclusion of large number of suburban schools within the rural fringe classification (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Isserman, 2005). This decision was supported by scholars who noted challenges in demographic comparisons and generalizability between rural-distant and remote when paralleled to the rural-fringe classification (Green, 2013; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Thier et al., 2021; Zuckerman, 2019). Moreover, to expand the nuanced understanding of rural classifications and rural communities, rural-remote and rural-distant subcategories were used to gain a perspective on social relationships in Oklahoma's rural educational setting.

Removing the rural-fringe classification kept the identification of participants to communities within rural areas of Oklahoma and removed the possibility of including interview data representative of suburban schools located near or within large metropolitan areas. The decision to remove rural-fringe data from the study was important because the potential random selection of a suburban schools would not align with the study's research questions and could result in novel responses compared to rural school leaders. However, because of the potential implications of the comingled suburban and rural data, a future study could examine the

inclusion of suburban schools within the U.S. Census Bureau and NCES’s rural categorization in Oklahoma.

The NCES definitions of rural fringe, distant, and remote originate from U.S. Census Bureau’s classifications. Rural-distant and rural-remote designations are defined as follows:

Rural-distant: a census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area

Rural-remote: a census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urban area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCES, 2006)

Within Oklahoma, 336 schools are identified as rural-remote and rural-distant. Table 1 shows the total number of Oklahoma school districts in each U.S. Census Bureau classification and the number of interviews conducted for each U.S. Census Bureau classification.

Table 1

Number of Rural Districts in Oklahoma

Census-defined Rural Territories	Oklahoma Districts	Number of Interviews
Fringe	58	0*
Distant	198	13
Remote	138	11
Total	394	24

Note: * The Census-defined rural territory classifications for rural schools in Oklahoma are from the NCES. The rural fringe classification includes suburban schools. As a result, I excluded the rural-fringe category.

Next, once the individual school districts were identified by census-defined classifications, the data were further refined to draw attention to social capital availability at the school level. To develop representation within selected the identified rural classifications, individual school districts were disaggregated into their grade-level configurations. By separating the sample into the school grade-level classifications, the participant selection

included a balanced combination of rural public schools within the rural-distant and rural-remote census-defined designations. From the grade-level list within rural-distant and rural-remote designations, 10% of the schools in each grade-level configuration were identified for participation in the study. Table 2 lists the distribution of respondents across the stratified sample and the number of interviews conducted at each grade level. Middle school and junior high school are combined because these terms represent similar grade levels and individual districts have autonomy on how they decide to group middle-grade configurations.

Table 2

Number of Rural Schools in Oklahoma and Number of Semi-Structured Interviews

Rural-Distant	Number of Schools	Number of Interviews
Elementary schools	171	5
Middle or Junior high schools	69	3
High schools	152	4
PreK–8th dependent districts	43	1
Total rural-distant	435	13
Rural-Remote		
Elementary schools	126	5
Middle or Junior high schools	37	1
High schools	124	3
PreK–8th dependent districts	14	2
Total rural-remote	301	11
Total schools	736	24

Participants from the stratified sample were solicited to participate in the study through direct telephone calls to each school site. District and school site office telephone numbers were retrieved from publicly available data listed on the Oklahoma State Department of Education’s

website. During the initial telephone call with each participant, a predeveloped recruitment script was used to introduce the study. If potential school-level participants expressed interest in involvement in the study, follow-up phone calls were scheduled based on each participant's availability

Twenty-four ($n = 24$) semi-structured interviews were conducted to develop the transcript data. Each participant represents an individual community, and no participants were from the same town or school district. The number of participants represents 3% of the rural-distant and rural-remote schools in Oklahoma. Table 3 lists the participants in the study and the ranges of school enrollment.

Table 3*School Type, Location, and Enrollment Range*

School	School Type	Locale	Student Enrollment
School 1	Elementary	Remote	80–100
School 2	Elementary	Distant	100–120
School 3	High School	Distant	60–80
School 4	High School	Distant	160–180
School 5	Middle School	Distant	160–180
School 6	Elementary	Distant	160–180
School 7	Elementary	Remote	440–460
School 8	High School	Distant	160–180
School 9	Elementary	Remote	220–240
School 10	High School	Remote	100–120
School 11	Elementary	Remote	520–540
School 12	High School	Remote	140–160
School 13	High School	Remote	40–60
School 14	PreK–8th	Remote	200–220
School 15	Elementary	Distant	140–160
School 16	Middle School	Distant	280–300
School 17	Elementary	Distant	180–200
School 18	Elementary	Remote	220–240
School 19	Middle School	Distant	80–100
School 20	Middle School	Remote	160–180
School 21	Elementary	Distant	300–320
School 22	PreK–8th	Remote	60–80
School 23	Elementary	Distant	420–440
School 24	PreK–8th	Distant	140–160

Table 4 shows the sample’s average enrolment, and the average enrollment of the rural-remote and rural-distance categories and Table 5 lists the demographic percentages and the percentage of students who are designated as economically disadvantaged. By the 15th interview, a consistent representation of the *a priori* codes and a pattern of emergent themes had

developed during the data collection process. However, the decision was made to conduct a second round of phone calls to invite school-level leaders to join the study. This secondary effort resulted in another nine semi-structured interviews. The nine additional semi-structured interviews continued to corroborate the previous interview data, and the pattern of *a priori* codes and emergent trends continued. After the conclusion of interview number twenty-four, no new trends or codes emerged during the transcript review and preliminary coding. At this point in the data collection, the consistency within the data signified that a reliable level of collected data existed (Mason, 2010). Table 5 lists participants' gender, years of experience as a public-school administrator, school type, locale, and school enrolment range.

Table 4

Sample and Population School Enrollment Averages

Sample Average Enrollment	Rural-Remote and Rural-Distant Average Enrollment
198	180

Table 5*Demographic Percentages*

School	American Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	Two or More Races	White	Economically Disadvantaged
School 1	40–45	0	0	1–5	1–5	50–55	55–60
School 2	0	0	1–5	50–55	1–5	40–45	55–60
School 3	0	0	1–5	50–55	1–5	40–45	55–60
School 4	5–10	0	1–5	15–20	5–10	60–65	55–60
School 5	10–15	0	0	5–10	5–10	70–75	75–80
School 6	40–45	1–5	0	0	0	55–60	55–60
School 7	1–5	1–5	1–5	35–40	1–5	55–60	45–50
School 8	15–20	1–5	1–5	5–10	10–15	55–60	55–60
School 9	40–45	0	1–5	1–5	5–10	45–50	75–80
School 10	1–5	0	1–5	20–25	1–5	65–70	50–55
School 11	30–35	0	1–5	20–25	1–5	65–70	50–55
School 12	60–65	0	1–5	5–10	1–5	25–30	75–80
School 13	35–40	0	0	5–10	15–20	35–40	65–70
School 14	65–70	5–10	0	5–10	5–10	10–15	85–90
School 15	0	1–5	0	50–55	1–5	40–45	65–70
School 16	15–20	0	1–5	5–10	10–15	55–60	75–80
School 17	1–5	0	0	5–10	0	85–90	25–30
School 18	5	1–5	1–5	5–10	15–20	65–70	55–60
School 19	20–25	1–5	0	5–10	5–10	65–70	70–75
School 20	10–15	0	0	5–10	0	80–85	50–55
School 21	75–80	0	0	1–5	1–5	15–20	75–80
School 22	25–30	0	0	1–5	1–5	65–70	55–60
School 23	15–20	0	1–5	5–10	5–10	70–75	55–60
School 24	50–55	0	5–10	0	0	40–45	95–100

Participants

Rural school principals, like urban and suburban principals, contribute in critical ways to the academic achievement of students and the overall organizational success of their schools (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Eberts & Stone, 1988; Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Supovitz et al., 2010). Rural public-school principals also face similar challenges to those faced by their

suburban and urban colleagues (Preston & Barnes, 2017). However, rural school principals seem to take on key roles and perform functions that differ sharply from those of urban and suburban principals. For example, rural principals hold a unique position within their communities—they are considered prominent authorities in their local communities (Mette, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). As a result, rural principals must be in tune with community expectations, be visible, and maintain a high level of accessibility to families and community members (Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014). As primary citizens in their broader community, they are also well-situated for building strong professional relationships with the school and community. For example, small staff sizes allow for frequent interaction and involvement, which can, in turn, develop social and professional networks. Chance and Sequra (2009) find that small populations and dense networks provide the antecedents of trusting relationships in specific rural settings, ultimately helping to develop social capital resources (Chance & Seguar, 2009).

Table 6*Participants*

Participant	Gender	Years of Administrative Experience	School Type	Locale	Student Enrollment
Participant 1	Male	3	Elementary	Remote	80–100
Participant 2	Male	5	Elementary	Distant	100–120
Participant 3	Male	12	High School	Distant	60–80
Participant 4	Male	2	High School	Distant	160–180
Participant 5	Female	26	Middle School	Distant	160–180
Participant 6	Female	20	Elementary	Distant	160–180
Participant 7	Male	16	Elementary	Remote	440–460
Participant 8	Male	28	High School	Distant	160–180
Participant 9	Male	5	Elementary	Remote	220–240
Participant 10	Male	16	High School	Remote	100–120
Participant 11	Male	5	Elementary	Remote	520–540
Participant 12	Male	3	High School	Remote	140–160
Participant 13	Female	7	High School	Remote	40–60
Participant 14	Male	28	PreK–8th	Remote	200–220
Participant 15	Male	9	Elementary	Distant	140–160
Participant 16	Male	5	Middle School	Distant	280–300
Participant 17	Male	8	Elementary	Distant	180–200
Participant 18	Male	2	Elementary	Remote	220–240
Participant 19	Female	5	Middle School	Distant	80–100
Participant 20	Male	5	Middle School	Remote	160–180
Participant 21	Male	4	Elementary	Distant	300–320
Participant 22	Female	1	PreK–8th	Remote	60–80
Participant 23	Male	25	Elementary	Distant	420–440
Participant 24	Male	8	PreK–8th	Distant	140–160

Preston and Barnes (2017) summarized that effective rural school principals take advantage of social capital within their communities to enhance their schools' educational opportunities. Social capital resources available to principals may be in the form of volunteer support, donations, local grants from their community, or local businesses support i.e., donated

sports uniforms, advertising, sponsorships, and providing volunteers (Anderson & White, 2011; Hamlin & Li, 2020). Shatkin and Gershberg (2007) observed a significant interaction between developing robust schools and building healthy communities. Specifically, they analyzed school governance models that initiated activism around school issues, which resulted in positive relationships between the school and the community. The researchers noted that a critical component was the school principals' facilitative leadership approach and civic capacity within their larger communities (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). However, civic capacity was subject to fluctuations, and as Putnam (1995) contended, social capital was a resource that could degenerate. In other words, like other forms of capital, social capital may be developed or eroded over time. In rural communities, it may be assumed that social capital was inherent to these settings because of the community's smallness or perceived closeness (Anderson & White 2011). However, social capital characteristics such as trust, access, cooperation, reciprocity, tie strength, and networks can be gained or lost because of rural school leaders' decisions and actions (Anderson & White 2011).

Scholars have noted that on-site work demands, and job-related stress may limit the ability to build a social network in some rural school settings (Combs et al., 2009; Klocko & Wells, 2015). Because of the demands of rural school leadership, some school leaders may find it challenging to develop and maintain social network relationships within the community. From performing human resource functions to driving a daily bus route, rural principals could be too overburdened to develop more formal network ties to the community. The multifaceted nature of rural-school leadership may create barriers to building strategic network connections with the local community. These work-related demands of running a school may limit the development of formal relationships in local communities. However, less formal relationships between a school

leader and families and nonparent community members may surface in the day-to-day activities of principals. For example, in both the pilot study and this study, participants noted meeting families because they stand in the student drop-off area every morning and greet students and caregivers every day. Similarly, others noted that while they drive a bus in the mornings, they develop relationships as they pick up students at bus stops. These experiences combined with everyday interactions with students and families place principals in proximity with the community; however, the administrative demands of their job role may limit the development of more strategic social capital networks.

Interview Procedures

The development of the interview questionnaire began during a 2019 pilot study of rural school leaders' understanding of the availability of social capital resources. The pilot study included semi-structured interviews ($n = 3$), and the questionnaire solicited similar codes during the data analysis of participant responses. Also, the participants were able to answer the interview questions based on personal experiences as primary citizens within the rural community. This identified attribute of the questionnaire was essential because, both the pilot study and this current research, intended to solicit school-level administrators' perspectives on the relationship between the school and rural community. During the research project's development, the questions were refined to increase attention on closure between the school and community. Also, cognitive interviews ($n = 4$) were conducted with the questions to generate insight into their characteristics and how potential interviewees may perceive the intent and format. The cognitive interviewee contributors comprised one rural, one urban, and two suburban administrators.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone, and each interview lasted between thirty and fifty-one minutes. Telephone calls were the most appropriate method to gather interview data because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the delta variant's significant rise in Oklahoma. Informed consent was provided through verbal communication before beginning each interview. Using a computer and speakerphone, twenty-three of twenty-four interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed using a program called *Happy Scribe* for transcription. Even though all participants agreed to allow recording, a momentary failure of the recording software resulted in no recorded data during one interview session. The recording software's failure was discovered near the end of the interview session, and at that point, handwritten notes captured the participant's remaining responses. After the phone call ended, interview data were handwritten based on recall of the participant's responses to the semi-structured interview questions. All handwritten notes were typed and included in the subsequent coding and data analysis rounds.

The protocols supported using a semi-structured interview process to collect information about social relationships. Semi-structured interviews were selected to solicit school-level leaders' understanding of the social structure of their communities because of the potential to produce rich responses. The qualitative interview format strengthened the data collection because participants could share their understanding of complex social systems within their communities. By assembling data through the participants' perspectives, the study's qualitative research methods and semi-structured interviews uncovered information from school-level leaders' points of view that may build knowledge of human experiences and complex social structures in Oklahoma's rural areas. (Aurini et al., 2016; Martin, 2017).

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing individual communities, districts, schools, and participants. During the transcription process, all identifiable school and community information were redacted. This step included deleting town names, school mascots, community businesses, and descriptions of historical events exclusive to towns or school districts. Each school and participant within the study was assigned a number, and then removed names from the study's dataset. School-level leaders, schools, and towns were anonymized using a numeric system when reporting the study's results. For instance, "Principal 1," "School 1," or "Town 1" are all within the same rural community but are tied to distinct positions, organizations, or cities. Even when administrators indicated they were comfortable with direct quotes attributed to them, numeric identifications were used to protect the identity of participants, schools, school districts, and communities. In addition to number-based pseudonyms, anonymity and confidentiality was upheld by creating data ranges to conceal school and school district identities as well as their locations. For some of the schools within the sample are unique, and without data ranges, deduction of school and town identities would be possible.

Appendix B includes the semi-structured interview questions used during each interview session. The questionnaire contains both descriptive and theoretical questions. The design of the descriptive questions intended to examine school-level leaders' understanding of social relationships between the school and the rural community (Aurini et al., 2016). These questions asked about experiences and perceptions of families, nonparent community members, and civic organizations' interactions with the school. Although overlap exists, the theoretical questions emphasize the school-level leader's role as a prime citizen in the rural community and attempt to explore social capital resources and closure within specific rural communities (Aurini et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

By drawing on the existing literature and the pilot study as foundations, the transcripts were analyzed for *a priori* codes and emergent data during multiple rounds of coding. The interview questionnaire concentrated on the description of nonfinancial resources and the nature and content of societal links between the school and the community. In preparation to examine the interview data, 62 *a priori* were identified from the literature. These preliminary codes are listed in Appendix C. The transcripts analyses looked for evidence of *a priori* codes identified through developing the theoretical and conceptual framework. Some of the *a priori* codes consisted of closure, community and school obligations, expectations, trust structures, shared time and relational stability, social ties, norms, and shared goals with the community (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Dika and Singh, 2002; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Forsyth & Adams 2004; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1995). The preliminary codes provided insight into the nature, content, and function of social relationships between the schools and their communities (Coleman, 1988; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Portes, 1988). The initial codes' attention was on social relationships and resources that might activate political, economic, and social resources to advance the school as an organization or specifically support student academic achievement.

An online dictation service was used to transcribe the interview recordings and replayed the audio files to correct any errors made during the digital transcription. Then, each interview manuscript was re-read, and identifiable information was redacted. Once the transcriptions were complete the files were converted to Microsoft Excel, which was used throughout the data analysis process to organize the transcript data. The transcripts were numbered and tabbed 1–24 to match how the study's findings were reported within Excel. A codebook was created during the literature review and each code was assigned a number. For example, Code 6 represented

"network ties between school and community," and Code 41 equaled "parents on school committees." The codebook allowed for coding to be efficient and provided a way to record codes during the different stages of data analysis.

At the start of the data analysis, all transcripts and notes were read entirely as a single block of information. Next, each transcript was studied individually and small and exact references to social capital availability and embedded social resources were identified using the codebook's numeric system. The first coding rounds relied on the deductive codes, and the cycles of re-reading facilitated observations, emergent themes, and additional notes about the data. During the first round of data analysis, the transcripts were organized with additional columns to correspond to steps in the process. The first round was not intended to identify major topics or trends but to recognize specific language from the participants, which connected to previously identified codes from the literature and pilot study. All 64 of the preidentified codes were recognized in one or more transcripts during this work. To aid in organizing the information, words and phrases were highlighted to draw out specific connections to the code list gathered from the existing research. Furthermore, in some instances, the highlighted sections of the transcripts were cut and pasted into new columns within each spreadsheet to capture important information.

The first round of coding resulted in a listing of concepts like "community events take place at the school," "the school is connected to churches in the town," "limited support from civic groups because none exist in their town," "principal described a sense of shared distinctiveness with community," and "principal reported a sense of distance between the school and community." Before the second coding round, these emerging concepts and specific codes were listed in an added Excel column labeled Round 1. In addition, notes and observations in

another additional column labeled Notes 1 were listed. Next subsequent rounds of coding were labeled Round 2, Round 3, Notes 2, and Notes 3. Finally, observations on which codes surfaced consistently across each interview question were recorded. This step allowed for observations of linkages between responses and added in the identification of divergent responses.

In the second round of transcript review, keywords that surfaced during rounds one and two were recorded in the note's columns. For example, word phrases like "a family...", and "we are a family," or "we are the center of the community," or "we are the community" were listed as keywords or phrases in the note's columns. The process of noting occurrences of similar words and phrases on each transcript led to increased attention to word use, phrasing, and frequency of similar words or phrases. Like in round one, this process helped confirm the main themes emerging from the data.

The initial rounds of the examination developed the organizational structure of the analysis and began to capture the data's emergent concepts, keywords, phrases, and codes. In the subsequent phases of the data review sought to develop subcodes by grouping by the initial codes, analyzing the developing concepts, and grouping recurring words and phrases. Drawing the codes together into groupings and developing subsets of codes helped create emerging themes. In addition to developing categories with supporting codes, codes and exact references identified in the previous rounds were assembled and organized according to emerging patterns. Last, the detailed patterns were recorded with the linked codes listed below each category during these steps.

The patterns were recorded on a separate spreadsheet and included notes describing each developing idea. The reoccurring patterns resulted in the sorting of transcripts into sections based on each participant's assessment of the social capital conditions of their school and community.

Using the groupings to compare similar and diverging responses contributed to the third round of coding in meaningful ways by providing a foundation for the final themes of the study. Also, this step allowed for a reexamination of responses and participant perceptions of social capital and closure between the school and community. Extracting patterns from the data allowed for a more in-depth comprehension of the participants' understanding of the relationship conditions between schools and communities (Charmaz, 1983)

With each coding round, a review of the transcripts continued to occur. Comparing the data with the *a priori* codes supported the developing understanding of the social conditions of rural schools in Oklahoma. Summaries were developed for each of the clustered transcripts by reviewing each transcript's final coded data and notes. The summaries included comments, notes, reflections, and a listing of the codes identified during the analysis. This step helped blend the information and identify patterns and themes within the data. Through integrating all three rounds of coding, four findings emerged, which are explored in Chapter 5. The examination of the data resulted in the following themes:

1. Irrespective of social capital availability, principals described how rural schools frame rural communities and are tightly tethered to the local community.
2. Some rural principals described school-activated social capital that was generated by synergism among social, civic, and religious groups.
3. In certain locations, rural educators and other community members decided to return to their rural hometowns, reportedly contributing to a regenerative cycle that undergirded social capital in the community and school.
4. Some rural principals recounted limited school-level access to in-community social capital. They felt that this situation heightened separation and isolation, and ultimately,

accelerated ongoing decline in their communities caused by the limited interactions with families and nonparent community members.

Chapter Five: Findings

In many rural areas in Oklahoma, educators work in deteriorating communities (Bushnell, 1999; Porter, 2018; Rural America at a Glance, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018). Disconnected from resource-laden metropolitan areas, the geographic isolation and the potential absence of social supports may amplify the effects of pervasive poverty, limited healthcare resources, food insecurity, inadequate mental health assistance, reduced access to employment, and insufficient educational opportunities in rural settings (Meit & Knudson, 2017; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Porter, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018; Woods, 2006). To support school and community functions in rural communities, rural principals are thought to have long relied on social resources and reciprocal norms and values between families and nonparent community members. It seems possible that in these communities, social capital's attributes of closure, community, school obligations, expectations, trust structures, relational stability, social ties, norms, and shared goals would be of importance (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Dika and Singh, 2002; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Forsyth & Adams 2004; Lin 2001; Putnam, 1995). However, changes in many rural communities may be eroding these social links.

By exploring these dynamics, the analysis of the interview data produced findings across a range of social capital characteristics within twenty-four rural communities in Oklahoma. The study sought to understand social capital availability and school and community closure in rural locations by investigating how rural school-level leaders each described social interactions between their school and their community. Specifically, the study's research questions examined how administrators understood the mechanisms supporting social capital availability and how they explained the level of closure present within their community. Qualitative research methods were used to extrapolate narratives of social phenomena within individual rural schools and rural

communities in Oklahoma. The findings provided examples of variations in the bonds between rural schools and the surrounding communities. Some participants portrayed declining social networks, which they viewed as a detrimental separation of the school from the community. Conversely, other school-level leaders described settings in which meaningful levels of closure with tight relational bonds stimulated social capital resources among families, nonparents, and community groups.

In some situations, the lack of interconnectedness underlined fraying bonds within communities once conceivably characterized by interwovenness. For example, in addition to the pilot study's illustration, a participant in the study shared that their next homecoming parade might not take place. The change of tradition was not caused by the pandemic's effects—the site-based conversation about canceling the parade started before the pandemic and was reportedly initiated because of waning community participation. Although many families linked to current students may have attended, support among nonparent community members was declining, according to the principal. The apparent fading of interest in the homecoming parade appears to be representative of shifts within this rural town that reveal a withdrawal from shared bonds between the school, families, and community. Deviations from past practices like homecoming parades and other school and community events may represent seismic changes within the fabric of some rural communities and expose possible mechanisms behind fading social capital.

However, other rural school administrators described intertwined actors within the school and community. In these places, school administrators may have unique advantages compared to communities with possible diminishing levels of social capital availability. The interlocked nature of these social relations may yield resources that school administrators may leverage to address the challenges resulting from poverty, isolation, and limited financial resources to

advance student academic and social outcomes. These rural educators seemingly find themselves bolstered within interdependent social networks which offer effectual levels of social capital resources and shared social obligations that may offset geographical isolation and economic decline.

Even though the following paragraphs cluster the findings by the emergent themes, which group schools into cohorts, it is important to note that the primary themes are not intended to be exclusive to a specific type or classification of rural communities. The findings did not categorize rural schools and communities into fixed groups according to the perceived extent of social capital availability or community connectedness. Though the findings identified rural schools with unique social capital characteristics, some participants within this ensemble reported downward-trending changes in specific aspects of their community's social relationships. Conversely, within the collection of participants who noted declining social capital, even some of their responses contained elements of social capital resource availability. Also, during the coding process, multiple themes emerged on single transcripts. For example, a principal might report a lack of closure within the community and describe waning assistance for the school yet describe how the community shared a sense of linked identity.

In addition, some participants described decreased social bonds but still defined professional success for themselves and others in returning and staying to teach in the rural areas where they went to school. This theme also emerged in manuscripts where school leaders described heightened levels of school and community cohesion. Additionally, an administrator might describe numerous relational ties between the school and community such as "everyone knows everyone." However, in the same interview session, they described isolated efforts to raise academic achievement amid declining attendance at school events and activities.

In this instance, the size of the school-level leader's community fosters the ability to know many if not all stakeholders within the community, but still, shared obligations and norms may be insufficient to achieve positive outcomes from the school leader's perspective.

The analysis of the transcribed interview data resulted in the development of four major themes. These themes suggest that linkages between schools, school families, and nonparent community members contribute to the availability of social capital. The following comprise the four major themes:

1. Irrespective of social capital availability, principals described how rural schools frame rural communities and are tightly tethered to the local community.
2. Some rural principals described school-activated social capital that was generated by synergism among social, civic, and religious groups.
3. In certain locations, rural educators and other community members decided to return to their rural hometowns, which reportedly contributed to a regenerative cycle that undergirded social capital in the community and school.
4. Some rural principals recounted limited school-level access to in-community social capital. They felt that this situation heightened separation and isolation, and ultimately, accelerated ongoing decline in their communities caused by the limited interactions with families and nonparent community members.

These central themes are not without limitations; nevertheless, they provide information about the nature of social capital availability and closure within specific rural communities in Oklahoma. Uniquely, by concentrating on rural school principals' understanding of their schools and communities, the findings expand the understanding of rural schools and rural communities. The findings chapter is organized into three areas. The first examines the theme of

the rural school as the center of the community and local identity. The second section reviews school access to social capital and how the school contributes to the regenerative cycle of community attributes and social capital availability. The third section explores the theme of declining in-community social capital.

Rural Public Schools Frame Rural Communities and Link In-Community Groups

All twenty-four participants identified their school as the community center or primary linking agent. In line with existing literature on rural schools' community positions, interviews from this study indicated that regardless of the participant's description of access to embedded social resources, shared norms and obligations, or the strength of social ties, every participant identified their school as their community's hub. Through the research questions sought to understand the mechanisms behind rural social capital and closure; however, the connection between rural schools and their communities emerged regardless of social conditions. This finding was supported by research examining rural schools and rural school consolidation. For example, the relationship between the community and the school is well established (Brummet, 2019; Green, 2013; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sipple et al., 2019). Rural schools' positions as hubs within rural-remote and rural-distant areas open an opportunity to understand rural social characteristics. The position of public schools' role within rural areas was why principals were identified to possibly advance understanding of the nature and content of the social capital conditions in targeted rural communities. As the town's center, a rural school may link their community and serve as an activator of social, economic, and civic action. These intersections of social and economic elements across the rural community may also help form and maintain a shared identity among different groups, and in a sense, join the community together.

Similar to the scholarship surrounding consolidation, the nature of the school's position within the community was apparent in the interview data. Again, regardless of each participant's assessment of the social cohesion around their school, the school was understood to be at the community's core. Most often, this description took shape through social functions organized by or in collaboration with the school district. For example, athletics, school-based organizations like FFA, school events like fall carnivals, and homecoming parades were portrayed as joining functions that bind the community across multiple layers of social and civic strata. For example, Principal 2, an elementary principal with five years of experience at their current school, concisely noted:

The school is the hub—everything in this town.

The school district in which Principal 2 works might be described as a location with possibly declining social resources. For example, when asked about assistance and participation from families and nonparents, he shared that he observed a limited desire to be involved with the school, which created a disconnect between the school and community. However, he still recognized the school as the center, with limited connections across the social landscape. Expanding on the rural school as the hub, this study found that the rural school's role near the center of the community was multifaceted, and it was not necessarily indicative of reciprocal social action. However, as a hinge point in the community, the bonds between the school and the community influenced each other.

When asked about their school's role in the community, Principal 7, who has been a rural administrator for sixteen years, shared that rural communities "thrive" based on what happens at their schools. The administrator went on to explain that the relationship between the school and the community has multilevel influence on rural communities. To explain, he stated:

When you are in these rural communities, these communities thrive based on what happens at their schools. And that is the center of most of these communities. So, for every one of them that I've been at, the school is a big basis for what happens. The school–community relationship has a ton to do with the morale in our community and within our district.

Principal 7 identified that from their vantage point, the linkage between the school and the community influences the intangible attributes of community. The school as the community's center may represent the opportunity to maintain and further develop shared relational bonds. In the case of Principal 9's school (he is an elementary principal with five years of experience), he conveyed that their community was close-knit, and strong associations existed across several sectors within the community. When describing the relationship between the school and community, Principal 9 framed it in terms of a shared culture between the town and school. He stated:

Our community does drive our school. They are very, very engrossed in making sure we have what we need. If we have needs, we have great support for our faculty from our community. It's really a unique situation.

During their interviews, neither Principal 7 nor Principal 9 reported any level of separation among the various community stakeholders but noted a clear sense of collaboration among families and the nonparent community members. They attributed the reciprocal relationship between the school and community to social cohesion and shared norms and expectations for individual and collective success. Their comments reflected the bidirectional interplay between the school and families, nonparent community members, and other local organizations. The understanding of shared prosperity may find its catalyst in links between the community members and the school as the civic and social hub. However, in some schools represented in this study, school-level leaders reported being the center while still being isolated and self-dependent in their educational efforts.

Even though the school was their community's core, some rural school leaders reported separation in social support for students with their fractured communities. For example, Principal 1 reported a lack of linkages to in-community resources, and explained, when asked about how parents connect to the school and cooperate with the school's social and academic mission:

I mean, nonexistent. We are free 100 reduced lunch. We are about 90 Native American, and it is almost like we run an orphanage.

The comments of Principal 1, who has been in education for fourteen years and has been the principal in their district for three years, reflected the role of the school as a prime actor for supporting students in the area. In other words, their rural school was the leading organization in terms of student assistance. Absent family cooperation created a school and community context in which, according to the school-level leader, students depend on the school for critical support that might otherwise have originated with their families. According to Principal 1, this included meals, clothing distribution, holiday gifts, and access to social services provided by mental health organizations and other rural nonprofit resource providers.

Similarly, Principal 24, who was in their eighth year as a rural school administrator, described the school's role within in the community in this way:

The kids that we serve would fall through the cracks. And there's so many things in their lives they probably wouldn't have. I mean, our families do turn to the school when they're in need. Because, again, there's really nothing here in the community. And again, we are not that far outside of Large City A and we're not that far outside of Medium City B, but where we are and for those families that come to us, there's not a lot of options and resources.

Principal 24's statement was in the context of what support the community might provide for the school and exposed the service-provider task this school fulfilled in their community. While some participants noted financial and social resources elements, this school leader commented that the school was the center of community support and held the town together. This theme was

replicated by several participants who noted that the school provided a safety net for students and the community by distributing food during the pandemic, providing access to social services like mental health providers, and opening doors for students to access academic opportunities.

One School and Community Identity

Similar to being the hub of the community, the study found that being the center of the rural community included elements of communal identity. All twenty-four participants conveyed a sense of shared distinctiveness linked to the school; however, only ten participants noted a strong sense of shared behavioral expectations that accompanied this mutual perspective. For example, like Principal 14's statements, Principal 7 noted a sense of longstanding identity tied back to the school; however, Principal 7 accentuated the school's role in linking common expectations for behavior. When asked about the source of shared community expectations, Principal 7 deduced:

I think it goes back to generations and generations of people through farming, the agriculture industry. Those people have been the pillars of our community for years and years. And their kids, a lot of their kids come home. So, we have generations of families that have pride in our school. And so, to me, that is why we have this situation that we have here.

The shared identity in some interviews took the form of a school mascot, and in other interviews, shared identity was conveyed through shared expectations for behavior. For example, participants might use the phrase "*School 7 Mascots* don't act like that," or a "*student name* will always be a *School 7 Mascot*." In communities with seemingly higher social capital availability, the shared identity shapes deeply embedded expectations for behavior linked to the school as a central social organization. Beyond aligning with a mascot representative of school pride, Principal 19 shared that the community-wide norms are influential when they stated:

I think there's very high expectations for the school as a whole, academically, socially, athletically—all the way around. Parents, community, our teachers—everybody here just holds everybody to a high expectation.

Principal 19's statements reflected her understanding that association with the school included a shared expectation among families and nonparents for specific behaviors that seemingly represented an embodiment of the community. The expectations reflected shared norms and obligations for behavior that manifested in shared community identity.

The obligatory relationship linked to a shared school identity seems to solidify the school within the rural landscape. Comparably, Principal 14, who has been in their current role as a PreK–8th grade principal for more than 25 years in the same community, shared the following perspective:

Our school is the community. The community is the school. We are one and the same—70 square miles [off] countryside and dirt roads and hills and creeks.

This statement reflects the school's central role in the community's social landscape. Principal 14 shared that even though students do not graduate from this school since it is a PreK–8 district, students identify themselves as the school's mascot even past high school graduation.

Nevertheless, Principal 14 offered evidence of simultaneously declining social capital. In reflection over their 25-plus year career, even though the school was a powerful bonding agent, they stated:

I think we knew each other better because there were more fire department events and local events for the community to come out to. And there weren't more things to go out of the community to do. And so, I think we became more isolated, and it seems kind of odd being in a small community because we are pretty close.

However, at the same time, Principal 14 shared that each year at 8th-grade graduation, they remind the students that no matter where they go, they will always be a "School 14 Mascot." The imagery of the connections to school pride and civic identity plays an essential role in

understanding the school's centrality, and the formation of identity plays an essential role in how rural school-level leaders describe their place within the community. This finding supports the notion that rural schools are the center of many communities, even including schools where school-level leaders reported declining connections among community members.

Across the interview data, regardless of the perception of social capital, participants conveyed a clear understanding of the arrangement of their own rural community. The local rural school, positioned as a hub, linked community groups and individuals through shared community events like parades, football games, vocal music performances, to the education of children and the reinforcing of shared community norms. The multifaceted nature of schools seemed to serve as a representation of the entire community. However, even though schools appeared to be affixed to the local community, evidence of social capital's attributes of shared norms and expectations, information sharing, and trust was not always present. On the contrary, in communities where participants described higher degrees of social capital, schools leveraged social wealth to activate networks among social, civic, and religious groups.

Rural Schools Provide a Foundation for Well-Functioning Social Networks

The following central theme revealed that some rural principals described access to social capital resources and school-activated social features that generated reciprocal relationships among social, civic, and religious groups. Further developing the positioning of rural schools, participants described the nature of the rural school as an essential mechanism for creating shared social bonds and active synergism among stakeholders. Importantly, participants in the study identified that rural schools bind rural communities in ways that may lead to increased social capital attributes like collaboration, information sharing, shared norms, and interdependence.

As an example of the activating structures schools provided, Principal 21, who has worked in rural schools since 2014 and was entering his second year as a rural school administrator, stated:

Without our school, there is no town, and there would be no community. We are the bonding force in the community. And I think that's why we have such great parent support. And I think our community realizes our importance as the school district and they know that without our school, there's not going to be Rural Town 21.

In this statement, Principal 21 shared details about a vital function in their local community. They explained that even with a shell of a downtown business district, the school maintains the connection point for the community members. He concluded that in the case of their school district, people stay in the community because of the school presence in the rural town. Principal 21's statements provide possible insight into the nature of schools' roles as prime bonding agents in specific rural communities and their places at the heart of rural areas facing economic decline. Further explaining, Principal 21 shared the following:

And that culture just continues, if that makes sense, because we keep getting so many people back in the school system and back in the community that they are here for those same reasons, and they've experienced it. And then they are raising their kids with those same types of values. And I just think it's kind of a cycle, like a lot of things in life.

The statements contributed by Principal 21 described regenerative social attributes initiated by the of the school's roles in their community. These statements also draw attention to the rural school's role in social capital development through linking individual community members. Principal 21's perspective seems to suggest that shared social attributes linked to the school activated cohesion among between community groups resulting in tangible benefits to both the school and town.

Reciprocal benefit originating at the school was evident in other participants' interview data. As a central organization within rural communities, rural public schools may activate

pivotal mechanisms in social capital development. One story, provided by Principal 9, exemplified the school's role within the local community and its potential to make linkages across different community groups. During all five years in his role at their current school, a group of retired nonparents has coordinated and maintained a student lunch program. One day per week, every week of the school year, retired community members come to school and have lunch with elementary students in the cafeteria. The community members are not eating with their grandchildren but are eating and spending time with any students who decided to participate in the lunch program. In this instance, the school was the activator in this small community and provided connections to retired individuals.

Generational connections surfaced in other participants' school and community partnership descriptions. For example, Principal 3 noted the critical role nonparents play in supporting the school and the school's role in developing a network for social action among different groups. He relayed that the central members of the community understood that if the school were not successful, the community would suffer. In further explanation, Principal 3 described what would happen if the school disintegrated:

The whole area is nothing but farms. Nearby City A is our largest with 20,000–25,000 people. That's our largest. Most of them are little towns just like Rural Town A with 750, and Rural Town B with about 2,000 people. The farmers just understand hard work. They understand that the schools are generally the life blood of a community. Town 3 is done. We, School 3, are the largest employer. We are the lifeblood. The farmers, they understand that. Hey, again, no school, no community.

In Town 3, the past seven bond issues have passed with overwhelming backing from the community. In fact, the most recent bond issues passed with over 90% percent approval, and according to Principal 3, such a high passage rate was extraordinary compared to Oklahoma's required passage rate of 60%. The description of the town's dependence on the school reflected the school's place within the community and the school's ability to leverage social attributes for

action. He shared that the farmers and other key community members activate informal and formal communication networks to promote action at the polls by explaining the process more deeply. Specifically, Principal 3 shared the following:

They all meet at the coffee shop every morning, so they carry a lot of weight. They have always supported us and been willing to understand what we are trying to do.

The central role the school plays was vital in maintaining the town and community in which the farmers described resided. The school's ability to leverage social forces for progress was evident in the access to community-level efforts that resulted in civic engagement at the polls on election day.

Another example surfaced during the pandemic when schools linked families with food distribution. In one school location, the school became the pickup location instead of other locations within the community. As a result, the school became the primary linkage to ensure the food was delivered. One assessment might be that the social capital network ties among the other community organizations like churches and some parents were not sufficient, and thus the school needed to intervene. As the prime actor in the community, the school operated as a central connection among different groups within the community. This study's theme of the school as a linking agent within the community was reflected in several participants' stories of school-based fundraising efforts. One specific example was provided by Principal 21, who described how a school employee was in an accident. Both the employee and the other driver were injured, and the school organized a fundraiser campaign for both the school employee and the other community member injured in the accident. This example provides an insight into how, in some settings, close network ties may address challenges created by pooling limited financial resources.

Importantly, ten of twenty-four participants described characteristics of social capital that they attributed to underpinning the school's influence on community cohesion and its ability to activate social resources when needed. Understanding the school as a possible generator of community social capital was evidenced by the comments of Principal 15 (who was leading in a growing rural school district). According to him, the increase in school enrollment was not because the town's population was growing, but because the school's success was essential to this development. To illuminate this trend, he shared:

We get them from all over. We get them from Town 45, which is 15 miles away, and we get kids from Town 46, which is more than 20 miles away.

Although this finding may not necessarily indicate substantial social capital, it does provide some information about this school's role within the community. However, in this case, he noted strong cohesiveness from the community and went on to elaborate:

I think it is just the common vision that we have out there about continuing to become better and better and pressing forward, not accepting mediocrity or getting stale.

In this situation, Principal 15 described a context wherein people work together to accomplish goals and at the same time possess a shared sense of ideals focused on school advancement. This social mechanism, described by the principal, identified the school's role in activating civic engagement and identified a specific example of how transfer students were linked to supporting the school's success. The synergetic nature of the interplay between the school and the community reflected the reciprocity of relationships framed by the school's role within the local community.

The Hub of a Network with Local Churches

Another example of schools linking functions in rural communities was evidenced by the participants' portrayal of the interplay between the school and local religious organizations. It is

important to note that seventeen of twenty-four participants described a school-dependent mechanism linking local churches' material and social support to students and the community. This reoccurring theme emphasized the role rural churches may play in areas possibly lacking multiple financial and social capital sources. For example, schools located in urban or suburban areas may identify other organizations that directly support schools like civic organizations, foundations, and major nonprofit agencies. Conversely, with the rural school as the vehicle, the respondents within the study named rural churches as support organizations that addressed various school-based student and staff needs. To this point, Principal 11 commented:

I don't know of a church in this town that won't support this school. And there is a church on every corner. Some churches are more than others, but I have never called a church in this town and asked for something I needed and not got it.

Based on the respondent's statement, rural areas may depend upon churches to fill gaps in social support. By doing so, churches may serve as a connection between nonparent community members and schools by providing direct services to students and school-based student groups. One example of this relationship was shared by Principal 12. In his school district, their board policy dictates that when a student was determined to be living in a home with bedbugs, the home must be heat-treated by an exterminating company before the student may return to school. Even though the policy may disproportionately affect disadvantaged students, it was stringently enforced. However, as Principal 12 shared, a network-based safety net exists to help families.

Elaborating, he said:

A lot of our families don't just have the five-, six-, or seven-hundred dollars to get a heat treatment done at the drop of a hat. They do not have that in the budget. So, we will call one of our local churches, and they will put the money together.

Principal 12 had access to a network of churches that were accessible through shared linkages to help students within the school. Other school-level administrators commented on networks of

churches supporting their schools. Principal 9, who works in a town with a population ranging between 600–700, noted:

And then we have multiple churches here that all provide assistance every year. At the start of the year, they will come up with supplies and stuff and just give to us from what they have gathered at the church.

Churches within rural communities surfaced as leading actors in settings where participants described closer relationships within their community. Within this role, churches, like schools, may fuse residents together in ways that affect collective norms and closure between different social groups within the community. In this situation, the school's linking function may in some ways mobilize churches into associations with each other to connect different facets of the community. These bonds seemed to benefit the school and demonstrate a shared vision for collective action and social capital resources (Horwitz, & Lascar, 2021). It seemed, based on the respondents' insight, rural schools link multiple churches into an assembly of organizations to scaffold students in collective acts like providing meals and direct financial support for students and needy families. This linking action framed by the school possibly profoundly affected students and allowed others to develop a sense of collective service.

By framing social connections that intertwine rural communities, public schools hold a unique place within communities; represent individual and community identities, values, and traditions; and interweave overall economic welfare (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sipple et al., 2019). From this crucial position in the rural community, rural school leaders would have access to stable and consistent social linkages to underpin their academic mission of educating rural students. However, some rural schools are not immune to the apparent shifts in cohesion in rural towns that have experienced a weakening of social and civic connections.

Rural School Marvels

Within the findings of schools as community activators of social capital, the study identified that some rural schools leverage social capital assets in unique ways to underpin in-community closure. In these rural communities, school-level leaders described access to high levels of social resources and provided examples of closure amongst the community members and the school. While the finding was not exemplified across every transcript, eleven participants responded to the semi-structured interview questions in ways that portrayed some rural communities in Oklahoma as tightly interwoven and reciprocally interdependent. This finding was supported by the data analysis, which found evidence of in-community collaboration among social, civic, and religious groups to leverage social capital assets and underpin in-community closure.

Interestingly, in 1919, *Harlow's Weekly* cataloged a rural school in Oklahoma as a “Rural School Marvel.” According to the publication, the community was not even the size of a village yet wagons full of students arrived from the surrounding rural areas every day (Harlow, 1919). Based on the local population, the publisher estimated the school should consist of roughly 300 students; however, the school’s enrollment was 875 in 1917. Although the social capital attributes of the school in 1919 were unknown, the article notes that the local people were proud of their school (Harlow, 1919). The phrase “rural school marvel” used by editor Victor Harlow explains one of the study’s main findings. Through qualitative methods, the study identified that within Oklahoma’s rural school population, distinctive rural-school marvels foster synergism among families and community members to leverage social capital assets. These social capital markets manifest in descriptions of nonmonetary support, shared norms and expectations, and reciprocal linkages with nonparent affiliates and community groups.

Comparable to Victor Harlow in 1919, participants in this study made similar pronouncements regarding the nature of their community. What was notable is that while they understood their school to be unique, they described the school and the community at times interchangeably. For example, the following statements capture some school-level leaders' descriptions of their communities:

Principal 11: *"Town 11 is kind of a different community. In fact, I'm not gonna lie, our community is amazing."*

Principal 18: *"But the thing about it is our place at Town 18, it is incredible."*

Principal 13: *"So anytime, myself or Administrator 13, anytime we come up with something or we reach out that we need support, we find it because this is a close-knit community."*

Principal 9: *"Our community does drive our school. They are very, very engrossed in making sure we have what we need. If we have needs, we have great support for our faculty from our community. It's really a unique situation."*

Principal 10: *"It is more of a close-knit family type setting."*

These statements reflected a context in which schools are closely linked with the community.

The schools that reported higher civic engagement levels, network bonds, and shared identity also described an understanding of necessary interdependence. The qualitative findings may suggest that schools with higher levels of social capital may require community partnership for success. In other words, they would be unable to accomplish their mission as a school without reciprocal in-community social resources.

Shared Obligations and Norms

Within the set of unique rural schools, participants in the study described collective expectations amongst the community as evidence of school and community bonds. In some descriptions, cohesion took place in terms of closure of behavioral norms. In line with Coleman's (1985, 1988) descriptions of intergenerational closure among parents and children, rural school principals shared examples of in-community standards and expectations of behavior. For example, Principal 4 shared a story about a parent driving their child's vehicle too fast, and by

the time they arrived home, they received two phone calls from concerned parents who assumed the child was driving the vehicle. Other administrators shared stories of community members and other parents redirecting students at school events that were not that parent's child. These indicators of intergenerational closure provided insight into the social capital attributes of specific rural communities in Oklahoma and reflect communities where tight bonds were still intact.

Within settings where school-level leaders described closure between the school and community, they sometimes also portrayed shared expectations for achievement in academics and activities. The sense of collective expectations between the school, parents, and nonparent affiliates may be essential for school success and community stability. This finding was salient when juxtaposed against evidence describing the absence of shared expectations. When reviewing the transcript data, one of the first indicators of a unique situation was a principal's description of an understanding of shared community-wide behavior. For example, Principal 19 stated:

I think there are very high expectations for the school, academically, socially, athletically—all the way around. Parents, community, our teachers—everybody here just holds everybody to a high expectation.

Her comments were not unique. The theme of shared norms for resultant expectations was mentioned by other school-level leaders working in places that might be described as closely knit. For example, Principal 11, after explaining the uniqueness of their town, shared:

Our community is amazing. And, with that being said, the expectations are high.

In a setting where principals described meaningful levels of community support, they also relayed that those within the community maintain corporate expectations for the school's actions.

The idea of a shared effort to educate a community's students may directly assist schools in achieving their academic objectives. For example, shared expectations developed through community bonds may result in embedded cultural elements that foster interdependent ties between rural schools and rural communities where rural school-level leaders noted unique attributes that indicated a shared understanding of expected behaviors, aspirations, and values. Continuing the emergent trend of distinctive rural communities, Principal 9 described the following attributes of his community:

There's a lot of things that people hang their hat on here, and they want the school to be successful. They want their kids to be successful and have a chance to move on with their careers, whether it's college or whether it's workforce or whatever it is.

The embedded nature of the school's role in families' aspirations for their children may contribute to social resources for action with specific rural communities. That is not to contend that parents do not want achievement for their children in schools where school-level leaders reported limited community social capital. However, the study's findings may show that in communities where principals described social capital availability, they also described elevated expectations for shared success. Their descriptions indicated a sense of common benefit for all students within the community.

Inside the development of these shared norms and values, the interaction between the school, nonparents, civic organizations, churches, and businesses all seems to have an amalgamating effect in the community. Respondents within communities that reported attributes of rural-school marvels indicated a sense of shared benefit for encouraging specific patterns of individual actions. As an illustration of this finding, Principal 11 stated:

I want my kids to graduate from here. They are just a town full of good people that work hard and that want good things and expect high things from their community.

Similarly, Principal 4 explained:

I just think that they [students] see people helping them, and they want to do the best they can to make those people feel proud that they're helping them.

In the context of his twenty years at the same rural school, Principal 4's understanding of how students respond to the collective assistance was illuminating. The context of the statement was not families helping students but that the volunteer efforts of the community towards individuals and groups associated with the school yielded a reciprocal return from students in the school.

Importantly, Principal 4's comments underscored that some students possibly develop motivation from the mutual value shown to them by others in the community. Possibly, through the school, students become cognizant of the collective interest in their success and the school's success. Collectively, in a sense, students are interwoven with the community's overall success. As a result, students may develop reciprocal behaviors and return the social capital contributions of others by adhering to the shared norms of the community. Furthermore, students who are enfolded by the school and community closure, shared bonds, and norms, may encounter a possible convection of social attributes which promote specific expectations for both individual and public benefit.

The study also identified that community and school attributes contributed to the development of a deep sense of connectedness and sense of place. For example, Principal 11 illuminated that families will leave for a few years but will return. Principal 11 stated:

But then you still got those ones that may be gone six or seven or eight years. But when it's time for their kid to go to school somewhere, there is a large portion of our students that come back to Town 11. They go, 'Hey, I was raised here. My kids are going to be raised here.' I bet you I have had five families move back this year alone to Town 11. They say 'I just was tired of living in a big town. I want my kids to be raised by teachers that I know.'

These attributes may reveal a type of community closure and a level of social capital that may be unique to specific rural areas. Other participants shared a sense that families stay or return to

raise children in a rural area because of a sense of closeness, shared norms, safety, and shared family-like bonds. To this point, Principal 7 noted:

And their kids, a lot of their kids come home. So, we have generations of families that have pride in our school.

Principal 7's comments indicated that the cycle of returning families builds a reinforcing process within the communities. The parents consider their upbringing valuable and want their children to experience the same socially rich developmental environment. From the school-level leader's point of view, the underlying fabric of this context was the school. The families who move back create a type of regenerating cycle that contributed to the social qualities of the community.

Highlighted by Principals 7 and 11's statements, the relationship linking their schools and communities produced a mechanism that may have developed shared values, norms, and social attributes that fostered an understanding of reciprocal connection and social bonds. This level of social capital reportedly motivated residents to return and, as a result, perpetuated the desired shared community-level attributes (Besser, 2009; Liu & Besser, 2003).

Under these social conditions, the returning people foster stable social norms and the relationship between the school and community may develop connections constructed upon patterns of behaviors that are consistent throughout the community. For example, Principal 15, articulating their school's prime role within the community and the desire to link the community, stated:

It is just constantly looking for ways to involve community members to work with the school, to just make it a family affair. It is not something that just sporadically happened, and it had to be worked at hard. And there was some relationship that had to be mended from previous times. But I think it is just getting out there, getting people on the same path and vision, and seeing where the district wants to go.

These norms result in reciprocal relationships where expectations of school involvement may be more common. For example, if most families attend the basketball game or baccalaureate, then

relational pressure may exist for others within the social network to attend. When these norms are linked with the school, school- and community-initiated behaviors may have critical outcomes for students. In other words, collective efforts to maintain common actions may provide a unique environment for young people and for school leaders tasked with advancing educational efforts.

Success Means Returning to and Regenerating Community and School Social Attributes

One of the concepts that emerged from the interview data was that in some rural communities returning educators and other individuals contributed sustained community social characteristics. Sixteen of the twenty-four participants clearly identified undergirding social attributes as the reason rural educators return, stay, and work in rural schools and communities. For example, when asked about the nature of their rural school and their community, participants shared that many of their school's teachers grew up in the community and decided to return because they want to have input and contribute to the place of their upbringing. The study found that for some rural educators and community members, success corresponds to returning to a rural community, which may represent a counteraction to the outmigration that affects many rural communities in downward tending ways. As noted by scholars, individuals who leave rural communities often possess the skills and characteristics that rural communities may desperately need (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Gibs, 1998; Sherman, 2011).

The phenomenon of outmigration from rural areas compounds challenges already faced within many rural areas. It contributes to lower percentages of adults with bachelors and advanced degrees as well as disparities in the urban-rural educational achievement gap, which in turn reduces human capital (Gibs, 1998; Lin 2001; Rural Education at a Glance, 2017; Sherman, 2011). However, the study found that, for some, success was returning to teach and pursue

school administration in a rural school. This reinfusion of human capital may play a role in social capital development and offer insight into the nature and content of some social relationships within rural communities. This finding was not necessarily divergent to Carr and Kefalas's (2009) work, which pointed out that achievement means leaving rural towns for many young people. In addition to Carr and Kefalas (2009), other scholars have found that young people, in general, are more likely to leave upon graduation than stay in many rural communities. (Gibs, 1998; Sherman, 2011). This finding does not challenge the occurrence of outmigration but noted that some people return, bringing human and social capital.

On the surface, the finding that some rural educators return to teach and lead in their communities may not seem critical. However, the phenomenon of educators' decisions to return and stay in a rural community might offer some evidence of the social capital conditions present in some rural communities. Returning teachers and school-level administrators may serve as possible community conduits who redeploy human and social capital and, as a result, contribute to the replication of community norms and social capital development. The study's semi-structured interview questions did not ask specific questions about those who returned to teach in their community. This finding surfaced during the initial questions, which asked about the participant's background, and during the participant's description of their school and community. In other instances, spontaneous questions were asked based on answers provided by the participant. This finding may have implications for recruiting because, like suburban and urban counterparts, rural educators are critical to the academic achievement of students and the organizational achievement of their school (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Eberts & Stone, 1988; Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Supovitz et al., 2010).

As an example, Principal 10 noted during the interview that most of his school's teachers graduated, went to college, and returned to their hometowns to teach. The description of teachers returning to the community of their upbringing to contribute was not necessarily surprising because scholars have identified unique attributes of rural settings which foster necessary social structures for trusting relationships and a shared identity (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Lyson, 2005; Reynolds, 1999). Principal 10's perspective was supported by Principal 19. According to her, their rural school was described in the following ways:

I've heard many of my teachers describe it as a family. And now, it just feels like home, and everybody is just comfortable, and they want to raise their kids here.

The response of Principal 19, who has been a rural educator for seventeen years and a principal for five, explained why educators return, stay, and teach by identifying the family-like social network that provided a sense of interwovenness. The statement reflected similar portrayals provided by participants' descriptions of the social bonds within the community. Even when not specifically reflecting on why people stay in rural communities, participants noted that rural towns and schools tend to be close-knit, bonded, and share similar values. The same perspective seems to govern why some individuals return to rural settings.

However, it must be noted that schools are in many cases the largest employer in rural settings, so it may seem that educators return because employment was available. Although employment may be a contributing dynamic, participants explained that intangible attributes were the source of motivation to return. Explaining the reasoning behind the decision to return to a rural area, Principal 23 described that tight social bonding might drive the desire to return home to teach. For example, Principal 23 explained:

I would say probably half of our high school teachers are from Town 23. And the vast majority of the other ones are from the area. We have a few that might have come from somewhere way off but have moved to the area. So, most of ours, if they did not go here,

they went somewhere around in this county. I like the small school. I mean, I know every kid who walks down the hall. I probably know the vast majority of parents and grandparents like that.

The social linkages between knowing the students, parents, and grandparents motivated Principal 23, who worked in a larger suburban district at one point in their career, to return to a rural setting because the small size allowed close social networks. In the same pattern, Principal 15 summarized:

I have a teacher who went to Large City 43 and kind of wanted to get out there. I mean, that is kind of the story.

Importantly, Principal 15 went on to state:

Something pulled them back. So, I think that is just the foundation.

Within a rural setting, a sense of a common foundation, shared norms, and shared ideals are fundamental aspects of social relationships that develop bonds and linkages of social capital.

Further explaining the nature of some rural schools and the reasons undergirding why some educators return, Principal 21 conveyed that:

I think honestly, I just think it is such a long-time culture. And, you have so many people like myself in my elementary school. I have got five staff members in my elementary out of 18 certified teachers that are alumni. Yes, and then my wife. And another staff member whose husband is an alumnus. And she was from the area but did not go to school here.

Similar to why some families may return to rural settings, rural educators note the unique attributes of rural communities as a reason for returning. Although this finding surfaced across multiple transcripts, participants who described and provided examples of social capital resources access seemed more likely to mention high numbers of staff members who return to live and teach within the rural community of their upbringing. On the surface, the sense of home, family, and knowing one another may seem typical descriptions of rural settings. Still, they are

potent strengths that reflect interwoven social relationships and close-knit bonds in some of Oklahoma's rural communities.

Declining Apart

Scholars describe public schools as the fulcrum of many rural communities (DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2002; Lyson, 2005). As the center of the community, rural schools reflect the challenges created by declining populations, poverty, economic stagnation, and limited access to health care resources (Mayer et al., 2018; Meit & Knudson, 2017; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Porter, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018; Woods, 2006). However, from its central position, the school becomes a symbol of community identity (Lyson, 2005). In this context, rural schools need financial, human, and social forms of capital to advance student academic and social growth. The availability of social capital within the rural school context was critical to understand because research suggests a relationship between social capital and school performance (Spillane et al., 2015). In the case of rural communities located outside of urban and suburban centers, declining school-level access to in-community social capital may amplify isolation in some rural communities and possibly contribute to reduced student academic outcomes.

Eight of the twenty-four participants described events, experiences, and perceptions that indicated an unraveling of the bonds between the school and the community. Outside of the eight participants that described gaps in social capital support, other participants noted changes within the fabric of their rural community, which indicated changes in interconnectedness. In many cases, the fraying of social connection was described as changes or shifts in the social attributes of the community occurring over time. As a result, the findings suggested that some schools in Oklahoma experienced declining availability of in-community social capital.

Civic engagement and social capital availability changes in rural communities may not represent noteworthy findings. Besser (2009), Putnam (1993), Coleman (1988b), and Rupasingha and Freshwater (2006) theorized that social capital was diminishing within many communities and social groups. In line with previous research, similar changes in the linkages within rural communities were identified from the point of view of rural school principals. Although many of the descriptions were anecdotal and may reflect a slight tattering of the interwoven nature of rural communities, some examples were dramatic and possibly symbolic of more significant shifts within some rural Oklahoma communities.

It is important to note that the study concentrated on rural school principals' understanding of social connections, community–school associations, and civic engagement. The study identified several ways school leaders understood waning social capital from this perspective. In communities where leaders described limited access to social capital, the study identified reduced attendance at school events, insufficient volunteerism and nonparent assistance, and a lack of shared norms between the school and the community.

Social Cohesion Decreases Despite “Everyone Still Knowing Everybody”

This study found that some participants reported declining school-level access to social capital within their rural communities regardless of their pivotal position in their community. This finding was not unexpected but may be of interest because of the context of rural areas. Small towns and communities characterize rural areas. In these settings, individuals within the community may be known to one another and share common connections through the school and the community. In these smaller settings, societal conditions appear ideal for developing the social antecedents to produce cooperation, civic engagement, and relational bonds. However, participants in settings with limited school-supportive social capital described deteriorating

towns. In these locales, everyone seemed to know each other but they knew each other for wrong reasons. Referencing the nature of some rural towns, Principal 8 commented about the closely interconnected nature of rural towns when they affirmed:

We know everything about everybody here. You don't take a shower without somebody knowing you turned your water on.

However, she went on to describe a setting ravaged by drug use resulting in downward trending effects on the school. Stating dire conditions, Principal 8 said:

Well, the dynamics here in Town 8 are pretty sad. We have a lot of grandparents and aunts raising grandkids and their nieces and nephews. I am raising my Family Member 2 because of Family Member 1's bad choices, and I know you might have heard this before, but County 8 is probably the meth capital of the world. We fight a lot of the effects of drug use in our youth here.

The challenges communicated by participants related to negative community characteristics juxtaposed with the close associations afforded by small communities seemed contrary to common perceptions of rural towns. Based on the pilot study findings, I anticipated that principals who described reduced social capital would report gaps among the families and community members they knew. This anticipated finding surfaced in both the study and the pilot study; however, it was not described to the degree expected. It is worth noting that a few extremes surfaced during. For example, Principal 4, when asked about the number of families he knew, stated:

The number of parents I have never met or do not know on a first-name basis—it is huge. I mean, I would say, 70% I don't know by name.

However, most participants, even those who noticed declining social bonds, knew most of the families. Moreover, when follow-up questions were asked, the number of unknown parents was small, or they perceived a slight shift over time in the number of people they knew.

Because of the small nature of these communities, the predominant finding was that school leaders knew most of the families of their students and many of the local community members. Outliers existed but knowing individuals within the community was consistent in the findings. This study noted that the degree to which others knew each other varied but seemed rooted in the conclusion that many rural communities consist of longstanding families and community members. In these small settings linked by the public school district, it seemed likely that individuals would develop common bonds resulting in social action; however, this outcome seemed absent in some Oklahoma communities.

Fading Attendance at Activities and Events

Another trend reflecting declining social capital was the apparent shifts in school and community traditions. As previously described, a participant in the study shared a change in their community's longstanding homecoming traditions. When asked to describe this year's homecoming versus a homecoming parade before the pandemic, Participant 16 shared that the school discussed not holding a homecoming parade next school year due to declining participation. When asked if the decision was related to the pandemic, they responded by saying the conversation began before the pandemic. The reduction in participation moved beyond the homecoming parade and also surfaced in other areas within the school's community. Most notably, he conveyed that the community's attentiveness to the school was declining.

Although the ending of a school's homecoming parade may be a dramatic example of shifting relationships, other participants described changes in attendance at school and community events as well. For example, Principal 3 noted that since they started teaching in the school district in which they are now an administrator, parental participation has changed over time. In reflecting over the past twelve years, they stated:

I mean, even things like School Event A. Parents would organize School Event A and get it out to everybody on a Tuesday for that Tuesday evening. And you would have one-hundred and fifty cars going around the football field. Now, well, one, they just would not do it. And if they could manage to get it done, it is going to be a month and a half out, and you could have ten cars, and it's going to be the same ten people.

Principal 3's observation of the changes within their community was reinforced by their description later in the interview of the level of participation in elementary classroom holiday parties. At one time, according to Principal 3, parental contributions in the community shifted from *Here are some cupcakes* to *Do I have to bring cupcakes?* They shared a similar transition in parent-teacher conferences, which at one point were well attended but over the years participation had slumped. Changes in participation, attendance, and interest in school events may result from different factors; however, these changes may reflect transformations within reciprocity and shared relational ties.

From Principal 3's point of view, the school was not receiving an increase in complaints or concerns, but the changes were a result of intangible transformations within the community. Like the findings of Besser (2009), Principal 3 noted a reduction of farmers and farming families, which seemed to affect the community's social fabric. Other participants noted this trend. For example, Principal 2 noted that the "*older generation*" continues to undergird the school, but the people in "*their thirties and fifties, they really don't.*" Explaining the possible reasons beyond declining school-supportive actions in their small community, he shared the following:

You know, I think part of it is [they] just do not have a desire to get involved, you know. Some people had bad experiences in school and just don't have anything to do with it. Some people are just working a job and trying to make a living.

Purposeful social action like bringing cupcakes to a class event or attending a school activity to assist students may reflect common social ties and investments in school-centered relationships.

These social investments were important from participants' perspectives and may be essential for success. Investments in social connections are critical for small schools, and events like football games, fall carnivals, parent-teacher conferences, and back-to-school nights represent opportunities to share time to develop sufficient relational ties. In the absence of involvement in these events, schools experienced isolation and detachment from families and nonparent community members.

In declining settings, where families and community members do not link, these opportunities may remain unleveraged and increased isolation may be experienced. For example, Principal 24, who leads a PreK–8 district, noted:

We struggle drastically with parent involvement, even in our athletic events that we do hold. We never see a crowd from the home team just because parents have too many other things going on, and those are just not always important for them to come.

Similarly, Principal 7 shared that they worked in a school with limited linkages to the community, and when asked to describe how that was demonstrated, they stated:

And you could tell by attendance at ball games, attendance at school activities, attendance at FFA activities, things like that. You could tell it was different there than the other four places that I have been.

In larger districts, with a multitude of activities, statements like Principal 7's might not be concerning; but, in rural districts with 150–250 students, events like basketball games, livestock show, and meet-the-teacher events are important community events, which have multifaceted outcomes for communities.

In rural settings, according to the participants, these activities represent evidence of the school and community partnerships and provide critical opportunities to initiate social relationships that might lead to supportive school-directed social action. This was noted by Principal 14, who commented that people are

“becoming more disconnected, really from the school and from each other,”

but they noted that in their community,

“the school is probably the one tie-in to bring everyone together.”

Their statement demonstrated the hub of the community and conveyed that athletic and school–community events possess the potential to develop shared bonds and active social resources for support.

Insufficient Assistance at School Activities

Comparable to attendance at school events, involvement at the school may be an indicator of shared social linkages. As noted previously, potential economic deterioration in some rural areas may affect available financial resources, and when united with reductions in rural populations, has resulted in a subsequent drop in human and social capital. (Mayer et al., 2018; Meit & Knudson, 2017). Operating in these settings, rural schools seem in need of the tangible manifestations of shared social bonds. In other words, human and social capital are essential for supporting rural schools, and participants noted challenges related to lacking resources. For example, Principal 1 shared that they are in dire need of volunteers to help with school-based events and stated:

Sometimes it is nice not having them in your building, but at a small school, we are so short faculty wise, staff wise. We don't have any kind of parent/teacher organization. We don't have any kind of booster clubs. You know, that might relieve the burden of a paid employee, somebody that could come in and run some copies or somebody that could come in and be a bus monitor, somebody that could do the fundraisers for the teachers and the kids. And I know that sounds lazy. We want the kids to earn whatever they get. If people at our school do not do it, it does not get done. Our teachers work all the time. They take gate at games, work concessions, and run the press box. I had never been in a town where there was so little.

As a stand-alone comment, it might not be significant; however, more than one school leader reported limited access to in-community social capital from families, alumni, and nonparent

community members. The lack of nonfinancial assistance systems reoccurred among participants' descriptions of limited partnerships with the school mission. According to those interviewed, backing for the core mission of schools was not as strong as they felt was necessary to advance academic achievement. Granted, the term *support* may not immediately align with social capital resources, but according to the principals interviewed within declining settings, the concept extended beyond families and included the broader community.

As an example of needed assistance from outside the school, Principal 24 specifically cited the absence of community volunteers and mentorship opportunities. Although volunteer mobilization and mentorship opportunities may not directly reflect social capital, it might be proposed that declining social capital may reduce the likelihood of either form of school-based action. Regarding internships and the availability of community volunteers to support the school, Principal 24 responded:

I mean, our families turn to the school when they are in need.

In other words, community assistance directed towards the school was seemingly nonexistent. To a certain degree, the school was operating in a stand-alone capacity to aid students and the broader community. As seen in the other findings, rural schools' linking role regarding social activities and social services was a vital function of the rural schools; however, the participant interview data reflected that in declining locations this was possibly a one-way effort. Explicitly, rural school principals noted declining volunteer involvement and described a sense of isolation to meet the growing demands associated with educating students. Principal 24's statements showed that the school was the support network for the community's families.

Declining Support for Student-Centered Academic Endeavors

In addition, schools that noted limited links to volunteers along with declining attendance at events also noted a deficiency in perceptible manifestations of attention to the school's academic mission. Parental interest in the academic efforts of their students' schools could be understood through more specific lenses than social capital; however, the findings of the interviews reflected an overarching lack of backing within local communities for academic objectives. Participants' descriptions may signal limited closure between the school and community in these settings. For example, when describing interest in their school's academic mission, Principal 19 offered a comparison to another rural school they worked in previously when they stated:

I feel like there is lots and lots of parent involvement here in School 19, and it is a great thing. But in one of my previous communities there was not any, and you could tell it affected the kids. I feel like the parents themselves had kind of given up essentially on that school, and their expectations had really dwindled. They just were too focused on themselves.

Similarly, Principal 2 shared that

“education, in general, is not good. There's not a lot of value placed on it.”

The same sentiment was shared by Principal 3. When asked a follow-up question about whether the community aligned with the academic objectives of the school, Principal 3 stated:

And I hate to say that I do not see that partnership anymore. Now, I have parents tell me, 'I sent them to school so you could teach them math. I'm not teaching the math at home. Do not send homework home with my kids. I'm not going to help them do it.' It became commonplace a few years back; we thought that was very strange.

When the link between the school's mission and the community was fractured, principals noted a sense of working alone or nonalignment with the community. This circumstance seemed to have contributed to a general understanding of decline within the community. Isolation and lack of

shared interdependence may contribute to an eroding of the entire community. Reflecting upon a similar trend, Principal 23 stated:

I was here in the 80s. I think you had more parent involvement, but the world is changing people, and parents have changed. We don't get much involvement at all.

The involvement of families was more than attending events. It was also being supportive of the school's work assisting students to advance in academic achievement. In addition to the comments made by Principal 23, Principal 14 commented:

I would wish that we could say that we have shared expectations. I just think people's lives are so busy now, trying to survive and not just COVID, but pre-COVID, people just are trying to keep a job and bring money in. I think they want the best for their kids, but I do not think that is their focus.

The disconnectedness described by the school leader possibly marks fractures in the closure within the community. As described by Principal 14, when parents and the school do not share expectations, the school's effectiveness may diminish because of breaks in the social framework. The lack of shared obligations and expectations may represent declining social bonds. In the previous themes, the school is described as an activator of social capital, yet in declining settings, the school seemingly fails to find in-community social capital. The participants in these communities narrated conditions of absent supportive-social resources and self-dependence.

The decline of social linkages may be critical because social capital can enable collaborative efforts through social networks, norms, and trust, which may be essential for rural communities. However, the sources of these apparent shifts and the school's inability to leverage its position require additional study. Reduced shared experiences, absent parents, and downward trending community characteristics fueled by drug abuse may undermine closure between members of the school's network. The declining close ties reduce social capital and collective actions, and thus lower common expectations among the school, families, and nonparent

community members. For some of the communities in this study, the unraveling social fabric resulted in limited education-centric norms between the school and community, which may feed a degenerative cycle of loosening social and civic bonds.

Summary of Findings

The complex environment of rural communities was underscored by the confluence of evidence for both advancing and declining social characteristics. The intricacy affords qualitative methods an avenue to possibly extract rich information within the diverse rural landscape. Because findings are not always exclusive to one school or another, the findings were reported using each theme as a framework to describe different aspects of rural communities in Oklahoma.

The first theme of the study found that regardless of social capital availability, rural schools frame diverse social connections with the rural community and support a shared identity. The second theme that emerged from the interview data suggested that rural schools activate social capital resources among different community members. Within this grouping, a unique set of schools surfaced in which closure existed between the school, families, and nonparent community members. The next theme revealed that for some rural community members, success meant returning to teach and work in rural schools and rural communities. This mechanism resulted in a cycle reinforcing specific community social features. Next, a central theme of the study was that some participants reported declining school-level access to in-community social capital. The frayed social bonds may heighten isolation in some rural communities and result in an out-of-balance relationship with the school. The last theme of the study centered on schools and communities described as unique by some participants.

The qualitative inquiry reinforced that rural communities are intricate, and many factors may influence social interactions within rural areas. For example, some participants shared specific destabilizing events, such as tornados, mill closings, or floods, and others alluded to a complex intercommunity conflict that may influenced the social attributes of their community. Given the multilayered nature of rural communities, by using the sampling strategy and the qualitative methods sought to position the study to delve into specific rural communities' social characteristics. Through the interview process and the data analysis, the study uncovered possible elements that contributed to the social facets of some rural communities.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Howley et al. (2005) contended that research addressing rural areas must not undervalue how rural people make sense of their environment. By focusing on rural principals' knowledge of their social context, the findings and discussion may aid in developing understanding of rural public schools and communities. Existing research on rural social capital leverages community-wide case studies and survey analyses to examine the rural communities' social attributes (Besser, 2009; Boyd et al., 2008; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Fowler, & Etchegary, 2008; Liu & Besser, 2003; Ziersch et al. 2009). However, while providing meaningful insight, previous studies may not address the fine-grained distinctions of rural communities, and current studies may not capture the social interplay between schools, families, and other community members. By examining social phenomena through school principals' unique vantage points, this study adds to the existing scholarship and advances understanding of the nature of social conditions in some rural communities in Oklahoma. Scholarship exploring rural communities may be important because 29% of Oklahoma's public-school students attended a rural school (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019). Also, in the four states surrounding Oklahoma, rural students represent 14%–25% of public-school enrollments, and nationally, 15% of students attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019). The number of students in the rural schools in Oklahoma seems to justify focused study of the social context of rural communities. In addition, the study's qualitative methods aided in examining these complex social environments, and the themes suggested that a variety of social capital conditions exist across rural Oklahoma.

The findings of the study must be considered within the diverse nature of social interactions and the array of unique conditions that exist within each rural community. The study

was designed to build an understanding of the mechanisms undergirding social capital availability and school and community closure by exploring how rural school-level administrators described the own schools' and communities' social relationships. The research questions asked how school-level leaders understood the social attributes of their rural communities and how they described the nature of the relationship between their school and their community. Rural school principals were selected for interviews because their place in the community offered a distinct and possibly understudied point of view.

Relying on a stratified random selection of participants, the study's semi-structured interviews ($n = 24$) resulted in four major themes. The first theme revealed that regardless of social capital availability, participants explained that rural schools frame and tether rural, local communities. The second theme identified action generated by school-activated social capital among social, civic, and religious groups. Third, the study found that rural educators and other community members returned and stayed, creating a regenerative cycle fostering community and school social capital. Finally, the study found that some rural principals experienced limited school-level access to social capital, which possibly accelerated community-level downward trends. These findings do not expand social capital theory. Nevertheless, they may advance understanding of the social capital qualities of specific rural communities in Oklahoma.

The Significance of Social Capital in Rural Communities

More than half of Oklahoma's public-school districts are within rural communities, resulting in almost 200,000 students who attend a rural school (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). Understanding social capital within these communities may be fundamental because, in some locations, rural schools and rural communities face problems created by declining financial and human capital (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Mayer et al., 2018; Meit &

Knudson, 2017). Robert Putnam (1995) contended that social capital enabled collaborative problem-solving through networks, norms, and trust, which would seem crucial for declining rural communities. Schools serve a unique role within the rural community and could be a likely contributor to community revitalization and economic development.

The study sought to address how school-level leaders understand the sources of social capital availability and explained closure between the school and the community. The findings identified several unique interchanges between rural schools and communities in Oklahoma. Granted, the finding that rural schools are at the hub of the rural community was not unique. Previous research and long-existing anecdotal evidence established that schools are vital organizations in rural areas (DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2002; Lyson, 2005). However, the research provided a possible uncommon glimpse into the rural communities by highlighting differences in how principals described the attributes behind the different levels of social cohesion with their respective communities. For some participants, their experiences detailed family-like communities while others explained isolated efforts to educate their students. Importantly, while all participants in the study acknowledged that the school was the center of the community, in areas of possible reduced social capital, schools functioned as one-way support because of the limited closure with families and nonparents. The absence of social capital among the school and community resulted in an out-of-balance contribution from the school which may have heightened isolation and accelerated decline within the community.

The possible lack of social capital between school and community manifested in limited attendance at school events and reduced civic assistance. In addition, the most notable difference between schools that described social capital availability and those that did not was the apparent unraveling of shared expectations between the school, families, and nonparents. In these

communities with loosening bonds, the lack of interconnection resulted in a disproportionate dependence upon the school. When the dependence was one-sided, the school functioned more like a bracing organization that maintained the community. As a result, when detached from their community, school-level leaders in these situations described challenges resulting from reduced social resources and increased isolation. As keystone citizens in rural communities, the absence of social capital may limit school-level leaders' ability to collaborate with families and nonparents, which in turn may perpetuate negative community outcomes (Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Differing in perspective, the school-level administrators who conveyed social cohesion noticed a shared conceptualization of their school's role, which undergirded support for the school's social and academic responsibilities. The participants' comments exemplified shared community-wide expectations, generational closure, and numerous in-community supportive relationships and associations. In these instances, the school being the hub of the community appeared to convey that these rural communities were possibly unique. Addressing one of the research questions, rural communities that portrayed social capital access also reported multilevel links with families, nonparents, and community organizations. This conclusion may contribute to understanding the mechanisms of social capital within rural communities. In these unique settings, the schools,' families,' and nonparent community members' collective contributions to social resources linked to the schools may have produced distinctive environments for students. These factors may be pivotal in triggering social capital not only for school-level leaders and teachers, but for students as well.

For example, Byun et al., (2012) found that rural students in communities with greater degrees of parent-to-parent interaction and student church attendance demonstrated greater

college degree attainment. Social norms, fostered by cooperative action in conjunction with community members, may encourage students to observe the shared expectations of the community and activate social capital (Coleman, 1988; Horwitz, & Lascar, 2021). These shared norms and social attributes may develop a reciprocal social environment that promotes advancement for both individuals and the community. These social connections reinforce the exchange of social capital resources and enable information sharing to facilitate collaborative problem-solving (Burt, 2000; Hansen, 1999; Lin, 2001; Moolenaar, 2012; Uzzi, 1997).

At the Center of Unraveling Communities but Still Tied Together

Social capital theory can be understood through several lenses and scholarship platforms. The study's blending of multiple social capital concepts into the semi-structured interview questionnaire resulted in findings reflecting critical aspects across several theoretical perspectives. Even though the social conditions of communities are complex and contrasting across the sample, the study found that in some rural areas, the qualitative data appeared to suggest a decline of social capital within specific rural communities. This finding was similar to existing research which noted changes social capital in rural areas (Besser 2009; DeYoung, 1989; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006). Understanding the social capital conditions of rural areas may be of particular importance because the development and maintenance of social assets may be vital to attaining organizational goals in rural areas with seemingly limited resources.

Possibly contributing to existing literature, the study's findings indicated that, in some rural communities, the lack of bondedness resulted in the awareness of being detached but dependent upon one another. As participants described being the center of the community, they also explained a sense of working independently from the community. Based on the qualitative evidence, it appeared that in some cases, limited social capital meant school-level leaders and

teachers became accustomed to working without community support. This independence and lack of social bonds may contribute to a reciprocal reduction of school-supportive social characteristics in the community. For example, when schools decide to forgo a longstanding tradition like homecoming parades, families, nonparent community members, and the school miss opportunities to develop shared social connections, leading to a potential reduction in social capital. This example may underscore the importance of understanding the mechanisms within rural locations that generate social capital.

Reduced social assets and school and community norms may have a multifaceted effect on rural schools. Importantly, these collective qualities may facilitate the development of human capital, which may be critical in some rural areas. Coleman (1988a) sought to explain social capital's influence on creating human capital (Foley & Edwards, 1999). Specifically, Coleman (1988a) argued that social capital's three constructs: obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures, enable group members to activate social resources to create human capital (Coleman, 1988a; Foley & Edwards, 1999). In rural settings, the development of human capital may be critical to the success of schools and the community. However, even with declining social capital, a rural school's role as a prime actor may present opportunities for the focused development of social capital within the broader community. For the hub of the community, building social capital may result in gains in student academic achievement and workplace readiness. However, the absence of social capital in rural areas may hasten the deterioration and outmigration of desperately needed human capital.

Social Capital and Rural School Consolidation

When consolidation occurs, the structure that retains the community's identity, social connectedness, and economic vitality relocates to another community (Duncomber & Yinger,

2001; DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2005; Surface, 2011; Ward & Rink, 1992). While this study does not examine rural school consolidation, the topic's extensive scholarship identifies specific aspects of schools' roles within communities (Bard et al., 2006; Eacott & Freeborn, 2019). For some, the consolidation of rural school districts creates more efficient and effective schools, resulting in improved student outcomes (Nitta et al., 2010; Saxi, 2017; Self, 2001; Sell et al., 1996). Nevertheless, for others, school district consolidation signals the passing of the community (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Green, 2013; Peshkin, 1978). Scholars have suggested that schools are conduits to develop collective constructs that provide means to develop civic and social connections (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Green, 2013). The shared social constructs serve as a source of social capital development and contribute to shared community identity.

The school consolidation debate evidences the interwoven characteristics of rural communities. Scholars have found that the consequences of school district consolidation are wide-ranging and have a multilayered effect on individuals and communities (Brummet, 2014; Green, 2013; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sipple et al., 2019). The implications are economic and academic, and influence individual- and community-level social outcomes. One reason for this is that school districts symbolize intangible features of the communities in which they are located (DeYoung, 1991; Lyson, 2005). The interconnected nature of schools and communities is intricate, and across this relationship, schools may contribute to both individual and community understandings of place and identity (Bushnell, 1999; DeYoung & Howley, 1990). Schools contribute to community identity, local control, and the community's social networks, and when removed, individuals report reduced trust, community interaction, and quality of life after consolidation (Duncomber & Yinger, 2001; Ward & Rink, 1992).

In line with existing literature, the findings reflect that rural schools align their communities and connect rural communities' social, economic, and civic fabric. The joining of social and economic elements across a rural community helps form and maintain a shared identity among different groups. For example, the study found that schools were a conduit for churches to aid students and families. This finding was not unique, but the role of religious organizations and religious individuals in activating networks of support, civic action, and student achievement was supported by previous research (Irvin et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2013; Loveland et al., 2005; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Smidt, 2008). In rural settings, with reduced business and civic organizations, the partnerships with churches may function as an anchor between nonparent community members and the school. Through connecting social organizations that interconnect rural communities, rural public schools hold a pivotal place in communities.

However, from the central position in the rural community, the study assumed that rural school-level leaders would have access to established social linkages to strengthen their work of educating rural students (Schafft & Brown, 2000). However, as exemplified by some of the participants in the study, shared social assets were not available in all communities. Declining social bonds in some communities may provide insight into some of the factors behind school consolidation. Granted, much of the influence behind historical rural school consolidation mirrors patterns of economic transformation; however, questions surface about the role of social capital and civic engagement in communities facing declining populations when compared to those that may experience stable or growing rural communities.

Social Capital May Extend Rural Communities Beyond Economic Capital

Investigating how rural principals described the mechanisms behind social capital resulted in a theme that some rural communities possessed a sense of relational stability, generational closure, common bonds, longstanding families, and common expectations. These locations were possibly exceptional places with influential attributes that developed a strong sense of identity among residents based on the community's social fabric (Bushnell, 1999; DeYoung & Howley, 1990). For instance, Principal 11 noted that from their perspective, people return to rural towns and rural schools because of the interconnected nature of small towns. The connections among people and groups generates the conditions where individuals may create shared bonds and develop social capital. To this point, Principal 11 noted that returning individuals think, *"I want my kids to be raised by teachers that I know."* It is vital to observe the significance of the word "raised" as opposed to "taught" in his statement. The underlying reason hinges on knowing the teacher to such an extent that the raising of children was characterized as a collective effort. For this small town, the degree of closure may represent extraordinary levels of social connection that link students to social capital extending beyond their family. For those who return and stay, the close-knit relationships maintained within the group may create stability within the community that provides specific types of support for students. If these conditions are actual, rural schools, even within declining economic areas, may be better equipped to support academic advancement and provide resources for students because of the availability of embedded social capital. These social attributes may extend rural communities beyond the declining economic conditions by providing a socially rich environment through the collective efforts of teachers, families, and nonparent community members.

Strong social capital ties to the broader community, which includes families and other community members, can aid in the activation of social capital resources (Hansen, 1999; Lin, 2001; Uzzi, 1997). Relational stability develops obligations among those within the community. Participants noted obligation structures within small towns. For example, principals described generational closure within their communities, and relayed how these obligation structures and expectations became established over time from within the community. As noted by the participants' statements about longstanding families and generations of farmers, the community retains social capital through the permanency of its members (Besser, 2009; Liu & Besser, 2003). However, as these communities transform and fewer people return and stay, social capital may decrease because of reduced social expectations for specific civic behaviors. This may have important repercussions for schools that seek to develop a shared sense of school-supportive expectations and behaviors.

Limitations

The research project attempted to investigate the nature and content of social capital within rural communities. To examine the attributes of the relationship between schools and communities, a qualitative research design was used to explore the principals' perspectives of complex social experiences in rural communities (Aurini et al., 2016; Martin, 2017). Exploring the nature and content of the association between schools and rural communities through the theoretical lens of social capital was multifaceted, and as a result, the study has limitations in research design, data collection, and analysis. Furthermore, the purpose of this analysis was not to explain the unique community characteristics driving each school's access to social capital. Such research would require an extensive inquiry into each community's history and socioeconomics. Nevertheless, the study's methodology provided a thoughtful framework and

may generate insight into the personal experiences of school-level leaders. However, the findings must be considered within the confines of its limitations.

The participant population for the study comprised 24 school-level leaders from across Oklahoma's 736 rural public schools. Although the participants represented 24 different communities and school districts, they may not represent the population of rural schools in Oklahoma as a whole. As a result, future research would need to increase the number of participants to address this limitation. Also, even though the sample was stratified to distribute participants across census-defined tracks, the study's findings are not generalizable to other schools in Oklahoma or the United States.

Another constraint on the study was the selection of the US Census-defined categories rural-distant and rural-remote. The decision was made not to include the town-fringe, town-distant, and town-remote classifications because they contained schools that may not be considered rural. However, many towns within these locales may self-identify as rural and may be representative of rural communities. As a result, many communities that may contain rural characteristics have been excluded from the study population. To improve this methodological issue, a future study could develop a new method to select rural communities within Oklahoma.

Another constraint of this study was that the research methods did not include triangulation with members of other in-community groups like churches, civic organizations, parent organizations, or other residents or groups within the rural area. The absence of triangulation may reduce confidence in the findings. Future researchers could address this deficiency through the inclusion other groups in the study population to triangulate the perspective of school-level leaders. Additionally, while principals are central figures in the school, other school-level participants may provide different interview data. For example,

superintendents may have a broader understanding of the bonds between the school and the community. A future study could include superintendents in the sample to expand the data collection and triangulate between school-level leaders and superintendents.

Also, interviewer bias may have influenced how specific questions were asked due to the limited qualitative research experience. Subtle verbal cues or other aspects of communication may have influenced participants' responses. In addition, a lack of experience conducting qualitative interviews may have increased social desirability bias. For example, participants may have provided more positive assessments of community bonds because they may have believed it was to a certain extent an outcome of their effectiveness as a school administrator. This form of response bias may have been more common for school-level administrators in communities where downward tending relationships existed. Another limitation was that the social bonds and connections may look different and activate through other mechanisms. For example, digital social networks may be critical, and the participants may not have leveraged these networks via technology. Future researchers could expand the interview questionnaire to include questions about social media or how participants activate social resources through social media networks.

Selection bias may have influenced participants. The recruitment protocol included personal phone calls, and participants may have agreed or declined participation because of the wording of the recruitment script, subtle social cues conveyed during recruitment, or other personal factors. For example, when informed, potential participants that the study included questions about the relationship between the school and the community, some participants may have accepted or declined participation based on the topic of the study. For some, the topic may have sounded interesting. However, others may have believed the subject was intrusive and, as a result, did not want to discuss their school's relationship with the community. Others may have

agreed to participate because they wanted to share positive information about their school and community.

Conversely, other administrators may have chosen not to participate because they did not consider it appropriate to share “negative perceptions” of their school district’s relationship with families, civic groups, or other community members. Similarly, principals may have been reluctant to participate because of concerns about the study’s confidentiality. Even though numerous confidentiality protocols were outlined during the recruitment process, still, confidentially apprehensions may have caused some participants to not contribute to the study.

Another primary limitation was that the study does not evaluate school-level leader stability. Participants’ years spent as a school-level leader, or the frequency of newly hired school-level leaders, may dramatically influence their understanding of social capital and limit the activation of trust structures (Ford & Forsyth, 2021). In addition, the interview findings may also contain limitations shaped by participants’ understanding of the school’s function in the community. For example, responses may have been influenced by preexisting ideas of the school and community would in engage in mutual, reciprocal support. Also, participants may not possess the skills or aspirations to develop shared social ties, limiting insight into embedded social networks and the rural community’s social structure. Likewise, the development of social capital between the school and community was conditional upon a school leader’s governance style and the community’s civic capacity (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Importantly, the study does not review or evaluate the school leaders’ competence to cultivate and sustain social networks or relationships between the school and the community.

Scholarly Contributions

Evidence about social and economic trends indicates that rural residents face mounting challenges created by pervasive poverty, lack of health care resources, food insecurity, limited mental health support, reduced access to employment opportunities, and inadequate educational opportunities (Meit & Knudson, 2017; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Porter, 2018; Rural America at a Glance, 2018; Neumann, & Soulliere, 2018). In rural regions, schools are at the forefront of addressing these challenges. However, the role of social capital and closure in rural areas has not received adequate research. In addition, rural education as a whole may be understudied (Coladarci, 2007; Nugent, et al., 2018). This study attempted to address the limited examination of the social conditions in rural Oklahoma by exploring the rural communities through qualitative research methods.

While limitations exist, the study's attention to principals' nuanced understanding of community-level social attributes and the activating mechanisms embedded within the interplay between the school and community may have addressed a vital area for research. By exploring the social capital dynamics between schools and rural communities, the study may have developed additional understanding of reciprocal social networks that include families, nonparent community members, and schools. Perhaps by understanding the social capital conditions of specific rural communities, the study may underscore the significance of the role schools play in developing social capital resources in rural communities. The results may have also developed further understanding of how schools frame and activate social assets that contribute to shared community identity. As a prime community organization, schools serve a critical function, and as reported by several participants, act as fulcrums of their communities regardless of the availability of social capital resources.

When studying the aspects of a school's position within the community, developing insight into social capital within rural communities may elucidate some of the influences behind both stable and declining rural communities. Additionally, the findings may generate questions about schools' roles in developing social and human capital as well as provide a unique perspective on state-led consolidation movements' possible implications on school-level social capital. Additionally, the findings of the study may highlight the importance of understanding a school's social connections within the community. The study may also support the research of scholars who have described social capital as a diminishing attribute (Besser, 2009; Coleman, 1987; Putnam, 1993; Rupasingha & Freshwater, 2006). The qualitative data analysis documented rural communities in Oklahoma in which participants described an unraveling of the social cohesion between communities and schools. These descriptions included shifts in participation at school events, changes in interest in school matters, and reductions in observed norms. These findings may have implications for future research. In contrast, the study's findings also suggested that social assets for action were available for administrators in other rural areas. These divergent findings may contribute to the existing research by generating questions about public schools' social cohesion and cooperation roles.

By identifying interview participants through a stratified random sample of rural schools created by using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, NCES, and the Oklahoma State Department of Education, the study illustrated the findings of Greenough and Nelson (2015) and Thier, et al. (2021) that the U.S. Census Bureau rural-fringe classification included suburban schools. Table 7 shows that the rural-fringe classification for Oklahoma included 40 suburban or non-rural schools with an average student enrollment of 715. The study sample's average school enrollment was 198. In addition, the rural-fringe data set included school sites with a range of

enrollment from 11–1834 students. The differences in school size and proximity to urban areas may result in significant distinctions from the rural schools included in this study. The U.S. Census Bureau’s inclusion of suburban schools in the rural data set seems to warrant future study that may have implications for the analysis of previous and future research (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Thier, et al., 2021).

Table 7

Average Enrollment of Rural-Fringe, Suburban Schools within Rural-Fringe, and Rural-Remote and Rural-Distant Schools

Rural-Fringe Average School Enrollment	Suburban Schools’ Average Enrollment Included in Rural-Fringe	Oklahoma Rural-Remote and Rural-Distant Average School Enrollment
424	715	180

Last, the study’s methods underlined principals’ unique positions within rural communities. By leveraging school-level leaders’ unique placement, the study sought to develop knowledge of social capital’s attributes and structures in rural Oklahoma through a distinct lens. As a result, the study may represent the first in-depth exploration of the school-level social capital in Oklahoma’s rural communities. Additionally, the qualitative research methods may have uncovered essential features of the connections between rural schools and rural areas.

Social capital research emphasizes social capital’s attributes like information sharing, reciprocal social norms, and civic engagement. These and other attributes characterize relational networks in groups, organizations, and communities with abundant social capital. In some of the communities included in this study, social capital seemed to transfer in both directions. For example, participants reported that social ties produced shared experiences, resulting in shared norms. Also, they described how shared experiences created norms and social behaviors.

Examples of bidirectionality were described through actions and outcomes associated with community-wide school events and school-supportive activities. In this context, social capital may move in both directions. For example, rural schools, acting as the hub of the community, may activate social resources within the community that influence social cohesion. At the same time, community linkages may initiate social resources to leverage action to support school success. Understanding the interplay between social capital's attributes, schools, and communities may illuminate the less-understood social structures in rural communities and develop an additional understanding of social capital theory.

Future Research

Rural communities are multifaceted (DeYoung, 1991; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Koziol, et al., 2015; Lyson, 2005). Based on the vantage points of school-level leaders, the themes supported the idea that rural communities in Oklahoma possess a range of social capital. For some communities, an understanding of interwovenness surfaced, whereas others described a fraying of community bonds with a sense of separation. These findings may be of interest because scholars suggest that rural areas may be more close-knit than their counterparts. Even though a moderate relationship has been shown between population density and human capital, Putnam (2007) and Rupasingha and Freshwater (2006) contended that rural communities might contain a higher degree of civic engagement than urban communities because of similar community characteristics (Garces-Voisinat, 2011). For example, lower population density in rural locations may require collective behavior to provide community-level essential services (Browne, 2001).

In rural settings with high levels of social capital, longstanding social stability may produce shared social obligations that construct collective benefits, which in turn develop human

capital apart from population density. These common social resources, including weak social ties, have a multilayered effect on students and communities (Granovetter, 1973). However, as the study's findings indicate, some communities experienced deteriorating social cohesion. Further research into the social capital conditions of these communities may expand the theory of social capital by better understanding the possible precursors of changes in the nature and content of social relationships. Even so, some communities seemed close-knit and bonded, and additional research into the school's role in building beneficial in-community relationships may be equally important. Future ethnographic researchers may extricate and isolate the social antecedents and attributes that make some rural schools in Oklahoma unique. Also, ethnographic studies and future qualitative research that concentrates on fewer communities and school districts may be able to pinpoint influential social, economic, and historical aspects that underlie declining characteristics.

Understanding rural areas may begin with carefully organizing rural schools into more accurate classifications. The methodology of this investigation supported the research of others in showing that the U.S. Census Bureau's rural-fringe classification included large suburban schools and school districts (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Thier et al., 2021). Even though scholarship exists around this topic, reclassifying rural schools may warrant additional research. Future researchers could examine more precise ways to disaggregate schools by investigating other measures, classifications, and definitions of the designation rural. One possible solution to address the data irregularity is for future scholars to evaluate town or community populations as a more valid classification of rural areas. For instance, the current rural-fringe classification in Oklahoma includes suburban schools. When schools within the rural-fringe classification are grouped with rural-remote and rural-distant, significant differences exist in the social

characteristics of these communities. For example, within this study, the average rural-remote and rural-distant school enrolment in Oklahoma is 180 students. However, the average school enrollment of rural-fringe schools in Oklahoma is 424. By leveraging more reliable measures, additional studies may highlight gaps within existing scholarship that inadvertently misclassified rural areas using the U.S. Census Bureau's data.

Studying the role of rural schools in creating social capital may provide insight into policies related to school consolidation. School consolidation has an extensive history in the U.S., yet it continues to fuel a polarizing debate (Eacott & Freeborn, 2019; Green, 2013). As rural areas transform, the schools' roles continue to be an area of attention for local, state, and national policymakers. The divergence in outcomes and perceptions draws attention to the complex relationship among schools, communities, and rural school consolidation. In the case of declining rural communities, this interwoven environment may illuminate factors that contribute to either the reduction or development of social capital within rural communities. Perhaps future researchers could explore the social antecedents to rural community stability, deterioration, or revitalization. Much attention has been given to the economic forces behind consolidation. However, analyzing the social fabric of rural-school communities in advance of consolidation may help inform policies related to education reform.

As already noted, the study questioned how school-level administrators understood social capital within their community; however, it did not investigate other community members' perceptions of embedded social attributes. Additional research could take a more in-depth look at community-level social capital to include students, parents, community members, and others within school district boundaries. Likewise, future scholars could follow a similar pattern but review how urban or suburban school-level leaders may understand the social capital and closure

within their communities. By expanding to other locations, scholars may develop an understanding of the social conditions of other educational settings like urban and suburban locations. Also, by comparing rural locations with nonrural locations, researcher may better understand both locations (Biddle et al., 2019; Coladarci, 2007; Thier et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The qualitative data offered evidence that for some, rural schools and communities were tightly woven, but for others, in-community social bonds seemed frayed. Some principals noted that certain social capital mechanisms that fostered the common bonds that held their communities together had eroded over time. From their vantage point, the surrounding town was different than in the past. The rural school concept seemed to look different for some participants in the study, especially, those who had experienced a unique cohesiveness between the school and community. This conclusion advanced additional questions about the attributes of rural communities, and as a result, may position future researchers to investigate differences between rural communities with more complex analyses (Isserman, 2005; Koziol, et al., 2015).

Irrespective of social conditions, rural school staff and teachers are charged with educating students and preparing them for post-high school opportunities. For some students, this may mean staying in the rural setting, and for other students, graduation may be the first step toward leaving. As the study's findings revealed, some rural communities are unique and even though distant from large urban areas, meet the multidimensional needs of their students and communities through shared partnerships and reliance on parents, nonparents, and community organizations. Closure among these groups creates advantages for those within these communities. Nevertheless, in communities subject to continued economic and social transformation, the school's role may be one of ever-increasing importance due to community's

dependence. As the centers of these communities, rural schools' educational efforts are vital and merit the attention of scholars and policymakers.

Among other scholars, Leana and Pil (2009) found that, like the accumulation of human capital, social capital held by a group of individuals creates collective resources whose benefits translated to groups and organizations (see also Argote, 1999; Coff, 1999; Wellman & Frank 2001). Understanding rural schools and communities is imperative. Although scholars have given attention to school-level human capital through teacher preparation and certification, social capital may be underleveraged. Importantly, understanding the social conditions in specific rural communities may be especially critical when considering the unique challenges faced by many rural schools. Confronted with remoteness and declining economic assets, school-level leaders may find social capital vital in revitalizing the community, advancing school performance, and strengthening civic engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Coleman, 1988; Daly et al., 2010; Moolenaar et al., 2014; Portes, 1988; Putnam, 1993). Finally, the scholarship on social capital may encourage additional consideration from policymakers and others regarding the finespun social attributes within communities that influence student and school achievement

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Appendix A: Oral consent

Semi-structured school-level leader informed oral consent to participate in research

Dear _____,

I appreciate your time today and your willingness to consider participating in this study of rural schools and their communities. This study aims to understand better the relationship between rural schools and rural communities from the perspective of school principals. The research uses interview questions to explore the relationship between the school, parents, and the community. If you agree to be included in the study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will last forty-five minutes to one hour. Your participation is voluntary, and no compensation is provided. Also, the data gathered during the study will not be used in any future research projects.

Your community, your school district, and you will remain anonymous during the research process and final dissertation. Therefore, the risks associated with participation are limited. However, even though no identifiable information is used, deductive identification could occur. The research design limits this possibility by using ranges for descriptive data, anatomizing information, and randomly selecting schools for participation. You are also free to decline answering any question that you believe may expose you to this risk. There are no benefits from participating in this research.

Please note, participation in this research may include close social contact with the researcher. According to the CDC (www.cdc.gov), the virus that causes COVID-19 is spreading very easily and sustainably between people. Older adults and people who have severe underlying medical conditions like heart or lung disease or diabetes seem to be at higher risk for developing serious complications from COVID-19 illness. Our research protocol includes precautions that follow the CDC guidelines and comply with the current state and/or local restrictions on allowable personal interactions.

Also note that audio recordings will be transcribed using an online service not hosted by OU with its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential.

Your participation is voluntary. Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason. You can reach me at jeffrey.beyer@ou.edu, and my faculty advisor can be reached at daniel.hamlin@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to me.

What questions may I answer about this research project?

I want to make sure I have your permission to continue with the interview. So, please answer the following questions:

1. May I have your permission to start the interview? Yes No
2. May I have your permission to record the interview? Yes No

If no, then:

3. May I have your permission to take notes during the interview? Yes No
4. May I have your permission to use direct quotes from the interview? Yes. No
5. Do you want your name reported with direct quotes? (a pseudonym can be used otherwise) Yes N

So, remember that your participation is completely voluntary, you don't have to answer any question, and you can stop at any time. If you do choose to participate and then change your mind, you won't be penalized in any way. Finally, if you would like a printed copy of the information, I've just read to you, you are welcome to have this one or we can make arrangements for me to email you one.

Appendix B: Interview questions

Parents / Students

1. Please tell me about your background in education.	
2. Please share with me about the students in your school.	
3. Tell me about the parents and extended families of your students.	
4. Do the parents in your school know each other?	closure, sense of community
5. In what ways do you have a chance to interact with families and parents? Are there families and parents you don't know? Note: "Family" includes brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, guardians, and others.	closure, relational stability
6. Tell me about a time you and parent or family member worked together on a common goal or project.	shared goals, shared time
7. How would you like parents or extended families to support your school?	closure, trust structures
8. How would you describe the activity level of your school's PTA or other volunteer organizations that support your school? What does the PTA or other volunteer-based organizations do to support your school?	closure, trust structures, network ties
9. In what ways do parents influence your school? Do they serve on committees or volunteer?	closure
10. Tell me about the homecoming parade or other community-wide events?	social bonds, norms

Community / Nonparent affiliates

1. Tell me about your school's town / community	
2. How would you describe your school's relationship with the community / nonparent members?	social bonds, norms, closure, relational stability
3. In what ways do you have a chance to interact with other community members or community organizations? Are there community members you don't know?	closure, social ties, shared time
4. Are there other examples of events where the community and your school collaborate? (Sporting events, fundraising, bake sales, workdays, etc.)?	closure, shared time, community, and school obligations
5. What types of non-financial community resources are available to your school? For example, mentoring, volunteering, other supports for student, staff, and teachers.	social bonds, trust structures, sense of community
6. Do you have nonparent volunteers like community partnerships, church partnerships, other relationships organizations? What do they do?	social bonds, network ties
7. In what ways does the community influence your school?	closure

8. Are there any ways that you would like community to partner with your school. Are there any ways that you would like the school to partner with the community?

community
and school
obligations,
alignment of
interests

Is there anything else about your students, school, or town that you would like to share with me?

Appendix C: *Apriori Codes and Categories*

Codes	Categories
Community members on school committees Trust between school-level leader and parents Information shared between school and city Information shared between school and civic groups Confidence in dealing with community Reciprocity within informal relationships Confidence in working with parents Sense of trustworthiness between school and parents	Social resources
Relational ties between school and parents Volunteers at school events Network ties between school and community social network resources available to school-level leader Common social group ties	Social bonds
School-level leader has social influence in community Personal relationship with nonparents Personal relationships with parents School-level leader knows names of parents Investment in social relations valued Personal relationship with civic groups Social associations outside of school	Relational stability
Attendance at community events important Shared identity between school and community School and community collaboration Volunteer support of school Access to parent social resources Purposeful social action Access to community social resources Access to volunteer organizational resources	Sense of community
School-level civic engagement School works with city towards common goals Community works with school towards common goals Non-financial support systems	Shared goals

Community optimism
Access to community-level resources

Generational closure
School leaders are members of community groups i.e., Rotary
Parents know teachers in other grades
Teachers know parents other than their students' parents
School-level leaders know names of parents

Network ties

Community participation in school-level activities
Parents on school committees
In-school volunteer groups i.e., PTA, other
School participation in community-level activities
Time spent interacting with outside community members
School-level leaders hold voluntary memberships
Parent visits to school
School-level leaders visits homes
School-level leader stability
Community attendance at sporting events
Mutual recognition of individuals

Shared
experiences/time

Shared norms between school-level leader and parents
School expectations for community
Social obligations between school and community
Shared values with parents
Behavioral reinforcement among school and community
Observed norms between school-level leader and parents
Sanctioning behaviors
Common good over self
Reproduction of social class
Cultural reproduction
Social expectations
Observance of norms between school and community

Alignment of
interests

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects **Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01**

Date: June 22, 2021

IRB#: 13414

Principal Investigator: Jeffrey S. Beyer

Approval Date: 06/21/2021

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Declining apart? Rural public schools, rural communities, and social capital

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ioana A. Cionea'.

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board