

## **Leadership Challenges of the Rural School Principal**

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*As stress impacts the organization and operations of a school, leader stressors may be determined by the setting, years of experience of the leader, and the greater educational landscape in which the principal must lead. The researchers sought to differentiate between the perceived stress and joy of urban and rural school principals. Findings derived from this time series design inquiry suggest that despite external influence, there is limited change in reported stress of rural school principals. Though the leadership in any setting is complex and multi-faceted, the researchers identified and assessed contributing factors.*

Reports of principal stress have been reported for over three decades with indications of the numerous health concerns, problems with time management, relationships, conflict, and compliance with state and federal mandates (Armenta & Reno, 1997; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Gmelch, 1978; Lyons, 1990). Although the stress levels continue to be a function of the role of the principal, increased pressures to accomplish more with diminished support, and to be the source of solving societal issues (Kafka, 2009) are key to this inquiry. The researchers sought to examine how rural school principals moderated the challenges of public school leadership in the stress-filled world of the principal as illustrated by the study's research questions:

1. Is the stress of an urban school administrator different than a rural school administrator?
2. What are the key stressors for school administrators in each school setting?
3. What are the factors impacting the abilities and outcomes of school administrators?

Stewart and Matthews (2015) contended that principals of small school have different needs in comparison to medium and large school principals. They engage in policy, standards alignment, and professional development to create high performing schools, often despite intractable challenges (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). Yet, rural school principals are expected to undertake the myriad instructional, supervisory, and managerial responsibilities of the principalship within a different leadership context than their urban counterparts (Theobald, 1988, 2005).

### **Rural Schools Context**

Chalker (1999) argued that the unique context of rural schools requires unique leadership. The role of the principal in a rural school district is impacted by lack of resources, multi-faceted responsibilities, and expectations of a maintaining a high-profile role within the community (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

### **Lack of Resources**

Rural principals are challenged with fiscal limitations, limited access to educational and programmatic resources, and limited infrastructure, yet are held to the same accountability measures as their peers in urban and suburban schools (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). The Rural Low-Income Schools (RLIS) report indicated, "Rural school districts with high rates of low-income students also tend to have a reduced property tax base, which is critical to local district funding" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The poverty of rural schools poses often-insurmountable challenges for novice and experienced principals. There are over 9.6 million public school students living in rural communities in the United States, representing roughly one out of every five public school children (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Reynnells (2016) reported for the US Department of Agriculture that urban populations grow by millions per year while rural populations continue to diminish, creating an unsustainable funding model. The challenges of educating poor urban children have been addressed in very different ways than those missing from the

dialogue on educating poor rural school children (Herzog & Pittman, 1999).

### **Multi-faceted responsibilities**

Southworth (2004) described the isolation of the rural school principal, especially in terms of resources, collegiality, and professional development opportunities. The managerial, transformational, and leadership competencies required to lead 21<sup>st</sup> century schools are likely to be out of reach for rural school principals with limited access to colleagues, professional development, or formalized collaboration opportunities (SREB, 2006). Forner et al. (2012) noted there are important considerations that must be addressed to match leaders to the specific challenges of the context of rural school leadership.

Aside from the isolation of the rural school principalship, many principals have additional work assignments that may include serving as superintendent, being a principal of more than one school, or teaching for a percentage of the day (Cortez-Jimenez, 2012; Masumoto & Browne-Welty, 2009; Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Instructional initiatives are often subject to the endorsement of the community. "Rural school principals struggle with obtaining school goals and educational objectives, while simultaneously balancing diverse political, social, and personal interests of parents and community members" (Preston et al., 2013, p. 5).

### **Role in the Community**

Rural principals face sociocultural challenges unique to their school community. Preston et al. (2013) identified the challenges for rural school leaders as lack of employment opportunities for families in the community, geographic isolation, migration of people from the community, and lower levels of educational credentials. Principals in rural schools are expected to have an historical awareness that embodies the social, political and cultural aspects of the rural community (Lock, Budgen, & Lunay, 2012). Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) opined that principals who do not embrace this historical context may be viewed as outsiders and subject to increased scrutiny.

Masumoto and Browne-Welty (2009) avowed that community members are apt to scrutinize the actions of principals and place higher expectations on them in rural schools. It is a generally accepted expectation for rural principals to live within the

school community, act as a positive role model, and participate in local events (Clarke & Wildy, 2004).

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, the researchers examined principal workload stress through the underlying components of transactional stress theory that suggests that principal stress may result from an imbalance between the demands principals face and the resources available for dealing with those demands, rather than from the demands alone. In their research on emotions and coping, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) found that a person experiences an environment mediated by cognitive appraisal of the stressor and by acquired coping skills. By extension, this description can be appropriately applied to rural school principals and how they have historically responded to the stressful demands of the principalship (Williamson & Campbell, 1987). Combs, Edmonson, and Jackson (2009) reported that chronic pressure and high expectations are cultivating a culture of stress for school principals. Principals are under considerable stress as they respond to legislative demands in a time of high visibility and accountability (Klocko & Wells, 2015; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Sorenson, 2007).

### **Method of this Study**

Through this quantitative time-series design study, researchers developed a comparative matrix for the systematic measure of self-reported stressors for administrators in the K-12 educational setting. Focus was placed on the identification of differentiators between the setting of urban and rural administrators within the participants' responses. The setting of the principals was self-reported as either urban, suburban or rural. Further demographic questions would define the district and school populations to ensure alignment of reported district type across the respondents.

The founding study that led to these results was conducted in 2009 and the survey protocol was repeated in 2012 and once again in 2015. Although the study was not constructed as a longitudinal measure, the same means of participant identification were used in each protocol and as such participation from the same respondents is highly likely within the results. Each issuance of the survey protocol was conducted to establish a time-series design to acquire empirical trend-based data on principals and their stressors (Wells, Maxfield, & Klocko, 2011).

Table 1  
Respondent Demographics (2009, 2012, 2015)

|                        |                       | 2009<br>(n=933) | 2012<br>(n=725) | 2015<br>(n=512) |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Gender                 | Male                  | 49%             | 53%             | 54%             |
|                        | Female                | 51%             | 47%             | 46%             |
| District Type          | Urban                 | 15%             | 12%             | 14%             |
|                        | Suburban              | 45%             | 39%             | 38%             |
|                        | Rural                 | 40%             | 50%             | 48%             |
| Level of Principalship | Elementary            | 56%             | 55%             | 54%             |
|                        | Middle                | 25%             | 27%             | 30%             |
|                        | High                  | 30%             | 32%             | 34%             |
| Years of Experience    | Principal: >20 yrs.   | 10%             | 7%              | 9%              |
|                        | Principal: 15-19 yrs. | 11%             | 12%             | 15%             |
|                        | Principal: 10-14 yrs. | 23%             | 20%             | 23%             |
|                        | Principal: 5-9 yrs.   | 30%             | 33%             | 27%             |
|                        | Principal: <5 yrs.    | 26%             | 28%             | 26%             |

### Participants

All principals working in K-12 school districts (n=3685) in a Midwestern state (2009, n=933), (2012, n=708), (2015, n=512) were invited to participate in this study. Principals assigned to preschools, charter schools, and alternative education programs were not included in this study. For the purposes of this inquiry, the researchers examined the responses from principals who identified as rural school principals. Principals representing elementary, middle school, and high school levels responded to the questionnaire as shown in Table 1. Because rural school principals often oversee multiple grade level spans within a single building separated from multiple buildings in larger district, the total may vary from the participant total in some instances.

As indicated in Table 1, principal respondents were closely distributed by gender and widely distributed by years of experience as a principal. In sum, the participants in this study were representative of a larger population of rural school principals and were comparable in response rate collectively and individually by survey year.

### Data Collection

An electronic survey was sent to all principals in a Midwestern state using the same database for each of the studied years. The survey was administered electronically through Survey Monkey® (Appendix A). The authors, though understanding that many of the same respondents would be represented in each year of

the study, made no attempt to develop a longitudinal study from this data set. In the survey the respondents were asked first to identify demographic information about themselves (years of experience) and their district (urban, rural, suburban). Combined participant demographic comparison is shown in Table 1. Upon review, the only demographic category that would show greater than minimal response difference was that of urban, rural and suburban selection, as such facilitating further comparison of the data by these qualifiers.

The researchers used an identical survey protocol for collection of data in 2009, 2012 and 2015. Principals were asked through the collection survey to rate the frequency at which the activity or occurrence imparts stress on them individually. The principals were provided 26 stressors and asked to rate the frequency (4=*almost daily*, 3=*often*, 2=*sometimes*, 1=*almost never*). For each stressor, the participants were presented with an option of *does not apply*. In the study the researchers chose to isolate the stressor of overall loss of joy as a key differentiator between both urban and rural principals. This isolation of loss of joy as a factor would also allow the researchers to further explore the distinctions between gender and years of experience as contributing factors.

### Data Analysis

Through the development of the Likert-type scale, the researchers converted the data to an interval scale and treated the data as nominal. The respondents were asked to rank the amount of stress that they experienced from each categorical area in their daily lives (1 representing a low amount of stress and 5 indicating a

Table 2

Workplace Stressors Identified Through Principal Component Analysis (2009, 2012, 2015) Combined

|   |      |       | Urban<br>(n=267) |       | Rural<br>(n=901) |       | Suburban<br>(n=819) |       | Sig.       |
|---|------|-------|------------------|-------|------------------|-------|---------------------|-------|------------|
|   | Mean | SD    | Mean             | SD    | Mean             | SD    | Mean                | SD    |            |
| <b>Personal task management</b>                       |      |       |                  |       |                  |       |                     |       |            |
| Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands        | 2.91 | 0.970 | 2.95             | 1.007 | 2.95             | 0.976 | 2.86                | 1.023 | NS         |
| Job expectations of the principalship                 | 3.00 | 0.972 | 3.03             | 0.979 | 3.00             | 0.959 | 2.97                | 0.986 | NS         |
| Loss of personal time                                 | 2.99 | 1.017 | 3.01             | 1.020 | 3.03             | 1.013 | 2.96                | 1.023 | NS         |
| Work-life balance                                     | 3.08 | 0.983 | 3.13             | 0.997 | 3.05             | 0.957 | 3.05                | 1.007 | NS         |
| Insufficient time to get the job done                 | 3.26 | 0.903 | 3.28             | 0.853 | 3.29             | 0.893 | 3.22                | 0.929 | NS         |
| Constant interruptions                                | 3.16 | 0.965 | 3.19             | 0.948 | 3.20             | 0.966 | 3.11                | 0.970 | NS         |
| Personal goals and expectations to excel in this job  | 2.89 | 0.974 | 2.92             | 0.943 | 2.83             | 0.973 | 2.87                | 0.985 | NS         |
| My own ability to manage time efficiently             | 2.46 | 1.019 | 2.50             | 0.964 | 2.51             | 1.021 | 2.41                | 1.034 | NS         |
| Knowing how to prioritize tasks                       | 2.26 | 1.013 | 2.26             | 0.967 | 2.35             | 1.033 | 2.23                | 1.007 | NS         |
| Keeping up with email communications                  | 3.05 | 1.022 | 3.02             | 0.994 | 3.08             | 1.036 | 3.07                | 1.019 | NS         |
| Concerns regarding personal health and fitness        | 2.65 | 1.104 | 2.64             | 1.112 | 2.68             | 1.111 | 2.62                | 1.113 | NS         |
| General loss of joy in doing this work                | 2.13 | 1.138 | 2.16             | 1.147 | 2.14             | 1.144 | 2.09                | 1.129 | NS         |
| Being called away from the building                   | 2.69 | 0.873 | 2.72             | 0.860 | 2.65             | 0.876 | 2.73                | 0.873 | NS         |
| <b>Instructional demands</b>                          |      |       |                  |       |                  |       |                     |       |            |
| Providing instructional leadership for faculty        | 2.65 | 0.975 | 2.68             | 0.976 | 2.65             | 0.951 | 2.63                | 1.001 | NS         |
| Providing a vision for school improvement             | 2.40 | 0.955 | 2.44             | 0.989 | 2.39             | 0.938 | 2.37                | 0.963 | NS         |
| Planning quality professional development activities. | 2.54 | 0.844 | 2.56             | 0.845 | 2.52             | 0.816 | 2.54                | 0.875 | NS         |
| Responding to new demands of the curriculum           | 2.77 | 0.888 | 2.81             | 0.906 | 2.88             | 0.869 | 2.70                | 0.899 | <b>Sig</b> |
| Responding to student test score results              | 2.54 | 0.878 | 2.54             | 0.882 | 2.68             | 0.884 | 2.50                | 0.866 | NS         |
| Conducting teacher evaluations                        | 2.84 | 0.938 | 2.90             | 1.005 | 2.70             | 0.902 | 2.81                | 0.949 | <b>Sig</b> |
| Sharing leadership with teachers                      | 1.92 | 0.951 | 1.95             | 0.959 | 1.89             | 0.958 | 1.90                | 0.941 | NS         |
| <b>Professional task management</b>                   |      |       |                  |       |                  |       |                     |       |            |
| Dealing with parent complaints                        | 2.56 | 0.918 | 2.57             | 0.968 | 2.60             | 0.914 | 2.53                | 0.906 | NS         |
| Student discipline                                    | 2.63 | 1.020 | 2.70             | 1.041 | 2.77             | 1.021 | 2.46                | 0.993 | <b>Sig</b> |
| Lunchroom and building supervision                    | 2.63 | 1.100 | 2.63             | 1.052 | 2.76             | 1.117 | 2.58                | 1.096 | NS         |
| Volume of paperwork                                   | 3.15 | 0.873 | 3.19             | 0.850 | 3.16             | 0.861 | 3.11                | 0.892 | NS         |
| Dealing with changing demographics                    | 2.09 | 1.017 | 1.98             | 1.072 | 2.23             | 1.008 | 2.16                | 0.999 | <b>Sig</b> |
| Working with parent groups such as PTA                | 1.87 | 0.916 | 1.80             | 0.930 | 1.91             | 0.878 | 1.95                | 0.948 | <b>Sig</b> |
| Evening and weekend responsibilities                  | 2.56 | 0.993 | 2.59             | 0.981 | 2.61             | 0.991 | 2.52                | 1.001 | NS         |
| Increased performance expectations from cent. office  | 2.72 | 0.989 | 3.01             | 0.950 | 2.60             | 0.992 | 2.75                | 0.977 | <b>Sig</b> |
| Reports to district and state                         | 2.76 | 0.836 | 2.79             | 0.892 | 2.83             | 0.831 | 2.67                | 0.815 | <b>Sig</b> |
| <b>Handling conflict</b>                              |      |       |                  |       |                  |       |                     |       |            |
| Dealing with staff disputes                           | 1.81 | 0.871 | 1.82             | 0.911 | 1.82             | 0.877 | 1.80                | 0.854 | NS         |
| Conflict within the staff                             | 1.77 | 0.874 | 1.79             | 0.917 | 1.78             | 0.868 | 1.75                | 0.867 | NS         |
| Teachers' resistance to change                        | 2.56 | 0.955 | 2.61             | 0.966 | 2.53             | 0.951 | 2.53                | 0.956 | NS         |
| Issues with unions                                    | 1.78 | 0.912 | 1.77             | 0.951 | 1.72             | 0.889 | 1.82                | 0.925 | NS         |
| Working with ineffective or struggling teachers       | 2.30 | 0.919 | 2.30             | 0.965 | 2.31             | 0.918 | 2.25                | 0.900 | <b>Sig</b> |

Sign Mean Diff = ANOVA with significance level &lt;0.05

Sig = Statistically significant differences

NS = No statistically significant differences

4=Almost Daily; 3=Often; 2=Sometimes; 1=Almost Never

high amount of stress). The researchers then developed averages from the respondent data and created a comparative matrix looking at both individually (year by year comparison) and in totality of variance between and among demographic identifiers. Through this comparative analysis, the researchers were able to identify trends in the amount a factor would provide stress on the educational leader. The change was further analyzed from year to year and from setting to setting. This methodology allowed the researchers to identify trends and comparative results within the responses.

### Results

Results of the study identify a strong statistical inverse relationship between urban and rural principals related to the stressors they identified as impactful on their work. *Working with ineffective teachers* was identified as the highest inverse relationship, exacerbating the limitations that the rural principal experiences associated with overall program outcomes. The study further identifies the limitations that the rural principal experiences when compared to the urban principal in dealing with changing demographics and increased expectations of central office. These inverse relationships identify the phenomenon whereby as the level of self-reported stress variable increases in one setting, it will decrease in the other. The positive relationship in the variables of *teacher evaluations* and *board of*

*education presentations* suggest that across settings, there is common directional shift in measures of these factors. This positive relationship can be explained through increase pressures legislatively in teacher evaluation expectations and through the board of education, common across educational settings (Conley & Glasman, 2008).

### Factor Analysis

Established in the 2009 study, researchers identified the stress of the principal to be broken into clear identifiable areas within the survey responses (Wells et al., 2011). These areas would be broken into external, internal (personal), curricular and extracurricular and identified through an exploratory factor analysis and Promax rotation as shown in Table 2.

The stressors identified through exploratory factor analysis from the three studies remained relatively constant, hinting that principal stress may not be a function of the job of the principalship itself. Nevertheless, the increases in occurrences of stressors for rural principals were not significant.

*Stress for Respondents.* The researchers further identified the reduction of the overall stress of respondents from 2012 to 2015. This shift, first increasing, then the leveling or decline is representative of the manner in which external factors impact the perceived stress of the principal across the sample population. Each of the stressors identified in

Table 3  
Self-Identified School Principal Stressors (2009, 2012, 2015)

|   | 2009<br>(n=933) |       | 2012<br>(n=712) |       | 2015<br>(n=512) |       | Sig |
|---|-----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|-----|
|   | Mean            | SD    | Mean            | SD    | Mean            | SD    |     |
| Loss of Personal Time                           | *               |       | 3.09            | 0.989 | *               |       |     |
| Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands. | *               |       | 3.03            | 0.961 | *               |       |     |
| Conducting teacher evaluations.                 | *               |       | 3.09            | 0.859 | 3.10            |       |     |
| Volume of paperwork                             | 3.21            | 0.866 | 3.21            | 0.835 | *               |       |     |
| Diminished revenues.                            | 3.31            | 0.871 | 3.08            | 0.932 | *               |       |     |
| Insufficient time to “get the job done”         | 3.27            | 0.898 | 3.34            | 0.866 | 3.14            | 0.947 | Sig |
| Job expectations of the principalship.          | *               |       | 3.09            | 0.945 | *               |       |     |
| Keeping up with email communications.           | 3.04            | 1.033 | 3.12            | 1.000 | 3.00            | 1.029 | Sig |
| Work-Life Balance.                              | 3.01            | 1.002 | 3.19            | 0.955 | 3.08            | 0.972 | Sig |
| Constant interruptions.                         | 3.18            | 0.971 | 3.22            | 0.934 | 3.05            | 0.964 | Sig |

\* = Not considered a stressor, mean score < 3.0

Sign Mean Diff = ANOVA with significance level < 0.05

Sig = Statistically significant differences

NS = No statistically significant differences

Note. 4=Almost Daily; 3=Often; 2=Sometimes; 1=Almost Never

Table 3 for one year or more rise above the measure of 3.0 (3=*Often*) on the Likert-type scale, identifying higher than normal stress. Researchers also identified the clustering of the stressors, focusing on the area of

*Personal Task Management.* This result further informed the research and led to the identification of *loss of joy* as a key factor in the study. Finally, a Multiple Comparison Tukey HSD was conducted to identify the interaction and significance between each of the paired groups (rural to urban/rural to suburban) for each stressor. From the results described in Table 4, the researchers chose to focus on the interaction between Rural and Urban school leaders. These results allowed the researchers to further explore the variance from the results of the larger study to more clearly identify the impact differences between rural and urban school principals. Table 4 displays the significant variance as related to factors, isolating the comparison to rural against urban respondents.

The shift that is identified through this comparison was not only the presence of significant (< .05) variance but also delineated a shift in the stressors that would result in the variability between settings. As opposed to the general means analysis, the multiple comparison identifies that the major factors are related more closely with professional responsibilities. This shift from Personal Task Management displays a shift in operational stressors

and impacts, a characteristic of the rural setting. While each of the stressors identified in the study hold higher mean averages in the urban setting, the rural respondents identified a much lower level of stress on these operational factors.

The delineation between urban and rural respondents became more clearly identified in the study, focusing on the change in means and known factors from 2012 to 2015. Through this form of limited clustering in the comparison of urban and rural principals, the researchers developed an isolated list of factors and identified those with the greatest combined and unique impact on each population as explained in Table 4.

The researchers further explored the impact of years of experience on the average mean responses to identify the impact of experience as a factor in the response to stress. Though no average score would exceed the 3.0 level of differentiation, the impact of the years of experience on the mean scores was identified and created a normalized curve as shown in Figure 1. Though this result informed the study, further research is warranted to determine principal behaviors that are related to the joy and stress levels of the rural principal. Through this assessment by years of experience, significant variation at  $p < .05$  was identified between groups of respondents.

Table 4  
Self-Identified School Principal Stressors (2009, 2012, 2015).

|  | Rural<br>(n=903) |      | Urban<br>(n=268) |      | Suburban<br>(n=821) |      | Sig |
|--|------------------|------|------------------|------|---------------------|------|-----|
|  | Mean             | SD   | Mean             | SD   | Mean                | SD   |     |
| Loss of Personal Time                          | 3.01             | 1.12 | 3.04             | 1.02 | *                   |      |     |
| Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands | *                |      | *                |      | *                   |      |     |
| Conducting teacher evaluations                 | *                |      | *                |      | *                   |      |     |
| Volume of paperwork                            | 3.20             | 0.86 | 3.17             | 0.85 | 3.11                | 0.89 |     |
| Diminished revenues                            | 3.16             | 0.95 | 3.14             | 0.97 | 3.06                | 0.96 |     |
| Insufficient time to “get the job done”        | 3.28             | 0.89 | 3.30             | 0.85 | 3.22                | 0.93 | NS  |
| Job expectations of the principalship          | 3.04             | 0.96 | 3.00             | 0.98 | *                   |      | NS  |
| Keeping up with email communications           | 3.03             | 1.04 | 3.09             | 0.99 | 3.07                | 1.02 | NS  |
| Work-Life Balance                              | 3.13             | 0.96 | 3.05             | 1.00 | 3.05                | 1.01 | NS  |
| Constant interruptions                         | 3.20             | 0.97 | 3.21             | 0.95 | 3.11                | 0.97 | NS  |

\* = Not considered a stressor, mean score < 3.0

Sign Mean Diff = ANOVA with significance level < 0.05

Sig = Statistically significant differences

NS = No statistically significant differences

Note. 4=*Almost Daily*; 3=*Often*; 2=*Sometimes*; 1=*Almost Never*

## Results of the Study

The final reporting of these data is presented as a descriptive narrative. While generalizable findings may appear, this research is not seeking universals that exist free of context. The researchers present the results of this inquiry regarding workplace stress of rural principals. The results of this analysis point specifically to three key findings:

1. The perceived level of stress is increasing for all principals, rural principals report that their level of stress is stabilized for isolated factors;
2. Rural principals present as resilient in facing contextual changes;
3. Rural principals report a loss of joy in doing the work of the principalship.

In this study of principal stressors, the researchers found that rural principals were the least stressed and exhibited the greatest resiliency and acceptance of their role as principal, even after the widespread economic depression of 2010. Following the 2009 findings, the 2012 and 2015 findings yielded an increase in stress in nearly all areas while factors displayed little significant change from 2012 to 2015.

### Stress of Rural School Principals

In this study of principal stressors, the researchers found that rural principals shared stress levels with their urban and suburban colleagues yet exhibited the greatest resiliency and acceptance of their role as principal, even after the great recession of 2010. Following the 2009 findings, the 2012 and 2015 findings yielded an increase in stress in nearly all areas while factors displayed little significant change from 2012 to 2015. The delineation between urban and rural respondents became more clearly identified in the study, focusing on the change in means and known factors from 2012 to 2015.

Through this study, the researchers found an increased level of stress in the rural principal role yet a stabilization of those stressors developed to become the focus of the follow-up study, with the authors identifying the limiting impacts of change on the educational landscape and the resulting stress in the rural environment. As Dipaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) identified, stress was reported by 91% of respondents as a major occupational deterrent for continued work in an administrative role within the school setting. While stress was identified through

this study as a critical factor, variance was identified between educational settings and the respondent's identification of stress as the highest factor. This difference was most clearly drawn between the rural school principalship experience and the experiences of the urban school leader as determined through multiple comparisons of principal component analysis summarized in Table 5.

As the researchers explored the findings both holistically and in the comparative for urban and rural principals, the mean results displayed that urban leaders' stress and the impact of these stressors varied at a much greater rate than those of their rural counterparts. As the researchers identified, the mean urban principal score increased each sequence of the study. This contrasts with the findings of the rural principal. Though the rural principal presented with higher mean scores in the first year of the study, the stabilization and lack of shifting categorizes the resiliency of the rural principal against changes in the educational landscape. As a leader, this presents the case for grit and resilient leadership in the rural principal roles as compared to their urban counterparts.

The biggest differences appeared between 2009 and 2012 responses when principals were facing increasing accountability, incongruence in funding formulae, and external mandates. These multiple-hat wearing principals seemed to demonstrate more *grit* (Dweck, 2015) and resiliency than their colleagues in rural and urban school districts in this Midwestern state in weathering external influences and loss of control. Duckworth, Peterson, Mathews and Kelly (2007) defined grit through the development of scales predicting long term achievement through perseverance of effort and consistency of interest toward long term goal. Through this two-factor predictive process, the resiliency of the leader can be identified as grit. Grit within school leadership allows the leader to work through complex and multifaceted issues while maintaining focus on the goals of the learning environment and school community. The rural principal reported more frequent incidents of stress, yet a general stabilization of the stressor as factors on both their leadership and general joy for the work of rural school principals. With the stabilization of stressors for the rural principals, the factors contributing to the formation of grit, perseverance, and interest in goals, the researchers were able to be informed without the continual shifting of stress from one area to another.

Table 5

(Multiple Comparisons) Workplace Stressors Identified Through Principal Component Analysis, (2009, 2012, 2015) Combined

|  | Relationship | Mean Difference | Std. Error | Sig. |
|--|--------------|-----------------|------------|------|
| Conducting Teacher Evaluations                       | Rural- Urban | 0.204*          | 0.065      | Sig  |
| Board of Education Presentations                     | Rural- Urban | 0.266*          | 0.056      | Sig  |
| Dealing with Changing Demographics                   | Rural- Urban | -0.243*         | 0.071      | Sig  |
| Increased Performance Expectations of Central Office | Rural- Urban | -0.410*         | 0.068      | Sig  |
| Working with ineffective teachers                    | Rural- Urban | -0.165*         | 0.064      | Sig  |

Multiple Tukey HSD

Note:

Sig= Significant Difference

Std.= Standard

\*. The mean difference is significant at <0.05 level.

### Resiliency of the Rural School Principal

In analyzing these data, the rural principal offers a holistic regard for the profession. While many have dissented about overseeing multiple programs, services, and constituencies, the data suggests that the *Principal with Many Hats* may possess leadership coping strategies that mitigate stress and loss of joy in being a principal due to limited autonomy. These rural principals remain in control and seek support to mitigate the innate isolationism of the rural principalship.

Papa, Lankford and Wyckoff (2002) identified that while rural schools experience lower numbers of administrative applications, urban schools and districts receive applicants with fewer years of administrative experience and applicants who attended less competitive undergraduate programs. This increased number of years of administrative experience and higher performing undergraduate programs lead to a rural school administrator who is

better prepared for the stress of the administrative role. Abuhassán and Bates (2015) found that although Duckworth's two-factor scale created the foundation for the formation of grit, in the application to the school environment, persistence and the ability to access higher-order thinking skills or higher intellectual aptitude has a greater impact on long term goal attainment. This combination of applicant ability and the nature of the application pool contributes to the rural school administrator becoming more able to meet the stresses of the administrative role (Abuhassan & Bates, 2015).

Using more balanced leadership practices, one might argue that the rural school principal is able to more effectively address the challenges of the principalship. A major defining factor in the comparison between urban and rural principals is access to and use of resources as part of instructional and leadership practices. Consequently, due to

Table 6

ANOVA Workplace Stressors Identified Through Principal Component Analysis, Loss of Joy Question (2009, 2012, 2015) Combined

|                    | N    | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|--------------------|------|------|----------------|-----|
| More than 20 years | 175  | 2.14 | 1.102          | Sig |
| 15-19 years        | 243  | 2.22 | 1.191          | Sig |
| 10-14 years        | 444  | 2.24 | 1.146          | Sig |
| 5-9 years          | 602  | 2.11 | 1.156          | Sig |
| Fewer than 5 years | 530  | 2.00 | 1.089          | Sig |
| Total              | 1994 | 2.13 | 1.139          | Sig |

One Way ANOVA

Sig= Significant Difference

\*. The mean difference is significant at <0.05 level.



scarcity of resources, the rural principal leadership model must adapt and become more inclusive in both operation and process. This inclusive interaction involving other stakeholders allows for the leadership constructs to no longer be limited to the thinking of a single individual. This shift, though not eliminating the overwhelming nature of the rural school principalship as a stressor, allows for a greater balance of stress as is seen in this study during the gap between results from 2012 and those from 2015 when a clear shift toward operational stressors was avoided by the rural principal. This phenomenon is worthy of further analysis to determine the resilience of the rural principal through lived experiences in the field over an extended period.

### Joy of the Rural School Principal

A critical aspect of the stressors for rural principals, the significant relationship between years of service and loss of joy, was identified within the study. From the early careers of principals, the mean average of loss of joy, as a stressor would, increase on average of .25 mean points. This change was

identified as a statistically significant positive relationship. As years of experience increase, the loss of joy would also increase as a stressor as shown in Figure 1. This relationship would hold through from early career (fewer than 5 years) to mid-career (10-14 years) and would begin to decrease again later in the career of the principal and was determined through principal component analysis (see Table 6). This effect was unique to the rural principalship and was not identified in the urban or suburban settings.

### Summary of Previous Study

The foundational study in this series of research identified stressors of working principals and ways to mitigate that stress (Wells et al., 2011). The results indicated increases in the perceived state of stress with regard to personal stress and factors that have been associated with legislative demands on principals.

This foundational study was iterated two additional times in three year intervals to assess a

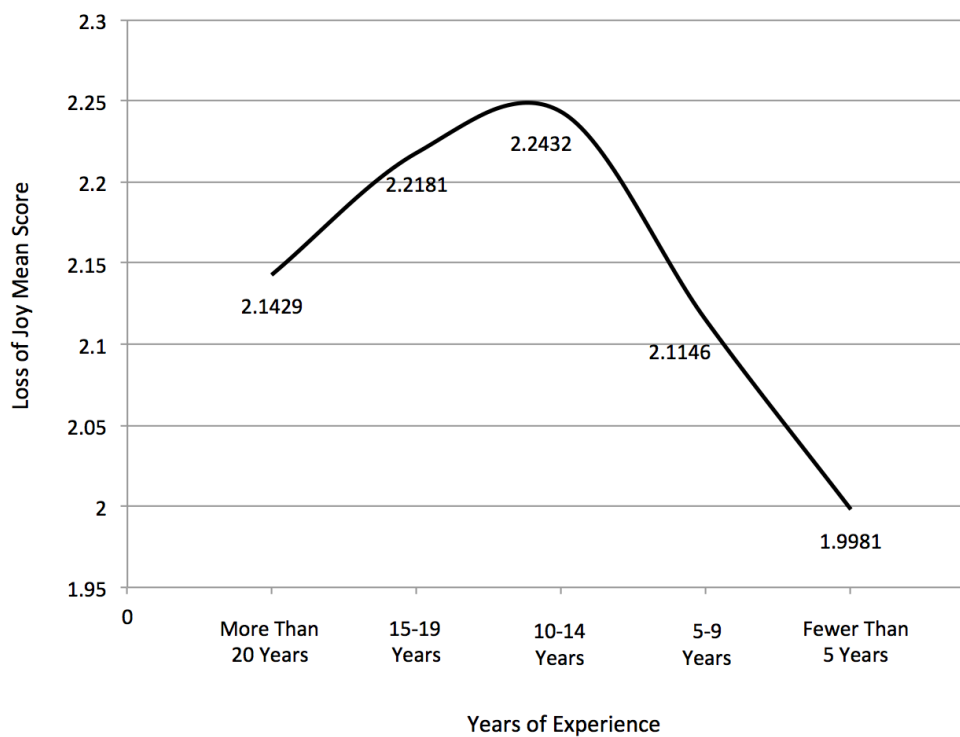


Figure 1. Average mean score by years of experience as a rural school principal for *loss of joy* stressor.

change over time and how that change was related to the existing educational environment during each survey (Klocko & Wells, 2015). This was a purposeful design in that the researchers expected that administrators would shift schools or districts, but the study would remain focused on the role and stressors of the principalship rather than any individual principal.

### Implications for Practice

Ultimately, the information from these studies informs practitioners in the field, and the professors who provide their preparation and training. In the “Schools Can’t Wait” report of the Southern Regional Education Board (2006), the challenge is clearly articulated, and responsibility is shared:

There is a lack of urgency for refocusing the design, content, process and outcomes of principal preparation programs based on the needs of schools and student achievement and little will happen until there are committed leaders of change at every level — state, university and local school district. (p. 6)

Policy-makers, university principal preparation programs, and state agencies need to augment efforts to support rural school districts in elevating the standards of practice for rural school principals.

University principal preparation programs must respond to the diverse needs of principals with specialized training matched with the context in the field. According to Bartee (2012) the identification of specialized skills must be established early through leadership programming to affect the future application pool for administrative programs across educational settings. Pijanowski, Hewitt and Brady (2009) indicated that the application pool for principals to lead urban versus rural school settings varies widely. While rural school leaders experience lower application numbers, urban school leaders receive applications from lesser experienced applicants and those who attended less competitive university programs (Papa, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2002) Local school districts and regional educational service agencies must be foundational to the dynamic nature of principal professional development through training, collaboration, and other distance-learning opportunities, thus improving access for rural educational leaders, and minimizing isolationism.

Rural school district superintendents would be advised to advance the development of principals to reduce the principal turnover rate and add to the stability of the school district. Fellow principals can contribute to the success of rural school principals as exemplary mentor principals through internships and collegial relationships.

### Summary

This study has provided the foundation for many of the important factors in the stressors of school leader, the similarities and differences that urban and rural school leader experience and the impact of stress on the general loss of joy in the role of school principal. Research motivated by the large shifts in the educational landscape experience over the past six years has led to this expanded and isolated exploratory study in the differentiation within teaching environments. This study identifies many significant relationships between factors and the setting that each respondent represents.

In the context of this study, the researchers found that stress, as it increases, impacts the organization and operation of a school leader. Through this lens, principal stress, leadership style, and the ability of the leader to overcome and persist become paramount to the success of any educational enterprise. Though differentiators were consistently identified throughout the study, *Personal Task Management* was isolated as pivotal to principal stress. This study has shown that stressors associated to *Personal Task Management* are key to the overall stress of the respondent and that significant variance is experienced as the educational settings are compared to each other. Results further lead researchers to explore the impact of years of experience in the unique setting of rural education. This exploration led to the findings of the normalized curve as related to the means score and the general loss or joy in the role of the principal as related to the years of experience as a school leader. As the educational landscape is ever shifting, it is beyond the scope of the study to define the unique combination of factors that result in the unique stress of the individual principal. Rather, this study, along with follow-up studies into the nuances of the rural principalship will lead to the greater identification of leadership needs and how best to support principals in unique educational settings.

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## Suggested citation:

Klocko, B.A., & Justis, R.J. (2019). Leadership challenges of the rural school principal. *The Rural Educator*, 40(3), 23-34. doi:10.35608/ruraled.v40i3.571