Revisiting the Revolving Door of Rural Superintendent Turnover

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This qualitative multiple case study is a follow-up to a study completed in 2007 that examined characteristics of rural school districts experiencing a high rate of superintendent turnover. The original study design incorporated extensive interviews with participants across four rural school districts; triangulating interview results with information found in school board minutes and published media articles. The four case districts had employed a total of 19 superintendents in the ten-year period leading up to the original study. However, since then, three of the districts have experienced a drastic change in their turnover trend. This study revisits the four rural districts to determine, from the perspectives of current and former superintendents, internal and external characteristics of the districts and the superintendents themselves that contributed to superintendent stability. Similarities and differences across the four districts are highlighted, and implications for high turnover districts and their superintendents are discussed.

As within most thriving organizations, quality leadership and the ability to initiate and sustain positive change efforts contribute to the success of rural schools. Difficulty arises when districts are unable to sustain reform efforts due to frequent changes in their leadership (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Rural school superintendents are often faced with deeply valued traditions and preconceptions that create challenges in establishing a meaningful vision for change, and, although some rural school districts are able to retain their superintendents long term, in many other districts, this dilemma is manifested in what has been described as a revolving door to the superintendent's office (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Natkin et al., 2003). This study examines rural superintendent turnover to provide insight into characteristics of the districts and the superintendents themselves that may contribute to both high and low turnover rates.

This multiple case study follows up research completed in 2007 that focused on internal and external characteristics contributing to high superintendent turnover in four small midwestern rural districts. The four case districts had employed a total of 19 superintendents over the ten-year period leading up to the original study. Since then, the same four districts had employed just nine superintendents over the next ten years, seemingly cutting their superintendent turnover in half. However, four of these nine superintendents were employed in just one of the districts, leaving only five superintendents employed over ten years in the other three districts. Hence, the turnover problem seemed to have substantially slowed in three of the four districts, while the fourth district continued in the same manner it had in the original study, changing leaders

every 2.5 years on average. This study revisits the four districts to examine the turnover phenomenon.

Before introducing the follow-up study, background and comparative information are provided by summarizing the findings from the original study. The purpose of the original study was to identify perceived characteristics of rural districts that may have been contributing to their high rate of superintendency turnover.

The Original Study

The study sought to identify characteristics of small rural school districts with high superintendent turnover. The original study included 89 participants from four high-turnover districts in a midwestern state. Participants came from four stakeholder groups: a) superintendents, b) staff members, c) community members, and d) board members. The original study also provided rich contextual details regarding the districts and the people who lived within them, as well as detailed findings within each participant group. Original study participant perceptions are recapped next, followed by an expanded review of the findings from the superintendent participants.

Perceptions of Superintendent Turnover

In general, participants across the four groups perceived superintendent turnover as having a negative effect on their school districts. A summary of participant responses from selected interview questions is included in Table 1. The most common negative affect of turnover mentioned was a lack of continuity. Most participants (72%) felt superintendent stability was needed for school success, and nearly all participants (84 out of 89, or 94%) felt superintendent stability was needed or

Table 1

Original Study Summary of Reponses to Select Interview Questions (across all participant groups, n = 89)

Participant Perceptions	Community Members (*n*=24)	School Board Members (*n*=23)	Staff Members (*n*=26)	Superintendents (*n*=16)
Percentage who perceived stability as needed or helpful	96	91	96	84
Percentage who felt turnover has had a negative impact on district	50	52	46	44
Average minimum number of years they would like their superintendent to stay	7.14	8.31	7.77	6.9
Average total number of years they would like their superintendent to stay	9.13	10.43	10.07	8.4
Perception of characteristic most causing stress for superintendent in their district	School finances	School board relations and politics	School board relations and politics	School board relations and politics
Perception of characteristic most influencing superintendent turnover in their district	School finances	School board relations and politics	School board relations and politics	School board relations and politics

helpful for school success. Most participants felt that they wanted their superintendents to remain in their districts for about seven to ten years. School board members, staff members, and superintendents generally perceived school board relations and politics as contributing the most to superintendent stress levels. These three participant groups also ranked problems with their school boards as the most likely characteristics contributing to superintendent turnover in their districts. Specifically, superintendents had concerns with board members not understanding their roles and responsibilities and board members micromanaging their school districts.

Most participants shared the belief that the superintendent needed to live in, and be visible to, the local community. Community members, school board members, and staff members often perceived their district as being used as a stepping-stone for administrators to gain experience before moving on to bigger, more prestigious, and higher paying jobs. Despite a concern of being a stepping-stone for beginning administrators, most community members, school board members, and staff members also perceived their districts as a final stage in some superintendents' careers. Comments from these groups focused on a perceived lack of commitment from their superintendents who had either already retired or who were near retirement. A summary from the original study, shown as synopsis of the most-applied codes across all participant groups, is shared in Table 2.

Superintendent Summary from Original Study

Although data have briefly been shared from all participant groups, to provide context for the follow-up study data (where data were gathered only from superintendents) specific attention will be given to the superintendent responses from the original study.

Superintendent responses to the question of which characteristics caused them the most stress suggested superintendents perceived school board relations and politics and school finance as the root of most stress in their professional lives. Most superintendents (69%) felt that school board relations and politics were the biggest contributors to superintendent turnover.

The external characteristic mentioned most by superintendents was a perception that board members are unclear of their roles and responsibilities, followed by a perception of board members micromanaging their school districts. The internal characteristic receiving the most attention was a perception that superintendents have multiple responsibilities in their small rural districts. Table 3 provides an overview of the most-coded responses by superintendents in the original study.

Clearly, the most important take-aways from the superintendents interviewed in the original study are that they wrestled with the multiple responsibilities they have in their rural districts, and that they had school board members who are unclear of their roles and responsibilities who often end up trying to micro-manage the day-to-day activities of the districts. These issues were impacting the work of the superintendents and causing stress in their lives to the

Table 2

Original Study Summary of the Perceptions Within Each Participant Group (across all participant groups, n = 89)

Most-Applied Codes	Community Members	School Board	Staff Members	Superintendents
		Participant Groups		
Many senior citizens / retired	X			
Financial issues / budget cuts	X			
Multiple cultures / factions with competing demands of supt.	X			
Need for supt. to identify with rural lifestyle/ small schools	X			
Referendum discussed			X	
School board turnover				X
Multiple responsibilities / "hats" for superintendent				X
Power with/ collaborative decision-making				X
Upward mobility/ Desired increase in compensation	X	X		
Communication skills important	X		X	
Lack of diversity in community		X	X	
Gender / ethnicity unimportant for success		X	X	
Board members unclear of roles and responsibilities		X		X
School board micromanagement			X	X
Power over / Chain of command	X	X	X	
Retired or nearly retired superintendents	X	X	X	
Community visibility / involvement positive	X	X	X	X

point that they often left the districts well before they had intended to. These responses are important, especially when considering the responses of superintendents in the follow-up study. The purpose of the original study was to identify perceived characteristics of rural districts that may have been contributing to their high rate of superintendency turnover. The purpose of this follow-up case study is to provide deeper insight into what transpired in the four case districts over the ten years after the original study. Three research questions guide this study: (a) Does superintendent turnover continue to be an issue for the case districts? (b) What internal characteristics have contributed to either continued superintendent turnover or stabilization in the superintendency? and (c) From the perspectives of the superintendents, what external characteristics have contributed to either continued superintendent turnover or stabilization in the superintendency? Before addressing these questions, attention is given to literature that informs the study.

Literature Review

Before introducing the follow-up study, it is worthwhile to consider relevant literature on rural

Table 3

Original Study Most-Coded Responses of Superintendents (n =16)

Code	Number of Participants Making Coded Responses	Number of Coded Responses from all Participants
Organizational		
Board unclear of roles / responsibilities	12	25
Board micromanagement	10	17
Community visibility / involvement positive	9	11
Negative Board Turnover	8	9
Personal		
Multiple responsibilities	14	32
Power with / collaborative leadership	12	16

communities, their school districts, school leaders, and factors that are often associated with superintendent stress and turnover. Together with the summary of the original study, the literature review provides a deeper understanding of the problem of superintendent turnover in rural school districts. This study considers the importance of stress in the lives of rural superintendents, and follows a premise proposed by Gaynor (1998) that, when analyzing problems that exist within a social system, the researcher should identify the sources and types of pressures that exist. These sources of stress for rural superintendents come from both internal and external sources.

External Characteristics Contributing to Rural Superintendent Turnover

Quality district leadership is critical in rural America, where approximately one-half of school districts, one-third of schools, and one-fifth of students are educated (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). In fact, the number of students who attend rural schools eclipses that of the largest 20 urban school districts combined (Hill, 2014). Yet, several factors inherent with rural education can cause the rural superintendency to be less attractive and can influence turnover in district leadership. Tekniepe (2015) grouped contributing factors to involuntary superintendent turnover into four broad domains: political conflict, internal pressures, external (community) pressures, and fiscal stress. Isolation, limited resources, and communities resistant to change are often obstacles that render service in rural districts less desirable (Lamkin, 2006; Rey, 2014). Other studies (Cooper et al., 2000; Kamrath, 2007; Ornstein & Levine, 2003; Parker, 1996; Shibles et al., 2001) have concluded that disagreement or conflict between school board members and the superintendent may directly influence a superintendent's decision to seek employment elsewhere or leave the position altogether. All of these factors contribute in different ways to higher superintendent turnover rates in small rural school districts.

Internal (or personal) factors are often heavily weighed by superintendents when making the decision to move on. For example, salary and prestige should be acknowledged as common contributing issues related to voluntary turnover in the superintendency, both rural and non-rural (Glass et al., 2000; Grissom, 2012; Kowalski, 2005; Yee & Cuban, 1996). Additionally, preliminary findings from a recent study (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2020) suggest that, regardless of urban or rural settings, superintendents face consistent issues that consume most of their time and energy, namely: a) school finance, b) personnel management, c) conflict management, and d) superintendent/board member relations. These issues are met by superintendents whether urban or rural, and undoubtedly impact their stress levels daily. In addition to these concerns, attention is turned to external factors or characteristics that are more closely aligned to rural superintendent turnover specifically.

Consistent with the original study, and grounded in the literature, four external factors routinely impact the rural superintendency, often manifesting in turnover; they are: a) isolation, b) fiscal stress, c) rural community pressure and politics, and d) rural school board politics and misconceptions. This list is not exhaustive, and individual considerations might not always easily fit into one of these categories; however, because these factors were established in the original study, and because literature continues to support their relevance (AASA, 2020; Parker-Chenaille, 2012; Yates & De Jong, 2018), each of these four factors are briefly explored next.

Isolation. Rural school superintendents face unique hurdles and hardships inherent with the "ruralness" of their districts. These districts are often the largest employer in the community (Harmon & Shafft, 2009), and they usually serve as the social, recreational, and cultural center for the community (National Education Association [NEA], 2018; Tekniepe, 2015). Compounding these challenges, superintendents in rural schools are commonly in their first district-level leadership position (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Further, rural superintendents often find themselves to be the only district-level leaders in the school system (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014) and one of, if not the only, chief executive officer in the community (Lamkin, 2006), thus they are often required to serve as a "cultural bridge" within their districts (Rey, 2014). Being "alone at the top" with a lack of familiar social interactions can lead to a feeling of isolation (Kamrath, 2007; Wood et al., 2013) which can impact the ability of remote rural districts to recruit and retain long-term effective leaders (Wood, et al., 2013).

Fiscal stress. Generally, rural communities consider their school superintendents to be highly compensated, and, because superintendent salaries are typically paid through taxation, public scrutiny and criticism is increased by rural community members who struggle with what they perceive to be overpaid administrators (Lamkin, 2006). Yet, salaries for rural superintendents lag behind those of their urban and suburban counterparts, typically averaging

about $95,000 in 2017 compared to an average of about $250,000 in large districts (Finnan & McCord, 2018). Rural districts often lack the funds to compete with larger salaries (NEA, 2018), and as one might expect, salary can be a strong predictor of turnover (Grissom & Mitani, 2016), often prompting district leaders to move their way up the career ladder, seeking higher compensation (Chance & Capps, 1992; Grady & Bryant, 1991; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Rey, 2014).

As cost-saving measures in many small rural districts, the rural superintendent has less assistance to complete key tasks and is likely to experience increased levels of responsibility (Lamkin, 2006) and multiple levels of "extra" duties that leaders in larger districts typically defer to other district-level administrators (NEA, 2018; Kamrath, 2007), thus requiring more time spent on managerial duties and less time on important educational leadership endeavors (Jones & Howley, 2009). Funding issues for superintendents in rural districts are not only limited to compensation and additional assignments. Rural superintendents traditionally operate within a community and school organization characterized by resource scarcity and a lack of steady revenue for rural districts (NEA, 2018). As Glass and Franceschini (2007) pointed out, superintendents perceive the lack of adequate financial resources as the single most important problem facing school districts. Doing more with less, in an age of high stakes testing and district accountability, contributes to additional stress for rural superintendents (NEA, 2018)

Rural communities. Preliminary findings from the most recent decennial study of the superintendency (AASA, 2020) point out that studies specific to the role of superintendent are often influenced by various factors including district enrollment, demographic characteristics of the superintendents and characteristics of the students and communities they serve. Rural superintendents serve a uniquely public and high-profile role (Arnold et al., 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Rey, 2014; Theobald, 2005); that is, their job requires close-knit relationships among community stakeholders (Jenkins, 2007; Lamkin, 2006). Some studies have also suggested that external pressures from community stakeholders may increase the incidence of superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2003; Glass et al., 2000; Hodges, 2005). Superintendents are under pressure due to the politics that surround established rural communities not always open to accept change (Tekniepe, 2015). In small rural school districts, there is already a set tone for "the way things are done," adding another obstacle for the superintendent to navigate when making decisions for the schools, especially if the community accepts or rejects the superintendent based on his or her own personal opinions (Lamkin, 2006; Tekniepe, 2015).

In some districts, it is not unusual for discontented community stakeholders to attempt to influence how the superintendent manages the school district, and when there is disagreement, to lobby school board members to remove the superintendent from office (Alsbury, 2003; Hodges, 2005; Tekniepe, 2015). This creates political pressure for the person serving as the superintendent, particularly if they are already a member of the community and feel obligated to side with the community on decisions (Tekniepe, 2015). As Campbell (2001) explained, community stakeholders, special interest groups, and the pressures that they exert can complicate a superintendent's ability to direct the administrative operations of a school district. Indeed, community politics greatly impact small rural school districts, requiring the superintendent to create positive relationships with community members and gain their trust (Tekniepe, 2015). However, some districts hire "homegrown" superintendents rather than seeking district leadership from outside, finding they are more committed to the community already, and thus, more likely to stay (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Rey (2009) noted that some rural districts seek out "the country boy" who understands the rural culture and values (p.19).

Rural school boards. The engrained way of "how we do things here" often reaches from the community into the school boards that govern the schools. One of the greatest political challenges facing the superintendent is the board with which they must work (Shibles et al., 2001). The strong commitment to the community lends itself to biases, entrenched opinions, and a fear of new strategies that may need to be implemented.

One of the most prevalent reasons for the high superintendent turnover rate in these small rural school districts is due to conflicting relationships with the school board (Fusarelli et al., 2003; Kamrath, 2007; McKay & Grady, 1994; Mountford & Brunner, 2001; Parker, 1996, Williams et al., 2019). The type of relationship that is had between the school board and the superintendent is a major contributor to job satisfaction and longevity (Chapman, 1997; Glass, 2001; Walter & Sharp, 1996). A conflicted and mistrusting relationship between the superintendent and school board quickly leads to increased turnover (Hendricks, 2013; Kowalski et al., 2011). A school board can greatly influence a superintendent's position, and of course, their decision to stay or move on (Williams et al.,

2019). The support offered or withheld can be the deciding factor whether or not a superintendent feels that it is worth staying or leaving the position, and, in some small rural school districts, the politics of the small-town feel can bring even more added pressure to the job than in larger districts (Kamrath, 2007).

For a district to be academically successful, an amicable working relationship between the superintendent and the school board is becoming increasingly important (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2004). Houston and Eadie (2005) found that one of the major dilemmas with school board relations is the lack of experience that superintendents have in developing a productive relationship with board members. Superintendents are often expected to build consensus among an increasingly diverse set of district-wide stakeholders (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski, 2005).

Many superintendents feel frustrated with the political interference placed upon them by the school board (AASA, 2020; Farkas et al., 2001; Sperry & Hill, 2015). Political conflict can arise from many sources. For example, when new board members are appointed or elected, power struggles within the school board can arise (Bryd et al., 2006; Fusarelli, 2006; Williams et al., 2019). In turn, these power struggles can usher in a new set of relationships between board members and the superintendent. For the most part, school boards initially tend to support their superintendents, but as disagreements arise, relationships are strained and trust wains (Bryd et al., 2006; Fusarelli, 2006). Sometimes, as a manifestation of weakening trust, boards attempt to micromanage the district's affairs, leaving superintendents frustrated by their lack of power and authority, and often looking for work elsewhere (Mountford, 2004; Rey, 2008).

In some rural districts, finding members willing to serve on the school board can be problematic, often resulting in new board members (Sperry & Hill, 2015). The recruiting process to secure school board members in small rural school districts can be a challenge due to already established politics within the area and a lack of knowledge about the education system. Rural communities often struggle recruiting and retaining effective and competent school board members (Zais, 2018). Most potential board members already adhere to the set culture and climate of the area, including its biases, traditional opinions, and fears (Zais, 2018). Although we continue to learn more about the impact of leadership on student achievement, it has become apparent that superintendents can have a positive influence on improving student learning, including within the rural context (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2006; Parker-Chenaille,

2012; Plotts & Gutmore, 2014; Waters et al., 2003). As more is learned about the importance of educational leadership, demand for highly competent leaders continues to increase (Leithwood et al., 2004). Thus, finding and retaining district leaders has become increasingly challenging in some rural districts (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Lamkin, 2006).

Method

Superintendent turnover is a complicated challenge that continues to be faced by many rural school districts. A return to the original case study was done to more closely examine the turnover phenomenon with ambitions to unearth developments and progress made in the case districts. Although the conclusions of this study are not meant to be generalizable, if some actions or processes undertaken in any of the case districts may have led to positive outcomes, consideration could be given as to whether those changes are replicable in other rural districts facing similar challenges. Conversely, for case districts continuing to experience high turnover, attention is given to whether the factors that contribute to the problem are consistent with the original study, or if new factors have emerged that could potentially warrant further research.

Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to provide deeper insight into what transpired in the four case districts over the ten years after the original study. To address the study's purpose, methods that are descriptive in nature to explain the many complex characteristics that might be contributing to the problem were identified (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018), and a qualitative multi-case study was conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Site and Participant Selection

The districts selected for the follow-up study are the same as those from the original study. Four case districts were selected from a midwestern state having many small rural public schools. Sample districts met the following four criteria: (a) public school districts not within a metropolitan area and defined as rural by the US Census Bureau, (b) districts with fewer than 1,000 pupils, (c) common school districts, and (d) districts having five to seven school board members. At the time of the original study, the four districts had a student enrollment of between 200 and 600 students K-12, and they were within communities with populations of 1,200 to 1,600. While these districts appeared very different in some ways (e.g., one is very remote and surrounded by a national forest, and one is a short drive to

several larger cities), they all shared the problem of superintendent turnover.

Based on reporting from the previous superintendent decennial study (Kowalski et al., 2011) and by Chance et al. (1992), a definition of "high turnover" was developed and applied. Ensuring that turnover was not a recent phenomenon, "high-turnover districts" must have employed four or more different individuals in the position of superintendent over the ten-year period leading up to the original study, thus allowing for a possible long-term superintendent to have left the district before turnover became an issue. During the designated ten-year period prior to the original study, the four case districts employed a total of 19 different individuals in the position of superintendent of schools, which was an average of nearly one new superintendent every other year for each district.

To address the research questions of the follow-up study, only superintendent participants were included. Across the four districts, interviews were conducted with three currently seated superintendents, and three former superintendents, with at least one superintendent (current or former) being interviewed from each district.

Data Collection and Analysis

Of the six superintendents interviewed for the follow-up study, five (83%) were male, and one (17%) was female. All participants were interviewed in two stages: first stage—structured, ranking of reasons for turnover or stability; and second stage—semi-structured, open-ended questions that moved to probing questions related to the ranked responses from the first stage. Both stages of interviews were done over the phone and were digitally recorded.

During the first stage, participants were initially asked if they believed their district had solved its high turnover problem. Then, based on their response, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of, and list of possible factors that might contribute to, superintendent turnover or superintendent stability. Each participant was given a list of seven possible factors (or characteristics), arranged in alphabetical order, derived from a review of the literature on factors that contribute superintendent turnover: (a) district demographics, (b) gender and / or ethnicity issues, (c) geography, (d) problems associated with community relations and politics, (e) problems associated with school board relations and politics, (f) problems associated with school finances, and (g) problems associated with staff member relations and politics. After sharing their perceptions of each factor or characteristic, participants were asked to rank the list in the order

they perceive the factors or characteristics as contributing to superintendent turnover or stability in their district. To get an accurate picture of what had changed, if anything, the same characteristics were used, thus keeping the data parallel from the first study. Trustworthiness and validity were achieved through member checking in the second stage of interviews. Through member checking, participants were able to establish validity of their accounts given during the first-round of interviews and correct any errors or challenge incorrect interpretation of data.

The second stage of the interviews included more open-ended questions that asked participants to talk about their perceptions related to superintendent turnover or stability in their districts. Stage two questions included asking participants to: (a) describe how their districts have (or have not) been affected by turnover, (b) share their opinions of what could be done to decrease superintendent turnover if it was still an issue, (c) explain their perceptions of changes that have occurred in the district that may have contributed to a change in superintendent turnover, and (d) discuss their perceptions of stress (and its origins) in the role of the superintendent, and how stress might contribute to turnover or stability. Based on the results of the original study, particular attention was given to the relationship between the superintendents and the school board.

Interviews were transcribed, and summative codes were assigned to capture the meaning or essence of comments from participants (Saldaña, 2021). Based on recurring comments made throughout the initial study's interviews, a total of 55 thematic codes were initially used to code the follow-up study data. However, due to changes in superintendent turnover in some of the districts, as the coding process began, several new patterns emerged, and new codes were developed. For example, in the initial study, the concepts of "board member turnover" and "promotion from within" were not discussed by any participants, because at the time of the study, all four districts were facing high superintendent turnover challenges and participants did not have reason to share perceptions of potential solutions. However, at the time of the second study, some districts were no longer experiencing high turnover, which led to the generation of new codes as participants explained their perceptions of the turnaround in their districts.

To frame the analysis of the follow-up study, attention is first given to analysis from the 89 responses in the original study. This is a stark contrast to the follow-up study which considered the viewpoints of only six superintendents. Although one option was to only review the data from the superintendent interviews in the original study, the

decision to include data from all original participants in the comparison was made for two reasons: a) the original study was broad in scope and painted a more comprehensive and unbiased view of the phenomenon of superintendent turnover in the four districts, and b) the responses from the non-superintendent participant groups (school board members, staff members, and community members) generally confirmed the viewpoints of the superintendents, and there was little variance in perceptions of the turnover problem within the district, with any notable exceptions already discussed.

The Four Case Districts

The benefit of a multiple case study is that the phenomenon can be examined within a small number of cases. The phenomenon of superintendent turnover in specific rural communities must be set in the context of the communities themselves; therefore, each of the four case districts will be described next, with pseudonyms replacing all identifying information.

Charleston. The Charleston School District has seen a sharp decline in enrollment over the past ten years, with total enrollment of just over 400 (PK-12) in 2017, as compared to about 600 in 2007. The district is within a county that spans approximately 900 square miles, with a total population of over 44,000 people (State Government Website, 2018). Interestingly, the county itself has shown growth of over 10% in the past 20 years (State Government Website, 2018).

Although there is no Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)–an area with high population density, such as a city–within the county, Charleston is located within 100 miles of a major metropolitan area. Opinions in Charleston differ as to whether being close to a metro area is a positive or negative attribute of the community, but both studies gathered concerns regarding the concept of "urban sprawl." Generally, perceptions are that people who work in the larger city are seeking more affordable housing, and a less "urban" family lifestyle. Inasmuch as the concerns seem to be warranted in the county, within the village and district, this does not appear to have become a concern, with population and enrollment showing a downward trend.

The median household income in Charleston was just over $36,000, in 2018, compared to a statewide median income of over $54,000 (State Government Website, 2018). Original study participants often mentioned lower income levels, usually coupled with

perceptions that the property value has continued to increase rapidly (because of urban sprawl).

Most of the students (90%) educated in Charleston's two separate school buildings are identified as white, non-minority students (State Department of Education, 2018). The high school sits "half empty" according to one participant in the follow-up study, due to declining enrollment. About 56% of the district's students are identified as economically disadvantaged (State Department of Education, 2018). Charleston High School has a graduation rate that consistently approaches 100%, and state report cards rate the district as "meeting expectations," with scores that are slightly below the state average in Language Arts and Math achievement.

Owl Creek. The Owl Creek community and school district is the most remotely located of the four districts in the study. Remoteness can be felt when driving to the district and is also consistent with an expected low population density. Owl Creek, like Charleston, is in a county that spans about 900 square miles, but the total county population is about half that of Charleston. Nearly 94,000 acres of Owl Creek's county are covered with lakes. Additionally, national and county forestlands cover thousands of acres. It is about a three-hour drive to the nearest mid-size town of about 100,000 people from Owl Creek.

Although the median household income is slightly higher than Charleston, about $38,000 in 2018 (State Government Website, 2018), concern over high taxes and low income was expressed by many participants. In one respect, Owl Creek has a similar issue to that of Charleston – high property valuation due to seasonal residents paying top dollar for lakefront or hunting / recreational land.

The district has seen an interesting shift in student enrollment trend data. Owl Creek had a student population of about 200 pupils in 2007. Since then, the enrollment has shrunk to about 140 students in 2017 (State Department of Education, 2018). A typical graduating class size is 12 students. In the original study, most of the students (about 93%) were white, non-minority students (State Department of Education, 2018), with about 3% of the student population reported as African American and another 3% Asian (State Department of Education, 2018). However, in 2017, the white population had reduced to about 88% of the students, and Hispanic / Latino students had risen from 1% to 5% of the student population. Also, the percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged had risen from about 40% in 2007 to 55% in 2017 (State Department of Education, 2018).

Pinedale. The Pinedale community and school district are located in a less remote area of the state. Pinedale is similar in size to Owl Creek and Charleston, but it has a county-wide population of over 90,000 in 2018, up from about 85,000 in 2000 (State Government Website, 2018). Unlike Charleston and Owl Creek, Pinedale's county does have a Micro-metropolitan Statistical Area within its boundaries, and it is less than an hour drive to a large city of about 600,000.

The population of Pinedale in 2000 was about 1,400, and it has since shrunk to about 1,100 (State Government Website, 2018). Pinedale held steady with no change in student population from 2007 to 2017, enrolling about 425 pupils PK-12 (State Department of Education, 2018). Like Owl Creek, Pinedale has seen an increase of about 5% in the Hispanic / Latino population in its schools (State Department of Education, 2018). Pinedale schools have also seen an increase in the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, going from about 16% in 2007 to nearly 30% in 2017 (State Department of Education, 2018). Interestingly, the median household income in Pinedale has stayed consistent at about $60,000 since 2000 (State Government Website, 2018), with one of the largest employers in the area being a state correctional facility.

Although a large lake is found in the center of the community, Pinedale does not have similar geographic characteristics to the previous two districts discussed (Charleston and Owl Creek), nor does a large seasonal or recreational population impact Pinedale and its land valuation. As mentioned, Pinedale is within an hour of larger metropolitan areas, and is considered by some to be somewhat of a "bedroom community."

Cantonia. The Cantonia community and school district is located less than 30 miles from Pinedale, and it shares several commonalties with the Pinedale community. The Village of Cantonia is found in a smaller county of only about 550 square miles, with a population of 85,000 (State Government Website, 2018), which is up from about 75,000 people in 2000. The county has shown consistent population growth over the period from 2000 – 2018. The two largest cities in the state are each about a thirty-minute drive from Cantonia (in opposite directions).

After experiencing about a 25% loss in students from 1996-2007, the district has shown consistent growth. In 2007, the Cantonia student population was about 500 pupils PreK-12. As of 2017, the student body had grown to about 630 students (State Department of Education, 2018). Within its schools, Cantonia has also seen an increase of Hispanic /

Latino students from 6% in 2007 to 13% in 2017 (State Department of Education, 2018). There has been no noticeable change in the percentage economically disadvantaged students (State Department of Education, 2018).

The median household income in Cantonia has seen significant growth. In 2000, the median household income was about $46,000 (compared to a statewide median income of nearly $44,000) (United States Census Bureau, 2007). In 2018, the median household income had risen to $70,000, compared to a statewide median of about $54,000. A major sports and recreation business is headquartered just about 15 miles from Cantonia and is the largest employer in the region. Because of the short drive to larger cities, Cantonia is also considered to be a "bedroom community" by some of its residents.

The Superintendents

When contacting the superintendents, it was immediately interesting to see how long the currently seated superintendents had been in their positions. In the first district (Pinedale), the currently seated superintendent was interviewed. This person had been in the position for two years. The immediate predecessor was also interviewed from Pinedale, who had spent three years in the position. From Charleston, both the current and most previous superintendent were also interviewed. The current superintendent was in their fifth year, and their immediate predecessor had spent eight years as superintendent. In Owl Creek, only the former superintendent, who had spent three years as superintendent, agreed to participate. Although the currently seated superintendent declined the interview, the individual was in their ninth year as superintendent. The last district, Cantonia, was perhaps the most interesting. In Cantonia, the currently seated superintendent was the same individual who had participated in the original study, meaning that they were currently in their twelfth year as superintendent. This was most impressive in the district that had previously only kept their superintendent for about a year and a half on average.

A summary of participants from the follow-up study is shown in Table 4. Although, in the ten years preceding the original study, the case districts had employed 19 superintendents, now, in the ten years after the original study, the same four districts had employed only a total of nine individuals in the position. More interestingly, of those nine, four had been employed in Pinedale alone, meaning that the other three districts only employed a total of five superintendents in ten years. Altogether, it became apparent that three of the original four districts no

Follow-up Study Participants

Pinedale	Charleston	Owl Creek	Cantonia
Current Superintendent (in 2nd year) Age: 42 Race: White Gender: Female	Current Superintendent (in 5th year) Age: 43 Race: White Gender: Male		Current Superintendent (in 12th year) Age: 52 Race: White Gender: Male
Immediate Predecessor (3 years) Age: 63 Race: White Gender: Male	Immediate Predecessor (8 years) Age: 68 Race: White Gender: Male	Immediate Predecessor (3 years) Age: 57 Race: White Gender: Male	

Note. This table summarizes information from the six participants in the follow-up study at the time it was completed. Owl Creek was the only district where the current superintendent declined participation in the study. This individual was in her ninth year as superintendent in the district and was a white female.

longer had a superintendent turnover problem, but that Pinedale was still struggling to retain its superintendent long-term. Thus, the follow-up study quickly transitioned into one that highlighted the differences between Pinedale and the other districts.

Race, Gender, and Age

Not surprisingly, and consistent with the participants in the original study, all individuals report themselves as white (to the state-wide data reporting system). Given that all participants in both studies are white, an assumption is made that race does not impact the turnover in the case districts. Two of the currently seated superintendents are female, but only one of them agreed to participate in the study. When asked if she felt gender had contributed to turnover in the past, she replied that it had not. Further, in this district (Pinedale), the former superintendent, who was in the position for three years, was a male. Likewise, in the other female-led district, the predecessor was also a male. Therefore, no effort is made to tie turnover to gender. Additionally, it is worth noting that, in the original study, one of the most often occurring comments across all interview groups was that gender and ethnicity had no impact on superintendent success in the district. The superintendents themselves in the original study did not express a concern that gender or race were factors in superintendent turnover, although, about half of the original superintendents interviewed indicated that women and minority candidates might not consider their district appealing, given its "remoteness or whiteness."

As to whether age was a factor in turnover, two of the participants in the second study left their positions to retire. In Charleston, the former superintendent retired after eight years in the position. This district had experienced rampant turnover prior to the individual accepting the post, and in fact, in the year of the original interview, the school board had already voted to non-renew his contract in only its second year. In an interesting move, after participating in the original study, the school board (all members were interviewed for the study) voted to rescind their nonrenewal, and the superintendent subsequently continued for six more years. The superintendent attributed some of the decision directly to the study itself, stating that, "Once they [board members] were asked questions about all the responsibilities I had, they started to rethink whether their expectations were realistic."

In Pinedale, the former superintendent was hired out of retirement to "help get this district on track" after his predecessor exited having completed only two years. Though it was unsure how long he would stay in the position, his three-year tenure ended up being one of the longer in the last two decades. When he retired (again), he was replaced by a 42-year-old female. Thus, age itself does not appear to be a discriminating factor in any district, but it did come into play in two districts, one where the superintendent had built an eight-year career, and where turnover no longer seemed an issue, and the other in Pinedale, where, despite their ongoing turnover problem, they hired a superintendent who had already retired once, with no expectation of a long-term stay. Pinedale's actions regarding hiring a retired superintendent are not considered in depth in this study, yet it is deserving of comment that the school board was not looking for someone who could possibly stay beyond a few years, calling into question their hiring practices and vision for leadership longevity.

Geography

When considering whether geography has played a factor in superintendent turnover in the case districts, in the original study, there was consideration given to the "remoteness" of the districts. The original study asserted that some small rural districts, classified as remote, often experience a high rate of poverty, a lack of job-alike colleagues for district leaders, and require individuals who have an understanding of the isolation they may experience as white-collar professionals. As to whether geography was a factor in the follow-up study, in only one instance did it appear applicable. This was in Owl Creek, where the former superintendent left the position to accept a superintendency in another rural district in the state, but closer to family members and aging parents. Therefore, geography did not appear as an important concern as it relates to moving out of a rural district to one that is less remote. When asked about the move and the district, the former superintendent stated that, "I loved it there, and I would have certainly stayed. There was nothing that drove me out of [district name], but I needed to be closer to my family."

Findings

This section focuses specifically on findings from the follow-up study. However, comparisons between the studies are provided when they are noteworthy. The purpose of this study was to provide deeper insight into what transpired in the four case districts over the ten years after the original study. Three research questions guided the study: (a) Does superintendent turnover continue to be an issue for the case districts? (b) From the perspectives of the superintendents, what internal characteristics have contributed to either continued superintendent turnover or stabilization in the superintendency? and (c) From the perspectives of the superintendents, what external characteristics have contributed to either continued superintendent turnover or stabilization in the superintendency?

Three Districts that Apparently Solved the Turnover Problem

Data were collected from four superintendents across the three districts that no longer seemed to be experiencing high turnover. Although a small sample size, it is important to note that only a total of five superintendents were eligible to participate in the study, because these three districts had employed only five superintendents in the ten years after the original study.

Consistent with the original study, responses are divided into external and internal domains. Within the external domain, the code receiving the most attention was that of "positive" school board member turnover. All four participants commented on the impact that school board member turnover had on their districts, and, although there were other consistencies across all four of the participants' interviews, positive board member turnover emerged as the most-coded transcribed response. It appears, since the previous study, these districts experienced board member turnover that positively impacted those in the position of superintendent. In fact, one superintendent summed it up this way, "We had some awfully toxic board members, just a couple, but they were just plain toxic. Once they lost support and didn't seek reelection, that changed everything in my district." Yet, within these districts, even though they seemed to lose some board members, they were able to keep other board members who were perceived as "positive" by the superintendents.

Because "positive" can be interpreted differently by different individuals, it is important to press for a more consistent definition for use within data analysis, as the concept of "positive board members" surfaces often. When superintendents were asked to narrow their definition of positive, several consistencies arose, namely: (a) common sense, (b) commitment to students, (c) confidence in the superintendent, (d) optimism, and (e) ability to compromise. These characteristics identified by superintendents in the study are consistent with those found by Walter and Sharp (1996) who listed several desirable characteristics of school board members. Within this study therefore, the concept of "positive board turnover" relates to the exiting of board members who were perceived by superintendents as not consistently displaying these characteristics and replacing them with board members who did. One currently-seated superintendent commented that, "Though we were happy to see some board members hang it up, we were just as happy to see others stay. Some negative board members got tired of always fighting and it appeared they just gave up. Good triumphed!"

Although it is not as easy to link to superintendent stability, three superintendents also pointed out that staff turnover also had a positive impact. It appears that, in addition to some "negative" board members leaving the school board, some resistant staff members also made the decision to move on. Generally, this was explained as more senior staff members retiring. One superintendent explained it as "a snowball effect" [when some board members left], stating, "older staff members saw the

writing on the wall, and decided it was a good time to retire."

Some superintendents felt that the school board issues had resolved themselves either through board member turnover or through increased education of board members. Though not mentioned by all superintendents, one superintendent really wanted to stress the work they had done to educate the board members of their roles and responsibilities. This superintendent commented that, "I take great pride in the work we have done with our board. We have gone to training together and followed up with that training to make sure we know what to expect from each other." This superintendent felt strongly that taking the time to educate board members about their roles and responsibilities, coupled with establishing mutually agreed upon expectations, followed up with annual reviews, changed the landscape of the superintendency in his district. He further explained:

> Once we knew what we expected from each other, and we put that down on paper, this made my life much easier. Board members could then evaluate me based on expectations they had established each year, rather than just a feeling they had about whether I was doing a good job, often based on one or two voices in their ear.

In these three districts, the superintendents were quick to point out that the changes made were very positive, and that they were actually able to sustain some of their change efforts because of the stability they were experiencing. All four superintendents interviewed made comments about the great things happening in their districts, and that they were experiencing increased student achievement because of the sustained change efforts.

Two additional themes emerged within the internal domain. The first theme was that the superintendents made decisions in a "deliberative" way, meaning they gathered input and took time to weigh pros and cons before making a final decision, but that they were also "decisive" in their decision making. This was a major difference from the original study where most superintendents stressed the importance of collaborative decision making. In the original study, when superintendents valued collaborative processes to make decisions, most of the other participant groups (board members, community members, and staff members) viewed them as "wishy-washy" or "weak." Now, in these three districts, the superintendents no longer pressed the importance of collaboration when making decisions, but instead, felt it was important to gather input, but "make a decision and be able to support that decision with data" (from one superintendent interview). This was a clear shift in thinking. It appeared that, after participating in training and

establishing mutually agreed upon expectations, that superintendents also determined that establishing sound decision-making strategies and techniques, coupled with effective communication of decisions, had greatly impacted the working relationship between the school board and the superintendents. This also leads to a potential area for further study, namely, the question of whether other participant groups (primarily staff members) had a shift in their perception of the decision-making processes of their administrators, and whether this strengthened their perceptions of district leadership

Another new theme that was absent in the original study was the importance of promoting from within. In two of the three districts that were no longer experiencing high turnover, the seated superintendent was promoted from within the district. In fact, the one superintendent who had been in the position for 12 years had advanced in the ranks in the district. Although the sample size is too low to draw a generalizable conclusion, it is worth noting that, where superintendents were promoted from within their districts, they seemed to remain long-term. Perhaps they gained an understanding for the politics and demands of the district and the community. Likewise, perhaps the district and community realized what they had, and knew they could count on, the person who had already made a commitment to their rural area. One superintendent expressed this when they stated, "They [the board] knew what they had. They knew me. They knew I was a [school mascot name]."

Promoting their own leadership seemed to make a notable impact on change efforts within two districts. By having superintendents who were involved with the groundwork of change implementation, or who were in the district when problems surfaced, providing contextually deeper understanding of issues being faced, these districts seemed able to handle concerns head-on, and implement change in an efficient manner, with little opposition. This was a stark contrast to how things had previously been done in these districts, when participants had simply stated, "If there was a change we were supposed to make, we usually didn't. We would just wait it out, knowing he [the superintendent] wouldn't be here long enough to follow through."

Additionally, these districts had previously seen the rise of an "alternative power structure" from the original study. Basically, because there was not a belief that the superintendent would be around very long, stakeholders turned to others within the schools for leadership that would more likely remain. For example, one district had a principal who had been seen as the one people went to when they had

concerns, rather than the superintendent. In another district, a long-term teacher seemed to garner more power than the currently seated superintendent. One participant in the original study had stated, "We always went to [name omitted to protect confidentiality] with our concerns, because we knew she would still be here. Even board members started turning to her for answers." However, in the follow-up study, this alternative power structure issue seemed to have been resolved. One superintendent stated, "People know I am not going anywhere. I've been here. I'm going to continue to be here." Another shared, "We no longer have confusion as to who the district leader is."

Indeed, three districts had experienced a noticeable change. The interviews with the superintendents were in stark contrast to those from ten years earlier. The tone was positive. Time was spent sharing accomplishments and improvements, rather than the pessimism and bleak outlooks that permeated the interviews of superintendents in the original study. Yet, the interviews in Pinedale seemed to have a familiar tone.

The One High-Turnover District

In contrast with the three districts that had employed a total of five superintendents over the ten years after the original study, the fourth district (Pinedale) alone had employed four superintendents over the same time period. The currently seated superintendent was in the second year, and the previous superintendent lasted only three years. When comparing the responses of these two superintendents to those of the 11 superintendents in the original study, many similarities become evident. Perhaps the most important point to make is that the board continues to remain unclear of their role and their responsibilities. This was a major finding from the original study, and it was also a major contributor to the stress of the superintendents across the four districts. Only Pinedale still struggles with the same problems it did over ten years ago with regards to school board members. In Pinedale, board members continue their micromanaging behaviors, wielding and competing for power within the district, causing unrest and stress for their superintendent.

Consistent with the original study, the Pinedale superintendents still felt that visibility in the community was important, as was the need for consistent, quality communication. One response in the external domain that wasn't highlighted in the original study was the need to increase superintendent compensation. One superintendent summed up the issue this way, "I can go up the road 30 miles and get an extra 10 to 15 thousand dollars a

year. To not do that, I would need to have a reason to stay; and so far, I can't find one."

In the internal domain, both of the responses that were most coded in the follow up study were consistent with the original study. Again, the superintendents expressed concern over the multiple responsibilities of the job. They continued to "do everything but drive the busses" as one superintendent stated. Although this may have been the case in all four districts, the superintendents from the three other districts did not mention it. In fact, they were more intent on stressing the importance of identifying with the rural lifestyle and enjoying what that lifestyle has to offer.

Perhaps the most important finding in the personal domain from Pinedale is that the superintendents continue to stress the importance of collaborative decision making. In the original study, this was often seen as a negative from those outside of the superintendency; and, in the three districts no longer experiencing high turnover, they have shifted to a deliberative but decisive model for making decisions, basing their decisions on data and input, but making decisions and sticking with them. In Pinedale, where decisions are made through a collaborative process, it appears that superintendents are still being viewed as weak (though this finding is not backed with data from non-superintendent participants as it was in the original study).

Discussion

Findings focus on characteristics most often perceived by participants as causing superintendent stability or turnover. Three of the four case districts had become models for superintendent stability, and superintendents from those districts commented on the positive impact of superintendent stability as it relates to change initiatives, sustained growth, and improved culture and climate. Across the three low-turnover districts, coded responses contributed to the development of four main themes: (a) board member turnover impacting superintendent stability, (b) internal promotion impacting length of superintendent tenure, (c) supportive school boards reducing stress in the superintendency, and (d) superintendents working with their school boards to assist them in understanding their roles and responsibilities. Within the district where turnover continued to be a problem, findings were consistent with the 2007 study. Coded responses most often included (a) board members being unclear of their roles and responsibilities, (b) board members micromanaging, (c) struggling with financial issues, and (d) conflicting leadership and decision-making practices.

It is clear that in the four case districts from the original study, three had made significant changes that had translated to superintendent stability. They tended to hire from within, and they focused on the importance of positive board members and board member training. They also shifted their decision-making model from one that focused on collaboration and involving many stakeholders in the act of making decisions to one that valued the input of stakeholders, gathered data relevant to the decision, and culminated in the superintendent making a decision and informing stakeholders of the rationale for that decision and the data that supported it. Then, the superintendents stood by their decisions and didn't waiver. In direct contrast, the superintendents in the high-turnover district had stuck with its decision-making practices of old.

One other notable difference between the three low-turnover districts and their high-turnover counterpart is the focus on superintendent/school board relationships. Where turnover is no longer an issue, the school board understands their role and responsibilities, due in part to an effort of the superintendent to train school board members. In these districts where "toxic" board members left the board, and "positive" board members stayed and learned about their responsibilities, the superintendent / school board relationship has grown strong. These superintendents have no intention of leaving. They seem to love their jobs, schools, and communities.

There continues to be a contrast between Pinedale and the other three districts in the study with regards to turnover, which has been discussed in relation to accepted characteristics and factors consistent with high superintendent turnover in rural school districts. Although salary and prestige (often manifested as upward mobility) were mentioned briefly, it is worth additional attention here. Recent literature (Yates & DeJong, 2018) suggested that the most significant factor that would convince some superintendents to remain with a rural school district is offering increased compensation. This raises the question of compensation of the superintendents in the four case districts – something that was not thoroughly examined in the original study.

In 2017, Pinedale, the district that continues to experience superintendent turnover, paid their superintendent about $105,000. This compared to a median family income in the county of about $60,000. Thus, Pinedale paid their superintendent about 1.75 times that of the typical community family. Charleston paid their superintendent about $118,000 in 2017, while the average family made about $36,000 in the county. Therefore, the Charleston superintendent made about 3.3 times that

of the average community family. In Owl Creek, the median family income was about $38,000 and the superintendent was paid $108,000 in 2017, or 2.8 times that of the typical community family. Cantonia, the district that paid its superintendent the most, at $135,000 in 2017, was also in the county with the highest median family income ($60,000). Therefore, the Cantonia superintendent made about 2.25 times the typical community family.

It is important to remember that the Cantonia superintendent had been in the position for 12 years at the time of the second study, while the Pinedale superintendent was only in her second year. Although not a topic for consideration here, this does raise a question with regards to superintendent compensation being commensurate with experience. Nevertheless, Pinedale is both the lowest paying district in terms of total compensation and in relation to the local median family income. Perhaps not surprisingly, Pinedale is also the district that is still experiencing the turnover problem. Low pay was mentioned by the current Pinedale superintendent as a definite concern. The superintendent knows that her salary lags behind that of her neighboring districts, and she expressed interest in possibly moving on if other issues did not resolve (issues with board members, etc.), stating, "I know that I could make more elsewhere, and probably have fewer issues to deal with. If things don't get better, I am not sure I'll be here for much longer."

Reading into her statement, one can assume that compensation is not the main issue she faces. In all likelihood, increasing compensation will not be the only solution to the turnover problem in Pinedale either. None of the other superintendents in the study mentioned their salary in either a positive or negative way. They did not say that their "higher" salary was keeping them in their districts. Rather, they expressed that a positive working relationship with their board members, coupled with a decisive decision-making philosophy, had helped the district transition to one where the superintendent is less stressed and less likely to look elsewhere. Basically, in the three districts where things seem to have improved for superintendent, salary seems less important.

Implications

Data from this study may be used to inform rural districts of underlying issues that, when resolved, could lead to a positive change in leadership stability. Likewise, knowledge gained could lead aspiring superintendents to a better understanding of their potential experiences in rural communities.

The three school districts that seemingly reversed their superintendent turnover problem

experienced turnover of key (negative) board members, while retaining positive, supportive board members. These districts tended to promote from within. Additionally, there was consistency when it came to power conception and decision-making. Superintendents from the three low turnover districts prefer to make decisions in a deliberative fashion, including viewpoints of others, but not requiring consensus before moving forward; whereas the one district that was still experiencing a high rate of turnover demonstrated incongruity in regard to decision-making styles.

The high-turnover district continues to experience board member micromanagement and board members not understanding their roles and responsibilities. These board members often want to get involved in the daily operations of the district and end up creating stress for the leader they have hired to run the affairs of the district. Also, the superintendent in the high- turnover district continues to "wear multiple hats" and experience additional job requirements and expectations beyond what is often expected from superintendents in larger districts.

Knowing the tendencies of these districts could lead to prospective rural superintendents spending more time researching the school board characteristics and expectations of potential employing districts. Three of the districts in this study showed that, with continued work and focused effort, things could change, and they could become districts that embrace change and value longevity of their leaders. Prospective superintendents could formulate interview questions for their potential employers and focus on finding a district that has a plan for expectations between the board and the superintendent; and, although the prospective superintendent may not make the decision to avoid such a district, they would at least understand the challenges that could be present and devise a plan to address potential issues.

Likewise, school board members may want to evaluate their views on superintendent turnover and its potential hinderance of change efforts. In the districts that no longer had high superintendent turnover, they were proud of their sustained change efforts that have positively impacted student achievement. The discussions with the superintendents in these districts were positive, and they seem to really enjoy talking about all the great things happening in their district. It was a stark change to the experience of ten years earlier, when very few positive comments surfaced in 89 interviews across the same districts. It was refreshing to see and experience, and it could, perhaps, provide a spark of hope to rural districts that have been living the struggles of high superintendent turnover.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study are recognized. First, both the original and follow-up study are limited by the districts included in the sample. To be considered for inclusion, districts were required to meet the researcher's definitions of rural and small. Therefore, districts that had most, but not all of their schools in rural areas, or districts that were primarily rural, but enrolled more than 1,000 students or had more than seven board members, were not considered for the study even though they may have experienced the same phenomenon of high superintendent turnover. Likewise, by limiting the study to only four districts, one from each geographical quadrant in the state, potential case districts that might have informed the study were not considered if they were in the same region as another high-turnover district that consented to participate.

Additionally, a limitation found in the follow-up study is the small participant sample size. Only six of the potential nine superintendents consented to participate in the follow-up study. Two former superintendents were unable to be reached, and therefore were not included in the study. Also, although at least one superintendent (current or former) from each district was included in the interviews, one district's currently seated superintendent declined participation in the study, and therefore, perceptions for that district are limited solely to a superintendent who had left the district. Therefore, full consideration to positive changes that may have occurred since the current superintendent took over could not be included in the study.

Through a review of the literature and the results of this study, several potential areas for future research surfaced. Although the small sample size for this study cannot generate sufficient data on which to base a conclusion that districts that "grow their own" superintendents are more likely to retain them long term, this study does provide support for that idea, and additional study as to the retention and turnover rates of districts who promote from within is certainly worthy of additional attention.

Additionally, it appeared as though one variable that seems to impact superintendent turnover (in a positive way) was board member turnover. In the districts where turnover was no longer an issue, superintendents usually talked about "positive" turnover in school board members, meaning that, when negative board members are replaced with more supportive board members, the likelihood of the superintendent staying in the districts increases. The impact of board member turnover on superintendent turnover could be of interest to both rural school boards and their superintendents alike, and therefore,

deserved additional research.

This study focused on rural school districts; however, superintendent turnover can be a problem in any school district, regardless of size or rurality. Therefore, a similar study of high- turnover urban districts would provide an extended literature base on superintendent turnover.

Finally, much of the conversation with superintendents focused on decisive decision-making practices. The superintendents themselves expressed that, by gathering input, but then offering clear

decisions for which they gained school board support, the perception of the role of superintendent had become the prominent leader within the district. Without gathered perceptions from other stakeholder groups, like those included in the original study, one cannot fully accept that this perception is reality. Therefore, future study in the three low-turnover districts could include interviews with school board members, community members, and staff members, to determine if, in fact, there was a broad perception of changes in the power structure

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