
IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR RURAL STUDENTS BY BUILDING ON A SCHOOL COMMUNITY'S ASSETS, STRENGTHS, AND RESOURCES



A Capstone Project

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Leadership and Learning in Organizations

Peabody College of Education and Human Development

Vanderbilt University

Nashville, TN

PARTNER ORGANIZATION



Rural Schools Association of New York State (RSANY)

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Rural Schools Association of New York State

- Non-profit organization founded in 1978
 - Mission: to promote and support a quality education for rural students in New York State
- RSANY aim:
 - Advocates for policies and legislation that support rural schools, provides professional development for rural teachers, and facilitates communication and collaboration among rural schools and communities



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Rural communities and schools are often portrayed as having limited access to assets and resources compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.

Few studies to date have looked at approaches on how to identify and leverage local assets and resources in rural schools. To do so, the school districts must use an asset-based community development approach to improve student outcomes.



LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL STUDENTS

Current Rural Environment

- Rural communities often face challenges in providing equitable access to quality education. Geographic isolation, limited resources, and a shortage of qualified teachers can lead to poor educational outcomes.
- Challenges in rural communities has been exacerbated by increasing standardization of education, begun during George Bush's administration with Goals 2000 and Barack Obama's (RTTT) Race to the Top Fund (Wilcox et al., 2014).

Current Rural Outcomes

- Postsecondary educational attainment is lower in rural areas than in suburban and urban areas. In 2015, only 19 percent of rural residents, relative to 33 percent of urban residents, had a bachelor's degree (Clark et al., 2022)
- According to the National Student Clearinghouse, rural students are the lowest proportion of students to move on to 4-year colleges, at 59 percent, compared to urban students at 62 percent, and suburban students at 67 percent (Marcus and Krupnick, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW: OTHER OUTCOMES AND DEFICIT-BASED APPROACH

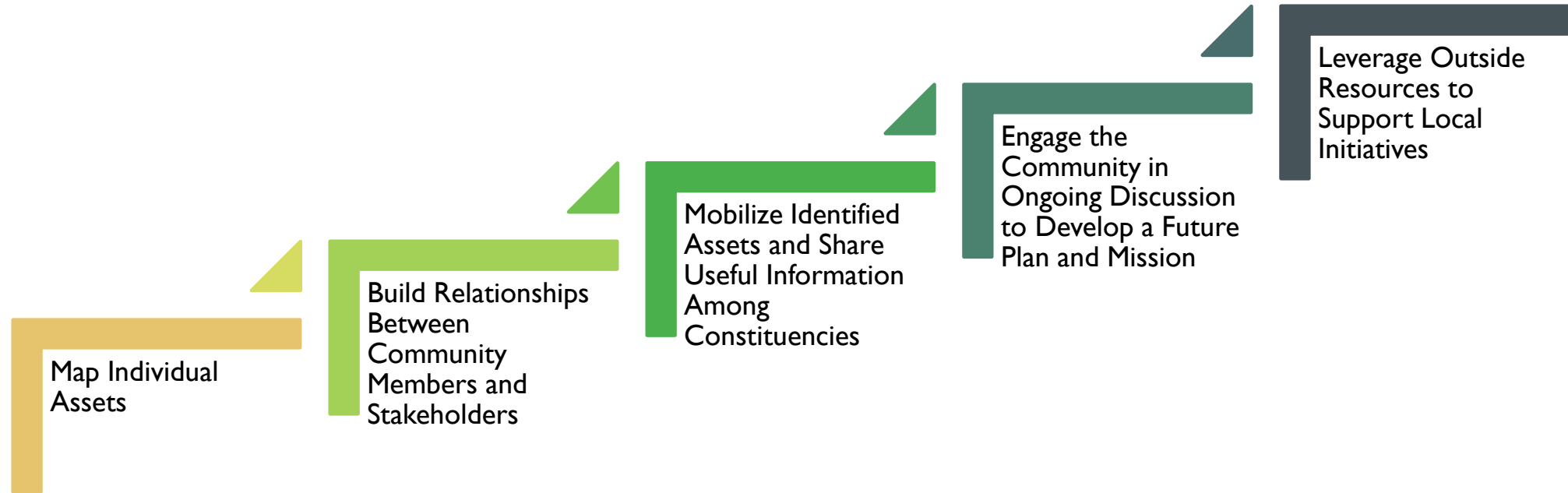
Other Outcomes

- **Socioeconomic**
 - According to the most recent American Community Survey (ACS) figures, the nonmetro poverty rate in 2019 was 15.4 % compared to 11.9 percent in metro regions (Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).
- **Employment**
 - Even after much of the country has recovered from the Great Recession (2007-2009), unemployment and underemployment remain widespread in rural areas (Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Deficit-Based Approach

- It is typical practice in our society for people to focus their attention on what is broken and how to remedy it. This forces people to operate in a system that employs a deficit model.
- When schools primarily focus on what they are lacking, they tend to work reactively rather than proactively.
 - When leaders are continuously putting out fires, they don't have time to focus on long-term planning.
 - It is also difficult to determine which strategies were most beneficial or to forecast future success.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



GUIDING QUESTIONS

What are the key challenges and barriers that teachers and administrators face in rural schools?



What are the key strengths and resources that support teachers and administrators in rural schools?



What asset-based activities are rural schools currently practicing?



What asset-based activities are rural schools not currently practicing?

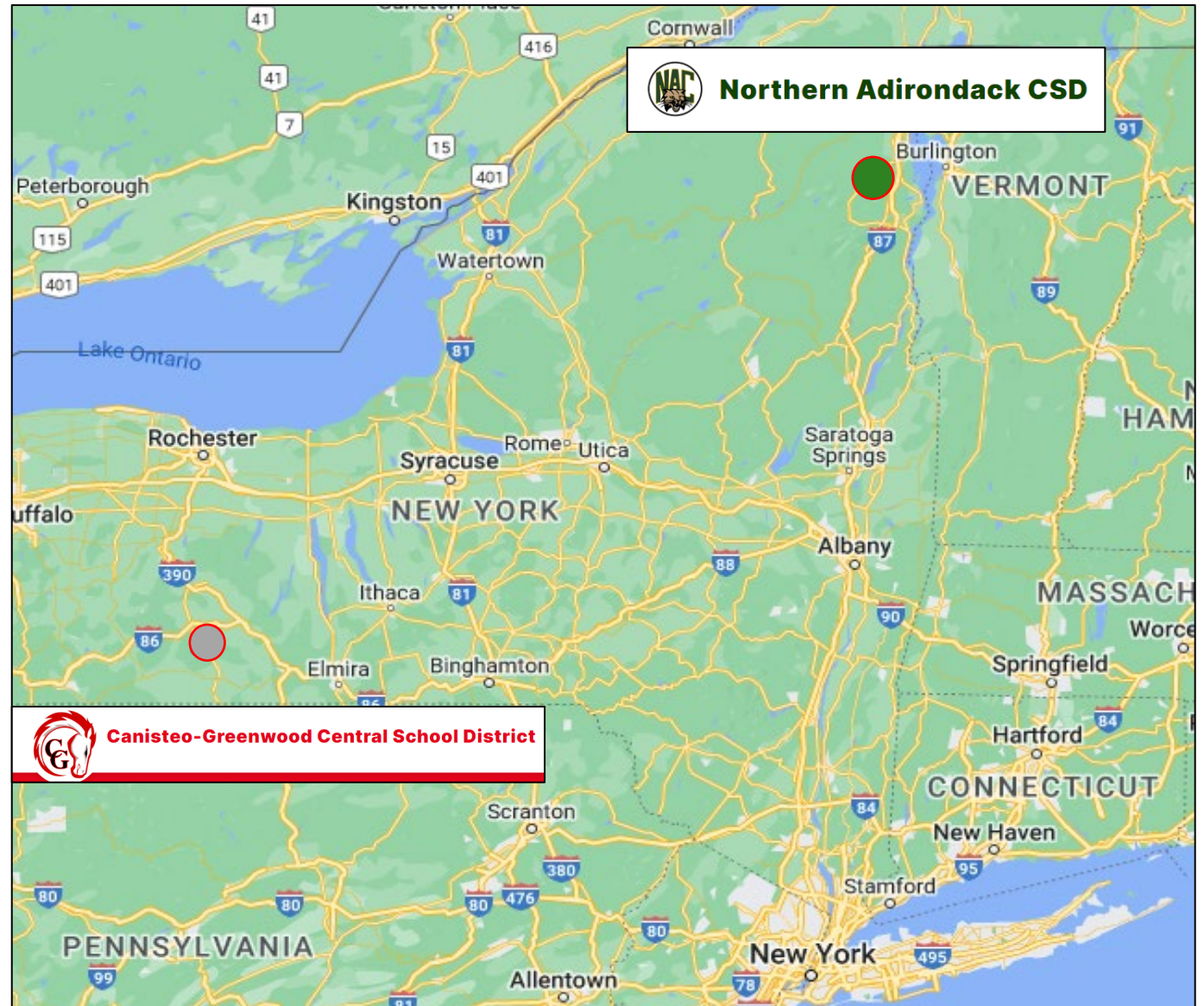
DATA COLLECTION: SURVEY TOOL

Survey

- Demographic data
- Open-ended questions
- Asset-based statements
 - 5-point Likert response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

- Northern Adirondack Central School District is a public school district located in Ellenburg Depot, NY. It has 814 students in grades PK and K-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 10 to 1.
- Canisteo-Greenwood Central School District is a public school district located in Canisteo, NY. It has 989 students in grades PK and K-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 11 to 1.

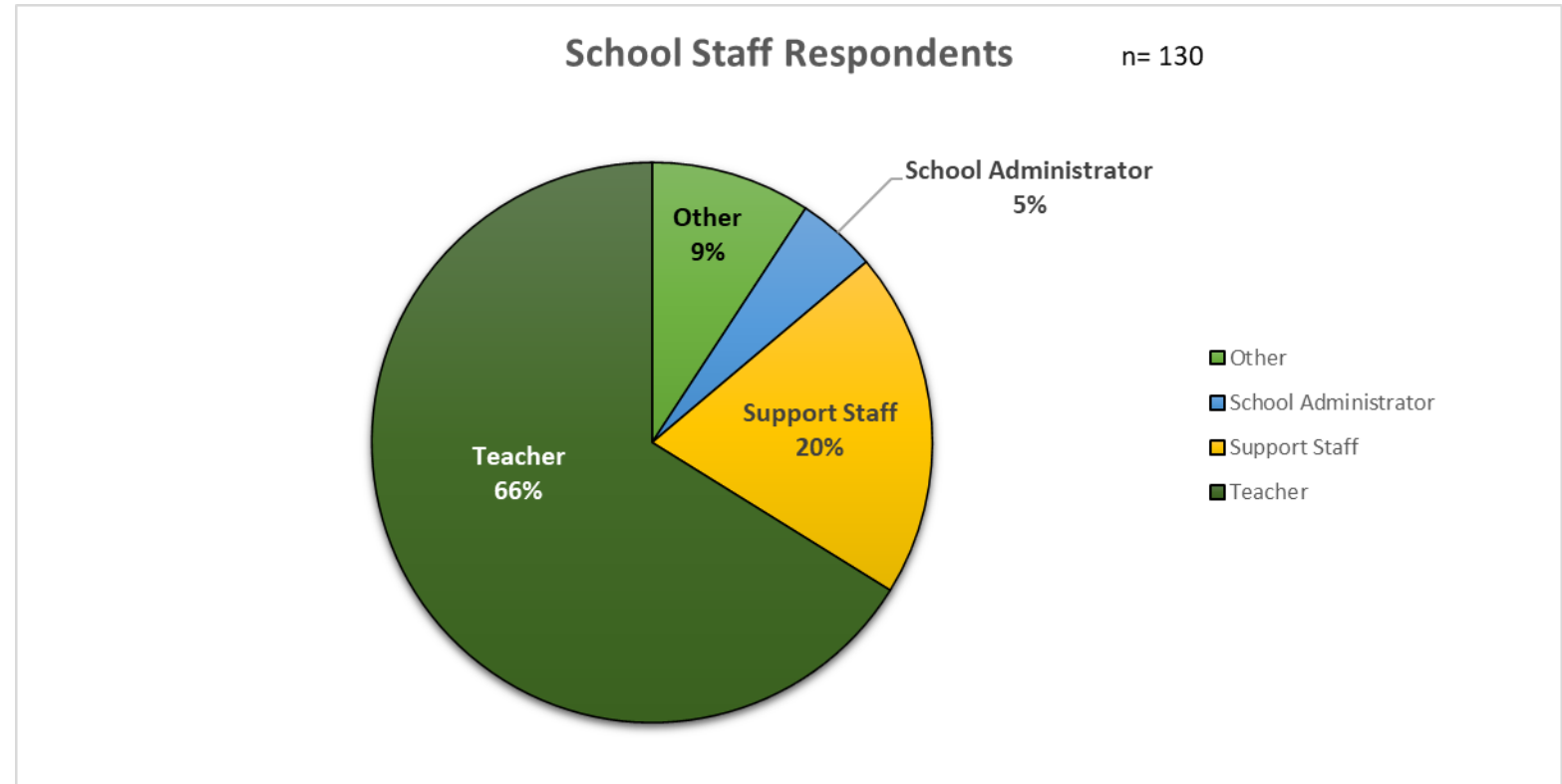


SURVEY RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

Question: What is your role?

Includes:

- Teacher
- Administrator
- Support Staff
- Other (librarian, nurse, etc.)

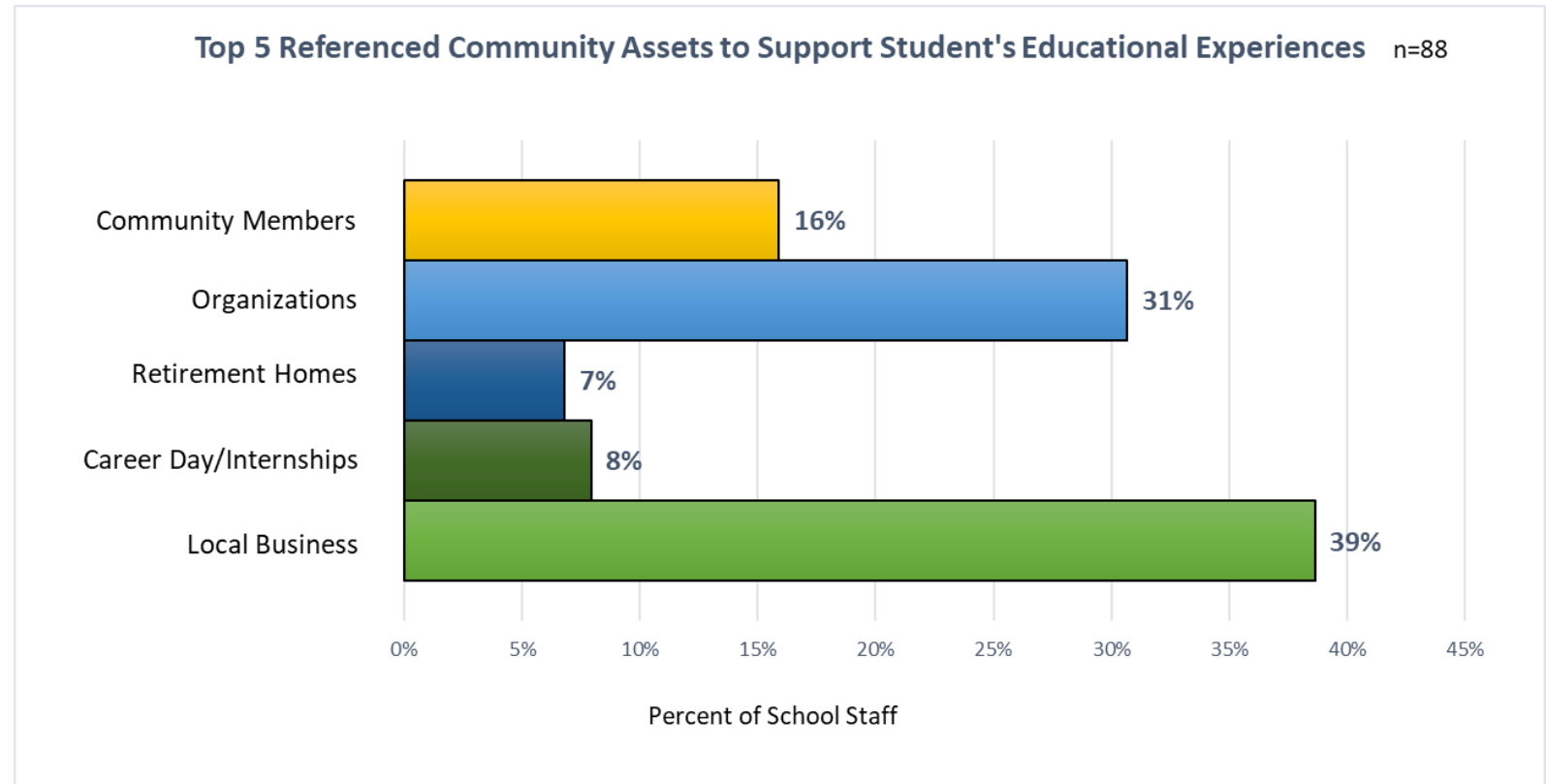


DATA ANALYSIS: CODEBOOK

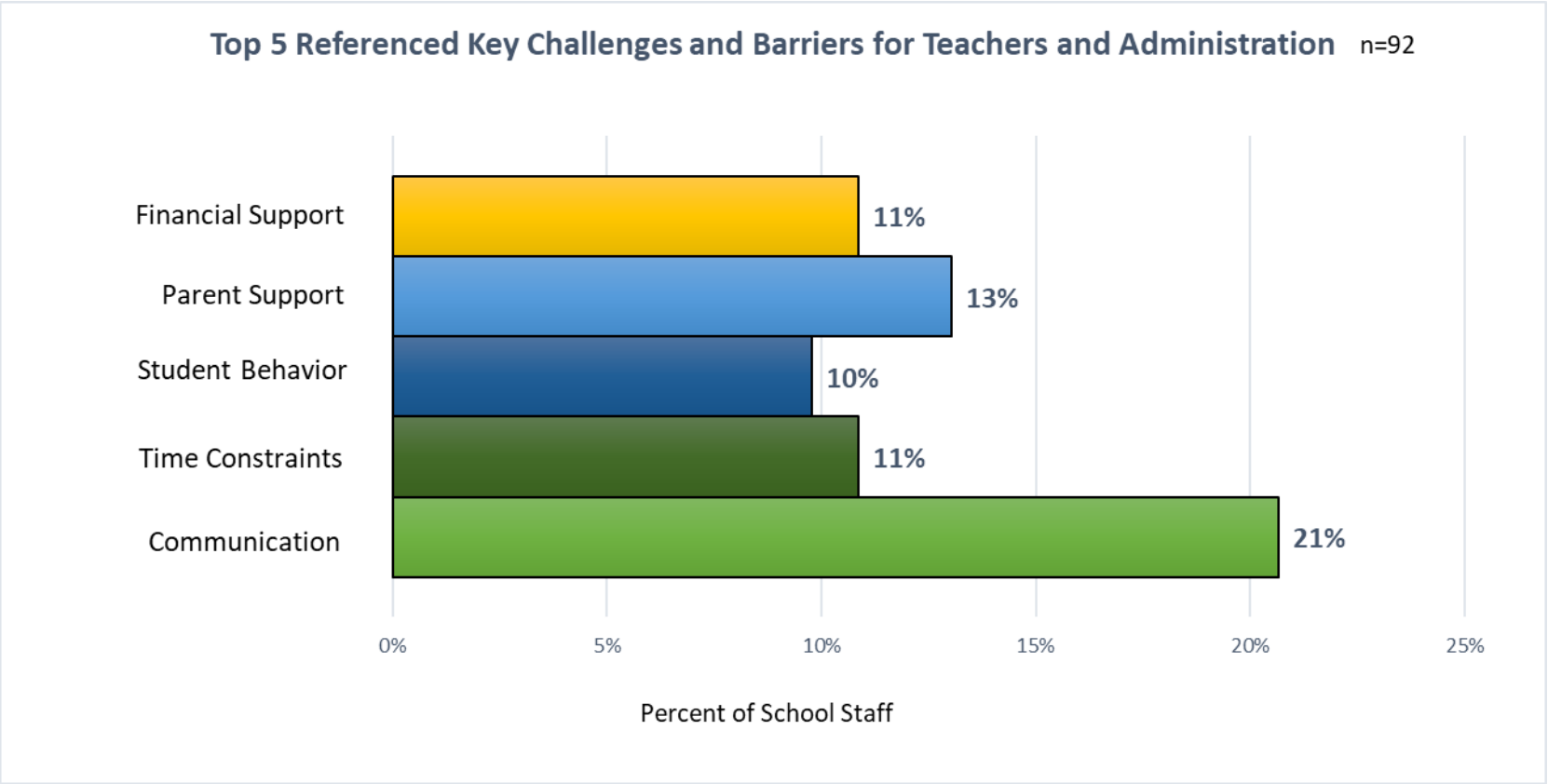
- I did inductive coding during data analysis. Using this codebook, I assigned relevant categories to each data point.
- Prompt: In your opinion, what community resources or assets (e.g., local businesses, organizations, or community members), could be tapped into to support and enrich student's educational experiences?

<i>PARENT CODES</i>	<i>CHILD CODES</i>
Local Business	Manufacturing Plant
	Farms
	Greenhouses
Organizations	Animal Shelters
	Food Bank
	Diabetes Association
	Historical Society
Community Members	Town Hall
	Museums
Retirement Homes	Senior Living Homes
Career Day/Internships	Guest Speakers
	Internships
	Real world experiences

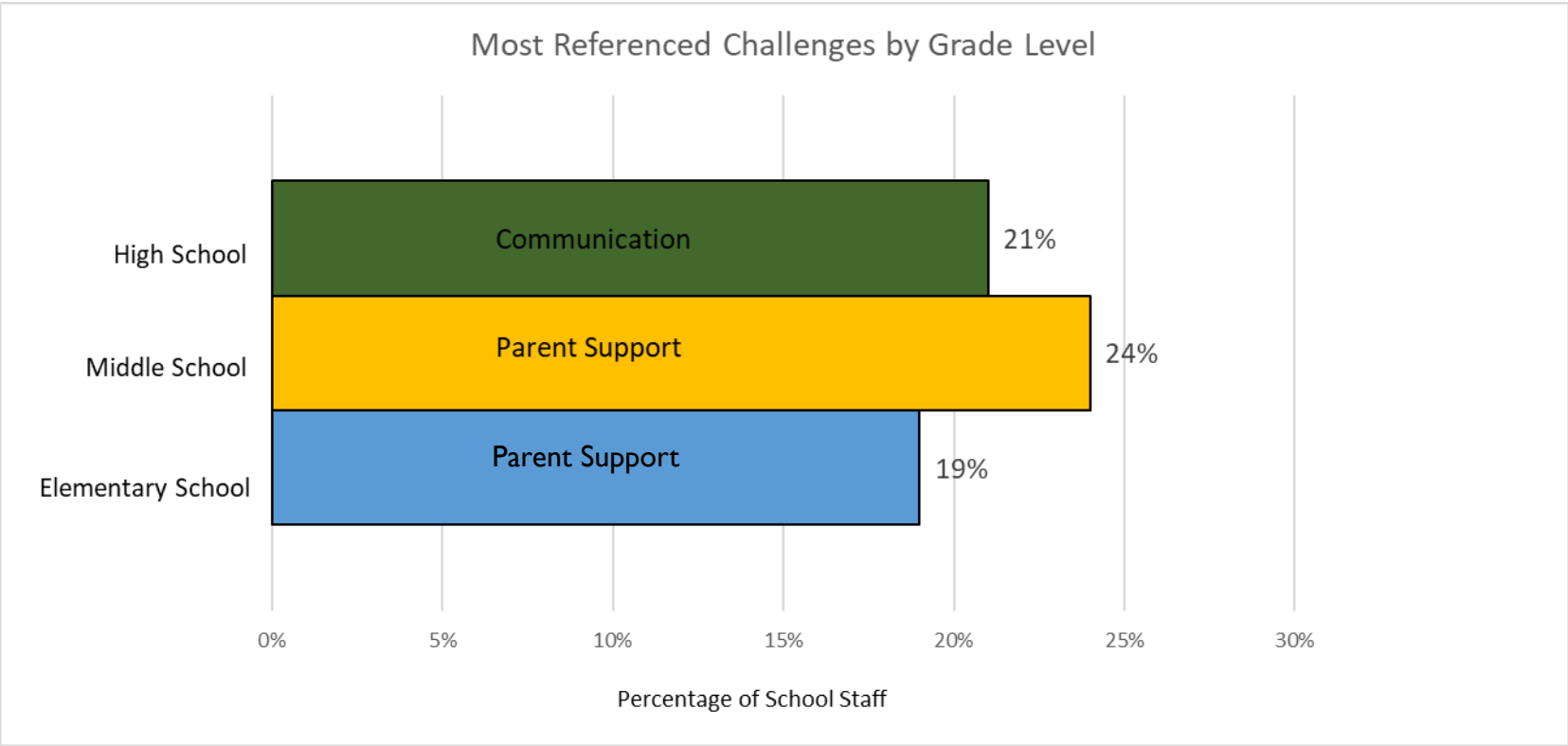
FINDINGS: ASSETS TO SUPPORT STUDENT'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES



FINDINGS: KEY CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS



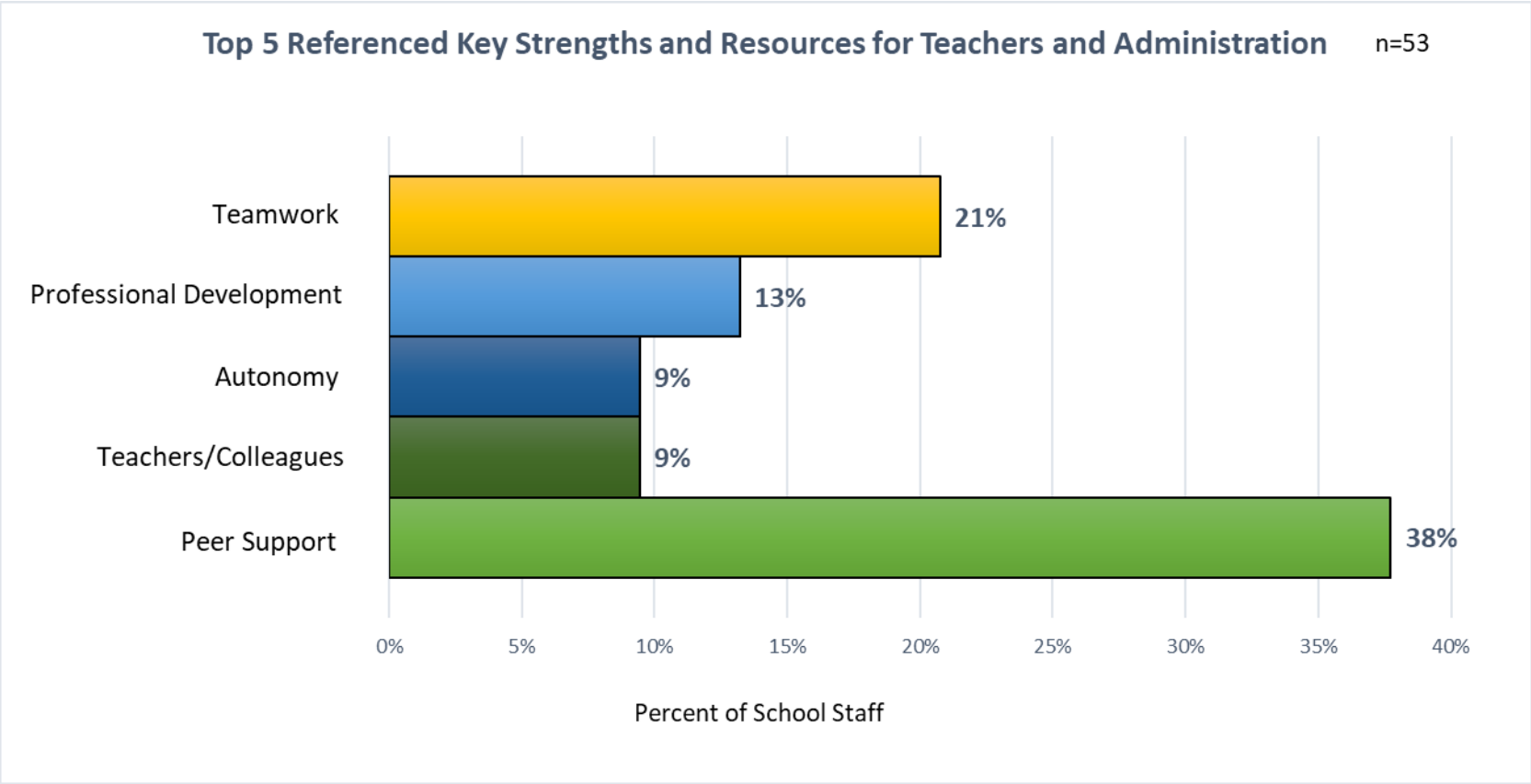
FINDINGS: KEY CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS



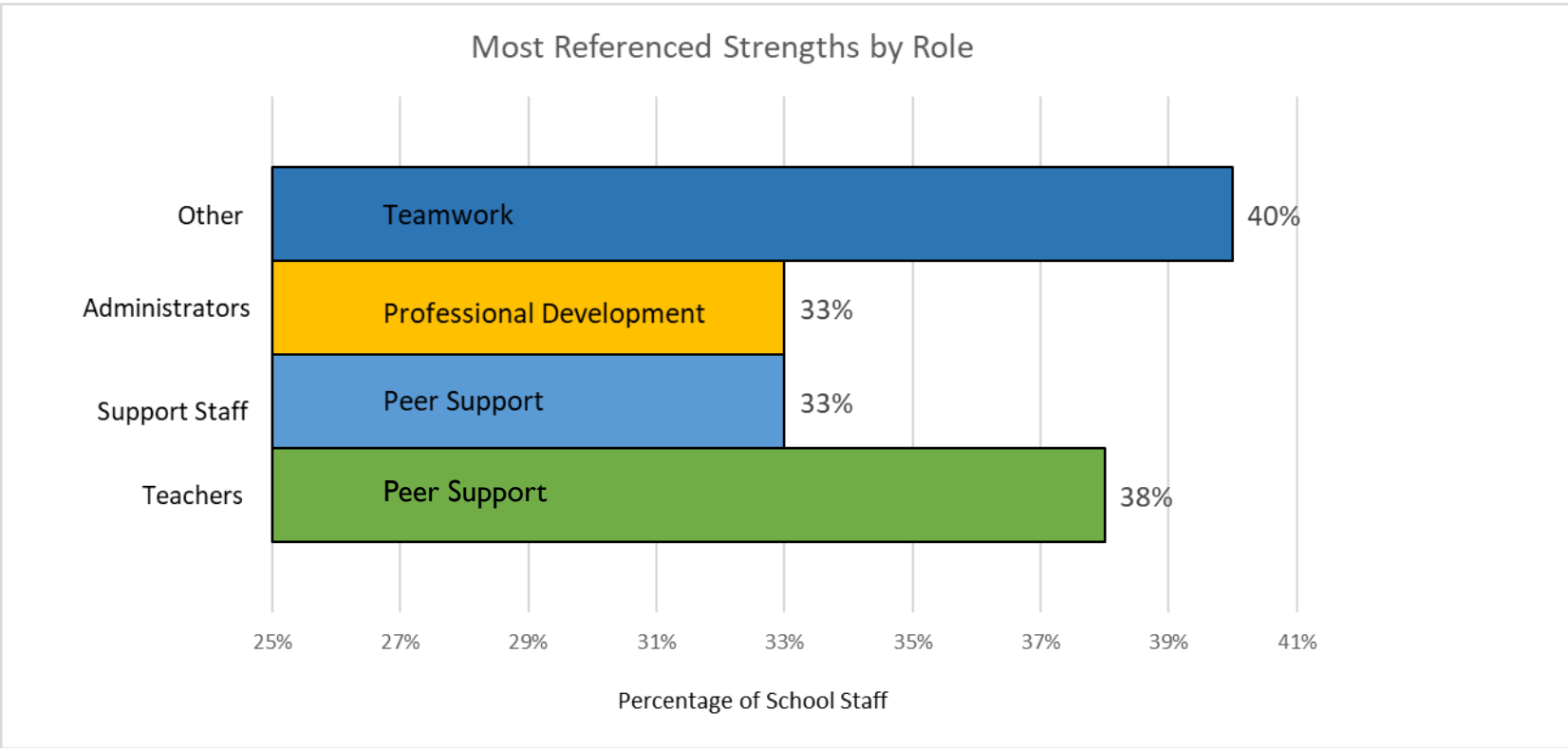
FINDINGS: KEY CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

#	Parent Engagement	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	We organize workshops or webinars that cover topics relevant to parents' interests and concerns	45.8%	32.1%	22.1%
2	We facilitate the creation of parent support networks where parents can connect, share experiences, and provide mutual support	36.2%	26.9%	36.0%
3	We offer parent education programs that focus on topics such as effective parenting strategies and understanding educational standards	49.2%	36.2%	14.6%
4	We establish clear and regular channels of communication between teacher and parents	5.4%	6.1%	88.6%

FINDINGS: KEY STRENGTHS AND RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS



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FINDINGS: KEY STRENGTHS AND RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

#	Teacher/Admin Strengths	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	We identify teachers who have exceptional knowledge and expertise in specific subjects or disciplines	20.6%	29.0%	50.4%
2	We recognize teachers who excel in instructional innovation and technology integration	21.4%	29.0%	49.6%
3	We identify teachers who excel in differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs of students	27.7%	26.9%	45.4%
4	We identify teachers and administrators who excel in collaboration and teamwork	26.2%	27.7%	46.2%

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Create Cross-Departmental Committees or Working Groups.** Communication between departments and buildings was a significant issue for school staff, with 21% of respondents reporting it as a challenge. Therefore, my first recommendation is to incorporate people from various departments into multidisciplinary committees or working groups. This would utilize a current asset such as peer support, which was one of the most referenced strengths, for example a respondent claimed that there is a strong comradery amongst teachers and they're good at sharing ideas. Both administrators and teachers also agreed they work well as a team, with teamwork the second most-referenced strength.
- 2. Engage Local Businesses and Community Members.** School staff referenced autonomy as a top-5 strength. Respondents also identified local businesses (39%) and community members (16%) as assets or resources that could be tapped into to support and enrich student's educational experiences. A rural teacher's autonomy empowers them to creatively integrate local business and community members into students' education. There are several ways in which local business can make a positive impact including: internships, mentorships, collaborative projects, and job shadowing. These programs bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world applications. Engaging with senior community members and exploring history of the local area helps students develop a cultural relevance and pride in their community. Rural communities possess unique historical, cultural, and social contexts that can significantly influence students' educational experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Establish Teacher Mentorship Program. Almost half (43%) of the teachers surveyed indicated that they have over 20 years of experience. Findings in 3a also identified more school staff agreed than disagreed with teacher/administrator strengths as an asset-based resource that rural schools are currently leveraging. In rural schools, there is frequently a combination of seasoned educators with insightful knowledge and less experienced educators who may need guidance. A mentoring program helps close the experience gap by facilitating the dissemination of best practices and information from seasoned educators to those who are just getting started as educators. Studies have shown that mentorship programs can increase retention rates in rural schools that struggle with teacher turnover.

4. Form Explicit Teacher/Parent Partnerships. Teachers agreed (84.7%) that they involve parents and families in their child's education by organizing regular communication, but then they identified parent support (13%) as the second most substantial challenge. Therefore, my third recommendation is for teachers to practice parent engagement activities. Teachers benefit from parents' insights about their child's development, interests, and learning preferences, while parents obtain a better understanding of the school's curriculum and objectives. Engaged parents can establish clear expectations and norms for their child's behavior that are consistent with those set by the school.

LIMITATIONS

Survey
Design

- Self-assessment limits results to school staffs' perceived support systems, cultural practices, parent engagement, teacher/administrator strengths, and innovative practices.



QUESTIONS?