

Improving Educational Outcomes for Rural Students by Building on a School Community's
Assets, Strengths, and Resources

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Acknowledgements

To my parents, thank you for giving me the opportunity to go after my dreams. I hope I made you proud.

To my wife, Elana. Thank you for your unwavering support and love. I love you more than words can ever express.

Thank you to two amazing friends that I met along my Vanderbilt journey, EC and GJ. I hope to see you soon!

To Dr. Hartigan. Thank you so much for having the patience to help me through this process and giving me the courage to keep going.

Executive Summary

Organizational Context

The Rural Schools Association (RSA) of New York is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1978 to address the concerns and needs of rural and small school districts of New York State (NYS). Based strictly on measures of population size and density, “rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people”.¹ NYS has one of the largest rural populations in the nation with over 400 rural school districts.²

The RSA's mission is to promote and support a quality education for rural students in New York State. To achieve this mission, the organization 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. For example, RSA advocates for funding equity for rural schools, access to high-quality educational resources and technology, and teacher recruitment and retention.

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.³ Few studies to date have looked at approaches on how to identify and leverage local assets and resources in rural schools.³ Given that rural students persist in having disparate educational outcomes from urban/suburban students, for example lower postsecondary attainment rates, a new approach to examining rural student populations is warranted.

¹ USDA ERS - What is Rural? (n.d.). <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx#:~:text=This%20delineation%20of%20built%20Dup,with%20fewer%20than%20%2C500%20people>

² D. Little, personal communication, October 7, 2022

³ B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023

Conceptual Framework

My investigation draws on conceptual elements from Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD is a philosophy and approach that focuses on recognizing and mobilizing a community's assets, resources, and strengths to effect positive change.⁴ It uses a bottom-up approach that prioritizes and builds on what is already in the community and helps create sustainable solutions over the long term.³

Project Questions

1. What are key challenges and barriers that teachers and administrators face in rural schools?
2. What are key strengths and resources that support teachers and administrators in rural schools?
3. Which asset-based activities are rural schools currently practicing?
4. Which asset-based activities are rural schools not currently practicing?

Findings

1. [PQ1 - key challenges] School staff including teachers, administrators, and support staff referenced **communication** as a significant challenge for teachers and administrators.
2. [PQ2 - key strengths] Respondents often referenced **local business** as a community asset that can be tapped into to further support student educational experiences. School staff also referenced **organizations** and **community members** as the second and third most frequently mentioned asset for student educational experiences. Respondents specifically mentioned the historical society and senior community members as resources for students to make connections between classroom learning and the real world.
3. [PQ3 – internally practicing] School staff agreed that they use innovative teaching techniques, such as collaborative teaching and project-based learning.
4. [PQ4 – internally not practicing] Respondents disagreed that they organize workshops that cover topics relevant to parents' interests and concerns or offer parent education programs focusing on topics such as understanding educational standards.

⁴ Maclure, L. (2022). Augmentations to the asset-based community development model to Target Power Systems. *Community Development*, 54(1), 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2021.2021964>

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 (Finding 1a). 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 (Finding 2a), 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 (Finding 2a).
2. **Engage Local Businesses and Community Members.** School staff referenced autonomy as a top-5 strength (see Figure 4, finding 2a). Respondents also identified local businesses (39%) and community members (16%) as resources that could be tapped into to support and enrich student's educational experiences (see Figure 6, finding 2c). 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.
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 commonly referenced substantial challenge (see Figure 2, finding 1a). 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.

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Organizational Context

The Rural Schools Association (RSA) of New York is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1978 to address the concerns and needs of rural and small school districts of New York State (NYS). Based strictly on measures of population size and density, “rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people” (Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.). NYS has one of the largest rural populations in the nation with over 400 rural school districts (United States Census Bureau, 2020). A Board of Directors, made up of 40 representatives in ten zones within the state, oversees RSA (RSANY, n.d.). The RSA administrative team includes an Executive Director, Director of Information and Advocacy, and a Director of Membership Services and Development.

The RSA's mission is to promote and support a quality education for rural students in New York State. To achieve this mission, the organization 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. For example, RSA advocates for funding equity for rural schools, access to high-quality educational resources and technology, and teacher recruitment and retention.

To become a member of the RSA, which currently consists of 300 schools, a school district must meet certain eligibility criteria defined by the New York State Education Department. Specifically, the school district must (1) be located in a rural area, (2) have an enrollment of fewer than 3,000 students, (3) have at least 50% or more of students eligible for

free or reduced-price lunch, and (4) pay an annual membership fee, which is based on the district's enrollment (RSANY, n.d.).

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 (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Rural studies show that local community leaders often use a deficit-based approach to problem solve, focused on identifying and addressing students' weaknesses, deficiencies, or deficits to improve outcomes (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Few studies to date have looked at approaches on how to identify local assets and resources in rural schools. Given that rural students persist in having disparate outcomes from urban/suburban students in terms of, for example, postsecondary attainment, a new approach to examining rural student populations is warranted.

Rural schools are often limited in terms of the funding they receive from state and local sources and in other resources. For example, rural schools have difficulties hiring all of the teachers they require, particularly in science and mathematics (Hill, 2015). Rural students do not have access to a variety of accelerated courses, such as AP and dual credit courses, that may be accessible in metropolitan or suburban education systems (Bailey, 2021). According to John White, the deputy assistant secretary for rural outreach at the US Department of Education during the Obama administration, the difficulties that rural schools face are specific and demand distinct answers. Rural towns are not only more likely to be disadvantaged, but they are also frequently cut off from nonprofits and social-service agencies that fill gaps in urban and suburban schools (Parks, 2021).

Concerned about citizens' development and prosperity, local leaders often use a deficit-based approach as a way of thinking and problem solving that focuses on the weaknesses, deficiencies, and challenges of a community, rather than their strengths, assets, and resources (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023). While this approach may be well-intentioned, it can have negative effects on the community members in several ways, especially the younger generation. A deficit-based approach can reinforce negative self-images and low self-esteem among younger members of the community (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023). If individuals are constantly told that they are deficient or in need of assistance, they may internalize these messages and feel that they are unable to overcome their challenges.

Children who have low self-esteem are especially prone to self-sabotage (Fields, 2023). If students do not believe in themselves, they may be less likely to participate in class, ask questions, or seek help when needed. This can lead to missed opportunities to learn and a lack of engagement in their studies. Pupils may act in ways that confirm their unfavorable perceptions of themselves (Fields, 2023). As a result, even if they are on the verge of success, they may get dissuaded. A negative self-image can impact a student's long-term goals and aspirations. Some of these children have been told all their lives they will fail and therefore many of them decide not to go on to college because it is not for them (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023).

An example of the above was discussed in an NPR article written by Jon Marcus and Matt Krupnick. A previous student, Dustin Gordon, from the countryside in Iowa stated, "there's no motivation for people...when they're ready to be done with school they think, that's

all the school I need, and I'm just going to go find a job" (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Some of these jobs include working on the family farm, factory work, and truck driving. 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 & Krupnick, 2017).

This study will adopt an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which identifies and leverages a community's existing assets, capacities, and resources rather than focusing simply on its deficiencies or issues (Maclure, 2020). This strategy emphasizes that each community, particularly rural areas, has unique assets that can be used to promote positive change and development (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Rural students and communities have intrinsic strengths and potential, which the ABCD framework recognizes. This strategy promotes empowerment, collaboration, holistic development, cultural responsiveness, and long-term sustainability by moving the emphasis from deficiencies to strengths (Huang et al., 2013). It allows rural children to thrive intellectually, socially, and emotionally in their own unique settings.

Review of Literature

In this section, I will explore relevant literature regarding three topics central to this Capstone project: unique challenges to education (academic outcomes) for rural students; other related outcomes (professional success and socioeconomic status) for rural students; and deficit-based approaches. Through an iterative process, I conducted searches using Vanderbilt's online libraries, Google Scholar, Google, ProQuest, and ERIC. I searched using the following key searches or combination of key words: rural education, rural employment outlook, deficit-

based approach, educational improvement, rural (schools OR education), and (rural education) OR (rural population).

Unique Challenges to Education in Rural Communities

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. Schools in rural areas may also struggle to offer a wide range of courses including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), extracurricular activities including band or choir, and support services like academic tutoring (Wilcox et al., 2014). This can impact educational attainment and limit opportunities for further education and skill development.

Rural communities' remote locations can generate geographical barriers. Teachers and students may have to travel significant distances to school, and insufficient infrastructure might make travelling difficult. Due to a smaller tax base and reduced economic activity, rural municipalities frequently suffer budgetary difficulties (D. Little, personal communication, October 7, 2022). This lack of money has a significant impact on the quality of education accessible in these communities. Attracting and maintaining qualified teachers in rural locations is tough. Many teachers prefer to work in urban or suburban schools because they can earn more money, have more professional development opportunities, and live in a more comfortable setting (McArdle, 2019). As a result of the high turnover rate, it is difficult for rural schools to deliver consistent and steady instruction to their children.

Challenges in rural communities have been intensified by increased uniformity of education, which began during George Bush's administration with Goals 2000 and was continued with Barack Obama's (RTTT) Race to the Top Fund (Wilcox et al., 2014). RTTT is predicated on the acceptance of Common Core State Standards and other reforms judged more fit for urban rather than rural settings (Wilcox et al., 2014). State-mandated standards and standardized testing have become essential components of the educational accountability system. Rural schools, like all educational institutions, are under pressure to satisfy these standards in order to demonstrate their success. However, fewer resources and unique constraints can make it more difficult for rural schools to attain the same outcomes as their urban counterparts.

Academic Outcomes for Rural Students

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). Charles Fluharty, president and chief executive officer of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Iowa, said that rural students live in areas where it used to be easy to make a respectable livelihood from farming, mining, and logging without a college degree. But over time, manufacturing started to disappear, agriculture got more and more automated, and mines closed (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). As a result of the lack of jobs, Fluharty claimed, rural pupils lost interest in field trips to technical institutions or public universities as well as recruiter visits.

A previous study highlights three factors that may curtail the educational aspirations and attainment of rural youth: family socioeconomic status, parental education, and a deep attachment to their families, communities, and land. The cost of higher education is one of the primary obstacles for those people with low finances, the cost of tuition, books, housing, and other related expenses may be excessively high. A child's attitude toward schooling is greatly influenced by the hopes and expectations of their parents. Without having attended college themselves, parents may have lower standards for their kids' academic progress or may not stress the value of a college education as much. Many rural youths lack practical understanding about how to realize ambitions for higher education and are hesitant to leave their communities. For the handful of individuals from rural families that do leave and earn college degrees, these children were the exception and referred to as “beating long odds” (Clark et al., 2022, p.19). Academic accomplishments form the foundation for many elements of an individual's life, including professional success, economic possibilities, and personal fulfillment. Additionally, during the academic journey, individuals develop critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and intellectual curiosity by pursuing knowledge and acquiring skills (Thompson, 2011). Higher education outcomes, such as obtaining undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, often broaden employment options and raise the likelihood of professional success.

Employment Outcomes for Rural Students

Agriculture was once the most prevalent occupation in rural areas, but it has been progressively declining since the mid-twentieth century (Smyth, 2022). Rural communities often struggle with limited job opportunities, particularly in industries beyond traditional sectors such as agriculture or natural resource extraction. This can result in high unemployment rates, low

wages, and few options for career advancement. The lack of diverse economic opportunities can lead to outmigration, as young individuals seek better prospects in urban areas.

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.). Further, long-term trends indicate that a bigger proportion of the nation's jobs will be concentrated in the country's largest metro areas in the future. For example, in April 2010, rural counties accounted for 14.1% of all jobs in the United States (Bishop & Cushing, 2021). As of April 2021, rural counties accounted for 13% of all occupations in the United States (Bishop & Cushing, 2021). During the same period, large metropolitan cities boosted their share of the nation's jobs from 56.7% to 58% (Bishop & Cushing, 2021). As of 2021, more than half of all rural counties (56.7%) had fewer jobs than they did in 2010 (Bishop & Cushing, 2021).

Socioeconomic Status

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' socioeconomic shifts were often seen as unfavorable to rural populations. Though some rural communities are thriving, rural areas as a whole have yet to match employment levels before to the 2008 recession, and significant poverty exists in many rural areas (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). According to the most recent American Community Survey (ACS) figures, the nonmetro poverty rate in 2019 was 15.4% compared to 11.9% in metro regions (Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Falling earnings and growing unemployment rates diminished economic well-being and stability in the United States, forcing many rural families to struggle with chronic economic uncertainty. The financial crisis had an impact on rural towns' jobs, earnings, and family finances, all of which may have influenced both student motivation to pursue their degree and a parent's ability to pay for college (Wells et al., 2019). While socioeconomic status is frequently discussed in urban settings, poverty in rural areas is equally linked to social processes and structures, such as education (Wells et al., 2019).

About 25% of rural children versus approximately 20% of urban children live in poverty (Clark et al., 2022). Child poverty is concentrated disproportionately in rural regions with low labor force participation and educational attainment. The socioeconomic background of a family influences educational outcomes (Wang & Shen, 2022). Economic stress on a family worsens a child's educational issues, such as underachievement and school dropout (Irvin et al., 2011). Earnings declines appear to be the most important driver in rising rural poverty rates, with the effect being twice as high for rural families as for urban ones (www.irp.wisc.edu).

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. A deficit-based approach overlooks a rural community's strengths, resilience, and capacity to overcome adversity in the face of systemic barriers (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023). When schools primarily focus on what they are lacking, they tend to work reactively rather than proactively (Renkly & Bertolini, 2018). Leaders who are always putting

out fires don't have time for long-term planning (Sher, 2016). In this country, the education of poor and working people is frequently viewed as a “glass half empty” (Duncan-Andrade, 2012). In the context of education, the "glass" signifies the educational possibilities and resources available to students in rural schools. The "half-empty" symbol represents the restricted access and support these schools frequently have in comparison to their urban and suburban counterparts or well-funded schools (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023).

Deficit thinking has detrimental consequences, it fosters a wide range of negative repercussions in society and education, such as lowered expectations of students, reinforcing oppressive structures and disparities (Davis & Museus, 2019). Deficit thinking places blame on the students for their deficiencies and might lead teachers to believe that these shortcomings cannot be rectified or supported in the classroom (Reed, 2020). When instructors have lower expectations of students that can incline their students to disengage (Davis & Museus, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

My investigation draws on conceptual elements from Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). I'm taking a model from higher education and applying it to K-12 context. This framework will help me design measures of community strengths and resources that rural schools can use to foster development in their communities. This study will be focusing on Step 1 of the ABCD model, mapping individual assets, to identify what asset-based activities rural schools are currently and not currently practicing.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a philosophy and approach that focuses on recognizing and mobilizing a community's assets, resources, and strengths to effect positive

change (Maclure, 2020). ABCD uses a bottom-up approach that prioritizes and builds on what is already in the community and helps create sustainable solutions over the long term. This is in contrast to a deficit-based approach that applies a top-down method, in which outside organizations and experts identify weaknesses and problems. While the deficit-based approach can be useful in some situations, it can lead to negative perceptions of the community causing a lack of ownership and engagement (B. Winchester, personal communication, April 24, 2023).

ABCD recognizes that community members are experts on their own communities and empowers individuals to take an active role in the development process. Through collaboration and partnerships, it builds a sense of shared responsibility that is critical to the success of the development efforts (Avila et al., 2014).

While ABCD is most frequently connected with community development and community organizing, it has also been used in the context of education (Scott et al., 2020). ABCD in education can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when educators and researchers began to investigate the possibilities of ABCD as a strategy to improve schools and communities. Dr. John McKnight, a professor at Northwestern University who had previously worked on community development programs, was an early pioneer of ABCD in education (du Randt, 2021). McKnight and his colleagues began to apply ABCD ideas to education, emphasizing the need of including parents, students, and community members as co-creators of educational programs (Scott et al., 2020) .

One of the main ideas behind ABCD in education is that schools and communities are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. By leveraging the strengths and resources of the community, educators can create more effective and sustainable educational programs. For

example, educators might work with local businesses to provide job training opportunities for students, or partner with community organizations to provide after-school programs (Borovoy, 2010).

The key aspects of ABCD are that it is asset based, internally focused, and relationship driven (Scott et al., 2020). To achieve positive change in a community, ABCD outlines five-steps: 1) map individual assets; 2) build relationships between community members and stakeholders; 3) mobilize identified assets and share useful information among constituencies; 4) engage the community in ongoing discussion to develop a future plan and mission; and 5) leverage outside resources to support local initiatives (Biscotte & Mourchrek, 2020) (see Figure 1).

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

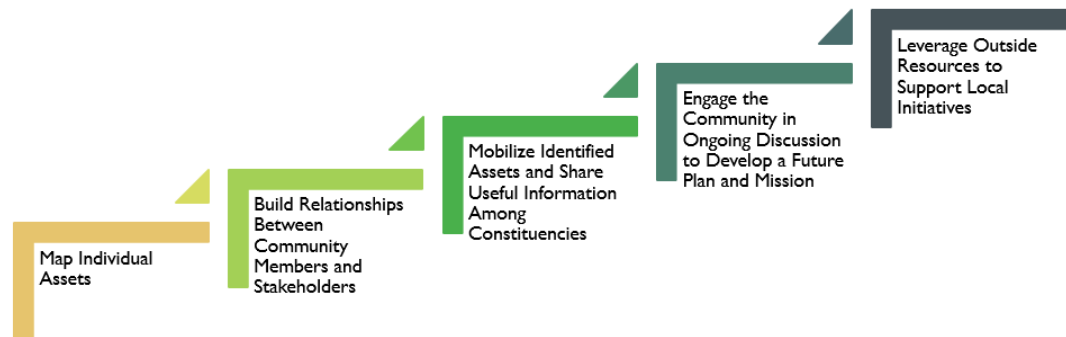


Figure 1: 5-Step ABCD Model

ABCD in education has also been used to promote a more holistic and culturally responsive approach to education. By recognizing and valuing the cultural assets and knowledge within a community, educators can create more inclusive and relevant curricula that better meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

As community development facilitators, change agents must "encourage networks that foster mutual learning and shared commitments so that people can work... together in relatively cohesive and equitable communities" (Gilchrist, 2009, p.21). Community members begin by mapping the school's assets using the ABCD stages. Second, "meta-networking strategies" are employed to help communities form ties that "promote respect, trust, and mutuality" (Biscotte & Mourchrek, 2020) and go beyond surface encounters. If members of the community disagree, change agents should provide their assistance in identifying common ground and "mediating, translating, and interpreting between persons and agencies that are not in direct or clear communication with one another" (Biscotte & Mourchrek, 2020).

Guiding Research Questions

Based on my problem statement, literature review, and conceptual framework, this Capstone project aims to address the following guiding questions:

1. What are key challenges and barriers that teachers and administrators face in rural schools?
2. What are key strengths and resources that support teachers and administrators in rural schools?
3. Which asset-based activities are rural schools currently practicing?
4. Which asset-based activities are rural schools not currently practicing?

Project Design

Data Collection

I developed a survey with the help of RSA leadership to investigate rural schoolteachers' and staff's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. I also want to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and opinions. I adapted the survey from current content by using a source questionnaire called "Community Assets Survey" that measures different aspects of community development and mobilization process (Jakes & Shannon, 2002). The survey included subscales that measured human capital, physical assets, and participation for both individuals and community. I chose to administer a survey for a few reasons. Surveys are particularly useful in measuring attitudes (Clifton & Carrasco, 2018). Further, given the geographic location of my participants (i.e., in rural communities far away from where I live) and time constraints, survey administration proved to be the most convenient and effective method of data collection.

I began my study by clearly defining the research objectives and the specific information I aimed to gather through the survey. This helped me determine what aspects I wanted to explore, the target population, and the purpose of the survey. Next, I reviewed existing literature and relevant surveys to understand what already has been done concerning asset-based community development. I then decided how to structure the survey in a logical order which included the type of questions to ask, such as multiple choice for demographic data, open-ended for perspectives and opinions, and Likert scale for asset-based statements. My goal was to write clear and concise questions that are easy for all school staff to understand.

Once I developed a draft of the survey, I began to consider survey length to avoid response fatigue. I aimed for school staff to complete my survey in 15 minutes. My next objective was to obtain approval by reviewing the survey with my partner organization (RSA). I also worked with RSA on how to best distribute the survey. They advised that I send it via email to the school district superintendent so they could forward the survey to all school staff. I conducted a pilot test with RSA before sending the survey to help identify any confusing or ambiguous questions. I sent the final survey version out with a short paragraph clarifying the purpose of the study, assuring confidentiality, and provided an estimated time required to complete the survey with a simple “thank you” for participating in the study and a contact email address in case individuals had questions (see Appendix A).

Survey Instrument

I used Qualtrics, an online building and management tool to build the survey. The survey included demographic questions including years of experience, main role at the school, and current grade level(s) taught. I captured qualitative data via three open-ended questions. One question asked school staff to indicate what community resources or assets could be tapped into to support and enrich students’ educational experience. This question was designed to elicit responses that spoke to the above-mentioned conceptual framework. The remaining two open-ended questions were included to obtain feedback from school participants regarding key challenges and key strengths for teachers and administrators.

Staff members answered 20 asset-based statements on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” The asset-based statements aligned

with the following five categories: teacher/administrator strengths, parent engagement, cultural practices, support systems, and innovative practices (see Appendix B for the full survey instrument).

Based on discussions with my partner organization, I made all questions optional and anonymous. I informed school staff of these conditions via survey email (refer to Appendices A). RSA believed that if the survey questions were optional and anonymous, respondents would be more willing to discuss difficult matters and provide more extensive and honest feedback.

Survey Setting

RSA connected me to three rural school districts across the state of New York. I distributed a survey draft to RSA and to the school superintendents, James Knight at Northern Adirondack, David Brown at DeRuyter, and Thomas Crook at Canisteo-Greenwood for their feedback and approval. Once I obtained their approval, I emailed them the final version, which they disseminated accordingly. The surveys were administered to all school staff at three school districts, Northern Adirondack Central (N=103), DeRuyter Central (N=105), and Canisteo-Greenwood Central (N=106). I selected this approach for two reasons. First, it allowed the school to ensure the proper handling and protection of sensitive data, aligning with their own data protection policies and practices. Second, the survey coming from leadership indicates a desire to gather meaningful feedback to enhance school system's effectiveness and address the needs of staff and students.

Data Analysis

Following the conclusion of the survey, I exported all survey data (open-ended and asset-based statements) from Qualtrics to Microsoft Excel for initial review. After the preliminary review of data, I categorized the twenty asset-based statement questions into five groups – teacher/administrator strengths, parent engagement, cultural practices, support systems, and innovative practices. I calculated the percentages of strongly disagree to strongly agree for each statement (see Appendix C). To optimize table readability, I combined both disagree and strongly disagree into one category labeled “disagree.” I took the same approach with agree and strongly agree, both were combined into the “agree” category. To determine whether an asset-based activity was being practiced, I examined which category had a higher percentage (disagree or agree). I excluded the “neutral” category from these comparisons.

I used an inductive coding approach to code qualitative statements from open-ended questions. I began initial coding by assigning codes to smaller units of information. Next, I looked for themes by identifying patterns and grouped similar codes. Using a codebook as a reference guide, I assigned relevant categories to each data point. For example, local business was a category (parent code) and it included data points (child codes) like farms, green houses, and manufacturing plants (see Appendix D).

Findings

I summarized key findings below according to each of my guiding research questions. First, I present basic descriptive statistics detailing the respondent sample in terms of the key demographic questions I asked. These demographics paint a picture of the final sample represented in my study.

Survey Respondents

The final respondent sample consisted of 134 distinct records. One hundred twenty-five respondents identified their school district; nine did not. Approximately 66% of respondents identified as teachers, with 20% being support staff, 9% other, and 5% administration. Based on information I obtained from RSA, I believe several teaching and staff members were unwilling to identify their demographic information or answer specific questions for fear of being identified or disciplined.

Demographic Data

My survey collected demographic information including school district, gender, age, role, years of experience, and which grade levels staff teach or support. The final sample consisted of 74% female and 24% male respondents. Of note, 43% of respondents indicated that they were 50 years of age or older, the largest age group in the sample, followed by 40-49 (31%) and 30-39 (21%). School staff below the age of 29 were the smallest age group (5%). Most of the school staff teach or support either elementary schools (42%) or high schools (38%), with 20% supporting middle schools. Two-thirds, or 66%, of the respondents identified as teachers. Almost half (43%) of the teachers surveyed indicated that they have over 20 years

of experience. An additional 18% reported that they have been teaching for 16 to 20 years. A relatively small percentage of respondents indicated between 5 to 10 years or less than 5 years teaching experience (13% and 9%, respectively). Support staff was the next largest group in the sample at 20% followed by other (9%). The other group consisted of following roles: bus driver, school counselor, librarian, nurse, student aide, and teaching assistant. School administration were the lowest percentage of respondents at 5%.

Key Findings Related to Guiding Research Question #1: What are key challenges and barriers that teachers and administrators face in rural schools?

- 1a. School staff referenced communication (21%) as the primary challenge or barrier, followed by parent support (13%), time constraints (11%) and financial support (11%), and student behavior (10%) (see Figure 2).
- 1b. Examining the most-referenced challenges by grade level, there were differences between elementary, middle, and high school staff.

Communication

I found that 21% of school staff referenced communication gaps between departments and buildings as a problem (see Figure 2). Communication was also an issue between administration, faculty, and staff. As one teacher stated, “At times, I feel that there are broken lines of communication pertaining to my expectations as an educator. I feel that polices/programs/initiatives are put in place with little understanding of their need and/or what my identified role is in said process.”

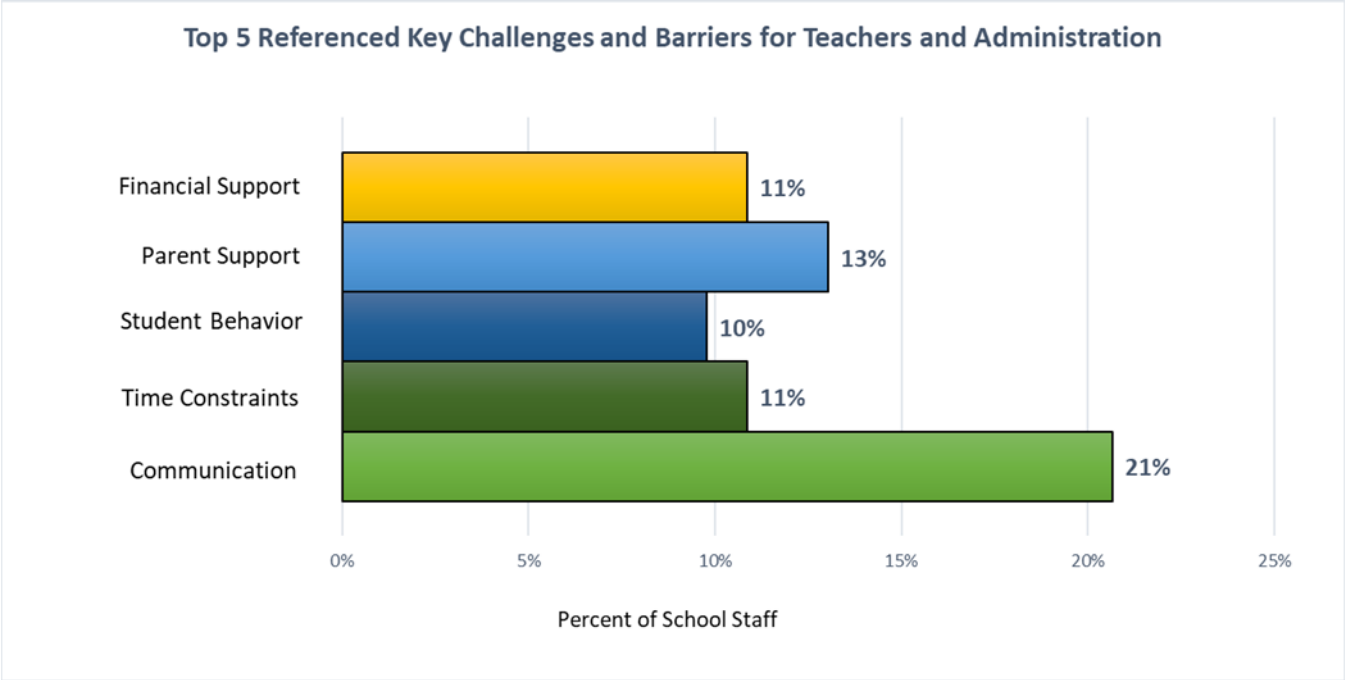


Figure 2: Top 5 Referenced Key Challenges/Barriers for Teachers and Administration

Parent Support

The second most-referenced challenge was a lack of parent support, with 13% of respondents citing this challenge (See Figure 2). A respondent specifically pointed out that “key challenges or barriers we face are the ‘I don’t care’ attitude and the lack of parental support for children who struggle or have behavior issues.” Another school staff member professed, “At times parents who do not hold their students accountable at home so trying to teach along with parent while the students are at school and teach them right from wrong as well as academics can be challenging at times when they are taught differently about these topics at home or there is not follow through at home.”

Time Constraints

School staff also referenced time constraints, with 11% of the respondents identifying it as a challenge (See Figure 2). For example, a staff member stated, “teachers need more time to develop materials beneficial to student learning.” A teacher also revealed, “The high school administrator and guidance office are busy all the time and don’t have a lot of time to organize connections to organizations or parents, so individual teachers who feel this is important take it upon themselves to provide these experiences, but they are few and far between.”

Financial Support

Another top-five referenced challenge was funding, with 11% of survey respondents identifying it as a difficulty for both teachers and administration (See Figure 2). A teacher expressed her challenge was “enough funding to teach or provide for our district in the best way possible. We also don’t make a livable salary.” A respondent also proclaimed, “Lack of funding and geographic isolation makes it hard to hire enough support staff and faculty – like IT/tech integration.”

Student Behavior

I found that 10% of the school staff reported difficulty managing student behavior (See Figure 2). A teacher wrote “Lack of support for students with behaviors, not enough staff or a solid program on hand to handle the behaviors that seem to be getting worse every year.” Another respondent identified drug use as a barrier by saying “...our school is facing is the increase in drug use. We have many Superintendent hearings for this in the current school year. The kids are able to get it. They are not afraid of getting caught. They share it.”

Differences by Grade Level

Elementary and middle school staff identified parent support as their key challenge, while high school staff most frequently identified communication as a barrier (see Figure 3).

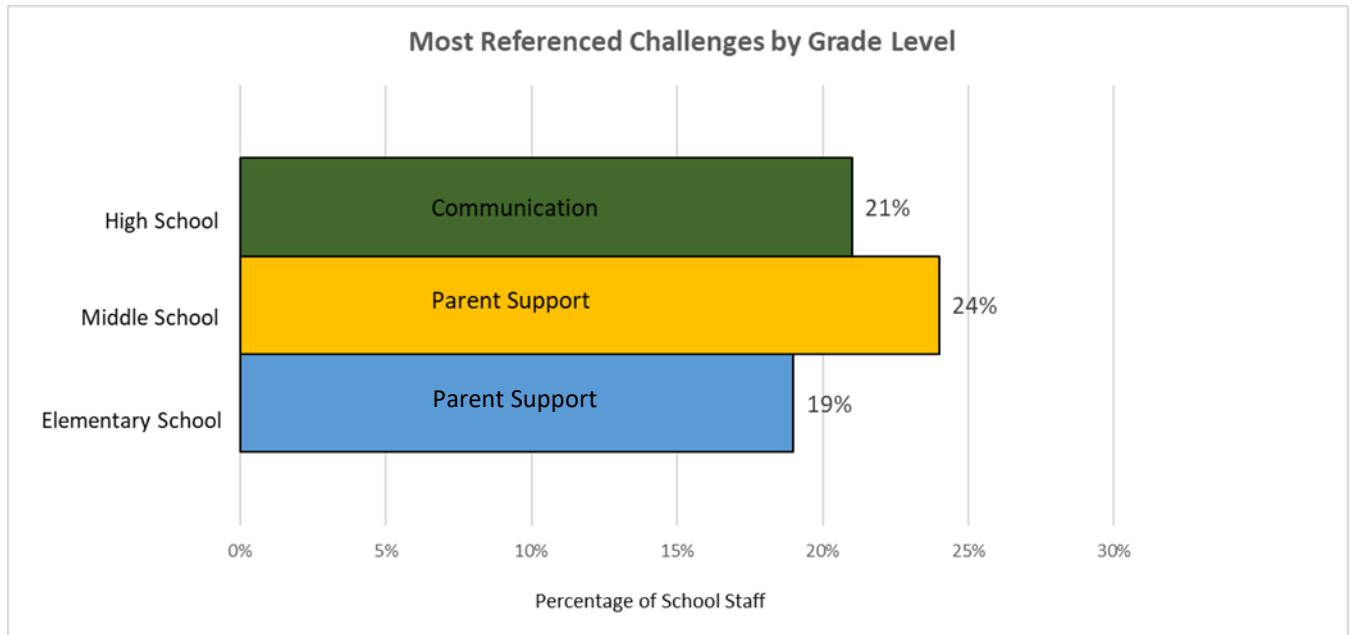


Figure 3: Most-Referenced Challenges by Grade Level

Key Findings Related to Guiding Research Question #2: What are key strengths and resources that support teachers and administrators in rural schools?

- 2a. School staff commonly referenced peer support (38%) as an internal strength, followed by teamwork (21%), professional development (13%) and autonomy (9%), and teachers/colleagues (9%), see Figure 4.
- 2b. Examining the most-referenced internal strengths by role, there were differences between administrators and the others group, while school staff and teachers identified the same strength.

- 2c. Analyzing the most frequently referenced external resources, there were five areas within the community school staff cited as potential sources to leverage to support student educational experiences.

Peer Support

Findings revealed that 38% of school staff referenced peer support as a major strength in rural schools (See Figure 4). A teacher pointed out “We have strong comradery amongst teachers. We are good at sharing ideas and supporting one another.” The same message was shared by other teachers, “We also all support one another and always advocate for our students and their learning” and “our main strength and support comes from each other and within.”

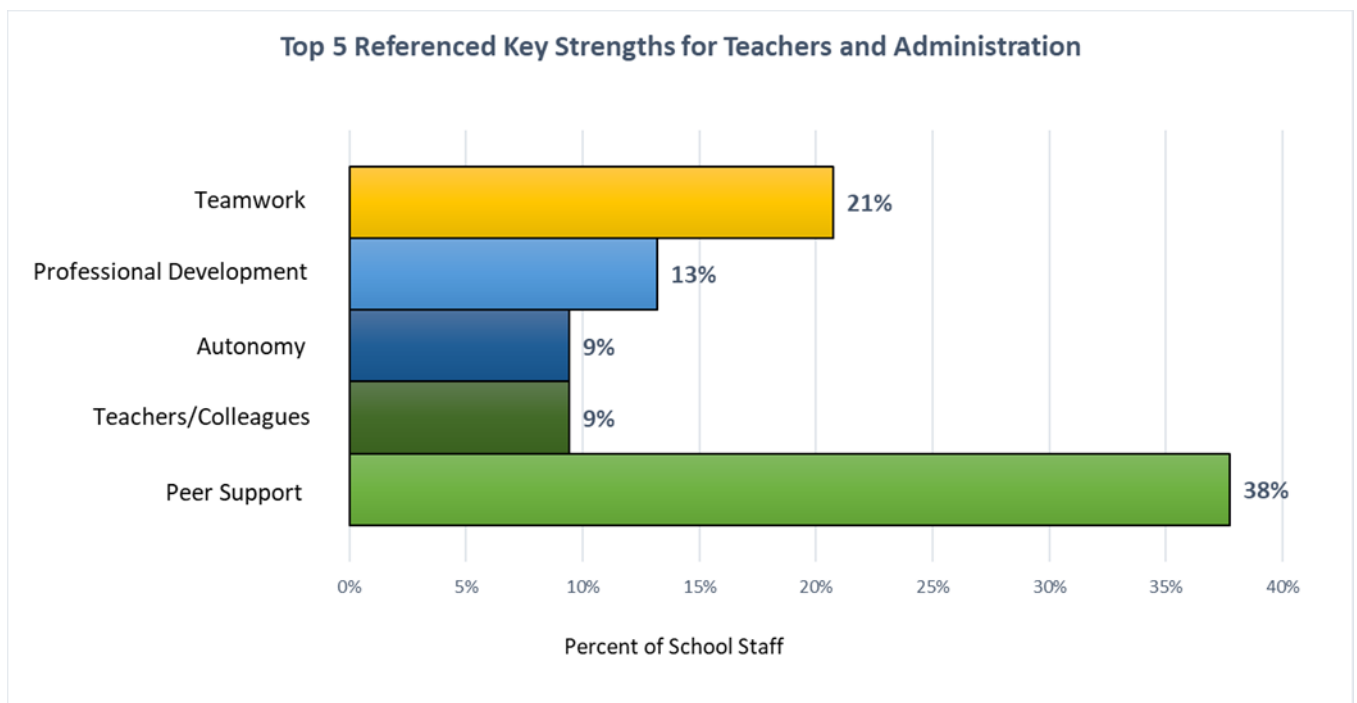


Figure 4: Top 5 Referenced Key Strengths for Teachers and Administration

Teamwork

Both peer support and teamwork involve collaboration among individuals, but teamwork stresses the achievement of specified goals through the systematic coordination of a group of people, whereas peer support focuses on emotional support, knowledge sharing, and skill teaching by individuals in similar situations (Texas Health and Human Services, n.d.). School staff referenced teamwork (21%) as a strength (See Figure 4). Teachers also felt teamwork was an asset, with one teacher stating, “we have a strong team approach within grade-levels and overall.”

Professional Development

I found that 13% of the school staff listed Professional development as an asset (See Figure 4). A school administrator stated, “we are a Professional Learning Community school, so we are constantly having professional conversations about learning.” Teachers agreed that professional development is a strength with one saying, “our school is definitely top notch when it comes to professional development, and giving teachers the material things they need to teach.”

Autonomy

Findings revealed that autonomy was a strength, with 9% of school staff citing it in their survey responses (See Figure 4). A respondent said, “educators have the ability to change programs to meet the needs of the children instead of staying with the same thing, doing it the same way.” Another school staff member expressed “teachers have the autonomy to do what they see fit in their classrooms.”

Teachers/Colleagues

The respondents felt other teachers and colleagues (9%) were a strength in their school district (See Figure 4). A couple of teachers stated, “we have strong leaders in special area disciplines” and “we have a great faculty.” Specialized teachers were also mentioned, especially librarians and STEM teachers.

Differences by role

Broken down by role, teachers identified peer support as a predominant strength. Support staff also referenced peer support as a major strength. Administrators acknowledged professional development as a significant asset. Finally, the other group identified teamwork as a strong point (see Figure 5).

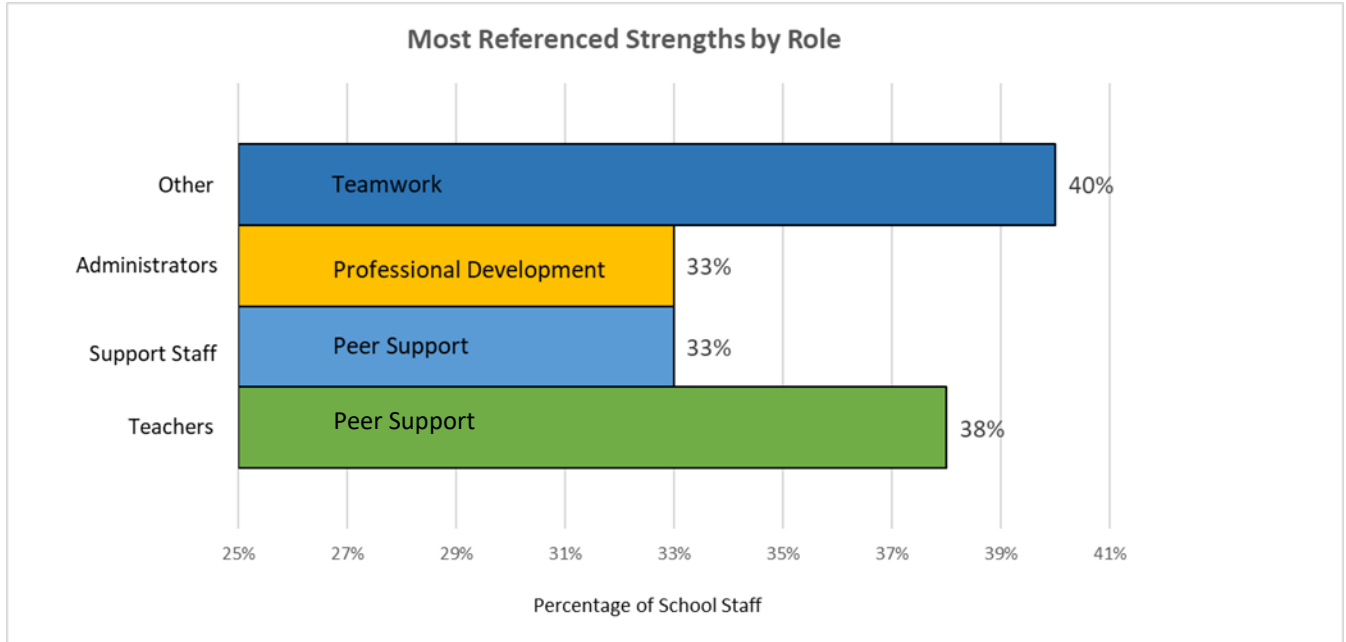


Figure 5: Most Referenced Strengths by Role

External resources within the community

Categorized by external resource, school staff most often referenced local business within the community, followed by organizations, community members, career day/internships, and retirement homes, see Figure 6.

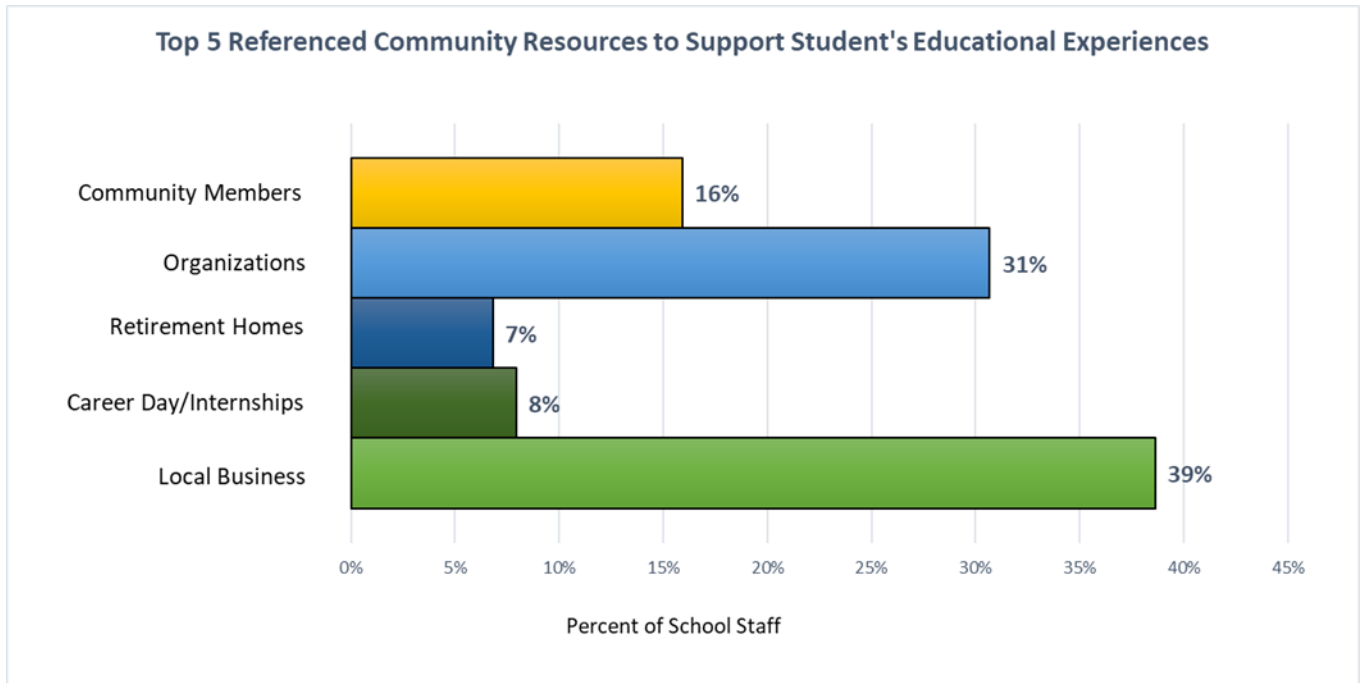


Figure 6: Top 5 Referenced Community Resources for Students

Key Findings Related to Guiding Research Question #3: Which asset-based activities are rural schools currently practicing?

- 3a. More school staff agreed than disagreed with three asset-based categories including innovative practices, teacher/administrator strengths, and support systems. Broken down by statements, innovative practices and teacher/administrator strengths had school staff that agreed more than they disagreed with all four statements. Within

support systems, respondents agreed more than disagreed with three out of four statements.

Innovative Practices

Findings revealed that school staff reported using collaborative teaching the most with 65.4% agreeing that they are currently practicing this asset-based activity (See Table 1). Over 50% of respondents also agreed that teachers are using project-based and blended learning to connect students to communities and cultures and to engage them in real-world projects. The lowest agreed-with statement was place-based education (38.5%) that connects to local environments, communities, and culture.

Innovative Practices	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
We use place-based education that connects to local environments, communities, and cultures (hands-on and experiential learning)	25.4%	36.2%	38.5%
We use project-based learning that engages students in real-world, interdisciplinary projects that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration	21.5%	24.6%	53.9%
We use blended learning that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning	18.5%	23.9%	57.7%
We use collaborative teaching where multiple teachers work together to plan and deliver instruction	14.6%	20.0%	65.4%

Table 1: Innovative Practices

Teacher/Administrator Strengths

School staff agreed (50.4%) that their school identifies teachers who have exceptional knowledge in specific subjects and 45.4% agreed that their school identifies teachers who excel in differentiating instruction to meet the needs of students (See Table 2). School staff also reported that teachers who excel in instructional innovation are recognized (49.6%), as are those teachers and administrators that are strong in collaboration and teamwork (46.2%).

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

Table 2: Teacher/Administrator Strengths

Support Systems

Three asset-based statements under the “support systems” category had the highest proportion of respondents who agreed (See Table 3). Teachers felt (84.7%) that they actively involve parents by organizing regular communication. This statement overlaps with “we establish clear and regular channels of communication between teachers and parents” in the Parent Engagement category below (see Table 4). Many school staff also agreed (82.4%) that they encourage active participation of community members and local organizations in school activities. Finally, respondents agreed at 67.9% that they forge collaborative partnerships with local business and government. The lowest agreed-with statement was facilitating learning experiences (26%) where students interact with elders who can provide insights to cultural practices and values.

Support Systems	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
We encourage active participation of community members, parents, and local organizations in school activities	7.6%	9.9%	82.4%
We facilitate learning experiences where students interact with elders who can provide insights to cultural practices and values	38.2%	35.9%	26.0%
We forge collaborative partnerships between our school and local community organizations, businesses, and government entities	11.5%	20.6%	67.9%
We actively involve parents and families in their child's education by organizing regular communication	5.3%	9.9%	84.7%

Table 3: Support Systems

Key Findings Related to Guiding Research Question #4: Which asset-based activities are rural schools not currently practicing?

- 4a. More respondents disagreed than agreed with two asset-based categories including parent engagement and cultural practices. Broken down by statements, parent engagement and cultural practices had school staff that disagreed more than they agreed for three out of four statements.

Parent Engagement

Under the Parent Engagement category, respondents largely disagreed with three out of the four statements. School staff disagreed (49.2%) that they offer parent education programs that focus on topics such as understanding educational standards (See Table 4). Individuals also disagreed (45.8%) that they organize workshops or webinars that cover topics relevant to parents’ interests or concerns. Finally, respondents disagreed (36.2%) that they facilitate the creation of parent support networks where parents can connect and share experiences.

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

Table 4: Parent Engagement

Cultural Practices

Respondents largely disagreed with three out of four statements under the Cultural Practices category. School Staff disagreed (50%) that they establish mentorship programs where students are paired with community members serving as cultural mentors (See Table 5).

Teachers also disagreed that they create opportunities for journaling and group discussion about students’ cultural backgrounds. Lastly, 33.8% of the respondents disagreed that they integrate service-learning projects for students to engage un cultural practices.

Cultural Practices	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
We integrate service-learning projects for students' to engage in cultural practices	33.8%	34.6%	31.5%
We establish mentorship programs where students are paired with community members serving as cultural mentors	50.0%	28.5%	21.5%
We adopt culturally responsive teaching practices into the curriculum	24.2%	34.4%	41.4%
We create opportunities for journaling and group discussion about students' cultural backgrounds	35.7%	45.0%	19.4%

Table 5: Cultural Practices

Recommendations

The following four recommendations are derived from my key findings from this investigation. My first recommendation is to create cross-departmental committees. It is possible to have a more comprehensive understanding of each child's skills, challenges, and interests by bringing together representatives from several departments like academics, counseling, extracurricular activities, and special education. My next recommendation is for teachers to use their autonomy to engage local businesses and community members. This exposure may pique student interest, sharpen their critical thinking abilities, and assist them in making future professional decisions that are better informed. Interacting with adults from varied backgrounds who have achieved success in many industries can stimulate students to set goals that are challenging but achievable. My third recommendation is to establish a teacher mentorship program. The stability in the teaching workforce ensures that students benefit from consistent and experienced educators over time. Finally, the last recommendation is to form explicit teacher and parent partnerships. Open and effective communication between teachers and parents

creates a collaborative support system that ensures children's needs are met holistically. I detail each of these recommendations more fully in the subsequent sections.

Recommendation #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 (Finding 1a). Therefore, my first recommendation is to incorporate people from various departments into multidisciplinary committees or working groups. Peer support (38%) was referenced as a major strength (Finding 2a), for example a respondent claimed that there is a strong comradery amongst teachers and they are good at sharing ideas. Both administrators and teachers also agreed they work well as a team as teamwork was the second most referenced strength (Finding 2a). These groups can work together on certain tasks, curriculum creation, or research efforts. Faculty from various disciplines will communicate more frequently and develop stronger bonds as a result of routine gatherings and exchanges.

Recommendation #2: Engage Local Businesses and Community Members

School staff referenced rural teacher autonomy as a top-5 strength (See Figure 4; finding 2a). Respondents also identified local businesses (39%) and community members (16%) as resources that could be tapped into to support and enrich student's educational experiences (See Figure 6, finding 2c). When rural teachers are given the freedom to tailor their curriculum, teaching methods, and classroom activities according to the specific needs and interests of their students, they can create a more engaging and relevant learning environment. There are several ways in which local business can make a positive impact including: internships,

mentorships, collaborative projects, and job shadowing. Students can obtain practical skills, explore potential career pathways, and have a better grasp of the local employment market by participating in hands-on work experiences. These programs fill the gap between classroom instruction and real-world application. 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. Empowering rural teachers with autonomy and involving businesses and community members in the education process creates a powerful synergy that propels student development and success.

Recommendation #3: Establish Teacher Mentorship Program

Almost half (43%) of the teachers surveyed indicated that they have over 20 years of experience. Findings in 3a 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. The difficulties specific to rural education, such as geographic isolation, a lack of resources, and community dynamics, can cause greater turnover rates among younger teachers. One respondent stated, “teacher concerns are not heard... as a result we have lost good people to other jobs.” Another individual pointed out, “teacher shortage is a real thing. Getting qualified applicants for vacancies is tough.”

These issues may be solved by implementing a mentoring program designed specifically for rural areas. For example, The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project has increased retention rates for early-career teachers from 68 to 79 percent by linking new teachers with experienced mentors (McArdle, 2019). Due to high rates of teacher turnover and a decline in the number of persons joining the teaching profession, there has been a severe national teacher shortage during the past several years. The Learning Policy Institute reports a reduction of 35% in teacher preparation program enrolment between 2009 and 2014 (McArdle, 2019). A mentoring program addresses high teacher turnover in rural schools by providing a comprehensive approach and a sustainable solution. By nurturing the skills, confidence, emotional well-being, and community integration of new teachers, mentoring programs foster an environment where educators thrive, students excel, and the rural school system prospers (Bowman, 2014).

Recommendation #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 commonly mentioned challenge (Finding 1a). Therefore, my third recommendation is for teachers to practice parent engagement activities. Parent engagement must include two crucial components: parent voice and parent presence (Mckenna & Millen, 2013). Parental voice is the opportunity for parents to communicate their ideas and perceptions about their kids' day-to-day activities and educational experiences. It can include parents' desires and goals for their kids or it can take the form of frustration and concern about the educational process. Parent presence refers to a parent's actions and involvement in their children's education; activities

include assisting with schoolwork, going to school-sponsored events, and becoming a PTA member (Mckenna & Millen, 2013). When parents actively participate in their child's education, it sends a strong message to their child that education is important and valued (Brooks, 2019). It also allows parents to actively participate in decision-making processes, such as selecting educational interventions or setting goals for their child.

Schools could also provide parent education programs that focus on topics such as effective parenting strategies and understanding educational standards which would help with another top-5 referenced challenge, student behavior (Finding 1a). 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

In terms of survey design, the main limitation of this investigation was that it was self-assessing in nature, which limits results to school staffs' perceived support systems, cultural practices, parent engagement, teacher/administrator strengths, and innovative practices. Therefore, I was not able to measure and assess actual effectiveness as it pertains to these five asset-based approaches.

Conclusion

The purpose of this investigation was to develop a research-informed approach to identify local assets and resources in rural schools and communities. In doing so, the overarching aim of

the partner organization was to help improve student outcomes in today's unique and complex rural school districts. Asset-Based Community Development is a philosophy and a bottom-up approach that focuses on recognizing and mobilizing a community's assets, resources, and strengths to effect positive change.

Findings revealed that communication was a significant challenge for teachers and administrators. Findings also identified the most-referenced asset was local businesses and the third most-referenced asset was community members. Respondents agreed teacher/administrator strength was an asset-based resource being leveraged, while parent engagement was lacking. To address these results, I recommend creating cross-departmental committees, engaging local businesses and community members, establishing teacher mentorship program, and forming explicit parent/teacher partnerships to contribute to the development and success of students.

I believe further investigation is warranted given the potential negative effects that poor student outcomes can have on both the individual and the broader rural community. Examples include businesses and industries refraining from investing in the area, limited career prospects, perpetuating the cycle of poverty in the community (Reed, 2020), and outmigration leading to brain drain (Gillham, 2010). President Obama and Agriculture Secretary Vilsack stated, "strong rural communities are key to a stronger America" (O'Brien, 2013). To be strong, rural schools and communities must acknowledge the assets and resources that exist and, more importantly, leverage them, for their students to succeed.

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Appendix A

RSA Survey Email

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Andrew and I'm a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. I'm partnering with the Rural Schools Association (RSA) to conduct a survey of rural school administrators, teachers, and support staff. Your school district has graciously agreed to participate in this survey and I hope that you will take time to share your valuable insights and opinions.

Taking part in this survey is completely voluntary, and all responses are anonymous. I am the only person who will have access to your responses and will only include aggregated data in my report. No individual will ever be identified. Your participation will involve answering a series of questions related to your community and school's assets, strengths, and resources. The estimated time to complete the survey is approximately 15 minutes. If you encounter any difficulties or have any questions or concerns regarding the survey, please feel free to reach out to me at andrew.s.kupchik@vanderbilt.edu.

Survey link: https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0ciEdt0hrgBP25g

Thank you for your time,
Andrew

Appendix B

RSA Survey

Q1 Please select your school district

▼ Canisteo-Greenwood Central (1) ... North Adirondack Central (3)

Q2 What is your gender?

Male (1)

Female (2)

Self-Identify (3) _____

Q3 How old are you?

Under 25 (1)

25-29 (2)

30-39 (3)

40-49 (4)

50-59 (5)

60+ (6)

Q4 What is your main role at your school?

Teacher (1)

School Administrator (2)

Support Staff (3)

Other (4) _____

Q5 How many years of experience do you have working in schools?

- Less than 5 (1)
 - 5-10 (2)
 - 11-15 (3)
 - 16-20 (4)
 - More than 20 (5)
-

Q6 Which grade levels do you currently teach or support? (check all that apply)

- Elementary (1)
 - Middle School (2)
 - High School (3)
-

Q7 Please rate your agreement with the following statements about support systems at your school:

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We encourage active participation of community members, parents, and local organizations in school activities (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We facilitate learning experiences where students interact with elders who can provide insights to cultural practices and values (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We forge collaborative partnerships between our school and local community organizations, businesses, and government entities (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We actively involve parents and families in their child's education by organizing regular communication (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q9 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?

Q10 Please rate your agreement with the following statements about parent engagement at your school:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We organize workshops or webinars that cover topics relevant to parents' interests and concerns (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We facilitate the creation of parent support networks where parents can connect, share experiences, and provide mutual support (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We offer parent education programs that focus on topics such as effective parenting strategies, understanding educational standards, and navigating college and career readiness (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We establish clear and regular channels of communication between teacher and parents (newsletters, emails, or dedicated online platform to share student progress) (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 Please rate your agreement with the following statements about teacher and administrator strengths at your school:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We identify teachers who have exceptional knowledge and expertise in specific subjects or disciplines (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We recognize teachers who excel in instructional innovation and technology integration (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We identify teachers who excel in differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs of students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We identify teachers and administrators who excel in collaboration and teamwork (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 Please rate your agreement with the following statements about innovative teaching practices at your school:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We use place-based education that connects to local environments, communities, and cultures (hands-on and experiential learning) (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use project-based learning that engages students in real-world, interdisciplinary projects that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use blended learning that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use collaborative teaching where multiple teachers work together to plan and deliver instruction (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13 In your opinion, what are the key challenges or barriers that teachers and administrators face in your school?

Q14 In your opinion, what are the key strengths and resources that support teachers and administrators in your school?

Q8 Please rate your agreement with the following statements about cultural practices at your school:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We integrate service-learning projects for students' to engage in cultural practices (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We establish mentorship programs where students are paired with community members serving as cultural mentors (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We adopt culturally responsive teaching practices into the curriculum (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We create opportunities for journaling and group discussion about students' cultural backgrounds (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix C

RSA Survey 20 Asset-Based Statements

#	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%
#	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%
#	Cultural Practices	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	We integrate service-learning projects for students' to engage in cultural practices	33.8%	34.6%	31.5%
2	We establish mentorship programs where students are paired with community members serving as cultural mentors	50.0%	28.5%	21.5%
3	We adopt culturally responsive teaching practices into the curriculum	24.2%	34.4%	41.4%
4	We create opportunities for journaling and group discussion about students' cultural backgrounds	35.7%	45.0%	19.4%
#	Support Systems	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	We encourage active participation of community members, parents, and local organizations in school activities	7.6%	9.9%	82.4%
2	We facilitate learning experiences where students interact with elders who can provide insights to cultural practices and values	38.2%	35.9%	26.0%
3	We forge collaborative partnerships between our school and local community organizations, businesses, and government entities	11.5%	20.6%	67.9%
4	We actively involve parents and families in their child's education by organizing regular communication	5.3%	9.9%	84.7%
#	Innovative Practices	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	We use place-based education that connects to local environments, communities, and cultures (hands-on and experiential learning)	25.4%	36.2%	38.5%
2	We use project-based learning that engages students in real-world, interdisciplinary projects that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration	21.5%	24.6%	53.9%
3	We use blended learning that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning	18.5%	23.9%	57.7%
4	We use collaborative teaching where multiple teachers work together to plan and deliver instruction	14.6%	20.0%	65.4%

Key	
Doing	
Not Doing	

Appendix D

RSA Survey Codebook

PARENT CODES	CHILD CODES
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