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Article

# Mobilization and Adaptation of a Rural Cradle-to-Career Network

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Academic Editor: Hal A. Lawson

Received: 6 July 2016; Accepted: 10 October 2016; Published: 19 October 2016

**Abstract:** This case study explored the development of a rural cradle-to-career network with a dual focus on the initial mobilization of network members and subsequent adaptations made to maintain mobilization, while meeting local needs. Data sources included interviews with network members, observations of meetings, and documentary evidence. Network-based social capital facilitated mobilization. Where networks were absent and where distrust and different values were evident, mobilization faltered. Three network adaptations were discovered: Special rural community organizing strategies, district-level action planning, and a theory of action focused on out-of-school factors. All three were attributable to the composition of mobilized stakeholders and this network's rural social geography. These findings illuminate the importance of social geography in the development and advancement of rural cradle-to-career networks.

**Keywords:** cradle-to-career networks; new institutional designs; collaborative partnerships; school-community partnerships; rural schools

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## 1. Introduction

How can rural schools meet the educational, economic, social, and civic needs of their communities in the face of standardized educational reforms and increasing globalization? How can rural schools and communities work together to revitalize their economies? Moreover, how do they do so in the face of the out-migration of highly educated and socially connected youth? How do collaborative efforts emerge in places with significant social isolation and exclusion of particular groups? How do community and organization members mobilize in the development of a rural cradle-to-career network? How does mobilization impact the network structure and development of a local theory of action development?

These questions have significance for rural communities found in every state in the US, and in other nations where the flow towards urbanization puts many communities at risk for continued population and economic decline. The scope of these issues in the US is illustrated by Census data that show rural communities make up 14% of the population [1].

This qualitative case study of a rural cradle-to-career network in the United States was structured to yield actionable knowledge regarding members' mobilization and the network's, place-based adaptations. Because this network was one of the most advanced rural networks affiliated with the national Strive Together network, it provided a timely opportunity to understand how the network developed in context, starting with its initial formation and continuing with subsequent developmental phases. Special interest resided the ways in which social isolation and exclusion influenced the mobilization process, resulting in the development of a particular network structure and a local theory of action.

## 2. The Need for Place-Based Cradle-to-Career Networks in Rural Areas

Cradle-to-career networks represent place-based, systems-level approaches to new institutional designs that harness the power of partnerships to impact educational and economic indicators at the community or regional level [2]. Such partnership efforts are bolstered by collaboration of professionals from across educational, government, social service, and business sectors. These collaborative partnerships have been described by Lawson as “an intervention in service of new institutional designs” [3] (p. 641). The complexity of rural governance [4] and the complexity of social problems suggest the need for such collaborative partnerships [5]. Four key issues recommend their development in rural areas: persistently high levels of poverty; social geography that includes isolation and exclusion based on ethnic and class boundaries; migration patterns of youth; and the development of place-based education as a means of resistance. These issues are described below.

Idyllic landscapes figuratively and literally obscure rural poverty, hiding material deprivation, lack of employment opportunities, and persistent low wages [6]. Rates of poverty in non-metropolitan areas of the United States remain higher than those in metropolitan areas [7]. The persistence of poverty in rural places reflects significant restructuring, with low wage service and seasonal employment replacing traditional living wage jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and mining and other extractive industries [8,9]. Economic renewal in rural places is hindered by limited infrastructure and the out-flow of human capital [8,10–12]. As in urban places, economic hardship is associated with adverse outcomes for rural children, families, and schools [13,14]. Such negative outcomes further contribute to declining local economies and result in the present population loss, leaving the future of rural communities and their way of life at risk.

Social isolation and exclusion exacerbate the negative effects of poverty. Social exclusion refers to the mechanisms that deny particular individuals and groups full participation in mainstream society, especially the economy and democratic politics [15]. Recognizing the diversity of rural places in the United States and beyond, many communities share two features of social geography contribute to such exclusion and isolation: challenging terrain and rigid social boundaries. For those experiencing the hardships associated with poverty, transportation challenges across great distances make social isolation and exclusion more extreme by limiting access to goods and services [16]. School consolidation efforts increased the distances traveled to take part in school activities that serve as the center of communities [17], resulting in limited social capital available to individuals or the community [8].

Rigid social boundaries further increase social isolation and exclusion and limit social capital. These boundaries are often a result of the stigma surrounding poverty and subsequent moral judgments. As a result, class boundaries are reproduced through inequitable school and community investments in particular student sub-populations [8,9]. Additionally, long histories of racial or ethnic strife in some rural communities continue to create social boundaries and further contribute to social isolation and exclusion [18]. By limiting educational investment only to groups seen as innately deserving—through their social position, talents or moral characteristics—schools limit the skill and creativity needed to identify new economic opportunities and to turn rural communities around [9]. Taken together, these causes of social isolation and exclusion not only affect the quality of life of individuals, but also negatively impact the cohesion of communities [15].

Inequitable investment and limited community cohesion have been implicated in long standing patterns of brain-drain [8,9,19]. The phrase ‘brain drain’ typically describes the outmigration of the most highly educated young people from rural to urban and suburban areas. This migration pattern is attributed to the need of young people to seek employment opportunities aligned to their aspirations and educational credentials [9]. The ease of mobility and increased connectivity in the 21st century exacerbates this long-standing phenomenon of loss of rural human capital. Additionally, the most successful students are often the most connected to their communities. This pattern leaves rural areas with limited human and social capital to contribute to the revitalization and stabilization of their communities [8].

The relationship between educational success and community connections for rural youth suggests two interrelated pathways to stabilizing the populations and economies of rural areas: human capital development aligned with local economies and building connections between young people and their communities to develop social capital and civic capacity. Place-based education has long been identified as a means to create such interrelated pathways [20] in order to resist or even reverse the trend of brain drain. Place-based education does this through the inclusion of local history, geography, ecology, geology, and culture in the curriculum. These efforts also employ a hands-on, community-oriented pedagogy, which supports inter-generational learning, develops social capital through strengthening reciprocal networks, builds trust, and instills the local social norms in students [2,8,10].

### 3. Cradle-to-Career Networks

Place-based education has been seen as an important strategy for rural communities to address educational, social, and economic needs. However, the complexity of these challenges suggest the need for more comprehensive strategies. Cradle-to-career networks provide comprehensive strategies to support the healthy youth development [21] from birth through entry into the workforce and engage in “doubly holistic” [22] efforts to link educational institutions with social and health services for children and families. Additionally, such networks may provide increased social capital [2,23] and increased civic infrastructure [24] and civic capacity [23,25] that support systems level improvements at a community or regional level.

Among the most prominent of these cradle-to-career networks is the Strive Partnership, which emerged from a workforce collaborative in the Cincinnati metropolitan area. In Cincinnati, top level leaders developed a common agenda for educational and economic development focused on increasing the number of college and career ready youth. From this leadership, level flows cascading collaboration, in which organizations in the same sector work together to eliminate redundancy, align their efforts to the network’s goals, and utilize shared metrics for success [26].

The Strive model has been scaled up through the development of a national network and technical assistance center. Of the nearly 50 communities in the U.S. identified as members of this national network, several are in rural places [27]. Advocates for these models describe them as adaptable to any local context based on the prioritization of developing local leadership and goals. Advocates also emphasize the need for fidelity to a tested theory of action [21]. Yet, for such partnerships to be effective, “they must be fit for purpose, in this context, at this time” [3] (p. 637). That is, such partnership models may not be automatically transferable; rather, they must be driven by local priority missions and goals, based on the unique social geography and context.

#### 3.1. Conceptualizing Cradle-To-Career Networks

Research on cradle-to-career networks to date has largely been descriptive [26,27]. The complex nature of these networks, bringing together community leaders around a shared agenda and developing cascading collaboration among organizations, makes conceptualizing them challenging as they combine elements of social movements, organizational partnerships, and municipal level civic capacity. Theories from each of these areas have been engaged to conceptualize cradle-to-career networks and are described in the theoretical framework that follows.

##### 3.1.1. Social Movements

Social movements are voluntary collectives among individuals with shared beliefs that seek to fix a problematic situation in society [28,29]. Often, these movements find support in organizations that provide infrastructure, including bringing people together and creating communication networks [28]. These organizations have become largely professionalized [28]. Social movements may be oppositional or may work more closely with those in power in the government [30] to reach their aims.

Similarly, cradle-to-career networks bring together community leaders around change in education to support a common agenda of college and career readiness. Backbone organizations can be seen as a specific type of social movement organization in their role of bringing people together and engaging in communication activities, as well as in facilitating organizations to take action.

### 3.1.2. Organizational Partnerships

While social movements may act in opposition to the existing structures of governance, organizational partnerships often seek to work within them. Such cross-sector organizational partnerships address complex social problems that a single institution or sector cannot solve alone [5,31] in order to create outcomes at the community level [32]. These partnerships engage organizations, including government, non-profits and philanthropies, as well as the community as a whole [33]. Such partnerships require “the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately” [31] (p. 44).

The cascading levels of collaboration in the Strive model reflect the need for organizational partnerships in order to identify shared goals, identify common metrics, and to engage in “mutually reinforcing” [21] (p. 38) activities that reduce redundancy and create alignment in efforts.

### 3.1.3. Civic Capacity

Edmondson and Zimpher suggest that cradle-to-career networks go beyond social movements and organizational partnerships in their capacity to develop new civic infrastructure. They define new civic infrastructure as cross-sector leaders developing action plans around common outcomes [24]. Such notions of joined-up governance [4,34] suggest the political science theory of civic capacity. Like social movement and organizational partnerships, these theories address change at the community or municipal level [25,35]. Civic capacity builds on urban regime theory that describes how community actors relate to one another in coalitions to create power dynamics that enables the development of “power to”, or the capacity to act, rather than exerting “power over” [25,36]. Civic capacity builds on this by identifying a common agenda and shared issue frames as guiding the efforts of a coalition within a single policy arena. Such shared issue frames are developed through collective cognition, or the repeated interactions of individuals in a civic environment that create shared understandings of needs and potential solutions [36].

Cradle-to-career networks could be considered a strategy for developing civic capacity; however, in order to address the most challenging and entrenched issues around educational and economic development, these networks cross a variety of policy arenas, suggesting the need for broader coalitions and the identification of interdependence among policy arenas and organizations.

## 3.2. Conceptualizing Stakeholder Mobilization

The cradle-to-career literature identifies the importance of bringing together the right mix of the right stakeholders [37]. This literature focuses particularly on the need to bring together community elites, including leaders from the business, non-profit, government, and educational sectors [21], as well as organizations to collaborate [26]. This need to mobilize individual actors as well as organizations complicates the issue. The social movement, organizational partnership, and urban regime and civic capacity literature provide a conceptual basis for understanding the mobilization of a cradle-to-career network.

### 3.2.1. Social Movement Mobilization

In the social movement literature, mobilization has been identified as an aggregate of a variety of activities at the individual and group level. In some cases, social movements bring together those typically outside of the political process, through community organizing strategies, in order to generate sufficient power to make demands. Individuals come together through the recognition of collective

grievances and shared values [32,38]. The identification of such shared understandings and values proceeds through framing activities.

These framing processes include assigning blame, developing alternatives, and condensing the larger meaning into easily understood messages through motivational framing. Such motivational frames typically serve as an emotional call to arms that bring people together [29]. Existing social networks serve a bridging function as a key mechanism of face-to-face information exchange, with individuals more likely to engage when they have a personal connection to someone inside the movement. Connections to other organizations and groups contribute to the successful mobilization of members [39]. Those with greater resources, including time and money, are more likely to have such connections and to mobilize [28]. However, the nature of such connection matters. Where a greater number of weak ties exist as channels for information, communities are more likely to mobilize [40].

Together, how people understand the problem, combined with resources and access to certain social networks may dictate who mobilizes for a movement and who does not. The development of Strive from previous workforce development efforts suggests organizational resources, access to networks, and shared understandings support initial mobilization of community leaders to a cradle-to-career network.

### 3.2.2. Organizational Partnerships

The literature on organizational partnerships focuses on bringing together organizations to engage in cross-sector efforts. Key stakeholders must be strategically identified and recruited. Similarly, to social movements, shared understandings of local issues contributes to mobilization of organizational partnerships [34]. However, this literature also identifies the active roles of individuals and organizations play roles in bringing together partners.

At the organizational level, identifying a lead partner with broad legitimacy can serve as a “linking mechanism” that brokers attention to the problem with a group of stakeholders [41,42]. Additionally, organizations that identify their self-interest in collaboration and recognize the interdependence of organizations in meeting their goals are more likely to join [43].

At the individual level, credible, boundary-spanning leaders bring stakeholders together across sectors [34]. These individuals are often powerful individuals such as mayors, CEO’s, or non-profit leaders [44,45]. These and other individuals also play roles as sponsors by providing resources. Others serve as champions to further the partnership’s agenda [23,34]. Like organizations’ need for legitimacy, individuals engaging in such partnerships must attend to trust, which serves as a glue and lubricant to the work. Such trust includes interactions between people, confidence in the organization, a common bond, and feelings of goodwill [46] and requires on-going attention to build through sharing information and knowledge, demonstrations of competency, good intentions, and follow through [47,48].

With their cascading levels of collaboration, cradle-to-career networks engage organizations to work together around broad, intractable social issues that cross sectors. These networks bring together educational institutions, businesses, social service agencies, health care providers, and other organizations around a common, broad concern of educational and economic development. Additionally, backbone organizations play important linking functions. However, the organizational partnership literature suggests the need for cradle-to-career networks to attend to the individual level as well.

### 3.2.3. Civic Capacity

In the view of civic capacity theory, political power is fragmented, requiring coalitions to come together in order to harness enough power to govern effectively and create change [34,49]. To do so, coalitions must overcome the divide between the public and private sectors [49] by creating new relationships among community elites, as well as bringing together parents and educators [25,50].

The initial conceptualization of civic capacity underscored the importance of mobilization, but provided limited insight into how stakeholders come together. More recently, civic capacity has been conceptualized as a specific, place-based type of community level social capital that cannot be translated to other locations. Both existing and new relationships contribute to the development of civic capacity. Community leaders play important roles in developing new relationships and engaging in communication [51].

This literature suggests that cradle-to-career networks that bring together community leaders and develop a shared agenda may be a mechanism for creating civic capacity for school change. Cradle-to-career networks seek to bridge public and private sectors and to commit resources to municipal level issues. However, the civic capacity literature suggests this capacity is arena specific, while cradle-to-career networks take on multiple policy arenas beyond education.

### *3.3. Implications for Analysis*

Cradle-to-career networks require bringing together individual and organizational actors from across public and private sectors to engage in community level change. A key challenge remains identifying social factors that contribute to the mobilization at both levels. Analysis of processes within social networks provides a bridge between micro and macro sociological theories and allows for aggregation of action among small groups into large scale patterns, such as social movements and collective action. This assertion requires examining individuals in social networks in order to more fully understand how micro-structures contribute to mobilization at a collective level [39,40].

## **4. Materials and Methods**

Qualitative case study methodology provided tools for an in-depth understanding of the development of the rural cradle-to-career network by maintaining a focus on the unique context and social geography [52,53]. Case study methods allowed a focus on a single unit in depth and engaged with the inherent complexity of lived experiences including the non-linear development of cradle-to-career networks [54]. Case study research also enabled analysis of many potential variables [53].

### *4.1. Sample Selection*

A purposive sampling was conducted to identify rural communities with advanced cradle-to-career networks. Based on the local state policy climate, this study was delimited to networks using the Strive model. The sampling began with networks identified as members of the Strive Together national network. The United States Department of Agriculture definitions [55] of rural were used to identify networks in non-metropolitan counties that encompass one or more districts with schools identified as rural by the National Center for Educational Statistics [56]. Network websites were used to determine whether groups were active. This process yielded two potential sites and conversations with local network leaders identified one network as having advanced to action.

A criterion sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. This strategy ensured that the study included (1) active network members; (2) representatives of stakeholder types identified in the literature; and (3) members of multiple school-district communities.

### *4.2. Data Collection*

Data collection occurred during two, week-long site visits, in November 2014 and June 2015. Fieldwork was scheduled to allow observation of several Network meetings, including a large public gathering at which student survey data reports were released and a meeting of the governance council was held. Field notes were hand written or typed during these meetings.

Additionally, data collection included 28 interviews and six focus groups conducted with a total of 40 individuals. Semi-structured interview protocols were used. These protocols identified key questions to assure the same information was collected from each individual, while also allowing

the interviewer to probe subjects' thinking and ask follow up questions [33]. Field notes were taken throughout in order to identify areas for follow up and to capture emerging themes. Field memos were produced at the end of each interview day to further identify themes and areas for follow up.

Document collection yielded approximately 100 documents. These included publically available blog posts from the network's website and media coverage in the local paper, as well as internal documents, such as meeting minutes and planning documents. Multiple data sources allowed for triangulation, as well as supporting internal reliability and validity [57]. All transcripts and documents were uploaded into the NVivo 10 software [58] to facilitate analysis.

### 4.3. Analysis

The researcher engaged in coding and analysis that combined deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive analysis proceeded from a set of codes developed a priori from the literature review. These codes reflected the larger study design, with four main categories: descriptions of community and local context, mobilization, issue framing, and theory of change. In order to develop inductive codes, the researcher took note of themes that the urban-centric literature on cradle-to-career networks did not address. These inductively derived codes included community strengths and weaknesses, communication strategies, grass-roots organizing, and leadership. A second round of coding identified patterns, themes, and relationships in the data. Analytic memos were used to record concepts and themes as they emerged. These memos formed the basis of summary reports [59].

Throughout the study, construct validity was maintained through the use of (1) the use of theory to develop interview protocols; (2) multiple data source; (3) field notes and memos; (4) the creation of a digital database; and (5) member checking [60].

Network conveners were provided with multiple opportunities to identify factual inaccuracies [59] and provide additional insights [60] through member checking. To this end, the researcher developed summary reports of each site visit, and shared them with the Network leaders with a request to check for factual inaccuracies. The leaders did not provide a response at this time. Portions of the larger study that described the local context and the development of the Network were also sent to leaders. One of the leaders provided corrections for several factual errors, including clarification of chronologies. Diagrams of the Network's structure and theory of change logic model were sent to the leaders. One reported that the structure appeared accurate and the logic model reflected her understanding of the Network's aims.

Additionally, an expert peer debriefer was used to reduce the risk of bias. Conversations with the peer debriefer occurred at each stage of data analysis, including during the development of summary reports, during coding, and during the writing stage [59].

## 5. Results

This study set out to understand how rural community members are mobilized for the creation of a cradle-to-career network. In particular, it focused on the processes that contributed to mobilization and how individuals understood their own engagement with the Network. Additionally, the analysis examined how adaptation of the Strive Network occurred in a rural context. Overall, mobilization of Network participants occurred iteratively as the Network developed from its initial launch to early action phases. Throughout, participants cited the importance of relationships in bringing people together. The next section provides context for the development of the Network, before describing these iterative strategies and the resulting mobilization, network structure and theory of action, and providing several implications and conclusions.

### 5.1. Network Context

The Grand Isle Network is centered in Grand Isle County, a large non-metropolitan county of over 3000 square miles in the Midwest. The Network's geographical bounds encompass a larger area that is widely understood as the "greater Grand Isle region". This region includes Grand Isle County



and the county seat, Big River, as well as portions of three nearby counties that depend on this hub for employment, retail, services, and leisure activities. The Network encompasses nearly 30 towns and villages, collected into seven school districts. These districts range in size from nearly 4000 students in Big River to those in outlying rural areas that serve less than 300 students. The Grand Isle Foundation, a private philanthropic organization, serves as the backbone organization. The Foundation's home giving area overlaps with that of the Network.

Participants identified an increased recognition that, for communities to succeed individually, they would have to succeed together in the face of regional issues, such as education, employment, housing, transportation, and poverty. Despite this recognition, participants reported significant challenges to developing such regional understandings and bringing together individuals from across the seven school districts. For example, participants identified the sheer size of the Greater Grand Isle area as a challenge for mobilization. Even within individual school districts, participants reported, "the number one challenge is we're so spread out." They noted that many families lacked reliable and consistent transportation to allow them to participate in the life of the schools.

Others noted the social geography created challenges in bringing people together around regional issues. For example, a member of a community foundation identified the role of individual town identities on limiting mobilization. She said, "Early on, mining... and the forestry industry played a large role, but these communities were able to be kind of on their own and kind of function as their own community, and have their own little kind of town culture so to speak." However, she also reported that people have started to see the need to work through these differences. She continued, "I think they are finding very rapidly that it no longer works, it's not realistic, and the community really, in order for them to be vibrant and functioning, has to be more than just a town boundary... I think people are starting to realize in the last five or six years, I think they are starting to realize that if they don't start working together as a larger community, it's not going to be good."

Although Grand Isle County remains nearly 95% white, participants identified several sources of diversity. The main source of ethnic diversity is Native peoples. While the Bureau of Indian Affairs school has not joined the Network, it does include a school district that serves several villages on the Reservation. Other sources of diversity identified were those that moved to the area for its natural beauty, recreational activities, and slower pace of life. Among the study participants at least, many of these new arrivals have brought with them post-secondary degrees, as well as different values. Participants also alluded to different values and identities held by communities that developed out of the logging industry in the 19th century and those that developed out of the mining industry. Finally, participants noted that there is a wide range of socio-economic levels, which possess different values and ambitions for youth, and contribute to the diversity of the area.

The Network leadership includes members from the school districts, early childhood programs, out-of-school time programs, county social service agencies, workforce development organizations, non-profit organizations, small businesses, faith-based organizations, a charter school, and the local community college. Members of the Grand Isle Network, like the Strive Partnership, had prior experience in collaborative partnerships in the birth to career continuum. This previous experience provided advanced readiness through a reserve of existing working relationships and a library of locally learned lessons. In these earlier collaborations, the Grand Isle Foundation served similar administrative and logistical roles, with staff providing leadership and facilitation for these prior collaborative partnerships. Participants reported that the Foundation has earned a strong reputation for doing "the right things" and "good quality worthwhile" work. Participants reported that when Foundation staff ask people to get involved they typically do.

## 5.2. Mobilization Strategies

Mobilization of the Grand Isle Network proceeded in an iterative fashion, reflecting the Network's growth through several stages. In some cases, large community-wide gatherings brought people together for short term efforts, in other cases, individuals were recruited to commit to take part

in the leadership of the Network. In some cases, specific stakeholders were targeted, in others, participants relied on existing personal, professional, and familial networks to mobilize members.

Network leaders in particular highlighted the importance of relationships to their efforts. They noted that in the absence of financial or other resources, relationships were an important factor for the development of a rural network. For example, one stated, "One of the assets we have are our connections to each other." One convener reported that people see each other at church, youth sports, and the grocery store and the other stated: "You know almost everybody. You work with them, you live with some, you socialize with them, and these are things that create stronger networks."

### 5.2.1. Initial Mobilization

In 2009, initial conversations between the seven K-12 superintendents and members of the Foundation identified educational outcomes as an area of mutual concern. Members of these organizations attended a presentation by Geoffery Canada of the Harlem Children's Zone that reportedly shifted the conversation away from failing schools towards aspects of a community that support educational achievement and student success more broadly. This initial group took on this community-focused vision for education as their common agenda.

From there, this small group sought input from community members in a series of gatherings, each attended by over 100 stakeholders from across the seven school districts in the Greater Grand Isle area. These individuals reportedly represented the eight dimensions of a healthy community: education from Pre-K through post-secondary, the arts and recreation, physical infrastructure and human services, law enforcement, local government and community leaders, business leaders, and religious organizations and healthcare. These initial meetings served to identify educational and economic needs across the various communities and to generate solutions. These framing activities set the stage for recruitment of the leadership team.

### 5.2.2. Developing the Core Team of Leaders

Prior to the final community meeting, Foundation staff engaged in one-on-one conversations with individuals they felt would be key actors or who had significant personal motivation to get involved. During the final meeting, the Foundation staff issued a call to arms, asking individuals to self-identify their level of commitment and passion in a series of concentric circles. Those willing to "(say), I have time, I have energy and I have a lot of passion around this and I'm going to dig in and work on this" placed their names in the center, becoming the Core Team.

This group of over forty individuals represented a wide range of sectors from across the seven districts, including K-12 education, early childhood, post-secondary, non-profits, out-of-school time, business, social service agencies, faith-based groups, and the local government. Between 2010 and 2014, Core Team members provided direction for the Network. Their efforts included a study trip to the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati; membership in the Strive Together national network and attendance of national convenings; the development of a local roadmap document outlining "aspirational goals"; the identification of indicators and measures aligned to those goals; the development of a student survey based on these goals and positive youth development factors; and creating and carrying out communication strategies.

During this launch phase, this group experienced turnover. Participants described efforts to recruit new members as proceeding through the identification of missing stakeholders and then engaging in an "education and an ask". This proceeded largely through existing relationships. One participant reported "I would say most of the recruitment comes through word of mouth, somebody at a higher level decides that it's important for somebody to be at table...Just connections."

### 5.2.3. Restructuring Leadership for Action

In 2014, two key mobilization efforts took place in the push towards action. First, the Core Team determined that a smaller, more accountable leadership group was needed. During the latter half of

2014, members of a smaller Governance Council were identified and recruited, replacing the Core Team in January 2015. During the previous year, a sub-committee of the Core Team worked to identify key local actors they believed should be on this Governance Council based on their organizational affiliation. One participant reported that the group identified the “seat that should be occupied, a particular voice that’s missing.” From there, he continued, “Once that’s been identified, then there’s kind of (a conversation about) who has roads into that, or who knows somebody in that community, organization, that could reach out to and talk about work.” Another participant reported that this recruitment proceeded through the mapping of social networks: “We used our networks. Who is connected to the businessperson? We literally had papers around the room or working tables to say, who are you connected to? If you’re already connected to them, make that call, make that ask, tell them what you’re doing. So, it’s a lot about relationships.”

A member of the Core Team, and later the Governance Council, reiterated the importance of relationships in mobilizing these individuals: “This is a small community and we all know each other to a certain extent already before this started, at least we knew of each other. (The director) and I have known each other since, for a long, long time. So there are those relationships that go back. He knows my family. I know his family. I know his mother. We go way back.” She continued, “We have a new Governance Council member coming to the meeting tomorrow for the first time. And that’s funny because she used to be one of (the) at-risk youth that I worked with.”

In addition to relying on existing relationships, participants reported that those recruited to the efforts had been “vetted” for shared values of the importance of youth and community and “in order to get invited, you had to have proved that at some point”. Another participant reported identifying shared values through previous experiences: “You get to know someone through your work with this committee or that committee, or this organization, or your bowling league. And, you’re identifying those people with common values and beliefs.”

In engaging new members, participants described their work of brokering connections between individuals and the effort. One reported, “So I explain a little bit and then ask, what part of this speaks to you, or what part of this do you feel like you can identify with or are able to offer guidance and assistance? And then I talk about the Governance Council. We’re at this point where we need to create a governing body and would you want to be involved in this?”

Although mobilization of the Governance Council proceeded largely through existing relationships among individuals with shared values, turnover in key institutional roles required building new relationships. In particular, administrative turnover at the community college created the need to build new relationships. A community college staff member reported: “We have a new Provost that’s interim and we also two new deans, so those three people are all new within the last two years. So I have been trying to give them information and say that they should just try it out, get involved. So far I haven’t had any takers. . . I think I’m going to have to sit down and meet with them again and just talk and see if we can get the commitment from one of them to be there.” Ultimately, these conversations led to one of the deans joining the Governance Council.

#### 5.2.4. Data Gathering

Concurrent with recruiting the Governance Council, a second large mobilization effort occurred that brought together over 200 adults and youths. At this public meeting, Network leaders presented regional level student survey data reports. Bringing people together for this event proceeded through Core Team members’ social networks. For example, participants reported “grassroots organizing with people that (the Core Team members) knew in their network, that they thought might be interested in this work.” Several participants reported that the Foundation staff asked them to invite at least three people in their networks. One participant reported inviting ten individuals and another reported asking her son and several of his friends to attend.

### 5.2.5. Mobilizing for Action: Pockets of Readiness

At the data gathering, Foundation staff solicited individuals who might be interested in using the survey in their community. This work contributed to the development of community groups known as “pockets of readiness”. Unlike the community action networks (CANs) in the Strive model, which bring together actors in the same sector to action plan at a community level [21] these pockets of readiness engage individuals at the district level.

The need to develop such a decentralized approach to action planning grew out of a pilot effort in one of the mining communities and suspicions of top-down efforts to engage community members in action planning. According to one of the Foundation staff members, “We got some things done, they did some action planning activities but we recognized that we needed to go where there were already people or individuals that were passionate about kids, passionate about what they saw on the roadmap and wanted to do something. And our best addition there was linking people together and providing facilitation so they could do what they wanted to do...organized around the roadmap.” Another Foundation staff member reported that this approach allowed them to “follow the energy”, and tap into groups who already were interested in efforts aligned to the Network goals. In many cases, these pockets of readiness engaged youth directly in action planning.

Of the various pockets of readiness identified by participants, each evolved in a different way. At the charter school, a pocket of readiness group developed out of faith-based and familial relationships. In one school, a Core Team member worked with teachers to identify and invite high school students to examine their district’s student data and develop an action plan. This group included cheerleaders and students who were identified as “not the usual suspects” for getting involved in school leadership, including a student in the foster care system. In other cases, existing groups, such as a student community service group, were recruited as a pocket of readiness.

In addition to action planning in their own communities, the vision of Network leaders is, for these groups, to engage in Networked Improvement Communities (NICs). Conveners cited the research of Bryk and colleagues on the use of NICs as a means to accelerate continuous improvement cycles by allowing groups to learn from one another [61]. In June 2015, the evaluator met with members of these groups to learn about how they developed and what they were doing. These findings were shared out in January, 2016, in the first “Link and Learn” session. In addition to such formal opportunities, participants emphasized the need to engage in this work informally through their social networks. Recognizing a sense of how the community does things, one participant memorably exclaimed, “If you’re having a conversation in your backyard over a hot dish, how can you get upset? You can’t! You can talk about things.”

### 5.2.6. Missing Stakeholders

As one participant stated, “if you look around the table you have a lot of folks who have, who are like us, who get paid to be there.” Individuals from a variety of sectors and across districts were mobilized. However, participants identified five stakeholder groups as absent: low-income parents, community elites, Native American community members, teachers, and members of the mining communities. Many noted the need to engage these stakeholders and the Foundation has recently added inclusion as the ninth dimension of a healthy community, identified as “ethnic diversity, poverty experience, (and) people with disabilities.” suggesting a greater emphasis on engaging typically marginalized populations. At the time of the study, three overlapping barriers combined to limit mobilization among these stakeholder groups: social isolation, differences in values, and distrust.

In terms of social isolation and exclusion, participants reported that low-income community members did not necessarily have strong relationships with schools and other institutions. Further, participants reported that low-income individuals do not share the same social networks as those mobilized. For example, one participant reported that those in the Network were “People we know through interactions in community and professional lives. There’s also the relationship that a lot of

these parents who sit on this committee have an interest and tie to schools, so those have already been established to some degree.”

When asked about mobilizing parents who are not traditionally engaged with schools, one participant replied, “That is one of the areas that we’re looking to improve... And THERE, I think strategies DO need to be developed because it’s not going to happen by INVITATION or natural interactions.” These efforts are limited by the fact that meetings occur during the work day. As one participant described this, “it makes it incredibly difficult with meeting times for someone who, is you know working, unless you’re retired, you don’t even have the luxury to be able to go.” Further, meetings are held in the county seat, creating transportation challenges for those living in poverty. Others identified the need to meet parents out in the community, such as at Walmart and other places.

Additionally, a lack of natural interactions between those in poverty and community elites limited the engagement of both. One participant reported, “I think the people that have more means and are engaged in the arts and those kinds of things, don’t necessarily SEE the struggles of those that don’t have... It’s a struggle for many families, and those families are often invisible...I think that’s the biggest challenge, really engaging people that have some means because they don’t see the problem.” This statement suggests that the social isolation of those living in poverty limited their own mobilization and the mobilization of those with greater resources to engage in collective action. Further, other participants identified that two of the largest employers are owned by multi-national corporations with headquarters overseas. This reversal of the typical trend of outsourcing jobs from rural places, reportedly lead to a lack of engagement of business elites who do not necessarily make decisions with the best interest of the community in mind.

Others reported that differing values and goals for young people hindered the mobilization of low-income parents, as well as members of the mining communities. For example, one participant noted that in Big River many parents valued the arts and music lessons, things they experienced growing up. On the other hand, low-income parents were reported to value hunting, fishing, and other outdoor pursuits. Comments such as this implied a certain bias and judgement against those who held different values for youth. Additionally, participants reported that, in Big River, there was a greater push towards college, but that people in the outlying communities wanted their children to find jobs close to home. Some noted that in the mining community in particular, parents saw a “college for all agenda” as threatening by encouraging their young people to leave.

Finally, distrust limited the mobilization of several groups, including mining community members, teachers, and members of the Native American community. Of the mining community, one participant reported, “Trying to get people involved sometimes is difficult. And I think sometimes a little bit of that mentality of, ‘Oh, that’s the Grand Isle Foundation, that’s Big River, why would we want to do it?’” These tensions arose during an initial attempt to action plan with members of these communities. One participant stated, “And there was a lot of suspicion that came with that (action planning), like, what are you trying to do here? I think there’s been enough top down done here in the communities that there was a lot of suspicion and some resistance.”

This distrust was amplified by fears that cooperation and collaboration would lead to school consolidation and the resulting loss of control and loss of their community center. One participant reported, “(The mining communities) They have a strong history there of feeling kind of like they are being persecuted. They are right in the middle of between two big school districts.” She continued, “(They) have this history that, that comes out of how they see things and it’s just a thought, you know they are a small school district, they feel real strong identity around their sports teams and they’ve been forced to do some things because of finances that they’d probably won’t do otherwise.”

Further, distrust appeared to limit the direct engagement of teachers, which one participant described as “a huge voice that’s missing” because they work directly with students. Several participants reported that the lack of mobilization was due to being “stretched thin trying to get through the curriculum” and their “very full plates”. However, others cited a lack of trust. One participant reported that teachers are “tired of the mistrust from the public of what they do.”

Another reported a perceived lack of trust on the part of teachers to be able to identify problems in the schools, such as large class sizes, stating: "People want to protect themselves. Of course, if a kindergarten teacher goes to the administration and says, I can't do this, they're not going to have a job. So nobody can stand up and say you have unrealistic expectations of what a person can do."

However, a superintendent identified an alternative explanation for low teacher engagement: "As a superintendent, I have a lot more latitude about where I'm investing my time...And when you're a teacher, you have very little flexibility. You're scheduled from, you know, whatever, 7:30 to 3:30 to 8:00 to 3:30."

Additionally, participants reported limited participation by members of the Native American community. Although the superintendent of the district that serves students who live on the reservation described the situation as "a peaceful coexistence" but not "complete integration", there appeared to be limited participation of members of the Native American community. As one participant put it, "Unfortunately, they (the Native American community) have not seen themselves in the work." In part, this appears to be due to misunderstandings and distrust. A Network member who lives on the reservation noted that among many white residents there were a lot of negative stereotypes: "And they don't realize that not all Natives are on welfare, not all Natives are alcoholics. And some of the reason that they are those things is because of the historical trauma. So I think that really plays a huge part in how things go on here and how perceptions (are) on both sides." Several Foundation staff are involved in other efforts to rebuild trust with these residents.

The pattern of mobilization can be described as leading from the middle. Many Network members appear to be middle class professionals, many of whom enjoy extensive personal and professional relationships. This mobilization pattern is, in part, dependent on the rural context, including a lack of CEO level leaders in both business and government. While participants identified community organizing as a strategy for mobilization, it appeared limited by several sources of social isolation and exclusion, and the resulting distrust. In addition to limiting mobilization, these and other factors related to the rural context impacted the ways in which Network leaders adapted the Strive model. These adaptations are described in the following section.

### 5.3. *Adapting the Model*

As members mobilized and began to organize around the goals of student success, educational opportunity, and economic growth, they recognized the need to make the Strive model their own. Several members of the Foundation organization described their work as "Strive-ish" or "Strive-esque." They identified several key features they felt set them apart from Strive, including, the use of community organizing strategies the development of the pockets of readiness (described in part above), and the use of Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) to link them.

#### 5.3.1. Community Organizing Strategies

One participant reported that "One of the key learnings (from the Strive Partnership) was that context matters. And that was a huge learning." From there she reported, "We could not ADOPT, we needed to ADAPT." Part of this strategy of adaptation included the use of community organizing strategies. One Foundation staff member reported that community organizing strategies were part of the backbone's operating procedures. She stated, "Framing (issues) and building social capital and mobilizing people equals change. That's one tenet that's a strong undercurrent of how we engage." Another Foundation staff member described these community organizing strategies: "We need to be really intentional about building (relationships), about having coffee with, very conversationally, very Saul Alinsky-esque community organizing... finding that person, going to them, (discovering) what they care about and helping them uncover how they connect with the work."

This emphasis on community organizing for mobilization included the development of the Core Team and Governance Council, as well as their interactions with community members. A Foundation staff member reported that this emphasis on community outreach is "One of the

things that I think makes us different from a lot of the Strive (networks) is that the governance council's job, is really about connecting the work on the ground in communities to the broader context." Another participant reported the need to spread the message of the roadmap within her organization: "Right now (our job) is to engage others and tell others about our story and talk to our populations that we work with." Another reported, "My peers don't know... they know something is going on in the community, but they don't have the words to put to it." She continued, "I have taken it upon myself, in my own spheres of influence, to bring the data to people."

### 5.3.2. Linking Community Level Pockets of Readiness

The pockets of readiness described above also reflect an adaptive approach to the Strive model. Rather than beginning with community level planning undertaken by similar organizations, these school district level groups develop action plans around their own data. This approach appears to be a concession to the need for each community to own their action planning.

However, Foundation staff in particular saw the need to bring these groups together to build towards a more regional approach to solving larger issues. For example, one explained:

"We also know that many of these communities can't just plan in isolation, because there's going to be some common issues that are regional. So we will connect the communities once or twice a year, take the leader of each of these pockets that we're working with and pull them together in what we're calling Link and Learn sessions. Where they can get together and talk about what they've learned, talk about what they're working on and then identify, is there a regional issue that we need somebody to really dig in and help us figure out. And if there's a regional issue that comes up, then we'll convene a regional group that works kind of across kind of both regionally, locally and through the governance council, in a robust continuous improvement process to try to figure out what that is."

As one member put it, opportunities for individuals from across the various communities to come together provided a greater sense of regional connectedness: "A lot of those perceptions were cleared up at something like that, where everyone comes together in the same room... we do all have to work together and get rid of those perceptions." Alluding to the high school sports team rivals, he summarized, "It's not the Hawks vs. the Chiefs—we're the Grand Isle area."

### 5.3.3. Theory of Action

Individuals mobilized for such collaborative efforts bring with them their own ways of knowing and understanding the world around them. They bring with them their espoused theories of action, the beliefs, attitudes, and values that guide individual actions [40]. In developing a common agenda to drive regional change, these individual understandings must be shaped into a single theory of action. Theories of action describe the intent of an organization to reach their stated goals [2]. Such theories of action may manifest in formal plans. These plans often take the form of a logic model, identifying key steps to reach proximal and distal outcomes. In the case of the Grand Isle Network, much of the theory of action remained at an emergent level as the distribution of the draft theory of action document appeared to be limited. In collecting individuals' theories of action in regards to the Network, an overall emergent theory of action appeared.

This emergent theory of action had several distinct differences from the theory of action provided by Strive Together. These special features reveal the unique composition of this rural network. First, the emergent theory of action emphasized efforts within individual communities, via the pockets of readiness structure, described above. Although participants did not explicitly describe this structure as such, the pockets of readiness appear to be a strategy to deal with the different values and identifies among the various communities by allowing them to action plan in their own districts.

Secondly, and significantly for a cradle-to-career network, the emergent theory of action lacks a focus on educational achievement. Similarly, schools were not identified as a primary target for change. These areas appeared to be a source of tension. Several participants noted that making an effort not to blame the schools increased the trust needed for district and building administrators,

at least, to engage. Participants also recognized that teachers and schools were under a significant onus from the state accountability system and did not wish to add to that pressure.

However, many participants, as parents, reported negative experiences with the districts. One school administrator also noted that schools, like other organizations, were unlikely to change unless clients demanded it. Together, this suggested that among those mobilized, school change was an area of significant tension but choosing to focus on other areas allowed members to move forward together.

Thirdly, participants focused on relationships among adults as a key mechanism for change. For example, a Foundation staff member stated, "Change follows relationships." This relational change effort focused strongly on communications. One participant described this as "communication not just about the work, but communication is the work." People perceived communication in both formal and informal capacities as an important driver of the Network's efforts, serving to bring new individuals into the network, to develop shared understandings, and ultimately to contribute to the development of action aligned to the roadmap.

Finally, the inclusion of youth in the pockets of readiness and the data gathering reflects Network members' commitment to including youth voices in the work. In addition to providing youth opportunities to engage in action planning at the district level, it was identified that participants wanted to have a youth representative in the Governance Council and to develop a network of high school student councils. Others emphasized the need to recruit those students who are not typically 'joiners', in order to both engage these students in civic projects and to help design new programs that would appeal to youth that have not been drawn to more traditional outlets, such as sports.

## 6. Discussion

The literature on cradle-to-career networks and collective impact emphasizes the need to bring together "the right mix of the right stakeholders" [23,37]. The literature suggests this mix is dependent on the geographic and programmatic scope of the network [2] and is likely to evolve as the Network grows. Rural social geography presents challenges to the iterative work of stakeholder mobilization. These challenges include difficult physical terrain, social isolation and exclusion of certain populations, and brain drain which limits both human and social capital. Overcoming these challenges to mobilization requires adaptation of existing models, including recruitment strategies and configuration of the Network.

The findings of this study also suggest that mobilization of a cradle-to-career network in a rural area draws on a variety of processes and strategies that reflect not only rural challenges, but also on the hybrid nature of cradle-to-career networks. These processes and strategies combine elements of social movement mobilization with elements of organizational partnerships and civic capacity. Further, these processes engage both structural and functional elements of social capital.

### 6.1. Social Movement Mobilization

Reflecting the Grand Isle Foundation's espoused commitment to community engagement in their work, conveners engaged in community organizing and other strategies of social movement mobilization. These included recruitment strategies in which information flowed through face-to-face interactions in both public and private channels. Private face-to-face interactions [39] included the initial conversations among the superintendents and Grand Isle Foundation staff that established shared interests. They also included one-on-one conversations in which Network members engaged in the "education and ask" with members of their social or professional networks in order to recruit members for the Core Team and Governance Council.

Others engaged this strategy more generally in order to drum up general interest about the Network. Public face-to-face interactions included the interactions [40] the initial gatherings and the data release gathering. At these meetings, Network leaders engaged in motivational framing activities in order to recruit new members. Recognizing that the large geographic scope limited face-to-face



interactions, the communications committee focused much of their efforts on revising the Network's website and blogs as a means to reach out through public, mediate channels [28].

Participants identified shared understandings of issues as a factor in bringing people together. This reflected a "hearts and minds" approach to social movement mobilization. Further, while many identified professional interests in the work, participants also spoke as parents in their identification of grievances with the school districts. However, unlike low-income parents who might share their grievances, it was identified that those that were mobilized largely came from the professional class, identified as having sufficient resources to engage in social movement work.

For example, the middle manager of the power plant was able to attend meetings, unlike the hourly workers he supervises, while another participant reported that her boss had freed up her schedule for her to engage in multiple Network roles. Similarly, one superintendent noted he enjoyed significant discretion to focus his energies in ways he feels will benefit the district, but that principals have much less discretion and teachers have virtually none. Additionally, several Network members represented other social movement organizations in the Network, who, as one such member put it, are paid to be there. This suggests a combination of grievances and the professionalization of social movement mobilization [31]. One implication of this professionalization of social movement mobilization is that in recruiting new members, people appear to draw more on the professional networks, rather than personal networks.

### 6.2. Organizational Partnerships

As noted above, many of those mobilized in the Network represent organizational partners. Some of these organizations can be categorized as social movement organizations, such as a community action agency, while others represent schools, faith-based groups, non-profits, government, and businesses. These partnerships require a brokering organization with sufficient legitimacy to bring partners together across sectors. The Grand Isle Foundation appears to enjoy a strong reputation in the greater Grand Isle Foundation for doing the right thing.

While these partnerships occur between organizations, individuals play important roles in bringing them together and building the partnership. When asked who recruited them or how they got involved, many participants did not just identify the influence of the Foundation, they specifically named the two Network conveners who are full time employees of the Foundation. These individuals actively engaged in communication and relationship building among individuals in order to further organizational partnerships. In their professional capacities, these individuals serve as champions [31], pushing the Network's agenda forward through their efforts, as well as boundary spanners in their ability to engage with individuals from a variety of organizations [62].

### 6.3. Civic Capacity

The urban regime and civic capacity literature highlights the need to mobilize community elites from education, business, and government sectors as these individuals can contribute resources to the common agenda. Such mobilization occurs through repeated conversations in a civic capacity that create collective cognition [53]. Mobilization of the Grand Isle Network reflects the limited participation of business of government and business leaders. Participants identified that two of the major employers in the area are owned by multinational corporations, which limited their engagement in the local community. Others noted a lack of understanding among community elites, suggesting limited opportunities to engage in the development of collective cognition that contributes to mobilization for civic capacity.

Further, the network's balance of leveraging existing relationships and developing new relationships appears to combine elements of Mitra and Frick's conceptualization of existing and emerging regimes to support civic capacity. Existing regimes leverage previous working relationships to tackle new community issues. While these partnerships may endure, they have a limited time focus on specific issues. However, emerging regimes appear more dynamic and creative, and are focused

specifically around an issue [51]. In the case of the Grand Isle Network, the combination of a history of working together and new relationships provides a platform and legitimacy, in particular of the Grand Isle Foundation, to the effort as it seeks to reach new members.

#### 6.4. Social Capital

Throughout the mobilization of the Network, existing and new relationships were identified as a means of bringing people together. This suggests that while Stone and colleagues failed to identify macro-level structures that explained differences in mobilization among cities [25], micro-structural differences within social networks contribute to differential recruitment to social movements [40].

However, unlike Stone and colleagues' assertion that social capital is the passive aggregate of interactions, participants in this study actively harnessed the power of social networks by identifying their form and using them to recruit members [63]. Even when using purposefully identifying missing stakeholders, participants reported mapping social networks in order to identify the best person to issue an invitation.

The degree of closure and the strength of ties within certain networks appears to have limited involvement of groups that did not have "natural interactions". For example, many of the professional networks appeared to consist mainly of strong ties between individuals who had worked together on previous projects. However, in some cases, weak ties were combined with strong ties to mobilize new groups, particularly at the level of the pockets of readiness. For example, the Grover Charter pocket of readiness grew out of interactions among a small, tightly knit faith-based community and family members. One member of this group had ties to the schools through her work and reached out to Foundation staff. This participant and others served as connectors, or boundary spanners, who were able to broker new relationships between different parts of their networks.

Whitham suggested that informal gathering places provide opportunities for informal networking that contribute to community social capital and perceived well-being of the community [63]. In small communities, the limited number of these "third spaces", such as bowling allies, create an increased number of weak ties [40] across class lines [64]. Social geographic barriers appear to limit participation. In particular, participants identified youth sports and other leisure activities centered in Big River. However, participation in these activities for those in the outlying communities would require significant financial means for transportation. This suggests that for those community members living in poverty, not only are there few opportunities to engage in the formal civic life, there are few opportunities to engage in the informal social life that provides the type of weak ties that contribute to mobilization [40].

In addition to the structure of social networks, functional aspects appeared to be important in bringing together individuals in the Grand Isle Network. These functional aspects included trust and shared values, norms, and beliefs about education. Participants reported trust among the Network participants. In part, this trust appears to have developed through previous work together. On the other hand, participants identified distrust as a factor for why particular groups had not engaged. In some cases, this lack of trust was specific to the initiative, such as teachers who might fear for their jobs if they identified problems. In other cases, the distrust appeared more wide-spread and in particular, the distrust among the Native American community has long historical roots.

Similarly, participants identified previous social experiences as serving to identify people who share the same values. Participants reported similar values and beliefs but identified that others, in particular those in the mining communities and low income parents, did not share these values. In particular, the goal of post-secondary education appeared highly contentious among the community at large, despite agreement among participants.

The challenges created by functional and social aspects of social capital led to adaptations of the Strive model. In particular, the pockets of readiness model also sought to address this by allowing each district ownership over action planning. This strategy allowed the Network to identify existing groups or help develop new groups with interest in the work. Network leaders were able to meet each group

where they were. Deliberately linking these groups and providing them structured opportunities to learn from one another was identified as a means to contribute to a more regional understanding of needs that could bring people together across the districts. Rather than forcing district members to see themselves as a region and engage across community boundaries, Network leaders appeared to be cognizant of the need for these groups to first develop a basis from which to begin to build a regional network.

## 7. Conclusions and Implications

These findings reiterate Kerr and colleagues' suggestion that place-based initiatives require attention to the nuances of place [65]. Not only do residents experience similar challenges differently [2] they may also understand them differently.

McGrath and colleagues identified the importance of mapping the educational terrain in developing collaborative partnerships [2]; however, this study suggests the need to engage in more extensive mapping. Such efforts might include the actual physical terrain and geography, as well as identifying how, where, and when members of different communities intersect and interact. Such mapping may be challenged in rural areas by the low density and lack of adequate transportation.

In addition to mapping the physical geography, this study suggests the need to map the social geography to identify which populations are most affected by social isolation and exclusion. This type of mapping should be complemented by identifying sources of distrust in order to begin building bridges with these groups and developing opportunities for them to engage with the Network in ways that are inclusive and non-threatening.

Social capital development is especially important when low-income parents are targeted for cradle-to-career network development and associated school change. For example, the research on the mobilization of urban parents in support of school change emphasizes the importance of three kinds of social capital (bonding, bridging and linking) in tandem with deliberate efforts to view these parents as key resources and rewrite the rules of engagement in support of this unique sub-population of stakeholders [66]. These research findings have import for future research, policy, and practice regarding cradle-to-career development in rural communities.

Evidence from the Grand Isle Network indicates that social capital-rich relationships with rural low-income parents are not present at start-up, nor do they develop automatically as the cradle-to-career network progresses. Network leaders—top level executives, boundary-crossing intermediaries, and agenda champions from all walks of life must—assume active roles in targeting low income parents and cultivating stocks of bonding and bridging social capital to facilitate parents' engagement. Then, mechanisms for linking social capital must be developed, in support of such linking social capital.

Ishimaru's conceptual framework suggests that these efforts (1) include re-visioning low-income parents and others experiencing social isolation and exclusion as experts in their own lives; (2) identifying systemic goals and developing a culture of shared responsibility across these boundaries; (3) adapting change strategies that continually build capacity of participants and develop relationships; and (4) recognizing educational change efforts as political processes and linking school efforts to larger community issues [66].

The inter-organizational partnership aspects of cradle-to-career networks may challenge the development of such linking social capital given the large number of organizations involved. On the other hand, the wide breadth of organizational partners may provide additional leverage points for linking social capital as certain organizations may enjoy a greater degree of trust with certain populations. For example, the early childhood collaboration in Grand Isle partners with Head Start has successfully increased the number of pre-school classrooms for low-income families for nearly 20 years. This organization might serve as an important entry point for low-income parents across the various communities in which their classrooms are located.

Similarly, the Network's shifting to a decentralized approach allows individuals in the mining communities and other outlying districts to connect with their local school district rather than the backbone organization. Identifying such institutional entry points to develop linking social capital may be key to building relationships with those missing stakeholders who have experienced distrust. However, for those experiencing historical, systematic social isolation and exclusion, such as the Native American population, distrust runs deep across multiple organizations and may require significant efforts on the part of individuals and institutions. This suggests another aspect of modeling networks: the identification of those organizations with strong, trusting relationships with specific groups.

## 8. Limitations

This study's generalizability is open to question for several reasons. For example, rural social geographies vary, and cradle-to-career network development is inherently nuanced, even when a national model such as Strive Together serves as a guide.

In brief, the mobilization and adaptive strategies identified in this study are selective and reflect the local context. In part, these strategies were influenced by the decision of local leaders to engage in a regional scope, requiring mobilization across multiple school districts. Similarly, they reflect decisions to focus on out-of-school time programs, rather than academic priorities in K-12 schools, particularly those curriculum, instruction, and climate changes that support the achievement of minority and low-income students [50]. This suggests the need for further research that considers mobilization and adaptation in networks in a variety of rural contexts.

Another limitation in the findings derives from the sampling procedure. The interview data were gained from active network participants. This strategy omitted the voices, views, and actions of potentially important stakeholders such as low-income parents who are not currently engaged [51].

Finally, the Grand Isle Network is a dynamic entity, one that continued to evolve as this study proceeded. Its status at the time of the current study is thus like a snapshot in time. This unique network merits future investigations with the current study serving as a developmental baseline.

**Acknowledgments:** Funding of the fieldwork for this study was provided by several sources at the University at Albany—the Office of Graduate Studies Dissertation Fellowship, Initiatives for Women, and the Graduate Student Association—as well as SUNY System Administration.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest. The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the decision to publish the results.

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