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Interpreting Rural Students' Stories of Access to a Flagship University

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Research Article

Space and Place in Rural Program Implementation: A Look at Two Early College Programs in Ohio

Ann Allen
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Employing concepts of place and space, we consider the implementation of Early College initiatives in two small school districts in Ohio, situated in very different regions of the state. One is a rural district near the foothills of Appalachia, and the other is a small town district on the shores of Lake Erie. The paper examines data collected through a state-wide evaluation project. Our analysis suggests that where a school is located matters to the kinds of resources, opportunities and constrains it has for implementing state programs. Resources like transportation, access to college partners, and even proximity to other school districts made important differences to how these school districts implemented the Early College program. Given the variable conditions of school districts in Ohio and other states with a large number of rural and small city school districts, state policy makers should consider flexible implementation plans and variable levels of support.

Introduction

Early College is an initiative aimed at decreasing the financial burden of college for underserved populations by providing students opportunities to gain college credit while they are still in high school. It goes further than prior initiatives, like dual enrollment and other post-secondary education opportunities, as it allows students to potentially graduate high school with both a high school certificate and an associate's degree from a post-secondary institution. There are more than 240 Early College High Schools in 28 states (Lauen, Barrett, Fuller, and Janda, 2017). Ohio, as part of its Race to the Top initiatives, funded Early College pilot programs. As part of a larger evaluation of the Race to the Top initiatives in Ohio (Stringfield, et al., 2017; Allen & Roberts, 2017), we investigated the implementation of Early College in two small school districts located in different regions in the state. What we found was that the implementation of these programs is directly affected by geographic considerations. In other words, how schools are situated within a particular environment makes a difference in how state programs and policies are implemented. In this way we see that a school's location affects how programs like Early College develop within particular environments. We also found that the implementation of Early College has the potential to affect school as a place of learning and how students experience schooling.

Theoretical Perspective

In this paper, we employ theories of place and space as a way to understand how Early College programs impact rural schools. We recognize schools as both places that exist within the space of a regional geography, and schools as places of learning (Agnew, 2011; Bell, 2007, 2009). The two school districts we examined sit very differently within the state's geography, and as such have different opportunities and challenges. The differences, ultimately, lead to different applications of the Early College program for their students.

Bell (2009) delineated concepts of space and place. She defined factors of space as "distance, commute time, and the availability of transportation" (p.496). She wrote, space "is measured in miles and minutes." Place, she noted, "refers to the social, economic, and political meanings people assign to particular spatial locations." She continued, "factors such as the learning environment, student composition, or safety might be thought of as place markers."

Agnew (2011), made similar observations, but noted that the concepts of place and space were inherently entangled. For example, in considering two concepts of place, he said:

The first is a geometric conception of place as a mere part of space and the second is a phenomenological understanding of a place as a distinctive coming together in space. From this

viewpoint, if place in the former sense is definable entirely in relation to a singular spatial metric (latitude and longitude, elevation, etc.) or other spatial grid defined by putatively non-spatial processes (core-periphery, city-hinterland, administrative regions, etc.), place in the second sense is constituted by the impact that being somewhere has on the constitution of the processes in question. (p. 2-3)

Agnew went on to write that “in the simplest sense place refers to either a location somewhere or to the occupation of that location. The first sense is of having an address and the second is about living at that address” (p. 6).

Literature Review

Background of Early College

Early College is an approach to schooling that accelerates curriculum so students are prepared to enroll in college coursework in the junior and senior years of high school. Early College first appeared in 2002 (Jobs for the Future, n.d.) and has spread across the country as a way to increase college opportunities for underserved students and potentially decrease the cost of attaining a college degree. Early College programs and other programs that promote access to college coursework in high school vary greatly across the states (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). Barnette, Maclutsky, and Wagonlander (2015) chronicle approaches to Early College, including the early development of Early College Middle and High Schools on college campuses. These schools were developed specifically to provide students with dual enrollment opportunities on a college campus. Some of the programs were four-year programs, moving students through two years of college course work within a four-year high school, and others added an extra year to high school for college coursework, making Early College a five-year program. The authors noted that Early College programs are now being implemented across the country in comprehensive high schools, offering up the potential to provide more students with access to college level coursework in high school.

Typically, college coursework completed during high school is paid for by the home school district, decreasing the cost of college for participating students, an important consideration for economically disadvantaged students. Like most Early College programs, Ohio’s Early College program is aimed at

increasing college enrollment of “students who are underrepresented in regard to completing post-secondary education; students who are economically disadvantaged, as defined by the [state] department of education; students whose parents did not earn a college degree” (Advanced Standing Programs for College Credit, 2014, Section 3313.6013). Data from Jobs for the Future (See: <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-design>) indicate that Early College students across the nation graduate high school at a greater rate than their non-Early College peers, and 30 percent of those who enroll in Early College earn a post-secondary credential by the time they graduate from high school. In order for students to achieve the college credit needed by the time they graduate from high school, however, school districts accelerate curriculum for Early College students. This can be done by creating an accelerated curriculum in high school or by pushing some high school courses, like Algebra, down to 7th or 8th grade, and opening up the upper grades for college courses. Depending on a district’s approach, students can take college courses either at post-secondary institutions or at their own high school, by teachers credentialed for college teaching. In Ohio, high school teachers who earn a master’s degree in their content area may teach college level courses. Other key characteristics of Early College programs include partnerships with colleges and postsecondary institutions, engagement with parents, and activities that give students early exposure to college.

Early College and the Conception of Space

The implementation of Early College in school districts may affect the conception of schooling as a place of learning, how students experience schooling within their classroom, school or school community. The conception of the Early College program is to accelerate secondary education so that college-level learning can take place in the last two years of high school. Berger and her colleagues (2014) explained:

Early Colleges facilitate dual enrollment through established course sequences. Through the (Early College High School Initiative), Early Colleges partner with colleges and universities to offer enrolled students an opportunity to earn an associate’s degree or up to two years of college credits toward a bachelor’s degree during high school at no or little cost to the students. The underlying assumption is that engaging

underrepresented students in a rigorous high school curriculum tied to the incentive of earning college credits will motivate them and increase their access to additional postsecondary education and credentials after high school. (p. 2)

The acceleration of the high school curricula, the infusion of college-level coursework, and the increased opportunities to access a college degree changes the experience of secondary education for Early College students. Lauen and his colleagues (2017) suggest that the engagement expectations that come with the Early College curriculum affects the nature of relationships among students, teachers, and staff. The Early College program, according to the authors, changes the experience of schooling for those students enrolled.

Location and Space, Higher Education and Early College Implementation

As Bell (2009) discussed, space considerations in policy implementation may include location, commute time, and availability of transportation. We know from past studies that the location in which public policy implementation occurs contributes to variation in implementation, given that different locations afford differences in access, resources, and opportunities (Tickamyer, White, Tadlock & Henderson, 2007; Tieken, 2014).

The relationship between location and higher education has also been documented in literature. Students' college expectations and student enrollment are both affected by proximity to higher education institutions (Parker, Jerrim, Anders & Astell-Burt, 2016). We also know that where schools are located in proximity to higher education institutions can be a factor in college completion rates (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). More broadly, location affects many aspects of a student's day to day life that can both challenge and support educational initiatives (Flora and Flora, 2008). The distance to highly populated areas may also determine where post-secondary institutions are located, creating challenges for those students in communities farther from a city center or a larger metropolitan area (Turley, 2009). Transportation access may affect how connected educators are to educational resources and potential Early College partners.

Location of schools may also create challenges and opportunities in terms of implementation. An area's resources, proximity to needed partners and intermediary organizations, access to information and

information systems, all affect the likelihood of success. Hambleton (1983) noted that a key factor in successful implementation was "achieving the coordination of a multiplicity of agents," (p.408). He went on to write that "coordination problems" are a common feature of inter-organizational initiatives, and are more "acute when time pressures are added." Honig (2004) explored the challenges and opportunities of intermediary organizations in educational policy implementation in Oakland, California. She considered geographic location as a variable factor of intermediary organizations, and concluded that intermediary organizations "provided new resources – knowledge, political/ social ties, and an administrative infrastructure – necessary for implementation but traditionally unavailable from school central offices or school-community partnerships," (p.66). The fact that successful Early College programs rely on a coordination of services and interaction with college and community partners suggests that proximity to these partners may aid in success of Early College programs.

Opportunities and Challenges of Rural Schooling

Attention to the rural context is crucial for understanding Early College implementation decisions in these districts. For example, if proximity to colleges affects how Early College programs are implemented, as discussed above, school districts must weigh their ability to staff on-site Early College classes with their students' ability to travel to higher education institutions to take classes there. Access to public transportation is limited or nonexistent in rural areas (Flora & Flora, 2008) so it is much more difficult for rural students than their non-rural peers to rely on these means to travel to higher education institutions to attend classes. It is also likely that higher education institutions are further away from rural school districts than their urban counterparts (Turley, 2009), so distance to college sites along with lack of transportation for students, makes it challenging for rural schools to offer Early College courses off-site. If schools rely on students to provide their own transportation, Early College programs will be limited to students who have the resources to do so, which is misaligned with Early College's goal of making college more affordable for economically disadvantaged students. Traveling distances to attend Early College courses could also put pressure on students' time. Increased transportation time decreases the time and opportunities to participate in

other extracurricular activities as well as time spent on homework and other academic obligations, which are expected to be greater for the college-level classes taken through Early College programs compared to students' high school courses.

Due to low and sometimes declining enrollment, many small rural schools also struggle to adequately fund their schools. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was the federal legislation at the time of our research, funding formulas disadvantaged small schools (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, and Hupfeld, 2014). Despite federal funds that provide support for rural schools (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007), rural schools continued to operate on lower per-pupil funding than their suburban and urban counterparts (Yettick et al., 2014). Unable to supplement state and federal funding with corporate partnerships like many urban districts (Williams and Nierengarten, 2011), rural schools may attempt to secure competitive grants to fund desired programming. Winning such grants can be difficult for rural schools who often lack the grant-writing staff and resources to compete with larger districts (Brenner, 2016).

In addition to funding Early College programs, rural schools must also determine how to staff these programs. For students to complete coursework required for high school graduation early, thus allowing them time to take college courses through Early College program, schools compact curriculum by teaching more than one year's worth of curriculum in one academic year. In addition, in order for rural schools to be able to offer college courses, they often have to provide those courses on site, requiring a higher level of certification from their teachers. These changes to curriculum and certification requirements put added staffing pressures on rural schools, which often struggle to attract and retain teachers (Jimerson, 2005). This task was made even more difficult by NCLB's highly qualified teacher provision (Eppley, 2009). As rural schools already struggle to provide adequate professional development (Eppley, 2009) and hire teachers who are highly qualified under NCLB's regulations, the implementation of Early College programs will likely reflect the staffing and professional development challenges rural schools face.

Another challenge rural schools face in the implementation of Early College is related to the close ties they have to their local communities. Rural schools are tightly linked to their communities in

ways that differ from urban contexts (McCracken & Miller, 1988); this interconnectedness is due in part to the fact that there are far fewer public institutions in rural areas than in urban areas so rural schools often play a larger and more expanded role in their communities (Tieken, 2014) and are often seen as an extension of the community rather than a separate entity (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Additionally, rural community members are highly invested in their local schools because rural schools can be a source of political legitimacy and power for their communities (Tieken, 2014) and can serve to instill the community's values in the next generation (Flora & Flora, 2008; Wright, 2004).

Rural communities also serve as a crucial source of support for their local schools (Alleman & Holly, 2013; Bauch, 2001; King, 2012; Salamon, 2003), but rural administrators often must balance local priorities with state and federal ones in order to continue to receive the support from the local community (Jenkins, 2007). This balancing act becomes even more complex when multiple schools pool their resources to enact a common initiative, such as when schools form a collaborative. When deciding whether or not to collaborate with neighboring districts, rural schools must consider the advantages of combined resources with the potential difficulty of aligning multiple communities' priorities and goals.

Rural community members may have a particular interest in Early College programming because it encourages students to pursue a college degree, which due to many rural communities' lack of proximity to institutions of higher education, means that rural students may need to leave the community to pursue that degree or to obtain a job in the occupation for which that degree qualifies them (Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Howley, 2006; Rojewski, 1999). Community support for Early College programming, therefore, will likely depend on the extent to which community members "push" students to leave the community to pursue opportunities not available to them within the community or "pull" students toward remaining in the community to combat perceived "brain drain" or population decline (Artz, 2003; Corbett, 2007; Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Sherman and Sage, 2011) and the degree to which the community views Early College as a way to achieve those goals.

Methods

Early College was implemented in Ohio as one of the Race to the Top initiatives funded in the state. It was part of the Ohio Network of Education Transformation (ONET). The ONET evaluation team conducted a multiple case study (Yin, 2014), using both qualitative and quantitative data from two schools in the state for each of the initiatives being implemented. As part of a state-wide evaluation team we examined the implementation of Early College in two Ohio school districts (Stringfield, et al., 2017; Allen & Roberts, 2017): a rural school district and a small town school district on the fringe of large city. Both of the schools in our study approached Early College as a program that would be completed by students by the time they finished their fourth year of high school.

We joined the evaluation team as university researchers. Neither of us had any connection to the school districts or Early College programs prior to the study. All of the sites in the study were provided with pseudonyms, relating to their case. For example, Early College sites were designated EC1 and EC2 to protect the confidentiality of the participants in the study. Our aim in our research was to uncover opportunities and challenges to implementation. Providing confidentiality allowed participants to speak freely about the programs.

The methods used for the collection of data reflected those used for the state-wide evaluation (Stringfield, et al., 2017). For example, each evaluation team, of which we were one, collected focus group data, classroom observations, documents such as state monitoring reports and grant applications, and state achievement data via the state report cards for each school in the study. Each team conducted a two-day site visit with each school, in which interview, focus group, and observation data were collected. Follow-up data were conducted at each site a year later. We, as the Early College team, collected follow-up data via phone interviews with key school leaders, including the school principals and Early College implementation leaders. The site visits for both Early College sites included hour-long interviews with the state agency person in charge of Early College implementation, the school principals at the two main high schools in the study, key personnel, the leadership teams including the district superintendents, two focus groups of 6-8 teachers at each site, and approximately 120 minutes of classroom observations at each site. Although the

EC1 model consisted of a consortium of three school districts, the center of implementation, including leadership for the program, development and sustainability, was centered at the one high school, which we call EC1. Data collection including interviews and focus groups and observations, including observations of distance learning classes, were conducted at the main EC1 high school site. Documents such as the grant applications, the state site visit reports and monitoring documents were also collected. Data were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. Field notes were analyzed to capture the context of the observations and interviews.

Interviews and focus group protocol reflected the evaluation team's goals for evaluating the implementation of the programs, including fidelity to the original application, the goals of each reform, the use of leadership teams in implementation, and plans for sustainability. Initially for the state evaluation purpose, data were coded by individual teams using emergent coding and then compared across teams for agreement on key evaluation findings. Some of the themes that came through the Early College data indicated important insights into challenges and opportunities of implementing Early College programs in rural and small town schools. Therefore, we went back to the data from the initial study to analyze it more specifically for themes related to implementation issues in rural and small town schools. Specifically, our research aim in analyzing the Early College data the second time aimed to understand Early College implementation opportunities and challenges in rural and small town communities. We then coded the data independently in relation to the new themes and then compared our codes to determine alignment of themes within the data. Findings reported here reflect those themes.

To provide geographical context to the schools, the Ohio Department of Education classifies school districts as falling into one of the following categories: rural, small town, suburban, or urban. Within each of these four categories there are two subcategories to indicate the district's level of poverty and enrollment size (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). The first site, which we call EC 1, was classified as a rural district with a high level of poverty and small student population. At the time of our study, there were approximately 430 students in grades 8-12, and approximately 1200 students in the district overall, with a teacher ratio of about 17 to 1. The district sits at the foothills of Appalachia. The

second district, EC 2, had approximately 352 students in grades 6-12 and 600 students in the district overall, with a student teacher ratio of 16 to 1. It was classified as a district in a small town with high student poverty and average student population. The EC2 school district sits on the fringe of a metropolitan area.

The primary site for the Early College study (EC1) was considered a small rural high school by the state. It worked with two other high schools in a consortium for the delivery of the Early College program. The school's performance index was a C for 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. The secondary site for the Early College study (EC2) was categorized as a small city high school by the state. It implemented Early College as a part of a K-12 initiative (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). The school's performance index in year two of our study was 83 percent up from 76.7 percent the previous year.

The two school sites presented two different models of Early College as seen in Table 1. Although these differences will be further discussed in the Findings section, we offer a brief overview of the major differences between the two models here.

The first site, EC1, developed a consortium model of Early College among three school districts in the same rural region of the state. In order to facilitate classes and programs across the three districts, each school used technology and distance learning courses to bring students from across the three districts together for Early College classes. According to Early College program requirements, teachers who teach Early College classes must be college level teachers and have a master's degree in the course content that they teach. At EC1, teachers who teach Early College courses either already had a master's degree in their content area or were provided tuition to attain a master's in their content area as part of the Early College initiative. Because EC1 is situated in a rural area of the state with little public transportation, most of the college courses in the EC program are offered at one of the three high schools in the consortium. Any activities off high school campuses require students to either self-drive or requires the districts to arrange district transportation. Another component of the Early College model in EC1 is the Summer Bridge program offered to middle school students interested in Early College. In order for students to accelerate their high school curriculum and take college courses in high school, they need to identify their interest and begin the process of acceleration as early as 7th or 8th grade.

The summer bridge program brings students from across the three consortium districts together for team-building exercises and information sessions on college and the Early College program expectations. The summer bridge program aims to build community across the three districts for the students engaged in Early College programming. The consortium relies on grant funding to sustain the Early College program.

The second site, EC2, is a small town district in the north part of the state. The Early College program is situated within the one school district, and is led by the district superintendent, who has provided consistent leadership to the program since it began. Although students need to decide if they will pursue Early College in 7th or 8th grade, the district approaches Early College programming from a K-12 perspective, building a college going culture in the district in early elementary grades. The district sends its Early College students to college campuses for most of the Early College coursework. There is a district teacher who has an office at the local college to provide support for high school students in Early College there. The district is situated near a major public transportation bus line and has worked out an agreement with the transit authority to provide student transportation to local colleges. With students leaving the high school at 11th grade for Early College, the district is able to open up space for new students to enroll in the district, which provides a financial stream to help sustain the Early College program.

Findings

Considerations of Space

It was clear in our analysis that both space and place played a role in how Early College developed in the two school districts, including the opportunities and challenges districts faced in the implementation of the program. Both Early College sites in our study were small schools. Given the premise of Early College as a high school option, we expected to see the focus of Early College at the high school level. Our case study initially focused on how the high schools were implementing Early College. As we looked into the programs, however, it was clear that because of the need to accelerate curriculum, Early College was a program that had to start earlier than high school. In EC1, Early College began in 7th

Table 1
Comparison of Early College models and their components

Early College Models and Components	Early College Site 1	Early College Site 2
Implementation grade	Begin orientations in grade 7	Introduces college-going culture and Early College in elementary school, with student decisions on program in 7 th or 8 th grade.
Accelerated curriculum Structure	Begins as early as 7 th grade 3-District Consortium of Rural School Districts with three superintendents.	Begins as early as 7 th grade Single district, K-12 implementation with one superintendent.
Major delivery mechanism	On high school campuses, using technology for distance learning across 3 sites. Labs and other specialty programs offered on college campus.	Most Early College courses take place at local colleges and higher education institutions.
High school capacity for teaching	Promotes and develops high school teachers as college level teachers through professional development and master's degree attainment.	Promotes and develops high school teachers as college level teachers through professional development and master degree attainment. Also coordinates with colleges and college teachers for partnerships on campus. Provides support on college campus by placing a district teacher on site.
Student transportation	Students must drive or arrange own transportation, or district may provide transportation for special events.	District formed a partnership with local transit authority, providing free transportation for students between high school and college campuses.
Distance to nearest higher education partner	Approximately 18 miles.	Approximately 3.5 miles.

grade, when students who were in Early College experienced a compacted curriculum to move them more quickly through their high school credits. In EC2, Early College was seen as a systems-approach to delivering education, a philosophy in which the expectation for all students would be post-secondary education. In EC2, Early College activities began as early as Kindergarten.

The spatial relationship of EC2 to local colleges, transportation and even neighboring school districts created opportunities for the district that were not available in EC1. For example, EC2 sits on the edge of a major metropolitan area in the state. The nearest neighboring school district is less than 10 miles away, and the district is landlocked between neighboring communities and a major body of water, which keeps the district small. The district is within a few miles of a career center and a private college. A

local community college is approximately seven miles away. There is a major bus system in the region that runs across the metropolitan area.

Joe, the superintendent of EC2, noted that his mission with Early College was to “get every kid possible on that Early College trajectory. And we found in order to do that, we need to start it earlier (than 7th grade). We start with a pre-school and a full day kindergarten where the kids know the end result is going to college as soon as they are ready.” He added that part of the district’s approach is to accelerate some classes for all students. For example, he said there was a plan in place to accelerate all 8th graders to the 9th grade language arts course. “That is a big deal because we’ve never required acceleration for every child.” Joe said he wants every child to end up with College Writing, the school’s senior writing class, by the time they finish 10th grade, which means

he has to accelerate the English curriculum for all students.

Joe sees the feasibility of Early College for every student in part because there are resources in the district and community that make it easy for students to get to a college or postsecondary institution, something not available to students in the rural EC1 district.

“We’re taking away the hurdles, if you can’t afford a car to drive yourself to college, we’ll contract with a transportation service to get you there. The college we’re partnered with is only four miles away. And a tram will take them there for free. It’s part of our Early College arrangement.”

The EC2 superintendent also noted that the close proximity of the college and the career center and the free transportation system allows him to open up his school as a school of choice for neighboring communities. “

We’ve become a district that people want to get into, and they want to get in early, and be part of it starting with our full day kindergarten, starting with pre-school. People are coming in from out of the district – the surrounding counties – to be part of our preschool and then they stay for kindergarten, and we take them through open-enrollment. Open enrollment dollars - \$5,800 a kid – actually will allow us to sustain this (Early College). The cost of sending all these kids to (the career center) and (college) can be offset just by the open-enrollment dollars I’m getting in kindergarten.

Joe noted that he does not need to hire extra staff to accommodate the new students because with the juniors and seniors able to take their college courses off-campus, he can open up staff time for teaching younger students.

If we get this thing really clicking and every kid is out of the building for a significant portion of the day in their junior and senior year, then I can re-commission these teachers either as college professors if they’re willing to get the adjunct professional status, or middle school teachers, and I can increase the open-enrollment in middle school.

That was not an option for EC1, a rural district located approximately an hour or more from other school communities. Paul, a teacher in EC1 who was at the forefront of Early College implementation, said that “if the kid leaves our site and they enroll at a college, we lose those dollars.” Unlike EC2, the remoteness of EC1 prevented them from creating a

market school that could attract younger students and make up for lost revenue. Instead, the implementation of Early College in EC1 focused on the consortium of programming across three rural school districts.

Sarah, a consultant who works with the regional educational agency charged with helping districts implement the Early College program, explained:

EC1 is a consortium. EC2 is all by themselves, and only has 600 kids. They are landlocked against the Lake. What EC2 has done is wonderful to watch. (Joe) would like to have his juniors and seniors gone; he does not want them in the district. He wants them at college or the career center...His staff is now teaching freshmen and sophomores. There was a point in time where teachers thought they would lose their jobs. It’s been the opposite. They have had the largest increase in open enrollment. Their classes are larger and they had to move people down in order to meet the needs of incoming students. As a result of his open enrollment increasing, his general fund has increased. He is making money on this whole thing. As his kids leave (to go to Early College), he gets more kids in.

As Sarah noted, the model that EC2 established will not work in EC1, largely because of location constraints.

In EC1, (the students) are not going to leave; they are going to stay on (the high school) campus. The goal has been to increase their adjunct faculty members. They do not see it as an opportunity to bring (families from) other districts in. Maybe rightfully so. (The closest school district to EC1) is 40 minutes away, and that’s considered a neighboring district. Open enrollment would be a hardship for a parent in (the neighboring district) to bring a kid over there. It is going to be a completely different model.

Interviewees in EC1 agreed. Katy, one of the counselors in EC1, who is integral to its implementation, said when they first looked at Early College, they were concerned that it was not a rural model. She also discussed the challenge of funding and sustaining Early College in a rural context. The district counselor, for example, said, “You know, we are not a big city, so one grant pot doesn’t end and then another one with a whole new set of programming starts. I mean that’s just now how it works.” Instead, she said the district tries to coordinate funding and plan programs accordingly.

She gave the example of using a state grant with a local agency to help support the goals of Early College, and in doing so creating a new technological space with two other school districts in the region. Their consortium model, therefore, was a direct result of their space-based challenges as a rural school district.

The rural setting of EC1 also created a need for the district to figure out how to get students to college campuses for exposure to college culture. John, the principal of EC1 said these trips are important as “many of our kids don’t leave the area very often so taking them off-site and going and visiting places just so they have the exposure and excitement to get that started.”

Considerations of Place

Early College, connections and community.

Concepts of place play a large role in how communities are likely to respond to the Early College models in the two districts. Sarah noted in EC2 that the entire community is on board with the Early College model, and that the mayor of the town has actively endorsed the work of the school district. Karen, a counselor in EC2 who has been integral to the implementation of Early College, credits the Early College program with positive changes in the community.

We’re seeing a revitalization in the whole community right now, which I believe, truly, that good schools bring in great communities. I really do. So they’re having a revitalization, but I’m not sure you’d have a revitalization in a town unless you had the schools on board. I also see there’s greater pride on everybody’s part that we’re an Early College high school. We’re not just a high school; we’re an Early College high school and that we are preparing our kids for both college and career.

Sarah, the state consultant, said in the rural district, it is more difficult to get the community buy-in in part because EC1 is a consortium of districts and communities.

The difficult thing about EC1 is that it is a consortium. I will tell you this quite honestly, I don’t think consortiums work. These schools are embedded in their communities and change does not come easy. Here you have EC1 and (two other school districts) and they are all supposed to have the same schedule. It’s not happening. They’re supposed to be having the same

curriculum. It’s not happening. Those are struggles and challenges that they still continue to face.

Consideration of place also plays out for EC1 in terms of what college means to the community. Sarah noted that one of the challenges of creating a college-going culture in rural communities is the fear that students will leave. “This is where I am from. I understand the mentality . . . communities survive by keeping their own in-house and not allowing them to experience the outer world because they leave. I get that.” Sarah said she hopes that Early College in EC1 will lead to greater connections to the community in terms of employment. “They can literally begin to build their program around what their community needs. It will help bring those kids back.”

One of the EC1 teachers agreed: “The cool thing is about the (rural) model, the proud thing about this is, we want to try to give this opportunity to kids that we call our stayers. They’re going to bring back something good to us and are going to stay and be part of the community. Maybe they’re going to be innovators.”

Katy said she has seen the number of college going students increase since introducing Early College to the rural district.

Our average ACT score is on the rise. We see more college-going first-generation attendees, which is really the goal of Early College High School. They don’t come from a household that says, you know, ‘hey, we’ve been to college, we value education.’ Not that they don’t appreciate. It’s just they don’t know. And so, you know, we’re seeing that change.

Early College had a similar impact on the community in the small city. Karen, the counselor for EC2, said she has seen a change in how the community perceives the college-going initiatives from the teachers to community members.

I see more and more of them going, ‘Okay, this is going to work.’ The initial reaction, I think, was that you know, ‘Well, everybody can’t go to college.’ We said we wanted to prepare everybody for college. There’s a big difference. So they’re starting to understand that it means that we want to give intervention where intervention’s needed and enrichment where enrichment is needed. And our parents – I mean they’re really great advocates for it because they’re saving a lot of money and their kids are happy, which is really what parents want, happy kids.

Tom, the high school principal in EC2, said as the district has moved forward on its Early College strategies, he has seen big changes in the community. “Our enrollment has been increasing every year for the last 5, 6, 7 years. We’ve seen a steady increase and not many of the schools can say that. A lot of the other area schools are shrinking and we’re growing.” Superintendent Joe attributes the growth directly to the success of the school’s program. “We’ve had the greatest growth of any school in the last five years since we implemented this plan.” He added:

Our goal is to have so much demand through open enrollment for space here that parents who are getting closed out will do the one thing to get in that I can’t prevent by saying I don’t have enough staff and I don’t have room. They can move in. And when I have people moving in, buying houses here, investing in the neighborhood and the community because they want their child to be part of the school, the school’s going to change and have a dramatic positive impact on this community. Our end goal is that a great school district can create a greater community around it and I think that’s happening right now.

Tom agreed, saying, “Our relationship with our community and our community organizations is probably better than it’s been in a very long time.”

Leadership and place. We also found that leadership structure in the two school districts was affected by location. For example, in EC2, the landlocked small district, the Early College program is self-contained, with one superintendent leading the program, with the help of the secondary and elementary school principals and the school counselor. In EC1, the consortium of three rural districts, there is a leadership team made of up three superintendents, three school counselors and principals from all three district schools. All of the interviewees in EC1 mentioned the lack of program coordinator as a challenge to the Early College program. Sarah put it this way: “There are three head honchos, and that’s just the superintendents.” Sarah said the size of the leadership team and the logistical issues with coordinating across the three school districts makes it difficult to have a shared vision across the consortium. She shared her experience at one of the leadership meetings: “Are all of the guidance counselors on the same page? I’m here to tell you no. When I’m sitting in one of these big meetings and one of the guidance counselors says,

“who exactly is this program for,” I just want to fall on the floor. Where have you been? It’s for everyone.”

Another finding related to leadership and place has to do with how the districts sustain their programs. In EC1, grants are an important part of the sustainability structure, and as interviewees suggested, sometimes the goals of a grant will influence the way a program is developed. In EC2, leadership focused on building a sustainable program by creating a market for all day kindergarten, and expanding open enrollment in the district. However, even in EC2, it was the infusion of the Race to the Top Early College funding that spurred change. As principal Tom noted:

Before we had that money, we were very much a traditional school. We would have our kids walk across the stage. Our goal was to get them to their senior year up and out, and what happened to them after that was kind of up to them. We really looked at it and that idea of students having to adjust to fit the school just never really sat well with us. We have always felt that the school needed to adjust to fit the kid and that you would get the kind of student that you prepared for. You would get the kind of student that you set up systems to encourage - and with the acceleration, with kind of tearing down those walls of “this is a high school thing, this is a middle school thing,” Because of our size we were kind of doing that already, but (with the funding) we’ve really taken that idea and run with it. If the student is capable, the student is accelerated to the point where they are still being successful. We have things in place if they’re not. The idea that it’s a district-wide initiative, I think, is something that’s unique.

The college-going culture of Early College is more prevalent in EC2 than in EC1, in part because the leadership of EC2 are all visible to the students and actively promoting the Early College approach. Sarah noted that in EC2, the leadership of the district, from the superintendent down to the school administrators, is tight and actively involved with students. “(In EC2, the superintendent’s) office is in the high school. The high school and middle school are together in one building. There is one principal there. The principal in the elementary is also involved in Early College. They are all involved. The three administrators, the superintendent and both principals, work very close together.” In our observations, we saw the superintendent in the high

school hall when students were moving from class to class. Students were engaged with him, and he was calling the students by name. In EC1, the superintendent's office is not in the schools, and the leadership of the Early College program sits with the high school principal and the guidance counselor. Sarah noted that in EC1, there is a lack of cohesiveness among the leaders across the three consortium districts. "I do not know that the principals have a like mind to therefore pass that down to the guidance counselors who also have like minds."

Part of the success of EC2 is the superintendent's leadership and ability to change the culture in the district. Sarah gave an example of how the superintendent made changes when he first arrived.

He has been there for seven years. When he first went there at noon the entire district shut down. Everyone went home for lunch including the teachers. Then they couldn't figure out why they couldn't get all the kids back and they had behavior problems and vandalism in the afternoon. When he came on board that was one of the first things he changed. We do not close school, and no one goes home for lunch. It was uproar – they were ready to hang him. People who used to fight him tooth and nail are like 'we're doing great. Let's keep rolling with what we have.'

In EC1, the superintendent who was in place when the Early College grant was written left, leaving the district without someone in the central office of the district to steward the program. Sarah said a retired superintendent agreed to take on the role, but had not been very involved in the program at the time of our interviews. Our research indicated that the principal and guidance counselor of EC1 were in fact the leaders of the Early College program, and there was little being done at the district level to steward the program, particularly in the first year of the program. By the time we did our second round of interviews, in year 3 of Early College at EC1, they had a change in principals. The former principal who started Early College at the high school, left to be the superintendent of one of the other districts in the consortium. At the time of our interview, Katy said it was not clear yet how the move of the first principal would affect Early College. "It is his first year there, so I don't know that he has had enough time to make an impact," but she said, "he knows what needs to happen." She did say that district had a new superintendent, the third since the program started in

the district. John said the new superintendent was "very strong" in dealing with the politics of partnerships with higher education institutions. However, just as the stewardship of the superintendent in EC2 enhanced the college-going culture of the district, we found the changes of leadership created a missed opportunity to strengthen the college-going culture in EC1.

Culture, classroom, and learning. Another set of findings from our study reflect the ways in which Early College programming affects the school as a place: the classrooms, the walls, the culture, the interactions of students with the school itself. In EC2, there was a systems approach to Early College that filtered down to early elementary school. Our observations in the schools indicate that there was a college-going culture in all of the EC2's schools, including the elementary school. We saw, for example, college posters on the wall, a chart explaining how many years it takes to get different types of degrees, college banners in classrooms, and individual student data reports that allow students to check their progress on goals, something the elementary teachers and principal said helps students develop a college-going mindset. The guidance counselor in EC2 said that the college-going culture in the elementary school is strong. "The teachers wear their shirts from their colleges. They talk about the kinds of skills students need when they go to college. I know the (elementary principal) sends out regular newsletters and in her newsletters she talks about the Early College model."

Ted, the high school principal in the EC2 district, said Early College activities, like the college tours they offer students, has had a visible effect on the way students react to school. "It's amazing to watch because the kids will be riveted when they come back." Ted said there has been a change in philosophy in the district with Early College, an expectation that all students can go to college, and that all students will get the content they need to go to college. The guidance counselor put it this way: "It's not just good enough to have kids pass your course or not pass your course. Now, it's how do we make sure all of our kids get the content that we need." The district has a no excuses homework policy, in which students must complete homework and turn it in, and students must master content to pass a course.

The principal also said that open enrollment has also changed the culture of the school. Ted said at

first parents were concerned that open enrollment would attract a “dumping ground” of students. “I have to say that our residential kids aren’t gone, but (having open enrollment), it’s really setting a tone. You know the kind of student we attract, that college minded student, the college minded family, in two or three years we could have the private public schools. We can have that level of student.” In other words, open enrollment has helped to support the college-going culture by bringing in students who have college as their goal.

In EC1, the summer bridge program and Early College Consortium help to create a tighter link across the three districts. “The relationships that are formed not only between the students but the staff that go to different buildings is powerful. You are starting a network. You are networking already in high school. Some of the networking stuff, some of the social things that happen in college, your professional connections that you make generally at that level are happening now. That’s huge. That’s not a measurable thing, but it’s happening.”

Finally, the mechanisms EC2 has put in place along with the availability of transportation and the close proximity to colleges has helped to blur the lines between secondary and postsecondary education. At the time of our interviews, EC2 was starting to position high school teachers at the local college, teaching college level courses so that they can be available as resources for Early College students who may need that support.

Entanglement of Space and Place

A number of findings pointed to the entanglement of space and place. For example, the close proximity to colleges and the flexibility of staffing aided in blurring the boundaries of high school and college for both students and teachers. Joe, the superintendent in EC2 said the small size of his school allows him to be innovative with staffing. “We have a natural loop at the high school just because our classes are so small. The teacher who teaches Algebra 1 will teach Geometry and will probably teach advanced math.” That flexibility among the teachers, he said helps with the flexibility needed in staffing for Early College. Joe said one of his writing teachers who obtained a master’s to teach at the college level will spend part of her time at the local college, only four miles away, and part of her time at the high school. The move, Joe said, will help high school students transition to college. “(Students

will) be going to the campus. She’ll be there and so for any of the classes they are taking, she’ll be the conduit to get us the information as to where they’re struggling,” he said. The ability to work across the school districts is more difficult in the rural district.

The consortium model that EC1 used to implement Early College also affected both the space and the place of schooling. John, the principal of EC1, said the consortium model came out of considering the needs of the rural schools. He said the consortium model allowed three school districts to come together to share resources, including teaching staff, technology and programs.

Katy, the counselor in EC1, recalled that the agency that worked with EC1 to implement the state grant had not worked with a rural school. “They worked with urban schools or large inner city schools, so this was a foreign land to them. So quickly, we found out that their model was not going to work for our rural (schools). So we took that time and tried to develop what would work for us.

Sarah also noted that while EC2 is able to send students away to colleges for their Early College experience, EC1 depends on training their faculty for college level teaching so they can offer college courses on the high school campus. “They are developing their staff. The more staff they get on board in terms of adjunct (college) faculty, the better off they will be given their location. The more (the other two districts in the consortium) can also develop their staff, the better it becomes. It becomes a resource-sharing situation.”

Paul, a teacher in EC1 who led the Early College implementation, said that given the rural context, students traditionally have had few postsecondary options. “Because of where we’re located, the kids, if they want to do postsecondary, they need to drive (up to an hour away), and then have a choice of one university. But if you’re in a big city, of course, you’ve got probably three or four universities within a half hour of where you are.”

In addition, the nature of the consortium and the distance between schools created a need to use technology to offer distance learning courses to students across the consortium. The teachers in EC1 noted that while technology works for some classes, it is more difficult to use for others, although teachers in the focus group agreed that sustainability of Early College in their district will depend on developing their teaching staff to be college level teachers. “It is conceivable that if we each had our own staff, we wouldn’t need the technology piece to link the

schools together.” Another teacher added, “I don’t think anyone of us alone could have done it as well as we’ve done it together. It has been much richer. Even if we had all the money to do it alone, I don’t think we could’ve had the richness that this collaboration has produced.” Katy said through the use of technology and the consortium, the district went from having one Early College course to 42 Early College offerings for students, “which is giant for a rural high school.”

The geographic distance of EC1 to colleges and neighboring school districts necessitated a different model for Early College. The model in which EC1 worked with two other school districts as part of its consortium created different opportunities for EC1, changing the sense of the place of school and community in the area. For example, John, the principal of EC1, said the summer bridge program, which brings students together from the three consortium districts for team building and college exposure activities, is important for the program.

It is a kind of multifaceted bridge. We bridge the students from the other schools because it’s a three-school model and we also bridge our parents together. We also provide a bridge of information that we give to them about Early College high school. That bridges all of that because the parents have to be involved. They have to touch that because they have to make that decision about whether or not their students are going to attend (Early College).

Teachers in EC1 said that the summer bridge program is likely not something typical of Early College models, but is important to the rural consortium so when the students come together for Early College classes, whether through distance learning on onsite classes, they are comfortable with each other. One teacher put it this way:

These kids love that program, love the connection piece. By the time they are (in Early College), in video classes and distance learning, they are seeing the kids from the other classes and know who they are. They are a team in school. It’s not like they are strangers; they know each other. The counties have gotten smaller.

The fact that EC1 depends on technology and in-house teachers for Early College classes also has an effect on the space of schooling. In our research we observed classes in which a teacher at EC1 was teaching an Early College distance learning class to EC1 students and students from the consortium’s other schools. We also observed courses in which

EC1 students were participating in distance learning courses taught by teachers from the other consortium schools via technology. Students in classes with a teacher in the classroom were more engaged than students who were participating from a distance, although teachers in both situations did attend to students from distance sites by calling on them for discussion and checking with them in regard to their understanding. We witnessed that the technology is a central part of the classroom. One of the distance-learning teachers opted not to use a split screen with her image, so the students saw only the content she was teaching. This, again, was a way in which the learning space was different than when a live teacher was in the room.

As Lauen et al (2018) suggest, expectations affect the culture of schooling and in particular the way that students experience schooling. One of the findings from our work was that teachers in Early College classes in both districts attempted to treat Early College students as college students, putting more responsibility for their learning on the students. In one instance in EC1, we saw one student sit through an entire class without his textbook, while his classmate, who realized he did not have his book asked and was granted permission to get it from his locker. In EC1 and EC2, it is largely up to the students to manage transportation to Early College sites. In EC1, students need to find their own transportation unless the district offers a bus for an event. In EC2, the district established a partnership with the local transit company to make it easy for students to access transportation to local college sites, but students are still responsible for using that transportation on their own to get themselves back and forth from the college to the high school campus. Sarah said that in order to implement Early College well, there must be a shift in the way teachers treat students.

Discussion

The geographic concepts of space and place are important considerations in understanding how different school districts may implement similar programs in very different ways. The Early College cases in Ohio provide an excellent example of the ways in which the location of the school districts in the state and the spatial relationships of those districts to partners and resources created very different opportunities and challenges for each of the two school districts. The differences in implementation

also led to differences in how Early College programming affected the experience of schooling, the school environment, and the general conception of school as a place for students, teachers and community.

The choices that the school leaders made in EC1 and EC2 were largely influenced by the resources their location presented. A lack of easy transport, long distances to colleges and post-secondary institutions, for example, led district leaders to consider the development of a consortium across three rural school districts. The consortium model led to the focus on technology as a way to deliver college courses, with each district in the consortium serving as the site of a set of college courses. The Summer Bridge program emerged as a vital component to the consortium model, as it became a way to create community among students across districts. The bridge program helped students and teachers establish relationships and some common ground before engaging in Early College distance learning courses.

A very different model emerged in EC2, as the district superintendent quickly understood that his easy access to colleges, the metropolitan transportation system, and a large nearby school district created an excellent opportunity to develop Early College as a program that both serves to move students out of high school and to college campuses faster and a way to increase his market share of student enrollment by opening up those spaces for school of choice enrollment at younger grades.

In line with Lauen et al. (2018), we saw that the college-going expectations had an impact on the culture of schooling, conceptions of school as a place, at both sites. Teachers and administrators talked about perceiving teaching differently, with a greater focus on raising expectations for students. In EC1, teachers talked about the “counties becoming smaller” as students networked with peers across the consortium sites, and that in EC2 early elementary students were talking about going to college with their teachers and establishing goals that would help them prepare for college courses. We also heard how Early College expectations and activities affected communities, whether that was in the changing expectations of schools or the changing expectations for students in their community.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications of this study align with research (Tickameyer, White, Tadlock & Henderson, 2007; Ticken, 2014) which suggests that geographical considerations matter to the implementation of educational programs and policies. In the case of Early College, location and the resources available within these different locales created very different opportunities for the districts, allowing one district to develop a self-sustaining program, while another developed a program that depends on state grants. State departments must take into consideration the differences of location when rolling out state policies for school districts. This may mean policymakers need to be less prescriptive about how to implement programs and policies across different contexts. In addition, states should do more to establish funding for those districts that have fewer resources available to them.

Geography also should be a consideration for school leaders as they consider the opportunities and constraints of educational programming in their districts, including the ease and challenges of establishing relationships intermediary organizations (Honig, 2004). We saw how the school districts worked with the resources they had to build coalitions and partnerships across districts to make up for some of the geographic challenges they faced. We also saw the difference that proximity made to the ease of relationships with those intermediary organizations. From these findings, we identified the importance of intermediary organizations and partnerships in Early College. States who want to see successful Early College programs may want to consider policy directives that support or encourage strong partnerships by providing training or support in the development of partnerships, encourage the use of faculty across program sites to provide greater support for students, and provide financial incentives that may help school districts and institutions of higher education help to eliminate barriers that may exist for students as they participate in Early College courses. Finally, researchers must consider geographical differences in assessing state policy implementation.

This study raised new questions related to the implementation of Early College and presented us with thoughts for future study. For example, it would be useful to gather student perceptions of Early College experiences from the first point of exposure through college enrollment. Those data would help us

better understand how well the policy is aligning with the needs and interests of the students, and if in fact, Early College is helping students achieve college degrees. It would also be useful to follow-up on the

Early College sites to consider whether they were able to sustain the Early College initiatives and how their programs have changed or adapted over time.

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