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Rural Superintendent Turnover in Challenging Times: A review of the literature

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Rural Superintendent Turnover in Challenging Times: A review of the literature

Cover Page Footnote

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Review of Research

Rural Superintendent Turnover in Challenging Times: A Review of the Literature

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The Covid-19 pandemic has shown a light on structural problems in education. Changing conditions, policy recommendations, and pressure from local communities have caused strain among educators and administrators across the nation. For rural districts already strained by shortages of teachers and administrators, the pandemic particularly raised alarms about the potential for accelerating superintendent turnover. By examining the superintendent turnover literature through the lens of district leadership roles and critical leadership of place, this review can support research to address superintendent turnover, provide guidance for preparation programs that aim to reduce the instability of rural district leadership, and the preparation of administrators for crisis situations.

The Covid-19 pandemic created once-in-a-lifetime challenges for superintendents across the United States, leading to increased turnover (Sawchuk, 2021). Stability in district leadership appears to support rural student achievement (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), while heightened superintendent turnover has the potential to depress student achievement and is costly for districts. Rural superintendent turnover may have a negative impact on student outcomes and improvement efforts (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Adding to the urgency of stemming the turnover of rural superintendents is the number of districts impacted as approximately half of all school districts in the United States are located in a rural area (US Department of Education, 2014).

This review of the contemporary research on rural superintendent synthesized the state of knowledge, identified gaps in the literature, and provided implications for future research and leadership preparation programs.

To better understand the current phenomenon of rural superintendent turnover, this literature review traced the development of the superintendent turnover literature going back to the beginning of the accountability era (roughly 2000) and placed it in the context of current demands on rural superintendents. This study responded to calls to conduct research in rural education that is of use to rural schools and communities (Biddle et al., 2019) as the results have the potential to support the retention of rural

superintendents, thereby increasing the stability of leadership that supports student outcomes (Simpson, 2013).

The Contemporary Context of Rural Superintendent Turnover

The superintendent labor market is segmented by community type (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban) (Cooper et al., 2000) and by region (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). These contexts in turn shape the work of district leaders leading to the conclusion that “there is really no such thing as the superintendency; instead, there are many superintendencies” (Glass et al., 2001, p. 15). This is particularly true in rural districts which differ in scale and demographics across and within states (Howley et al., 2014). Previous research suggested that rural superintendent turnover has been a particular problem since the 1990s (Dlugosh, 1995, Glass, 1992). More recent research suggests the turnover rates of rural superintendents remain higher compared to those of non-rural peers (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

Superintendent Turnover

Turnover of district leadership occurs when superintendents seek new positions for professional or personal reasons, such as increased salary or improved working conditions, or when school boards

decide the cost of hiring a new superintendent is less than retaining the current superintendent (Eaton & Sharp, 1996; Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Distinguishing between such voluntary and involuntary departures is difficult due to the motivation of both parties to obscure causes of turnover (Eaton & Sharp, 1996). Factors related to turnover include those inside the district and community, as well as tensions with extra-local policies and superintendents' ability to navigate their many roles. Our analysis focused on the factors under greater control of both school boards and superintendents

In light of the the pandemic and continuation of the associated focus on public education as a political and cultural wedge issue (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021), new factors may need to be considered. For example, a report from the first year of the pandemic identified nine in ten district and school administrators in Nebraska experienced moderate to extreme job stress during the first spring and summer of the pandemic (CYFS, 2020). Stressors for superintendents included shifting recommendations from public health officials, political pressure from local constituents, and conflict with state leaders, as well as challenges in meeting the basic needs of vulnerable families, supporting mental health of students and teachers, and creating new learning opportunities (Cohn, 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Lochmiller, 2021; Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020; Walls & Zuckerman, 2022). Like other state-level policy decisions (Schafft & Jackson, 2010), mandates for school closures failed to consider contextual factors and structural educational inequities, such as rural schools' and communities' limited access to broadband internet (Brenner et al., 2020).

Conceptual Framework

Given the importance of the superintendent role and relationship with both school board and community as factors for superintendent turnover, we structure our review of the literature around Kowalski (2003; 2005) and Björk and colleagues (2014) conceptualization of superintendents' roles. We also utilize critical place-based leadership (Budge; 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) to focus on aspects of superintendent turnover unique to those in rural districts.

Superintendent Roles

Superintendents' work is highly contextual and complex; shaped by local social, economic, and political conditions; and framed by demands from the local, state, and federal levels (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski & Björk, 2005). To meet these demands, five roles for superintendents have evolved: teacher-scholar, manager, democratic-political leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski, 2003). Over time, these roles have become layered one on top of each other, creating the potential for role conflict and overload (Bredeson, 1996; Fuller et al., 2016).

As teacher-scholars, superintendents engage in instructional leadership, including overseeing curriculum, instruction, and school improvement efforts (Björk et al., 2014). Managerial roles include responsibility for compliance with state and federal mandates, budgeting, and personnel and facilities management (Björk et al., 2014). Rural superintendents may devote more time to managerial tasks due to the limited number of administrators and support staff in smaller districts (Jones & Howley, 2009).

The role of superintendents as democratic-political leaders is largely that of navigating community micropolitics and school board relationships (Björk et al., 2014). This role has particular importance in rural education due to the highly visible nature of the superintendency (Lamkin, 2006) and the centrality of rural schools in the social, economic, and political lives of their communities (Tieiken, 2014). Democratic-political roles of rural superintendents highlight the importance of contextually aware leadership, which considers social, political, and economic contexts (Klar & Huggins, 2020).

These contexts also shape superintendents' work as applied social scientists. In this role superintendents are expected to navigate issues, such as poverty, racism, and changing demographics, and to ensure schools are socially just (Björk et al., 2014). The applied social scientist role has recently gained additional attention in the support of social justice in education (DeMatthews et al., 2017). For rural superintendents, this work can include political negotiations around social justice issues and reconciliation of divergent values of the purpose of schooling and the future of rural communities (Budge, 2010; McHenry-Sorber, 2014). Maxwell and colleagues (2013) suggest rural superintendents'

equity orientations and efforts exist among a continuum. Lastly, Björk and colleagues (2014) identified the role of superintendents as communicators, including dissemination of information and two-way communication with constituents.

Due to limited resources, Howley and colleagues (2014) note that rural superintendents in small rural districts are more likely to assume a broad set of responsibilities within their roles, creating a need to balance competing demands, such as tensions between local views of educational quality and those mandated by state and federal policy (Rey, 2014).

Critical Leadership of Place and Rural Superintendents

The importance of context for district leadership suggested the need to attend to the unique roles rural superintendents play in both their districts and communities at large. Despite significant attention to defining roles of superintendents more broadly (Björk et al., 2014), the role of rural superintendent remains undertheorized (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Recent research on rural superintendents suggests they occupy a “position of ‘cultural bridge’ between the mainstream culture and a distinct rural culture” (Rey, 2014, p. 511). This bridging work includes navigation of state accountability and local values, norms, and perspectives on the purpose of schooling, (DeYoung, 1995; Howley et al., 2014), placing rural superintendents in positions of navigating political clashes (Budge, 2006; Rey, 2014).

Navigating these differences requires rural superintendents to engage in adaptive practices of buffering, bridging, and brokering to integrate external policy demands in locally meaningful ways (Zuckerman et al., 2018). Professional socialization influences superintendents’ responsivity to local and extra-local needs as they navigate local values and accountability policy (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed superintendents in the difficult position of balancing local political demands around school openings, including conflicting desires from parents and teachers, as well as larger state and national politics. Navigating these conflicts effectively requires relationships with teachers, students, parents, and community members (Walls & Zuckerman, 2022), reflecting the importance of people-centered

leadership identified as a key function of rural school leaders (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Critical leadership of place (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) developed the conceptualization of the roles of rural superintendents by building on earlier theorization describing the mutual interactions between leaders and community (Copeland, 2013; Forner et al., 2012; Harmon & Schafft, 2009) and the need for superintendents to negotiate power structures and respond to shifting demands of the local community and extra-local policy (Budge, 2006, 2010). This highlighted the importance of the roles of rural superintendents in bringing together competing factions in formal and informal negotiation spaces. Due to systems of social advantage and disadvantage, critical leadership of place must consider examination of racism, gender discrimination, classism within place-conscious discourses for rural education (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Enacting equity-oriented change in rural areas may exist on a continuum attenuated by district-community context (Maxwell et al., 2013), suggesting unique social justice roles for rural superintendents as they navigate external policy demands. With job security on the line, superintendents’ navigation of the dominant power structure represented by the school board can result in limited attention to the critical aspects of critical place-based leadership (Budge, 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017).

Methods

This study used a systematic literature review methodology (Grant & Booth, 2009). Search parameters included peer-reviewed journal articles from the period from 2000-2020 to reflect the most recent evolution of superintendent roles identified by Kowalski (2005). The search was limited to studies conducted in the US and to those that identified a rural context or included rural as an analytic category. The initial search used Google Scholar, ERIC, and EBSCO with the terms “rural” AND “superintendent” AND “turnover.” Hand searches were conducted of *The Rural Educator* and the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. The initial search yielded 14 studies. Several dissertations were identified, suggesting additional research is being conducted but not published. An additional two studies came to light thanks to reviewers. The initial analysis consisted of a summarization of each manuscript’s theoretical constructs and findings.

Table 1
Count of Superintendent Roles in the Reviewed Literature

Superintendent Role	Count of Articles
Teacher-Scholar	3
Manager	4
Democratic-Leader	10
Social Scientist	0
Communicator	6

Further analysis will include deductive coding using the five superintendent roles (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski, 2005) and critical place-based leadership (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018), including navigating accountability, political clashes, negotiating power structures, competing demands, and cultural bridging.

Findings

This review identified a sustained lack of significant research on superintendent turnover generally (Grissom & Andersen, 2012) and in rural areas in particular. Despite the limited literature, the findings suggest rural superintendent turnover can be tied to the various roles they play. Of the five roles identified by Björk and colleagues (2014), four were identified in the literature review. As represented in Table 1, the role of democratic-leader appeared most frequently, perhaps speaking to the importance of school governance as an important site of democracy in rural communities (Howley et al., 2014) and people-centered leadership in rural education (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Notably, no study addressed the role of social scientist and rural superintendent turnover. Each of the five roles and related factors of superintendent turnover are described below.

Teacher-Scholar

In the role of teacher-scholar, superintendents serve as instructional leaders. Only three of the 16 studies touched on this role, perhaps reflecting Jones and Howley's (2009) findings that rural superintendents spend less time on instructional leadership tasks than managerial tasks. Sampson's (2018) study of female superintendents of rural districts in Texas identified that for some, meeting the needs of students was a factor in the longevity of their tenure of at least six years. In their qualitative study of rural superintendents in Idaho, Williams and colleagues (2019) identified a sense of personal

fulfillment in having the desired impact on students and the broader community, as a factor in superintendents' desire to stay or leave a district. They identified that rural superintendents perceived a greater ability to make a difference in a smaller district, but that doing so required understanding district dynamics, including relationships with principals (Williams et al., 2019).

Similarly, Yates and De Jong's (2018) single-state study identified 'helping students succeed' and 'helping staff achieve their goals' as the two highest rated items on the rewards of the superintendency. This aligned with research on rural school leadership that identified the importance of collaboration and people-centered leadership, or the establishment and nurturing of interpersonal relationships with staff, parents, students, and community members (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Manager

Four studies touched on the managerial roles of rural superintendents and turnover. In a multiple case study in a single Midwest state, Kamrath (2015) identified that rural superintendents experience stress from multiple responsibilities, resulting in turnover (Kamrath, 2015). Many of these responsibilities make up managerial roles of superintendents. Limited administrative and support capacity may increase the need for rural superintendents to address such tasks (Jones & Howley, 2009). In a national, random sample survey, Fusarelli and colleagues (2003) found rural superintendents, like their urban and suburban peers, desired increased support for job success.

Given the slow recovery of school funding following the Great Recession (Leachman & Figueroa, 2019) this trend has likely only gotten worse. For example, in a more recent a national survey, Tekniepe (2015) identified management of limited resources as a stressor for rural superintendents and source of friction between a superintendent and board that may lead to involuntary turnover.

Similarly, in a multiple case study of superintendents in a single state, Forner and colleagues (2012) suggest that rural superintendents with longevity of at least five years in their positions navigate financial challenges by aligning resources to district priorities, increasing efficiency, and shouldering potential conflict over contract negotiations, highlighting the importance of the managerial role for rural superintendent stability.

Democratic-Leader

Of the superintendent roles described by Björk and colleagues (2014), we found that of democratic-leader was most strongly represented in the rural superintendent turnover literature, appearing in ten of the 16 articles reviewed. In this conception of superintendent roles, the relationship between school boards and superintendents is central to the work of district leaders (Björk et al., 2014).

For example, Tekniepe's (2015) survey identified political conflict as a significant factor related to turnover including both school board conflict and conflict with community leaders at large. Yates and De Jong's (2018) single state survey likewise identified board relations as a perceived factor in superintendent departure. In a multiple case study in a single Midwest state, Kamrath (2015) identified ongoing political conflict can result in repeated superintendent turnover in rural districts. Such conflicts may include superintendents' perception that the school board lacked adequate training and knowledge; micromanagement by the school board of district operations; lack of adequate contract protections against political removal; disagreement between board members; pressure from politicians and business leaders; and a lack of clear authority to act from the board (Tekniepe, 2015; Williams et al., 2019). In a follow-up study, Kamrath (2022) identified board turnover that led to increased 'common sense,' commitment to students, confidence in the superintendent, optimism, and willingness to compromise as a factor in increasing stability of the superintendency. Additionally, he identified board education about their roles and responsibilities and shared expectations as factors that could support stability (Kamrath, 2022).

Political conflict also can be between the board and the community at large, resulting in board member turnover and subsequent superintendent turnover. Alsbury's state (2003; 2004; 2008) analysis of national survey data and qualitative interviews in a single state traced the relationship between rural school board turnover and superintendent turnover using dissatisfaction theory. Dissatisfaction theory describes the political cycle in school organizations as characterized by periods of stability punctuated by intense political turmoil (Alsbury, 2003). This political turmoil, or community members' dissatisfaction with its schools, reaches a tipping point when board members are replaced. Turnover of elected board members often precedes the

replacement of the superintendent (Alsbury, 2003); however Kamrath (2022) identified board turnover as a potentially positive event that can lead to stability. Williams and colleagues (2019) identified superintendents' perceptions of board elections as a factor in their decision to stay or go. Conflict also arises from community disagreements with superintendent decision-making, creating stress for rural superintendents (Williams et al., 2019).

Close relationships between the district and community can reduce involuntary superintendent departure (Tekniepe, 2015). Grissom and Mitani's (2016) analysis of longitudinal administrative files of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education identified that rural superintendents promoted from within a district were less likely to change districts. Palladino and colleagues' (2016) multiple case study of female superintendent longevity in a single state identified the importance of building relationships across the community to create stability of leadership. For place-bound superintendents, those who risen through the ranks from teacher to administrator in the same district, avoiding conflict is also a survival strategy (Alsbury, 2008). This suggested people-centered leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017) as an important attribute for navigating the democratic-leader role in rural districts and that longevity of relationships provides a buffer to other factors in rural superintendent turnover.

Social Scientist

The rural superintendent turnover literature offered little insight into whether social scientist roles factor into voluntary or involuntary turnover. The general rural education literature suggests this as an important area for future research (Budge, 2006; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2022). In particular, navigating local and extra-local pressures, such as state and federal accountability measures (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; O'Rourke & Ylimaki, 2014; Zuckerman et al., 2018) creates tensions as extra-local policy often fails to consider the contexts of rural districts (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). These tensions potentially create conflict for superintendents attempting to improve outcomes aligned with extra-local accountability demands. However, it remains unclear whether navigating mismatches between community values and extra-local policy influences turnover.

Communicator

Like democratic-leader, the role of communicator was addressed significantly in the rural superintendent turnover literature. However, stressors related to this role appear to include not only professional communication, but also interpersonal relationships.

Challenges related to communication and interpersonal relationships include the pressure caused by the need for superintendents to be active and visible in the community (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Williams et al., 2019). External stressors also include the need to make difficult decisions in a fishbowl (Kamrath, 2015; Williams, et al., 2019), such as those associated with Covid-19 response (Walls & Zuckerman, 2022). In three of the districts that seemingly solved their superintendent turnover problem, Kamrath (2022) reported district leaders engaging a more decisive decision-making style paired with communication about the rationale for those decisions.

Conflicts with the community can include disagreements over the role of schooling. In their multiple case study in a single state, Kamrath and Brunner (2014) identified such disagreements as being perceived by community members as leading to rural superintendent turnover. However, in their multiple case study, Forner and colleagues (2012) noted that successful rural superintendents navigate local pressure through conversations with board members and community members, particularly in relation to their vision of academic achievement for all students. While the very public role of rural superintendent can cause stress (Kamrath, 2015; Lamkin, 2006), it can also provides opportunities to serve as a spokesperson for the district and to engage in communication about academic achievement and balancing traditional ideas of educational success with the needs of the community to retain youth (Forner et al., 2012).

In addition to communication, relationships and a superintendent's commitment to the community may prevent superintendent turnover. Palladino and colleagues (2016) found gender differences among rural superintendents. They noted that unlike their male counterparts, female superintendents were highly motivated to serve their district and community and did not view employment in a rural district as "notches on career ladders aimed at higher destinations" (Palladino et al., 2016, p. 47). This suggested place-based leadership, relationships, and

connection to place as a factor in rural superintendent retention.

Along with balancing communication and interpersonal demands on the job, Williams and colleagues (2019) suggested that rural superintendents experience stress in navigating competing demands in their public and personal life. These can include familial conflict over where to live, social isolation experienced by rural superintendents, and the sense of constant public scrutiny of their professional and private lives (Williams, et al., 2019). This also suggested the importance not just of communication skills for rural superintendents, but interpersonal skills.

Role Summary

Taken together, to reduce turnover of rural superintendents requires these district leaders to successfully engage in four of the five roles identified by Björk and colleagues (2014). In particular, the democratic-leader and communication role rose in importance, with navigation of micropolitics as a key factor in turnover. The role of social scientists appeared to be underexplored as a contributing factor in turnover. In particular, the role of rural superintendents in equity efforts remains an under-researched area (Walls & Zuckerman, 2022).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study primarily followed the constraints of the research reviewed. Studies of rural superintendent turnover reviewed included case studies within a single state (e.g., Kamrath, 2015; 2022), interviews with a small number of superintendents in a single state (e.g., Williams et al., 2019), and single state surveys (e.g. Alsbury, 2008; Yates & De Jong, 2018). Given the importance of context for the rural superintendency, or as Glass and colleagues (2001) wrote, superintendencies, plural, the body of literature on district leader turnover may reflect findings that are more contextual dependent than generalizable to the heterogeneity of rural districts in the United States. Additionally, the small number of published, peer-reviewed studies presented a limitation. The number of dissertations on the topic suggest that research is occurring but is not being published.

Implications

This study offered four implications for future

research on superintendent turnover in rural districts. It also offered two implications for school boards, as well as three implications for our work as faculty in educational administration programs that prepare superintendents.

Implications for Research

The first implication for research identified by the review is a need to engage in a wider examination of the factors that contribute to superintendent turnover in largely rural states. Such research might include surveys and analysis of state-level administrative data to trace career trajectories and identify patterns of hiring and turnover (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Additionally, qualitative methods offer opportunities to understand the two-way employment decision-making of superintendents and school boards. Likewise, case studies of positive-outlier (Burns et al., 2020) districts with low superintendent turnover and longevity of the current superintendent or those that have reversed superintendency turnover (Kamrath, 2022) can shed light on protective factors against turnover.

The second implication for research included a focus on how superintendents negotiate their many roles and the ways in which they handle role conflict. While the literature reviewed reiterated that rural superintendents wear many hats (Copeland, 2013), it is less clear about the particulars of these hats and how district leaders balance these roles. In particular, the literature reviewed identified the importance of interpersonal relationships that go beyond the superintendent roles previously identified by Björk and colleagues (2014). Other recent research on rural superintendents' navigation of the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of superintendents' relationships with principals, teachers, students, and families (Walls & Zuckerman, 2022).

The third implication for research included an ongoing need to examine the how rural superintendents enact their roles as equity change agents and engage in critical leadership of place (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020), as well as how they navigate these roles within the social, political, and economic contexts of rural communities (Klar & Higgins, 2020). McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) suggested the need to move beyond the previous flat conceptualization of rural superintendents to examine

how superintendents center the multitude of educational, health, and well-being needs of both children and communities during times of crisis, as well as during times of peace. To date, McHenry-Sorber and Sutherland (2020) noted that there has been no empirical investigation of the successful implementation of critical place-based leadership. While such studies might include aspects of superintendent turnover, this critical leadership of place stands alone as a research need.

The fourth implication identified is the need to research crisis leadership in educational settings. Although crisis leadership was not identified in the literature review, this review's findings that highlight the importance of democratic-leader and communicator roles in rural superintendent turnover research suggests this as an important area for research. The Covid-19 pandemic created additional demands of communication as superintendents negotiated changing policies (Walls & Zuckerman, 2022). While the pandemic's impacts were felt across the globe, superintendents frequently deal with more localized crises in the form of natural disasters (Cannon et al., 2020; Plien, 2022). Much of the current literature on crisis leadership comes from the business sector suggesting this as a research need to understand how superintendents can navigate crisis across their roles (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

Implications for School Boards

Given the cost of superintendent turnover and potential impacts on student achievement, this study suggested school boards need to reduce push factors that fuel voluntary turnover, as well as limit the attractiveness of pull factors in the larger environment. This review suggests the importance of attending to connections to place, relationships, communication skills, and beliefs about the purposes of schooling in hiring to reduce potential push factors, along with clarity of roles, authority, and autonomy to engage in instructional leadership and other personally fulfilling aspects of the role.

Likewise, interpersonal efforts to reduce conflict with the superintendent, as well as community members, may reduce both voluntary and involuntary turnover. In addition to attending to certain qualities during hiring, succession planning (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2022) may contribute to the development of leaders who already have strong connections to place.

To further support retention, school boards can, to the best of their ability put resources towards superintendent retention, such as the provision of sufficient administrative support for managerial tasks and maintaining a competitive salary.

Implications for Superintendent Preparation

The findings of this literature review also have implications for superintendent preparation programs, including our own practices as educational administration faculty. First, the findings revealed a need to attend to the democratic-leader role in superintendent endorsement programs. This includes school board and community relations from the perspective of power and politics, interpersonal relations, communications, person-centered leadership, and caring (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Walls & Zuckerman, 2022). As Yates and De Jong (2018) suggested, preparation programs need to explicitly focus on conflict management and other strategies for interpersonal relationship development. Grissom and Condon (2021) and Cohn (2021) also suggested increased focus of pre-service and in-service administrator preparation on crisis leadership, including mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and learning, as well as communication during times of crisis.

Second, as Cohn (2021) argued, replacing experienced superintendents who have left during the pandemic with “talented newcomers” (p. 29) is imperative for all stakeholders. Kamrath (2022) noted that in districts that stemmed the turnover tide, district leaders had risen through the ranks locally. Developing a pipeline of such talented newcomers, including succession planning (Fusarelli et al., 2018) within rural districts to promote those already committed to district and community and who have exhibited leadership qualities requires coordination with higher education programs to create accessible professional development and certification coursework for rural educators (McConnell et al., 2021). Creating leadership pipelines remains a challenge for higher education programs that face pressure to generate tuition dollars. Previous research on leadership pipelines suggested external funding can support these efforts by reducing the pressure to generate tuition dollars (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Other structural changes include increasing full-time faculty in preparation programs who can engage in rigorous self-evaluation and change efforts (Orr, 2011) and supporting candidates’ transition into

leadership roles (McConnell et al, 2021) by extending the advising role of faculty beyond degree completion.

Similarly, preparation programs can play a role by actively seeking women candidates, connecting them to carefully chosen mentors in the field, and engaging directly with issues related to gender and feminism to increase the number of superintendent candidates that research suggests are more likely to remain in the rural communities that already serve, yet remain underrepresented (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Muñoz et al., 2018; Palladino et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017).

Although the rural superintendent turnover literature does not address racial diversity, there is a need to increase the diversity in educational leadership (Fuller & Young, 2022; Perrone, 2022), particularly in rural communities experiencing demographic changes, to increase diversity of the superintendent pipeline. This requires attention throughout the career trajectory (Fuller & Young, 2022). While urban university-district partnerships hold potential for improving the pipeline of educational leaders (Williams et al., 2022), these models require significant adaptation for rural areas, such as multi-district partnerships or regional partnerships through intermediary educational organizations

Lastly, the findings underscored the importance of preparation faculty who are engaged in the field to prepare individuals not just for a generic superintendency, but for the multiplicities of superintendencies. These multiplicities include rural, suburban, and urban contexts; student demographics; and organizational and social structures created by previous consolidation efforts. Likewise, we need to prepare students for the many roles they must balance in rural districts.

Conclusions

Rural school leadership has been described as challenging due to fragmentation of the community along class and racial lines, as well as political factions related to values and purposes of education (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Surface & Theobald, 2014). Rural superintendents need to be engaged in all areas of school management and improvement (Kowalski, 2003). However, the variety of challenges makes rural districts less attractive, making it harder to recruit and retain superintendents (Lamkin, 2006). Identifying levers to reduce rural

superintendent turnover has importance for increasing student achievement.

The findings of this literature review suggested that rural superintendents must draw on multiple roles to reduce turnover, including management of financial resources, instructional leadership, democratic-political leadership, and communication. Less apparent was attention to the applied social scientist role and those related to social justice. Across roles, rural superintendents must attend to not only the local context, but also the relationships with teachers, principals, families, and community members, echoing Preston and Barnes (2017) identification of people-centered leadership as a key skill for rural principals.

While some factors may be outside of the control

of rural districts, the findings suggest rural districts can attend to salary to attract and retain superintendents. Likewise, they may seek to hire superintendents who have close connections to the local community, a deep commitment to place, and who exhibit attention to social, economic, and political contexts. Preparation programs can contribute to a reduction in superintendent turnover by attending to the importance of micropolitics and interpersonal relationships within larger efforts to develop leaders attuned to place. Likewise, we can increase our efforts to work directly with districts to identify talented newcomers for preparation programs and assist with succession planning to ensure a pipeline of candidates with the skills and values rural districts want and need.

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