Very little is known about how superintendents respond to and view the challenges brought about by increasing external performance demands on their schools. This important study uses a multi-case study format to create portraits of five rural superintendents, the challenges they face and their responses to those challenges. The participant perceptions were organized into five themes: declining enrollment, isolation, board and community relations, celebrated accomplishments, and rural schools in contrast with urban or suburban schools. The superintendents were most proud of changes they had made to improve instruction in their districts. They spoke of challenges with bringing professional development to teachers in isolated rural areas; declining enrollment and closing schools; federal mandates; school facilities; serving in multiple roles; and state bureaucracy. There are many misconceptions about rural schools by the general public and even less about the tremendous stress of being a superintendent in a rural school.

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Rural Superintendents

How Do Wyoming Rural Superintendents View and Respond to the Challenges Brought about by External Demands on their Schools?

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

How do Wyoming rural superintendents view and respond to the challenges
brought about by increasing external performance demands on their schools? Very
little is known about this question and even less is known about how rural
superintendents respond to and view these challenges. Rural schools may be among
the most challenging places to carry out a career. Just as all superintendents, rural
superintendents interact daily in and with their communities. The rural superintendent
must manage multiple roles when compared to an urban or suburban superintendent
who typically has a large central office staff. Policy recommendations in this light
were developed by a working group studying rural schools in the southeastern part of
the country. Their work culminated in a report, *Beating the odds: High performing
small high schools in the south.* The report chronicles what they believe is unique to
small high schools and creates a list of recommendations for policy makers. One of
the items on the list addresses the multiple roles that are played by staff in rural
schools. They suggest that policy makers ought to admire and support the benefits of
smallness, recognizing that teachers and administrators in small schools take part in
many roles and that high student-teacher ratios in particular are not a sign of
inefficiency, but a sign that teachers are serving in multiple roles, some of which are
reserved for specialists in larger schools (Rural Policy Matters, 2004).
Superintendents are subject to a new form of accountability with the federal
legislation No Child Left Behind (2001). Postman (1996) pointed out years before
NCLB that the god of economic utility has taken over the purposes of schooling.
Goodlad suggested that political leaders have become misguided by their own rhetoric
to increase test scores so that we will have world-class schools. "Placing the burden
for change so heavily on schooling was and is a serious mistake. But, when increasing
this capital for all becomes a national mission, education and schooling become
powerful agencies, not only for redressing inequities but also for strengthening the
entire fabric of democracy" (Goodlad, 2004, p.3). The challenges to the rural
superintendent are intensified by limited resources, personnel shortages, population
decline, poverty and quantifiable accountability. This is a form of accountability that
simply does not make sense to most rural superintendents because the schools are so
small, so rural, and homogeneous. Rural schools are often so small that reporting
results, while required, is often inappropriate because of the size of the cohort of
students. Further, many rural schools do not have large enough subgroups of diversity
for any type of statistical validation. The agenda of NCLB sets extraordinary
challenges for public schools in the United States. These challenges are particularly
daunting for those states that have a sizeable rural population, where the major
precepts of NCLB are often at odds with the reality of rural education (Coladarci,
2003).

Promoting constructive dialogue concerning rural schools is a major challenge
for rural superintendents. In a rural community, there are often strong family
connections and the interrelatedness increases the flow of information. Unfortunately,
much like the old game of telephone, the message may get lost in the interpretation of
the message and false assumptions may be made that diminish the relationships
between citizens and the school. But when a decision is made that a few citizens
disagree with, informal coalition-building may be set in motion, possibly creating
divisive and nonproductive communication. According to Mathews (1996):

Public organizations, broad based, inclusive, and focused on
the community rather than a single issue or cause, are needed to
mediate between the larger public interests which James
Madison referred to as permanent and enduring interests and
the interest of special groups which Madison called factions.
Special interests are not inappropriate, but they have to be
reconciled with the interests of the larger public. Only citizens
with other citizens can do that
(p. 49).

Problem Statement

Change is a difficult challenge for the urban or rural superintendent. Even
though there are smaller groups of people within the school and community in rural
areas, this can be very difficult. Change is extremely difficult when declining
enrollments create a concern for loss of community. Change may be seen as another
attack on the allegiance to the community. Often community members react to this by
holding on tighter to what already exists or to what existed in the past when the
community and school flourished.

Over the last 100 years as schools have become larger, rural schools have
become more separated from the communities of which they are a part. Change does
not come easily; neither do authentic partnerships across institutional and
organizational boundaries. "Local politics, organizational histories and other internal
factors often require the substantial involvement of an outside intermediary, both to
help overcome those internal obstacles and to stimulate new thinking, reflection and
higher goal setting" (Williams & King, 2002, p.1). Change has been very difficult for
the entire system of education because it is built upon a linear industrial model of
schooling. Goodlad (1997) described the system of schooling as a loosely coupled
enterprise of often conflicting interests and overlapping turf. The system, not
education, drives the enterprise.

According to Darling-Hammond (2000), most of the states that ranked among
the highest-scoring on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
examinations are strong local control states that have traditionally not exerted much
control over school decision making. She contended that perhaps the relative lack of
policy intervention itself is a support for student learning, leaving educators free of
regulations that might force greater attention to procedures than learning.

Schools contribute greatly either to the promotion or the dissolution of rural
communities. Theobald (1997) suggested the following ideas: First, rural schools
ought to attend more consciously to their physical, social, political and economic
dynamics. If this attention was given, the school experience would be much more
meaningful and some healing of the culture might take place. Secondly, rural schools
can carefully craft curriculum in a way that can rekindle community allegiance and
can nurture that suppressed part of us that finds fulfillment in meeting community
obligations. Rural superintendents are in a position to respond to the many challenges
of their communities if they understand those dynamics and provide leadership that
helps citizens to appreciate their community and its surrounding area.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover how rural superintendents view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing external demands and changes in community demographics. The two main questions were:

1) What are the challenges of the superintendency in rural Wyoming school districts?

2) How are superintendents responding to the challenges?

Past experience has shown that rural schools often lack the fiscal and human resources to successfully implement policies in a timely manner (Arnold, 2000). While performance demands in the form of state standards, mandated assessment strategies, and standardized testing requirements have had a profound and well-documented impact on the professional lives of teachers, much less is known about how this era of accountability has affected the professional lives of superintendents, and still less is known about its effects on rural superintendents. The results of this study should contribute to a limited body of knowledge related to the rural school district superintendency.

Methodology

The methodological design of this study was a multi-case study format to create portraits of five rural superintendents, the challenges they face and their responses to those challenges. Three methods of qualitative inquiry were used to collect the data: A focus group, interviews, and observations. The constant comparative method was used for the data analysis.

Limitations of the study

The study reflected the perception of the participants from Wyoming schools; thus, there is no claim that the findings will represent a national perspective. The study included a focus group, interviews and observation. The intention was to develop a picture of the challenges that these superintendents perceive and their responses to those perceptions. Because the researcher was a superintendent, there is a chance that her perspective could be viewed as either a limitation or an advantage. She is passionate about rural schools and has served them during her entire professional career. She understands the context because she has lived and worked in Wyoming as a superintendent. Her background could be a disadvantage because of assumptions that she might make based on her own frame of reference and experiences.

The significance of the study

The significance of the study was that in knowing how superintendents are responding to increased pressure and accountability, we can find ways to help them respond to the challenges and assist superintendent preparation and professional development programs to better prepare leaders to respond to the challenges. Limited research has been published on the rural superintendency and on whether or not superintendents are simply coping with the rural circumstance or finding ways to educate children in a different ways. This study attempted to add to current literature about the rural superintendency by determining perceptions of the challenges and by determining their responses to those challenges. The results should also be beneficial for other rural superintendents and for university preparation programs.

Definitions

No Child Left Behind: The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. The Act was designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on research-based materials and methods.

Adequate Yearly Progress: Accountability is central to the success of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and states the need to set high standards for improving academic achievement in order to improve the quality of education for all students. Under the NCLB each state establishes a definition of adequate yearly progress (AYP) to use each year to determine the achievement of each school district and school. Under NCLB, schools are held accountable for the achievement of all students, not just average student performance. Ensuring that schools are held accountable for all students meeting state standards represents the core of the bipartisan act's goal of ensuring that no child is left behind.

Urban: According to United States Census the urban classification means that all territory, population and housing units are in urban areas, which include urbanized areas and urban clusters. An urban area generally consists of a large central place and adjacent densely settled census blocks that together have a total population of at least 2,500 for urban clusters, or at least 50,000 for urbanized areas. Urban classification cuts across other hierarchies and can be applied in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas.

Rural: According to the United States Census the rural classification is any territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban. Rural classification cuts across other categories and can be in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify how rural school superintendents view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing external performance demands on their schools. This will be answered using two main research questions:

1) What are the challenges of the superintendency in a rural Wyoming school district?

2) How are superintendents responding to the challenges?

From the multiple roles to local politics and from responding to accountability to managing limited resources, the challenges to the rural superintendency are daunting and the responses to those challenges are emerging.

Chapter two presents the challenges, teaching and learning conditions, and rural school leadership best practice and information of the rural superintendency according to the research literature on these topics. In chapter three, the qualitative methodology used in this study is explained. Chapter four presents a description of the superintendents in their settings, chapter five the data analyses, and chapter six the summary, conclusions, recommendations and implications.

Chapter Two
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

If change is to happen in education, it might well happen in the periphery in the places inhabited by the citizens of a vulnerable locale known as the rural community. At the center of such places you will often find a school. A positive relationship between the school and the community is the most significant key to the survival of both. If Wendell Berrys' (1987) argument that change will likely occur in the margins or on the periphery are correct, perhaps rural schools offer a sense of hope and possibility for a better tomorrow in the world of public education. The purpose of the study was to discover how rural superintendents in Wyoming view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing accountability demands. The review of literature includes sections related to the leadership challenges of rural school superintendents, the conditions of rural schools, and the leadership best practices and information in rural schools.

Challenges faced by superintendents

No Child Left Behind

Assessment, opportunity to learn, and pedagogy are the most salient aspects of the role of the superintendent in instruction. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) put the opportunity to learn on the forefront of educational policy. The plan, which is contained in a volume of over 12,000 pages, includes stronger accountability for results, expanded flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. The intricacies of the law have been burdensome to educators in all sizes of districts. The Act expanded the federal role in education at a rate unmatched in the history of the United States.

Tompkins (2003) discussed the problems of NCLB. She highlighted the requirement to publish data even though the subgroups in rural schools are too small to formulate any valid conclusion. Interestingly, the misuse of statistics to judge school performance is hitting hardest the schools that serve the most vulnerable students in the politically weakest regions of the country. Tompkins (2003) indicated that while NCLB is intended to improve schools, it may be more likely to lead to school closure or consolidation.

School Facilities

Another significant issue for rural school leadership is facility quality. According to Schwartzbeck, Redfield, Morris and Hammer (2003), the smaller the district, the more likely it is to have a building with a feature in less than adequate condition. In many states funding for upgrading or adding new buildings is provided to districts with stable or increasing enrollments. Too many rural school children attend school in inadequate facilities every day. Student learning is difficult if the school building is substandard or suffers from old age and neglect. For these children, research confirms what common sense tells us: It is difficult for teachers to effectively teach and children to learn in schools that lack heat and air conditioning, have falling roofs and deteriorating floors, do not include safe electrical systems, contain toxic asbestos in ceilings or are not wired for computers and the Internet (Schneider, 2002). Students learn best in buildings that are healthy, well lit,

comfortable and safe, and in good repair. Some researchers have found that the quality of school facilities may have as strong an effect on student performance as family background, socioeconomic status, school attendance, and behavior (Educational Commission of the States, 1998). Sixty percent of rural schools have at least one major building feature in need of replacement or extensive repair because their school facilities are frequently ignored, neglected, or under-funded (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 1995).

Along with the growing need for essential repairs, nearly 50 percent of rural schools lack the electrical wiring necessary to support technology, 84 percent lack fiber optic cable, and 46 percent lack operational computer networks (Dewees & Earthman, 2000). Rural communities cannot afford the school facilities they so desperately need. Often state school facilities policies focus on the needs of high growth suburban areas, and consequently the concerns of rural communities are not heard at the state level. Despite having greater needs than people from other locales, low-income rural people do not have the same political clout as people living in wealthier and metropolitan areas of a state. In the end, this lack of political power often translates into policy decisions that shortchange rural schools and students. While poverty and diminished political power are realities for many rural places, states can actively promote equal educational opportunity if they adopt policies and make sufficient funding available to provide all students with an environment that promotes learning (McColl & Malhoit, 2004).

School Finance

No rural school superintendent in the Midwest can talk about the job of financial management without addressing the issue of population decline and declining school enrollments. The source of the decline is threefold: a 'graying' factor, or the increase in percentage of the population of senior citizens; the exodus of young families with children to cities in search of better opportunities; and a decline in birth rates. Many rural counties, particularly those with already-low population density, are seeing massive depopulation as farm economies change and families move to cities in search of work (Schwartzbeck, 2003). Instead, these formerly healthy communities are being transformed into rural ghettos, with high unemployment, high levels of poverty, violence and despair that are more and more isolated from the rest of the country. At the same time, public elementary and secondary enrollments are rising in suburban and urban areas. Rural areas face the threat of consolidation, loss of per-pupil funding, fewer instructional resources, teacher and administrator quality issues, and declining school facilities or difficulty securing funds for repair and construction (Schwartzbeck, 2003).

Transportation

Zars (1998) indicated that the buses have been redesigned so that they do not collapse easily and students have been taught how to avoid getting hit by a bus at the bus stop. However, health issues of children have not been explored. In some ways it is ironic that the biggest feeding program in the country, the federal free and reduced breakfast and lunch program, has thoroughly documented the need for children to have healthy meals both before and after school, yet no one has investigated the effect of bus riding on children's eating habits. According to families Zars spoke with, most children skip breakfast. Food and drink are not allowed on the bus. Many arrive at

school slightly nauseous and if breakfast is offered, turn away. A second health issue is going to the bathroom. Unlike most commercial buses, school buses do not have toilets. For students with rides over 30 minutes and through remote countryside, there is little if any opportunity to go to the bathroom. Zars asked another question, What is the effect of spending so many hours in a young life riding on a bus? "Children, whose lively little bodies have been sitting in school all day, are also sitting for hours on a bus. This is not time when they can stand up, run, play or otherwise exercise" (Zars, 1998, p. 2).

In 1869, Massachusetts passed the first law authorizing the expenditure of public funds to take children to and from school. Generally, farmers were paid to haul children to school in horse-drawn wagons and buggies (Witham, 1997). By 1919, pupil transportation at public expense was legal in all 48 states, driven by compulsory attendance laws and the closing of rural schools. When a large scale school consolidation movement began nearly a century ago, the reasons cited were to reduce fiscal inefficiencies and to increase curricular advantages for students in small, often one-room schools. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, demand for student transportation increased dramatically as the consolidation movement gathered momentum (Killeen & Sipple, 2000).

Howley, Howley and Shamblen (2001) launched a five-state study on bus rides and raised four very significant policy issues related to the rural bus ride: the longest rides at rural elementary schools widely violate professional norms; features of the rural school bus ride combine in ways that probably compound risks to the well-being of elementary children; hypothetical risk factors vary systematically by poverty and minority status (impacting rural white children, in fact, more strongly than rural children of color); and rural school consolidation prospectively shapes features of the ride and compounding hypothetical risk factors. Howley concluded that rural school consolidation imposes additional harm to children in impoverished rural communities.

Communication

The superintendent in a rural district has an additional challenge of finding ways to communicate that are conducive to the rural context. Rural superintendents in Wyoming claim that, when given an opportunity to dialogue, few gather. Conversely, when an issue surfaces that a few citizens disagree with there is an informal coalition building that often works against the decision that has been made or against the people that made them. In an effort to create more orderly and civil school board meetings, the Durham, North Carolina, school board voted 4-3 in March to eliminate public comment on issues not listed on the board's meeting agenda. This came after a series of monthly meetings at which residents ignored the rules, engaged in name calling, and yelled out comments in the middle of board meetings (Chmelynski, 2005). According to the publication *Becoming a Better Board Member*: "How the public is treated at your board meeting can either alienate people or make them feel welcome and important. A pleasant environment, a few social amenities, and a regular method by which the public can address the board not only contribute to good decision making but will also foster good public attitudes about those decisions" (Amundson, Ficklen, Maatsch, Saks, & Zakariya, 1996).

In a rural community, there are often strong family connections and the relatedness increases the flow of information. Communication in a small community without a newspaper can be done electronically with email and a website or through

broad-band television. A monthly newsletter is also a significant tool for communicating to the public.

Change

Rural people have been victimized by the exploitive national economy and realize how little help they can expect from somewhere else (Berry, 1987). Unfortunately, education policy often adversely affects rural places. Research efforts, sometimes too, undermine improvement in rural education. Too little attention is paid to the circumstances that exist in rural places, and very little is done to help citizens persist in this improvement for the sake of the community (Howley, 1997).

An understanding of change, as it relates to organizational theory and particularly school organizations, is essential for the effective enhancement of teacher and student performance in public schools. Wheatley (2001) noted that every organization needs to look internally to see one another as critical resources. "We need to learn how to engage the creativity that exists everywhere in our organizations" (p.10). Systemic change has been very difficult for the system of education and is still built upon a linear industrial model of schooling. According to Green (1980), the system is precisely what doesn't change in the established arrangements of educational institutions and reiterated arguments that guide their behavior.

Teaching and learning conditions in rural schools

Recruitment and retention of teachers

The ability to attract and keep quality teachers as one of the most significant problem facing rural districts (Swartzbeck et al, 2003). The scope of the problem becomes evident when one considers that 43 percent of U.S. public schools, attended by 31 percent of the nation's school-age children, are located in rural communities or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Social, demographic and economic factors affect teacher supply and demand. Rural superintendents in 2003 identified social isolation, geographic isolation, and low salaries as the most significant contributing factors to being unable to attract and retain teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Other factors included the poor economic health of the surrounding community, lack of adequate housing, and being expected to teach multiple subjects or grade levels. A study in British Columbia showed that a large number of teachers left their districts because of geographic isolation, weather, distance from larger communities and family, and inadequate shopping (Murphy & Angelski, 1996). Salaries in most rural districts are significantly lower than suburban and urban districts, placing rural schools at a disadvantage in an increasingly competitive marketplace. This salary is especially problematic in highly rural areas that have a low tax base and little industry. On average, a beginning rural teacher earns 13.3 percent less than teachers in non-rural districts giving wealthier districts an advantage in attracting recent college graduates (Jimerson, 2003).

Student Achievement

According to the Brown Center Report on American Education (2003), rural schools are generally performing quite well, scoring above average in most cases. According to this report, it is impossible for these data to tell us much about why rural students do so well. Almost all of the test score advantage was lost when regression analyses controlled for schools' racial composition and percentage of students in poverty. In other words, rural schools perform well but the advantage was lost when racial composition and poverty was considered. The report also indicates that at fourth grade, students in rural schools achieve at levels similar to students in suburban schools, scoring one point above the national average. By twelfth grade, rural students score about the same as urban students, two points below the national average. This slight slippage in rural students' scores from fourth to twelfth grades shows up in previous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in reading as well as other subjects. Rural students appear to have higher scores on achievement tests in elementary school than in high school. This study raised another profound cause for concern with survey data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics (1994). In this survey of schools with a twelfth grade, rural schools reported a low dropout rate in the senior year compared to both urban and suburban schools. Unfortunately, the graduation rate does not convert to a high college application rate. Only 57 percent of the rural students applied for college admission compared to 67 percent for suburban students and 63 percent for urban students. This rate may be pushed down by students wanting to stay closer to home. In some rural areas, post-secondary institutions simply may not exist.

Lee and McIntire (2000) explored key schooling conditions that affect student performance in rural and non-rural settings to examine variations in the achievement gap. The schooling conditions examined included: instructional resources, professional training, algebra offering, progressive instruction, safe/orderly climate, and collective support. Despite national aggregate patterns, the results vary substantially from state to state. First, some of the rural states performed at the top (Iowa and Maine) while others performed below the national average (Arkansas and Mississippi). Rural students performed better than the non-rural students in seven states (Connecticut, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, New York and Rhode Island). At the same time, rural students performed worse than non-rural students in the other seven states (Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia). Multiple regression analyses show that all six factors together explain about 84 percent of the total variation in rural achievement. Lee and McIntire dissected scores further and explored the relationship between gaps in math achievement and schooling conditions further by looking at opposing patterns of rural/non-rural achievement in Connecticut and Virginia. In Connecticut, rural students had significantly higher learning conditions in terms of instructional resources, professional training and safe/orderly climate. On the other hand, rural students in Virginia had worse conditions in terms of instructional resources, professional training, progressive instruction, and collective support. The study looked nationally at rural achievement gains. For years 1992-1995, there was uneven progress. For grade eight, students from rural/small towns made an average 10 point gain, whereas students from central cites made no gain. Fourth grade students made less dramatic gains, that is a 5 point gain for rural, a 3 point gain for urban/fringe large town and a 2 point gain for central city. While rural children made

the most significant gains at the national level, there was also substantial interstate variation in the extent of rural student academic improvement.

Reading Gaps

In Canada, research was conducted to understand the rural-urban reading gap. This study used data from the Youth in Transition Survey and the Programme for International Student Assessment (Statistics Canada, 2003) to measure the differences in reading performance between students in rural and urban schools in each province and to identify factors that may help to explain rural-urban differences. In the PISA 2000 study, Canadian students performed very well by international standards. Canada scored near the top in reading performance. Only students in Finland performed significantly higher than Canadian students. At the national level, students from urban schools significantly outperformed students from rural schools in reading. The study examined numerous correlations and came to the following conclusions: 1) There were generally no rural urban differences in individual student behaviors (personal behaviors and relationships, reading behavior and social interaction with parents) or in relationships with parents and teachers (disciplinary environment) or in reading performance (time spent reading). 2) Rural students were less likely to have a computer at home. The rural urban difference was larger in terms of home access to the Internet. Rural students made greater use of computers at school. 3) Urban students were more likely to aspire to a university education and had higher career expectations. 4) Rural students were more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. 5) Rural and urban schools are much the same when it comes to resources and environments. 6) Compared with their urban counterparts, adults in rural communities were less likely to have a job and fewer rural adults had jobs requiring a university degree.

Poverty

A good education is one of the most important ingredients to overcoming the damaging impact of poverty. Yet, there is less money per student spent on education in rural America. According to a United States Department of Education survey (1995-96), public school districts that served metropolitan areas spent a total of $7010 per year per student. In rural public school districts, this expenditure was $5302 per year per student. Almost $2000 more was spent on each student annually in metropolitan areas. In 1998-1999, U.S. public schools in rural and small towns enrolled 27 percent of the nation's public school students, yet they only received 23 percent of federal dollars allocated to educate public school children. Kathleen Cotton (1996) reported that from 1940-1990, the total number of elementary and secondary public schools declined 69 percent. The numbers of school districts have decreased by 87 percent; however, at the same time student achievement in small schools is at least equal and often superior to achievement in large districts.

Mobility

High student mobility occurs as frequently in rural districts as it does in urban districts. This fact, coupled with the nearly half a million children in the rural Midwest living in poverty, and the thousands more living just above the poverty line, heightens the risk of frequent mobility and academic failure. Correlations between the

characteristics of rural communities and the factors that contribute to high student mobility lead to the conclusion that rural administrators as well as state and local education agencies, must address this issue (Paik & Phillips, 2002). Families in rural communities are at an increased risk of becoming mobile especially toward metropolitan areas. This mobility toward metropolitan areas is likely because the single industry nature of the rural community limits economic flexibility when the industry, or economic stronghold, of the community is in jeopardy (Paik & Phillips, 2002). The single industry nature threatens the rural economy with sensitivity to fluctuating manufacturing and export rates; a higher poverty rate exists in rural communities. Rural workers, on average, earn four-fifths of their urban counterparts' salary. Economic booms tend to benefit urban areas; the majority of executive and high ranking managerial jobs tend to be in cities, not in rural communities (Stalker, 2001). There is a strong correlation between poverty and risk of academic failure and a strong correlation between poverty and frequent mobility (Wright, 1999). A key to reducing mobility is access to decent low-cost housing (Fitchen, 1994). Forty-one percent of highly mobile students are low achievers, compared to 26 percent of stable students. The more frequently a child changes his/her school, the greater the threat to academic achievement (Fitchen, 1994). According to the U.S. Government Accounting Office (1994), children who change schools more than three times before eighth grade are at least four times more likely to drop out of school. Another study found that successive school changes result in a cumulative academic lag; students who moved more than three times in a six-year period can fall one full academic year behind stable students (Kerbow, 1996). High mobility can have dramatic effects on school budgets and funding, especially in rural school districts that are typically smaller and grappling for resources (Florida Division of Teaching and Learning, 2002). Another issue to consider is that a large number of mobile students can pull down the academic performance scores of the entire school.

According to Howley and Howley (2000), rural as a context is often seen as an impediment: an impediment to school effectiveness, school excellence, systemic reform, economic development and global economic dominion. Common justifications for building larger schools and closing smaller ones were administrative and instructional. The administrative motive is to increase the economy of scale and utilize staff and resources more efficiently. The instructional motive pays greater attention to the effectiveness of education.

Rural school leadership best practice and information

The following paragraphs offer some leadership best practices that have worked in rural communities across the country. In addition to policy work, much work is needed to continue building this repertoire of practices and initiatives that make an impact on rural schooling. The literature review highlights a few of these, and a few will be found in the recommendations in Chapter 5.

Carlson, Thorn, Mulvenon, Turner and Hughes (2002) suggested additional research is sorely needed in the following areas: strengthening educational achievement and improvement schools; helping youth become more resilient and adaptive; fostering lifelong learning; enriching community capacity building; revitalizing and developing communities; increasing educational opportunities for all children; and creating new road maps to show young people how to stay in and grow their communities. In the area of local leadership capacities, research on building

community-based leadership in various capacities might include: democratizing relationships; building trust; addressing inequities in power structures; involving all constituencies in decision making; supporting parents as agents of change for children; developing new avenues for civic engagement; identifying and building on cultural, historic, and economic assets; identifying and supporting technology use, including new and emerging technology as well as extant forms of technology; identifying reasonable targets of opportunity for capacity building; and understanding strategic economic activities, including how to 'grow' good jobs, provide education for staying in the community, train for new jobs, and capitalize on community skills and assets.

Confidence Intervals

No Child Left Behind (2001) requires publication of data even though subgroups in rural schools are too small to formulate any valid conclusion. In response, a dozen or more states have allowed the use of confidence intervals for small groups. According to Colardarci (2002), the volatility of scores can be controlled somewhat through the use of confidence intervals. A confidence interval is similar to what pollsters refer to as a margin of error and provides an answer to the true level of proficiency. A school's observed proficiency derived directly from test scores is only an estimate of the school's true level of proficiency. The smaller the cohort of students tested, the wider the confidence interval. He illustrated that the percentage of proficient students in a very small class could decline from 60 percent to 13 percent or increase from 11 percent to 57 percent. In contrast, larger schools rarely change more than 10 percent in any year. With confidence intervals, small schools are not put at a disadvantage for being small.

Student post-secondary outcomes

Rojewski (1999) affirmed that rural youth were more likely to be work-bound than non-rural youth. The National Education Longitudinal Study examined data that focused on career-related characteristics and postsecondary attainment status defined by whether the rural and non-rural students were work-bound or college-bound. According to the study, socio-economic status (SES) had considerable influence in predicting transition path status. Individuals in the lowest SES quartile were twice as likely to be work bound, while adolescents in the highest SES quartile were four times more likely to be college bound. The study emphasizes the need for greater focus on the career development of rural adolescents. Work bound youth may be inadequately prepared for the transition from school to employment (Haller & Virkler 1993; Rojewski, Wicklein & Schell, 1995). The problems related to career development of rural youth are compounded by reduced access to and pursuit of post-secondary education, narrowed school curricula, limited exposure to the world of work and a lack of work related role models (Apostal & Bilden, 1991).

Poverty

Howley (1996) followed Friedkin and Necochea (1988) replicating their earlier work, and eventually launching into a comprehensive nine state study. Howley noted in his original dissertation, that a very strong inference emerged in the research that indicates that large schools are not just dysfunctional for impoverished students,

but they dramatically compound the educational disadvantages that inevitably threaten impoverished students.

In studies by Payne (1998), Maritato (1997), and Hodgkinson (1995), poverty had a significant and compounding affect on student achievement by generating fewer cognitive strategies, contributing to poorer health and possibly arrested cognitive development, which in turn causes students to do less well in school, and have more emotional difficulties. Authors have found that school size and higher levels of achievement appear to be tied to the socioeconomic status of a community (Friedkin & Nenochea 1998; Howley, Strange, & Bickel 2000). Generally, small schools seem to provide an achievement advantage for impoverished students. By the same token, affluent students tend to perform better in larger schools.

Low Drop-Out Rate

School dropout rates for grades seven through twelve and diploma graduation rates for twelfth graders provide a readily assessable measure of an important student outcome: staying in school and earning a diploma. Funk and Bailey (1999) indicated that the median high school completion rate in Nebraska is 85 percent. They noted that the probability of graduating from high school increases as school size decreases. High school completion is highest in the smallest schools. Districts with 600-999 students have the lowest rate at 80 percent and those with fewer than 100 have the highest completion rate at 97 percent. The researchers noted that one should "consider that the negative impact of high school dropouts goes far beyond school cost inefficiencies that result from schooling children who do not graduate. Certainly failing to graduate from high school is associated with a number of other social and economic costs such as increased need for public assistance, lower rates of labor force participation, lower wages and an increased likelihood of incarceration" (Funk & Bailey, 1999, p.7).

Advantage of Small Schools

In 2001 Public Agenda surveyed 920 public high school teachers and 801 parents with children currently in high schools. According to the survey results, parents and teachers perceived a number of advantages to smaller high schools and some serious drawbacks to larger ones. A majority of parents (66 percent) and teachers (79 percent) said that smaller high schools offer a better sense of belonging and are more likely to identify teachers who are not performing well. Of more than a dozen criteria assessed by the survey, respondents said smaller high schools outperform larger ones in all but two categories: offering a diverse student body and a diverse curriculum (Johnson, Duffett, Farkas & Collier, 2002).

Distance Learning

Distance learning is a fitting response to these pressing needs confronted by America's rural schools. Research shows that it can be as effective as classroom learning in terms of student performance (Hobbs, 2004). Distance learning can offer access to virtually limitless curriculum while retaining the benefits of a small rural school. The ability to offer a comprehensive or advanced curriculum is readily available in rural schools with the capacity for distance learning. A highly qualified teacher is available to teach any subject matter, seven periods a day. Teachers and

staff can assess unlimited professional development opportunities without the expense associated with time and travel. Students of all ages can experience virtual field trips to see, experience and talk with the world beyond their community.

Rural Community

Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1994) described the vital relationships within civic associations that make significant contributions to community health and well being. Putnam (1993) measured the effectiveness of regional governments in northern Italy. What he found to predict good government in Italian regions was local associations, choral societies, soccer clubs, and cooperatives. Some regions were characterized by dense networks of civic associations and an active culture of civic engagement, whereas others were characterized by oppressive relationships. As a school administrator, building these civic associations and social capital are a vital need for small rural communities that can help them grow and thrive. Superintendents may facilitate this by helping to create informal networks and associations and by encouraging civic involvement.

Place-based Learning

Across rural America, youth are responding to some of the most pressing issues in their communities. In partnership with adults, young people have created day care centers, saved wetlands; gathered oral histories from elders, established entrepreneurial businesses that bolster challenged local economies and testified before town councils and state legislatures on numerous civic issues. Their powerful hopes have the potential to strengthen rural communities and their schools (Cervone, nd).

Significant scholarship in the area of place and identity has emerged (Hummon, 1990; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Orr 1992; & Perin 1977). Hummon (1990) believed that through our place of residence, we form our world view and our understanding of other persons as well as ourselves. Orr (1992) argued for all persons, scholars and persons alike, to develop a more active understanding of place and the intentional involvement with a place. Attending to the place we live and the interrelationship between all of its parts comprises the fundamental work of living sustainably (Orr, 1992). Place-based learning is using the community as a focus of study that involves culture, art, economics, history, or literature from its natural setting. When learning is rooted in real issues and needs, students can become both academic achievers and good citizens. Students can meet the most rigorous academic standards while helping to improve their communities and solve real-life problems (Loveland, 2003). Student achievement is largely connected to what students know about where they are living (Barnhardt, 2003).

Place-based learning and student achievement

The Alaskan Rural Systemic Initiative has made significant gains in student achievement on the CAT-5 math test using placed-based learning compared to schools who are not engaged in the practice. Alaskan Rural Systemic Initiative helped create curricula that focused on connecting indigenous and Western cultures. One particular school had the lowest test scores in its district and a large percentage of their children between the ages of 12 and 16 were not attending school. After implementation, every school-age child began attending school and test scores rose

dramatically. In fact, after only a few years of implementation, the schools' third graders received the highest scores statewide on the Alaska Benchmark test for third grade, and six seniors passed all three sections of the High School Graduation Qualifying exam. Some students raised their reading level by more than a year in only five months. The principal attributed the change in attitude and achievement to place-based learning.

In another community where logging is an important part of the local economy, 125 students conducted a snag survey over four years with the Oregon Department of Forestry. The term "snag" is used by loggers and refers to trees and stumps to help revitalize animal habitat. In this community, students helped to calculate how many trees and stumps remained in logged areas. After measuring, students logged their finding into an Oregon Department of Forestry mapping and data program. What the students learned about measurement and calculation allowed them to come within a tenth of the actual measurements recorded by professional surveyors (Loveland, 2003).

Attracting and retaining rural teachers

Another challenge for rural schools is the ability to attract and retain teachers. The top strategy is restructuring schools to make them smaller: Keep small schools small (Hare & Heap, 2001). The authors also pointed out that a new teacher support mechanism should be equally available to teachers in any system. Their report found that rural and small districts are least likely to provide a teacher support program. Rural districts should use strategies to recruit and develop their own teachers and use common planning times to support new teachers.

Financing rural schools

Dunn (2001) indicated that statewide efforts in support of consolidation have been largely abandoned across the country. In rural settings, the school is figuratively and sometimes literally at the center of a small town and its environs. The rural school fulfills an integrative function as it defines the community and represents it to the larger world (Tyack, 1974). As state coffers become smaller and smaller, less funding will be available to create or maintain an equitable resource distribution. Fortunately for rural schools, the small size and critical relationship to the community have influenced the meaning of efficiency with the educational finance system of most rural states. The outcome of this redefinition is that the courts have now accepted a narrow, non-economic meaning of efficiency that has taken away potential changes to the existence of more inefficient rural school systems (Dunn, 1999).

Haas (2000) suggested three basic strategies for improving resources at small rural schools: First, increase the operating funds by changing the state funding formula. This method involves changing many minds while working at a distance. Second, use existing resources more effectively. This point is where most education leaders begin and requires changing minds locally. Third, capturing new resources is an option that takes the shortest amount of time but holds the least promise for sustainable improvement.

Chapter two presented the review of literature related to the leadership challenges of rural school superintendents, the conditions of rural schools and the

leadership best practices and information in rural schools. Chapter three will follow with an explanation of the qualitative research design for this study.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes a description of the methodology that guided the data collection and analysis of this study. Components of the research methodology described included the research design, population and sampling procedures, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analyses, limitations of the study, and the summary.

The purpose of the study was to discover how rural superintendents in Wyoming view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing accountability demands. Two main research questions were addressed:

1) What are the challenges of the superintendency in a rural Wyoming school district?
2) How are superintendents responding to those challenges?

Research Design

A multiple-case study research design was selected to match the research problem and questions. Case study research has grown out of an interpretative orientation that contends that through meticulous study one can approach a deep-level understanding of lived experience. The rationale for the design was to enable me to examine the rural superintendency as a lived experience. To address the problem appropriately, I hoped to illustrate an understanding of this experience through this inductive research strategy. Specifically, I intended to create theory from observations and intuitive understandings gained in the field. Merriam (1998) described this research as "research in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypothesis, even theory are inductively derived from data" (p.7-8).

I chose this design in order to create portraits of the rural superintendents, type of response categories, the challenges they face, and their responses to those challenges. The size and complexity of this format was one that I could manage as a lone researcher. Creswell contends "in qualitative inquiry, the intent is to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2005, p. 203). To achieve an in-depth exploration I decided it was important to develop an understanding of the superintendents and their respective school districts.

Population and Sampling Procedures

Population

The focus group included respondents from rural Wyoming. The respondents were superintendents from 21 of the smallest districts in the state. The superintendents for this case study and observation research were chosen as an extension of a study that included a focus group that was conducted in November, 2004, at the Wyoming School Boards Association Conference in Casper, Wyoming. Participation was totally voluntary, and 11 superintendents participated.

For the interviews, the superintendents were selected based upon their participation in the focus group, their availability and willingness to participate in the extension of the study, and were chosen by making phone calls until five agreed to

participate in the study. Four of the five participants were located within the Big Horn Basin of Wyoming, and one was located in the southern portion of the state. Superintendents in this study had numerous years of experience, some in other states, and one had served numerous years in Canada. All five of the participants expressed a fondness for the communities they were serving and had served in rural schools most of their careers. The participants ranged in age from the early 40's to mid 60's and included one woman and four men. The largest district represented approximately 700 students, and the smallest had fewer than 100 students. The schools were all remotely located at least an hour and half from an urban center.

Sampling Procedures

The sampling procedure used was purposeful sampling. The criteria for the focus group was to be serving in one of the 21 smallest districts in the state, a willing volunteer and will to give two hours of time during the Wyoming School Board Association Conference. The criteria for the interviews included being a member of the original focus group, serving in one of 21 smallest districts in the state, and a willing volunteer. I chose this based on the assumption that by doing so I could discover, gain insight, and more deeply understand the views of my subjects. I used purposeful sampling in order to select specific respondents for this study. In this case, the superintendents were all from small rural Wyoming districts. I needed to select from a sample where I could learn the most about the topic. I chose to interview five participants. This would be approximately one half of the composition of the original focus group and 10 percent of the state's 48 school superintendents.

Instrumentation

The Researcher

As the researcher, I am a 45 year old female doctoral student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. I have been an educator for 17 years serving five years as a classroom teacher; five years as a high school principal; three years as an elementary principal; one year as an assistant superintendent; two years as a superintendent; and one year as a Research and Development Manager for Educational Services at Applied Information Management Institute in Omaha, Nebraska. In the very early stages of my educational career I became interested in rural education and have carried my passion through as I have progressed up the career ladder. My interest was originally sparked by my involvement with Nebraska's School at the Center project. This project was a product of the Annenberg Rural Challenge. At about the same time, I became a leadership associate for the Institute for Educational Inquiry in Seattle. School at the Center was focused on helping schools use the community as a focus of study and invigorating rural communities damaged by the farm crisis of the 80's by engaging youth in the rebuilding of community life. John Goodlad's Institute for Educational Inquiry engages leaders in an agenda for education in a democracy. The Institute is a mission-driven, research-based agenda that seeks to: Foster in the nation's youth the skills, dispositions, and knowledge necessary for effective participation in a social and political democracy; Ensure that the young have access to those understandings and skills required for satisfying and responsible lives; Develop educators who nurture the learning and well-being of every student; and Ensure educators' competence in and commitment to serving as stewards of schools. These

two initiatives were very natural to me, and they became the philosophy that grounds my work. My passion for this work has been fueled by a number of authors and researchers such as Paul Theobald, Craig Howley, Wendell Berry, Paul Gruchow, John Goodlad, David Orr, Robert Putnam, Neil Postman, Linda Darling-Hammond and Margaret Wheatley.

I was concerned how I would filter information from the interviews without causing my viewpoint to distract from what the participants were saying. I was painfully aware of many of the issues that the superintendents brought forth. I used a reflective journal for self-monitoring. Prior to and following each interview I wrote in my journal about any thoughts, feelings, and frustrations in order to set aside emotions I might carry into or away from the interviews. This self monitoring technique enabled me to focus intensely on the interviews. In addition, field notes were kept with each interview and these notes were helpful in analyzing the data by providing contextual detail. Following the transcription, I read each interview summary very carefully and was able to glean the salient points of each interview.

Research Tools

The three research tools used in this study included, a focus group, interviews, and observation. Each of these is described in the same sequence below. The researcher and the questions are the instrumentation for the study.

Focus Group

The first tool used was a focus group. Patton (1987) defined a focus group as "an interview on a specific topic with a small group of people" (p. 135). Patton (1990) indicated a focus group is not a discussion, problem-solving session, or decision-making body, but rather a method of gathering information from an interactive group.

Twenty-one rural Wyoming superintendents of school districts with less than 700 students were contacted by email and invited to participate in a 90-minute focus group to be held in conjunction with the Wyoming School Board Association Conference in Casper, Wyoming on November 17 and 18, 2004. The mailing list was developed using the Wyoming Department of Education Directory (2004) listing of superintendents and enrollment data.

A four member team, led by Dr. Robin Dexter of the University of Wyoming, conducted the focus group with superintendents from rural schools in Wyoming. The team members served in various roles including a facilitator, a process assistant, a member check reporter, and third and fourth members wrote field notes. The process assistant conducted member checks with focus group participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) at the end of the focus group.

Participation was strictly voluntary. Eleven of the 21 superintendents who were contacted participated in the focus group. The group was comprised of nine males and two females, all Caucasian. Their experience ranged from one to five years. The level of education of the participants ranged from five with master's degrees, three with education specialist degrees, and three with doctorates.

A statement was handed to each participant stating the purpose of the study (Appendix C) as well as, contact information of the investigators. Questions (Appendix D) were prepared in advance, and the investigators transcribed the responses. If respondents needed clarification, the question was repeated. The primary means of data collection was through transcription of the participants' responses to the focus group questions. Data from the focus group interviews were saved in a Word document with personally identifiable information removed.

Interviews

The interview is the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another (Merriam, 1998). The main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information. For the interviews, I mailed letters of explanation of the superintendents who participated in the original focus group (Appendix E). The letter explained the study, the process, confidentiality and requested permission to extend the focus group study to interviews and observation.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed word for word. A digital recording device was used to assist with accurate transcription. The guiding questions (Appendix F) provided a framework. Since the interviews were conversational there was a need to eliminate some questions because the participant had already addressed a topic earlier in the conversation.

In a qualitative study enough detail must be provided to show that the author's conclusion makes sense. With extensive detail the chance of the research being valid is significantly increased. Reality, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "is a multiple set of mental constructions made by humans, their constructions are on their minds and they are in the main, accessible to the humans who make them" (p. 295). I had an opportunity to collect and compare data to ensure a match between my identified categories and participant realities. The interviews were conducted either in the superintendent's office or somewhere that was comfortable for them within their rural setting. Finally, the analysis incorporated my reflection, introspection, and self monitoring, exposing all phases of the research to continual questioning.

Another very common strategy suggested by Merriam (1998) was peer debriefing. Through peer debriefing I was able to step out of the context to insights and analysis with other professionals outside of the context. A researcher in the firm where I work provided feedback on my interviews and my work. He has worked as a researcher, a state department head of counseling, and a staff development consultant for an intermediary education agency or educational service unit. He has also worked with rural superintendents. Finally, interview transcripts and my analysis of the transcripts were shared with the interview participants in order for them to verify accuracy. A copy of the transcription summary was sent to participants. The participants were called to see if they agreed with the summary. All of the members assured me that the summary was accurate. Member checks assured that what was said is what was understood and reported.

Observation

The third research tool was observation. In this research, the interviews were conducted either in the superintendent's office or somewhere that was comfortable for them within their rural setting. This source of data is conducted in natural settings reflecting the life experiences of participants more accurately than do more contrived or laboratory settings. Other materials such as newspaper articles, books, and conversations were deliberately sought to discover alternative perceptions of the context. A method for validation of observation is Referential Adequacy Material (RAM) and was another strategy suggested by Lincoln and Guba in their various writings to establish credibility. All data must be interpreted in a manner that allows for holistic views of the context. RAM provided a small slice of observation from the context being studied and provides a supporting background that communicates a richer contextual understanding of the analysis. The RAM consisted of my field notes

and photographs. The field notes were simply a notebook with short notes about issues that were affecting rural schools in Wyoming and some about the communities where the participants were serving. I jotted down questions that I had along the way, frustrations, beliefs and perceptions that I had. The photographs were my own way of capturing the essence of the community. I took photos of abandoned ranches, funny signs, desolate expanses of land, mountains, schools, manicured lawns on a street and other things that I found to show a reflection of what I was trying to portray in my writing. All of these provided supporting background that I referred to in order to describe the community, the school, and individual. Using my five senses I was able to bring that holistic view of the context into the paper.

Data Collection Procedures

Focus group

A statement (Appendix C) was handed out to each participant stating the purpose of the study, as well as contact information of the investigators. Questions (Appendix D) were prepared in advance and the investigators transcribed the responses. If respondents needed clarification, the question was repeated. The primary means of data collection was through transcription of the participants' responses to the focus group questions. Data from the focus group interviews were saved in a Word document with personally identifiable information removed.

Interviews

I sent letters of explanation (Appendix E) to the five superintendents who agreed to further participation in the study. The letter explained the study, the process, confidentiality, and requested permission to do the interview in the superintendents' office or at a location of their choice. With the letter I sent a self-addressed stamped envelope with a series of dates for possible interviews. Each superintendent chose a date and returned the signed permission to me.

Next, I followed up with a telephone call to confirm the date and set a time and a place for the interview. Three of the interviews were conducted in the superintendents' offices and another was conducted in a local restaurant over a noon meal. One interview could not be scheduled on-site due to the absence of the superintendent, and it was held via a telephone conference call a few weeks later. The participants were assured that neither their personal identity nor the identity of their district would be released in the dissertation.

The guiding questions (Appendix F) were used to direct comments to a specific area of interest coupled closely with the research questions. Each interview was semi-structured and the focus of conversation guided the interview. Since the interviews were conversational, some of the questions were eliminated because the participant had already addressed a topic earlier in the conversation. All five interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and burned to a CD. The CD was mailed to a transcriptionist and a written document was emailed back to the researcher.

I used a reflective journal to assist in building bracketing skills. Bracketing is the process of setting aside all of our usual assumptions about a phenomena. Specifically, I had to set aside my assumptions, biases, prejudices and even common sense at times, to accept the phenomenon for what it is. Because my background is

very similar to those superintendents in the focus group and interviewed, there is potential to bias the data by my own assumptions. The purpose of the reflective journal was to prepare mentally for certain situations in advance. It was important to set aside time beforehand to bring to mind the specific issues and beliefs that would require bracketing. The process assists in the pure and clear transfer of phenomenon into the consciousness of the researcher. To facilitate this, before a day of interviewing, and following, I wrote in a journal about how I felt that day in order to conduct the interview as objectively as possible.

Observation

The research tool for observation included photography that attempted to depict the distinctiveness of each community. Photographs were taken of the downtown area in each community, unique local features, the school and the countryside around the community. Rich and copious field notes were taken during and following each interview.

Data analyses

The data analyses follow using a grounded theory approach. A grounded theory consists of categories, properties and hypothesis that are conceptual links between and among categories. The constant comparative method of data analyses was developed by Glasser and Straus (1967) as a method of developing grounded theory. Simply stated, the constant comparative method is to do what the name implies, constantly compare the data collected from the focus group, interviews and observation.

Tesch (1990) described a coding process which I used to systematically analyze my data. First, I read and re-read all of the transcripts carefully from the focus group and from the interviews, I examined all of the photographs, I read and reread my field notes and jotted down ideas as they came to mind. Next, I choose one of the interviews and examined it closely for substance, themes, and metaphors that emerged from the data. I repeated this process for the all five interviews, the focus group data, the photographs, and my field notes. I made a list of topics or themes that emerged and wrote them down. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons were constantly made within and between levels of data. The units of data from focus groups, interviews and observations were coded, analyzed, and then sorted into categories for each of the two research questions. I then organized the data in each category and reorganized within the categories. This analysis of the data resulted in categories and themes for each research question. Then I reviewed the data a final time to make sure that all of the data were represented accurately within the categories and themes for each research question. Finally, I made a comparison with findings from the review of literature to determine which categories and themes were supported or not supported in the literature.

Devising categories was largely intuitive but it was informed by the purpose of the study, my orientation and knowledge and the meanings that were explicit in the participant data. Throughout the process I kept track of my intuitions, thoughts, hunches, and predictions as I read through all of the data. The data analyses is the process of making sense out of the data. Making sense involved consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what I have seen and read. The answers to the research questions emerged from the analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through the validation mechanisms below and outlines how truth would be determined; how it would be communicated; and how error would be detected and corrected (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Validation occurred through numerous means including credibility, generalizability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is the degree of confidence in the truth that the findings of a particular inquiry have for the subjects with whom which, and the context within which, the inquiry was carried out (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility needs to be established with the individuals who have supplied the data for inquiry. It is assessed by determining whether the description developed through inquiry in a particular setting rings true for those persons who are members of that setting. In this study, credibility was established through member checking and peer debriefing. Member checks were conducted so that both the data and interpretations of the data were verified before being included. Peer debriefing was conducted by sharing the transcriptions with another researcher who understood the nature of the study, was able to provide feedback and help with the inquiry process.

Generalizability

Generalizability was established through the use of thick description and purposive sampling. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), an inquiry is judged in terms of the extent to which its findings can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents. Rather than attempt to select isolated variables that are equivalent across contexts, the naturalistic researcher attempts to describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). By carefully describing specific sights, sounds, and relationships I was able to create a scene in the readers' mind that would be familiar if they visited the setting. This thick description will allow other researchers to make judgments about generalizability.

The findings of this inquiry may or may not be applied to other contexts or with other respondents. Time changes both the context and the individuals who are in it. Rather than attempting to isolate variables that are equivalent across contexts, I attempted to carefully and thoroughly describe the interrelationships and intricacies of the context. The detailed description will enable observers of other contexts to make tentative judgments about the applicability of certain observations for their contexts to form their own hypothesis and guide their own inquiry in the context.

Two strategies that Merriam (1998) suggested to facilitate generalizability in naturalistic inquiry follow: First, she recommended using thick descriptions. I collected detailed descriptions of the context, and reported them with enough detail and precision to allow judgments about generalizability. I attempted to bring the reader into the context by descriptive writing. Secondly, by selecting participants that could maximize the range of information with typical and divergent views of the context which is commonly referred to as purposive sampling, I was able to guide the process into the richest possible detail.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), an inquiry must provide the audience with evidence that if it were replicated with the same or similar respondents in the same or similar context, its findings would be repeated. This study could be repeated with similar respondents in a similar context and the findings would be similar.

Dependability

To provide a check on dependability, the researcher must make it possible for an external check to be conducted on the processes by which the study was conducted. This was done through an audit trail that provided documentation and a running account of the process of the inquiry. The audit trail was important to show dependability, or simply evidence, that if the study were replicated in the same or similar context the findings could be repeated. The study was targeted specifically at a very small group of participants, that is, superintendents in the smallest districts in Wyoming. The study could be replicated in Wyoming among the remaining rural superintendents who were chosen for the study, and the results would likely be similar. If the study were replicated in another state, the findings would likely show similarities in some aspects but differences in others. Through an audit trail which included interview notes, incidents that took place, and perceptions, the dependability was once again examined externally through a running account of the process of inquiry.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established through supporting data and the reflective journaling. The audit trail enables an external reviewer to make judgments about the products of the study. An adequate trail should be left to enable the auditor to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to the source and if it is supported by the inquiry. The qualitative researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are free from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the confirmability of the data themselves. "This means that data can be tracked to their sources and that the logic used to assemble the interpretations intro structurally coherent and corroborating wholes is both explicit and implicit" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243).

Delimitations

The following delimitations were selected in order to avoid perceptions that could be affected by dissimilar school districts.
1. All superintendents in the study were practicing administrators in Wyoming school districts.
2. All superintendents were located in the 21 smallest districts in the state.

Limitations of the study

The study reflects the perception of the participants from Wyoming schools; thus, there is no claim that the findings will represent a view at a national level. The study is limited to a focus group of eleven participants and in-depth interviews with five of those original eleven. The intention is to develop a picture of the challenges that these superintendents perceive and their responses to those challenges. Because

the researcher is a former superintendent, there is a chance that her perceptions could be a limitation. Additional detail about the researcher is found in the Instrumentation section of Chapter 5.

Summary

Chapter 3 presented the research design, population and sampling procedures, instrumentation, research tools, data analyses, trustworthiness, limitations of the study, delimitations, and the summary. Chapter 4 will present the categories and the themes that emerged through the analysis.

Chapter Four

PRESENTATION OF FOCUS GROUP DATA AND DESCRIPTIONS OF CASE
STUDY FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presents data collected from focus groups, observation (including photographs, visual observations, fleeting thoughts, news clipping and field notes) and interviews. Focus group data is presented according to themes that emerged. Interview data is presented in the form of case study narratives to provide a contextual description of each of the five superintendents who agreed to be interviewed. The data collected from observations and documented with photographs is presented within the descriptions of each of the five superintendent settings. The purpose of this study was to examine how rural superintendents view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing external demands and changes in community demographics. The two main research questions were:

1) What are the challenges of the superintendency in a rural Wyoming school district?

2) How are superintendents responding to the challenges?

This chapter presents the data collected from the focus group, observation materials and interviews. The first section presents the data from the focus group. Following the focus group, I thought it was important to follow-up and collect additional information. From the focus group I selected five participants to interview. First, the sample is described in terms of the participants in the five case studies. Second, case study interview narratives are presented.

The study came about through my enthusiastic interest in rural education. Having studied the topic for many years, I wanted to add to the limited body of knowledge that exists on the subject. Education is unique in Wyoming because of the finance system, an elected state superintendent, and because of its unique demographics. I hope to add to a limited body of knowledge related to the rural school district superintendency.

Description of Sample

Twenty-one Wyoming rural school district superintendents were contacted by email to participate in a 90-minute focus group. The mailing list was developed using the Wyoming Education Directory listing of superintendents and district enrollment data. The 21 superintendents invited to the focus group represented the 21 districts with the smallest K-12 enrollments in Wyoming. Participation was voluntary. There were 11 attendees who participated in the focus group.

Focus Group Responses

Three themes emerged from data collected from the focus group participants. These themes: instructional leadership, resources, and state and federal mandates are presented in the following sections.

Instructional leadership. The superintendent is responsible for leading the district. The knowledge and skills that accompany this responsibility include budgeting, facilities management, personnel development and management, policy development, building and maintaining community relations, developing and articulating a vision and most importantly ensuring

that all children learn. A focus group participant supported this when he shared that as a superintendent in a rural district you have to capitalize on every opportunity to share why you are doing what you are doing.

Superintendents must be knowledgeable on how to use data to improve instruction and drive learning. One focus group participant commented that the challenge is to have knowledge in such a broad array of topics from knowing about plywood and particleboard, to reliability, consistency and cut scores. Another challenge of instructional leadership expressed by a focus group participant was that of providing a viable curriculum. A focus group participant shared their frustration by stating.

> Our kids do not have the same opportunities in a bigger district because we cannot offer the choices the big districts can. We cannot offer advanced sections of all courses. Our math and science teachers teach the entire 9-12 math and science curriculum.

Access to a viable curriculum and effective instruction were seen as critical to achieving an opportunity to learn for all students. One focus group participant stressed the importance of working with teachers to support the implementation of best practices to improve instruction. Another respondent stated that the challenge is to get everyone trained in everything and then supervise the implementation without overloading your people.

Adequate Resources. Many rural schools are struggling financially and have been forced to make hard decisions about allocating limited funding. The decision to cut staff or programs is difficult for the rural superintendent. A focus group participant shared this example,

> We have a great music program but in order to fund the music teacher position we have larger class sizes in elementary grades and this angers some of our elementary staff. But the community demands we keep the music program. I feel caught in the middle between what is best for the learning environment and what the community is demanding.

Another participant shared the frustration of not being able to fund cutting edge programs such as, integration of technology, advanced placement courses in math and science and entrepreneurial studies.

Federal and state mandates. In order to achieve the goals of No Child Left Behind superintendents have many more responsibilities related to accountability for results. In response to implementing NCLB mandates in their district, one focus group participant reported the "devil is in the details" and that the mandates are too prescriptive. Another participant posed the question, "Is NCLB coercion or best practice?"

Focus group participants indicate that NCLB forced them to use the data. Several participants expressed worry over how to meet the highly qualified component when so many of their teachers teach several subjects across different age groups. Providing quality staff development was another concern voiced by participants. One superintendent suggested that neighboring districts needed to collaborate more to share resources. Finding and retaining good teachers was another concern that emerged. One focus group participant

states, "we have good quality folks but we cannot pay them enough to keep them."

Of the 11 focus group participants, I selected five for further participation. Five in-depth interviews were conducted on-site. I selected participants based on their participation in the focus group and willingness to participate in the extension of the study. Four of the five participants were located within the Big Horn Basin of Wyoming and one in the southern portion of the state. The interview data was combined with observation data which included photographs, field notes, news articles, fleeting thoughts, observations and conversations.

Each superintendent in the study had numerous years of experience including some in other states and one had served many years in Canada. They were all fond of rural districts and had served in them most of their career. They ranged in age from the early forties to mid sixties. There were four men and one woman. The largest district represented had about 700 students and the smallest had less than 100 students enrolled. None of the districts was located near an urban center.

Case Study Narratives

Case study narratives were written to describe each of the five superintendents interviewed. The names of the superintendents have been changed to protect their identities and their communities are not identified.

Michael

I had already been in town from a previous interview, so it was a quick drive to Michael's office. The office was located in a residential area and looked like someone's home. I walked in, and he was ready to meet with me. He appeared to be more relaxed than the last time I had visited with him in the fall. His district had been undergoing some major changes brought on by closing school buildings. I remembered reading in the newspaper about parents boycotting the district and sending their students to a neighboring community in response to closing a school building. It became a personal attack on him though the decision was really made by the state.

I began the interview by asking Michael about his most celebrated accomplishment. His humble response was, "I don't know that I've had any." I looked at him with disbelief and he thought about it and said, "I guess getting the new elementary school built and the year after that getting another new school." He was pleased with the decision to build in order to prevent another consolidation of the district.

Financial challenges are overwhelming for Michael, but he has been proactive in writing and receiving a couple of federal grants. The district was able to partner with a private pre-school in the district and started a program for 4-year-olds which he indicated has helped prepare the children for school. He was able to secure a Reading First Grant, which enabled the district to have a major impact in reading achievement through new curriculum, hiring reading coaches, and intensive professional development.

The district struggles to overcome its isolation. Michael believes that technology is a partial answer, but he was proud to tell me that students were actually being transported 30 miles for courses at the community college on a daily basis.

Michael sees another challenge as some of the initiatives are making a difference for children, but are difficult to implement in rural schools and even more challenging to fit in districts with multiple small rural communities. The community

has no doctor, dentist, and no Department of Family Services offices.

Closing schools was difficult for Michael. "We are closing two elementary schools and combining it into a third." According to him this will reduce costs in the district, by having fewer certified staff members. The pain came close behind when Michael had to make a reduction in force. Michael indicated a financial benefit by saying, "We have had classes of 4 or 5 and by combining we have class sizes of 13-16 with a two track school. We combined a middle and high school into a new 7-12 school.

Michael reported that he is overwhelmed with guilt when he drives through the community where the district had to close a school. "When I drive through the community in 50 years, what is that town going to look like? What are these communities going to look like? They are struggling to survive now and it's only going to get worse." He expressed concern about rural America in general, specifically in the West and Midwest when he questioned, "The trend is to move to larger areas. Is this a trend that we can stop, or is it inevitable over time?"

Michael has worked very hard for the past few years with Wyoming's School Facility Commission and has found much of the process quite frustrating. "The state is trying to build school buildings in a system that is based on saving money and not serving kids in the curriculum that we currently offer." He shared a disconnect that became very clear to him in the process. "What we move toward as educational professionals for teaching and learning is excellence, yet when we talk about buildings, adequacy is the goal." He reminded me that Wyoming's history of school funding litigation is ongoing because of problems with adequately financing education in the state.

Knowing the challenges that Michael has been through with his buildings, I asked him how he was handling small town politics. His response was quick and pointed when he said, "To put it bluntly, I ignore small town politics." He continued, "I guess part of my ego says they don't know my business. They don't know the facts." Michael demonstrated his intelligence about dealing with the press when he stated, "I don't get into sparring matches with the newspapers." He indicated that he has had some uncomfortable letters to the editor aimed at him. At meetings he has also withstood some scrutiny, "I've been called a liar and a fraud at public town council meetings." But, he says with conviction, "There is a reason for saying that. They mask the facts if they attack a person."

I asked Michael if he had ever considered leaving. His response was, "Of course," he said if he could financially and emotionally provide a better home for his family near by. By the same token, he indicated that he is happy and his job is a challenge. There is a high level of stress that he says he is relieving with regular exercise. His blood pressure has risen steadily since he took the job seven years ago.

Joseph

I had looked forward to my interview with Joseph. The time that I had spent with him at meetings had been very positive. He reminds me of a young version of my dad. He was eager to help a graduate student finish her dissertation as he remembered being there. Only a few years ago, he served as an education professor in a college.

The drive took about five hours. It rained off and on, but it was a nice day to travel. I had heard that his was a beautiful community. I headed toward the community and pulled off the road to eat lunch and look around. The mountains were

beautiful, and I could easily see how one might be drawn the area. The ranches in the area were well kept and cattle were abundant. I drove into town on a two lane highway and the district office was on the left side of the road in a single story building. Joseph was waiting to see me, and we retreated to his office where we relaxed in a seating area with a sofa, overstuffed chair, and a coffee table.

I asked Joe what he was most proud of as a superintendent, and what had been his most celebrated accomplishment over the years. In a previous position Joe had landed in a system where "the administrative team had become very entrenched." The district had a very traditional top-down system and had become very punitive in their approach with students. Joe put some systems in place: a personnel system, a curriculum, and a staff development plan. He retorted, "They'd never had staff development to amount to anything." Within five years the system had changed. He added, "By the same token, whenever you're a change agent like that, you'll make enemies in a hurry, heh, very frankly!"

The district now has about 700 students, and he explained the transitions as, "Oh, we were 1,700 twenty years ago, now we're 700. Last May we were 660-670 students so we're up 30 students. It's the first time in years that we have literally gone the other way." Joseph talked about the potential for coal mining to increase in the area, "and there's talk now of a mine, and the locals that listen to this usually pass it off, but now there appears to be a real possibility that a coal mine is going to open up north." The mine would present a solid impact on the district. Joseph supported this when he stated, "If that coal mine opens, and a plant with it, whatever, or plants. Ten years from now, or maybe three, four or five years, depending on how it all develops, there would be a real solid impact on the district, which would stabilize us."

The district has three main attendance centers: Two of the communities have small elementary schools with thirty students in each that feed into a larger secondary. Joe indicated that the land area of the district is huge. One school is over an hour from the district office and other areas that are part of the district that no longer have a school is over 90 miles from the district office. The community had uranium mining but it ended in the early 90's. "It's a big district in terms of land area and costly per student because we are so spread out." He indicated that the small school adjustment is critical for the district.

I asked Joe if he had dealt with the School Facilities Commission. He chuckled and said, "Not very well." This year the district was forced to close a middle school. Most of the building will be demolished and sixth grade will go to elementary, seventh and eighth grade to the high school. The gym and lunchroom will remain. Joseph indicates that a group of community members have a plan for the building, "One of the hopes is that will host small conventions." The community he continues, "has a degree of tourism. There is a lot of the snowmobiling, fishing in the summer and hunting in the fall." He asked me if I was aware that there was an airport just outside of town. "A place for the rich! Ha! A playpen for the rich! It's sort of a vacation area for them, and our airport has large jets that land on it."

He continues talking about the challenges of declining enrollment and closing schools. "The Commission wants real changes, close an elementary, tear down another elementary and add on to the high school." The communities don't want to lose their schools. "The board is still smarting from when they closed the school, in a community 20 years ago." He has met with the communities that may lose their schools. "They could acknowledge the older buildings and the fact that the buildings were too large. They hang onto their schools tenaciously, period." In the end, he said, "We'll see what kind of power the Commission has."

Joe and I talked at length about the superintendent leading the education process. "I've always been progressive and taught a lot of professional development in my schools." He expressed concern that as a principal he could get ideas started, but could not get the system to follow. "I knew that as a superintendent I could make a better impact." His perspective since then is, "Superintendents are here to lead the instructional process. Most principals and teachers cannot imagine a superintendent that knows what they are doing with curriculum or learning."

Brent

I was disappointed that I was unable to schedule an interview to talk to Brent in his office. He was unavailable during the week I traveled back to Wyoming to conduct the interviews. I have observed Brent in meetings and have always been impressed with his good nature. He seems to let things roll off his back quite well.

We began the interview with me apologizing for having difficulty with my recording device. Brent was his usual cheery self and talked about the quietness that comes in the summer months. We talked about writing the federal consolidated grant and he was pleased to tell me that one of his staff members is responsible for that. I asked him to tell me about his most celebrated accomplishment. His quick response was, "I think at this time, probably student performance on the WyCAS (Wyomings' statewide test), kids that have done well on that." He indicated that the district had not been on AYP because of performance. The district did not make AYP at the high school level because of the dropout rate. Brent went on to talk about the improvement they had made after the first two years of the WyCAS. He shared, "Our middle school had the biggest increase of scores in the state." When I asked what he contributed that to, his quick response was, "good teachers, real simple." The staff took WyCAS seriously, and they did some things to prepare and discovered weaknesses before the students took the assessment and provided some remediation.

In talking about isolation, Brent spoke of the lengthy bus rides that his students have to contend with, "We have two kids that travel about an hour one way on the bus to get to school." He understands that it's difficult for them. "The isolation", he says, "limits what teenagers can do." "The closest mall is two hours, the closest Wal-Mart is an hour, and the closest movie theatre is 35 miles away." Parents are concerned about their teenagers on the road to travel those distances.

The isolation affects the district in getting good quality candidates to come to the community. Brent indicates, "Some candidates think that this is where they want to be, but think again and realize that they don't want to live that far from a mall or Wal-Mart or movie theater." Getting quality teachers is difficult. "We travel each year to three or four teacher recruiting fairs; we advertise nationwide; we advertise on the Internet; and in newspapers in Montana and Wyoming; and through all of the colleges and universities in all of the surrounding states."

Another challenge caused by the isolation is the difficulty of accessing services. He indicated, "We have a counseling center only seven miles from here, but they are overbooked and it's hard to get those services, especially if you have an emergency and need to get people there right away." Rural health care is in a similar situation. "We do have a little hospital and a medical lab outside of town but it's not the same services you have in a bigger community. They don't deliver babies out there and if someone's really sick or hurt, they have to be transported up to two hours to get to a hospital." Declining enrollments mean declining dollars when budgets are

so tightly connected to average daily membership. Brent states, "We've had to make cuts; I've not had to RIF anyone yet." When positions are vacated, the district tries to consolidate it into another position so that additional resources can be saved. He indicated that they've done this several times both in classified and certificated positions. Building budgets have been cut, and they have had be exceptionally frugal. "We don't drive a Cadillac in our district, we drive a Chevy." It has been difficult for the salaries in the district to stay competitive, and finding quality teachers is compounded by the isolation.

Brent indicated that the board is conservative, but student-oriented. "They see where we are with other districts in the state and are starting to get concerned about it." The district was hurt financially when it went into hold harmless for three years. Hold harmless meant that the money the district received from the state would not decrease because of declining enrollment, but would not increase for cost of living increases. Brent is frustrated that he is expected to run the district with the same amount money that he had to operate under four years ago. The board has a growing concern about keeping teacher salaries competitive. He shared, "They believe like I do that the most important thing that a superintendent does, is—you put real quality teachers out there in the classroom."

Brent and I talked about what he would change about being a rural superintendent, and he remarked, "I would change the perception." Brent talked about living in Casper for 21 years where he had his own children in the school system. "It's better for kids to attend a high school of 160 kids than large high schools of 1200." He knew as an educator the advantages that smallness brings; more attention and more opportunities to be involved. "You know, its not all backward hick type stuff, that's not what's really going on." I asked Brent what advice he would give to a new superintendent going into a rural community. "Be prepared to do about everything. You are the transportation person, the building person; you are a jack of all trades." He advised superintendents to be visible and available to the community and to the kids. He advised, "Get to know the community, what it is all about and what it values."

Brent in his easy going way, expressed frustration with rumors in the community. This frustration was noticeable when he said, "One of the most challenging is, I think, getting the communication straight. If people have a problem, they spread rumors." Citizens are quick to spread rumors, but slow to ask questions and find out what really happened. He continued, "I'll have people madder than hell about something that just didn't happen." It's difficult to communicate with patrons, so he works hard to counter those challenges by bringing the community into the school.

Alan

When I contacted Alan by phone for the interview, he was in a state of anger and disbelief. He had just resigned from his position as superintendent. I was glad that I contacted him, but was not sure what to say other than to offer some support and kindness.

I talked with him at length about what happened and asked him if he had any good leads on openings. His wife was assisting him with some Internet searches and applications, so he asked me to talk with her. Margaret was a delightful woman who seemed upset with the situation, but is not concerned about another job coming their way. We exchanged email addresses and I forwarded to her some job possibilities for

him.   I drove to his community on a brisk but sunny morning. I was thinking about Alan during the 90 minute drive. He spoke with raw emotion on the phone. I was compelled to help him and show my compassion for his dilemma. In fact, I was so engrossed in my thoughts that as I drove down the main street of the neighboring town, I was driving over the speed limit. A plain-clothed policeman in a huge four-wheel drive pickup drove the opposite direction down the street and apparently caught me on his radar. He maneuvered his beast of a vehicle around the median and put on his lights. I pulled over, and he simply told me that I was exceeding the speed limit by seven miles per hour, wrote out a ticket for $70, and sent me on my way. He did thank me for wearing my seat belt and rewarded me with a $10 off discount on my ticket. My focus for the rest of the drive was on getting to the interview.

Once in the community, it was easy to find the district office. I walked in the door and was warmly greeted and invited to take a comfortable chair in the reception area of the office. Alan came out after finishing a conference with a teacher and suggested that we talk over lunch. We drove in separate vehicles back to Mullen. The restaurant was a bar and grill establishment with dark paneled walls, windows across the front, and a salad bar in the center surrounded by tables and booths. I arrived several minutes before Alan and was given a seat at a booth and began to set up the boundary microphone, recording device and my notepad to conduct the interview. I ordered an iced tea to sip on while I waited for him.

Alan arrived, and we ordered. He seemed anxious to talk to me and carefully checked to see if he knew anyone in the restaurant. He asked me repeatedly if the interviews would be kept confidential. I assured him of that.

I began the interview by asking Alan about his most celebrated accomplishment as an educator. I emphasized educator because I'm sure he didn't feel much like celebrating his most recent experience. He smiled and responded with his distinct Canadian accent that his most celebrated accomplishment was getting the community involved in the education of its youth. In his own humble manner he expressed that he was pretty good at it. He said, "I find that a lot of rural people are intimidated by school. So you have to get them into schools and make them a part of it."

Alan talked about his experiences getting the community involved in the Native American communities in the Northwest Territory and in northern Manitoba with an excitement and audible passion in his voice. He advised, "You build on strengths. You know up north trapping and fishing is their strength and you invite them in to teach students how to trap a muskrat or deer or how to tan a moose hide and there is a learning that can take place." He articulated how he was able to teach math and science by contextualizing the curriculum with what is meaningful and relevant to the students. He was proud of this accomplishment in both native and non-native communities where he had served.

Alan found that the most difficult hurdle caused by isolation of a rural community was professional development because of the expense and the travel. He indicated that, "In the territories during that first week of school we would have three or four days of in-service. We could offer classes through the universities and professors would travel to teach over the weekend or on spring break."

Alan spoke about the extreme isolation of teaching in Canada. Alan's first job was teaching in a community of around 300 people with 80 or 90 students in the school. He expressed that, "A train went through the community every day but there were no roads, no airport, no TV, no radio or telephone." He served that school for four years until he moved further north to a native community of about 700 with

about 20 Caucasians including a priest, a sister, a brother, and a nursing staff. Alan knew that being a rural superintendent meant being a part of the community and the way they do things. He said, "I guess one of the most important things whether you're north or south, you have to show that you're willing to be part of the community and a part of the way they do things. If you're not, if you try to impose your values on them, it's never going to work and you won't be successful."

Alan spoke with frustration about the challenge of federal mandates: "The No Child Left Behind was really formed for urban districts because of equity issues. The rural ones are being crushed." Much of the act doesn't make sense to him because of the small cohorts of children in rural schools. He said, "The big district, I mean if you have 1,000 first grade children, your chances of being efficient are pretty good. But when you have 25 first grade children and five are special education and maybe two or three children have parents who don't believe in schooling, numbers are going to dictate whether or not you make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)."

The finances in Wyoming were not such a concern for Alan. He has spent many years in South Dakota and in the Canadian provinces and the Northwest Territory. He indicated, "In South Dakota the funding is a lot different than here. Here we get everything $9,000 per child, there we get $4,000 and the government can say well, this year you're in for a treat, we'll give you $69 per student." In an effort to save a financially strapped district, Alan cut his own position. He said, "Because they just couldn't afford the superintendent, I suggested that they go to a CEO/principal which is exactly what they did." He lamented about how much he loved the community and treasures the friendships that are still strong. "It was a tough, but necessary evil."

We discussed changes that might improve rural communities. He had no doubts about the quality of rural education. "I think there is a higher quality of education in rural communities. I can get to know kids and in a huge city you can't do that." His deepest concern is the loss of local control in rural schools.

His frustration was apparent when he said If I could change anything, it would be to lessen the bureaucracy. We're told that we have local control yet everything we do is state mandated, that's the biggest paradox there is. There is nothing we can do on our own in our school and if there were something I could change, I would leave them as they are without all the bureaucracy, but that will never happen.

Alan has years of experience and a wealth of knowledge. I was impressed with his love of his communities, its children, and the people. He had good advice for working with parents. He advised, "You can't be afraid to go to basketball games or whatever and sit with the parents. The parents are going to want to talk about school and you've got to listen to them. A lot of times people like to start at the top and you've got to educate them to follow the chain of command." He understands how to defuse some of the problems. "You've got to listen to them instead of trying to argue a point that the school is right." He has always kept an open door policy and allows people to come in so that he can listen and then help them follow the chain of command. "Sometimes it defuses their anger by just listening to them."

He spoke painfully about his recent experience with his board. He said, "There were board members that don't like me and actually my wife warned me when I was interviewed in the spring that there are two board members you've got to watch. She's pretty good with a gut feeling." Speaking about his predecessor, he indicated that she did most everything herself and he believes in empowering people with authority and responsibility. "When I was hired, that's one change the board wanted." He regrets coming to the community. "Coming here is the biggest mistake I've made. Our board

meetings are televised and you know two board members would ask questions mainly to embarrass me."

He spoke of other districts where he had marked success with the board. "I think you get in with a good board and you know I've worked with seven schools in my life and we had our issues, by and large, but we worked well together."

Marsha

I was excited to talk with Marsha. The expanses of miles between communities were noticeably desolate and almost uninhabitable. I drove through miles and miles of sage brush and unusual rock formations. According to maps of the region, much of the area that I drove through is owned by the Bureau of Land Management and is classified as wilderness. Ranches were scattered miles apart, and it was much more likely to see a herd of antelope than it was to see domestic cattle. There was a skiff of snow on the ground that crowned the peaks of the mountains.

As I drove into town, I stopped and took some photographs. I was surprised at the number of businesses that were in operation. When I opened the door to my Blazer, I heard a faint sound of classical music and traced it to a mechanics shop down the street. The classical music seemed to reflect the calmness of the community. There were only a few cars on Main Street gathered near the café for lunch.

I was early, so I decided to spend some time looking around the town. The homes were well kept, and the lawns were manicured. I drove up to school and began to see a hub of activity. There were students on the playground, and a bus driver was inspecting buses. Inside, the halls were painted a medium blue halfway up from the terrazzo floor and above the chair rail the wall was painted white to the ceiling. The school appeared crisp and clean, but dated and in need of upgrades in lighting and flooring. The offices appeared to be something that were added after the building was built, but were in no way modern facilities.

A chart on the wall of the office showed a bar chart of books read during the year. There was a challenge between staff and students. I found out later from Marsha that the staff was winning the challenge up until the last week of the competition. There was to be picnic celebration on the day of the interview for all of the community.

The dress of the teachers was casual and comfortable. I spoke to the principal, and he indicated that Marsha would be returning shortly. She was having lunch with her daughter and granddaughter. While waiting, I spent a few minutes walking around the school. I noticed the high school track record on the wall. There were many records that remain unbroken that were set in the 60's and 70's. In fact, the latest record posted was from 1999.

Marsha walked down the hall to greet me with a huge smile. She seemed anxious to chat and have a break from the stress of the week. I followed her down a short flight of steps to the gymnasium, walked across the gymnasium and up another longer flight of steps to her office. We sat across from each other on a banquet table that is used for board meetings in her office. I set up my voice recorder, the boundary microphone and my computer. The time I spent with Marsha helped me to create a portrait about how she views the challenges and responds to the challenges brought about by increasing external demands and changing demographics.

Marsha and I bantered about some personal things and then I started the interview by asking her to talk with me about her most celebrated accomplishment. Her expressive eyes danced as she responded, "Well, serving the district." She

followed that comment with, "Probably to change the focus to improvement. You know we were one of those districts that believed that it was important to know how to do the paperwork, and send it to the state for accreditation. None of it made a difference in the classroom. We finally got everyone to understand that we need to be data driven. We need to be doing all of this stuff like accreditation, NCA, and that whole process for the sake of the kids. I mean for the sake of us being an excellent school."

She is very proud of the changes that she has made in the area of reading instruction. The success of her work is evidenced by the chart on the wall that shows all of the books read by staff and students. Her ability to influence and motivate all of her staff to read is an indication of her strong relationship with them. She talked about how this is making a difference by saying, "We had some of the first data that we shared with the board last meeting and reduced the number of students at risk for reading failure based on test scores and the star tests from 77% to 42%."

One of the issues that affects Marsha's work is the isolation and remoteness of the community. Travel is difficult on mountain roads in the winter and the location of the community is over two hours from the nearest city. She indicated that teachers are unable to take the classes and workshops because of limited access. Even with on-line staff development programs, she said that teachers feel very isolated. It seems that professional development is inadequate in rural schools and abundant in cities. She expressed her frustration by saying, "You read about Casper that has their own staff development program, and they bring in degree programs."

Isolation affects staff development and students. The enrollment is declining; the day I interviewed they had 91 students in grades K-12. She indicated, "We have a declining enrollment and a lot of students have left because we don't have the same programs, we can't offer as many sports, we don't have cheerleaders, don't have Future Farmers of America, we don't have an agriculture program or whatever else they are interested in at the moment and that has really affected our enrollment." She indicates that families come and go. During the 2003-2004 school year there were 65 changes and 100 students enrolled. She continues, we have a few families that move here to work on the ranches and that doesn't work out for one reason or another and they would like to stay but can't because there is no other work. Some come here to just live in a trailer hoping to find work. We do have families that bounce from place to place staying one step ahead of DFS or the law. If students are absent for a couple of days and you turn them in for absenteeism, you turn around and they are gone. We have 91 kids and that's going down. In two years it will be 76 kids and that's only if the kids that are here, stay. I forgot to mention the struggle with the parents who don't like the teachers so they pull them out and home school them. Then they like the next teacher so they bring them back until they are dissatisfied again and pull them out.

Marsha talked at length about the financial challenges of the district. Declining enrollment has made it necessary to create multi-age elementary classes and eliminate many high school electives. They have had a number of high school classes with one or two kids. Losing high school electives is a double edge sword. If you eliminate offerings, you eventually lose more students. Music and art have been trimmed down to half-time positions. Even worse, the board doesn't understand. There is a struggle to keep students because of a lack of offerings, mobility, and less programs. It's hard to attract teachers because of the remoteness and the salaries. She said, "Our teachers' salaries since I came here eight years ago were the lowest in the state and still

are. But, we have been able to maintain an insurance benefit package that's number one in the state. Every year when we have salary committee meetings, the salary committee recommends movement if possible, but we understand we'd rather stay open and have our jobs than cut programs for kids and teachers positions."

We talked about her position and the challenges of everything that she has to do. The board has considered a joint superintendent/principal position, but she discourages them from doing that. The board doesn't understand why she has to go to so many meetings. She said that they actually asked her if they could hire someone just to go to meetings. She currently serves as superintendent, special education director, Title One director and federal grants writer. The district is on a bare bones budget, and with declining enrollment it's sinking even further. She does literally everything. She expresses, "A secretary would be nice. My secretary is my business manager and he has his own job because he is the business manager. Every one of those people, for everyone of those positions (superintendent, special education director, title one director and federal grants writer) have required meetings that we must attend. The same situation happens for teachers. We have one language arts teacher, one science teacher, one social studies teacher and you can't pull them out to go to the meetings, so I try to buffer that and go to a number of those. Sometimes I wonder if the state understands." The paperwork for the state is overwhelming. Besides being burdensome, the state is not always sure what they want and what they want changes from month to month. With frustration she said, "The state expects the same kinds of people and processes no matter what size school."

The state accreditation system was a very frustrating part of Marsha's job. She indicated that their school profile was unacceptable because of a missing piece of data. The data had been sent to the state under another cover but was not coordinated back to the plan. The school was tattooed with a conditional accreditation for that error. The frustration results from the state inventing the processes as they go. She retorted, "It's wasn't that we didn't turn stuff in on time, it wasn't that we hadn't done the right stuff, its' just not the way they wanted it! That's the biggest frustration. They still haven't come up with what they want for standard setting. It changes from person to person."

Marsha indicated that she handles small town politics 'very delicately'. She finds the communication was quite frustrating. She works very hard to be in front of the public and communicate often and even has a monthly board-community coffee talk. One of the hottest political challenges is coaches. She indicates that the community will see coaches not having high enough standards or the opposite with too high of expectations. Coaches have learned to let their coaching certification lapse so they can't coach. She continues speaking of the superintendency as a job that is short-lived in small communities because of petty grievances from time to time. She indicated, "They do accumulate with the personalities of people and the vindictiveness seems to stay. It does and there's nothing you can do. But then you start over somewhere else and you're an expert from 50 miles away."

When I asked her if she had ever felt like leaving her quick answer was "yes, yes, yes." She indicated that her frustration is constantly battling with those people "who don't have it and who aren't there yet." She says that teachers understand what they need to do and where they need to go for

information. Community and board members spend more time talking about coaches and the athletic programs. Parents can be frustrating too. She expressed dismay about a recent incident when a teacher reported a couple of students smelling of marijuana so law enforcement was called and said, "You really get tired of hearing; you're going to hear from my lawyer!"

She reminds herself that what she is angry at is the system and the process and not the individuals. She knows that they are doing the best they can and as for the board, "it's a volunteer job and they are donating their time to do what they can and they get as much, if not more grief, from parents and community as I get."

Chapter 4 presented the purpose, research questions, focus group data, case study narratives that were written to describe each of the five superintendents interviewed and their rural settings. Chapter 5 presents the findings that emerged from the data collected from the focus group, observations, and interview data. This data is presented along with findings from the literature review.

Chapter 5

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Three methods of qualitative inquiry, previously described in Chapter 3, were used to collect data: a focus group, interviews, and observation. The constant comparative method of data analyses was used to code, organize, and analyze data collected from the focus group, interviews, and observations. The constant comparative method of data analyses was developed by Glasser and Straus (1967) as a method of developing grounded theory. Simply stated, the constant comparative method is to do what the name implies, constantly compare the data collected from the focus group, interviews, and observation.

The units of data from focus groups, interviews, and observations were coded, analyzed, and then sorted into categories for each of the two research questions. I first organized the data into categories, and then organized the data within the categories into themes. This analysis of the data resulted in categories and themes for each research question. I reviewed the data a final time to make sure that all of the data were represented accurately within the categories and themes for each research question. Finally, I made a comparison with findings from the review of literature to determine which categories and themes were supported or not supported in the literature.

Devising categories was largely intuitive, but it was informed by the purpose of the study, and my orientation and knowledge of the meanings that were explicit in the participant data. Throughout the process I kept track of my intuitions, thoughts, hunches, and predictions as I read through all of the data. Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. Making sense involved consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what I have seen and read. The answers to the research questions emerged from the analyses.

The two research questions were answered by comparing and contrasting data from the data collected and the literature review. Focus group, interview, and observation data were isolated into single units of data. The single units of data were then sorted into categories. The five major categories that emerged from the data were a) declining enrollment; b) isolation; c) rural vs. urban; d) board and community relations; and e) celebrated accomplishments.

In the following section, these categories are discussed. Individuals are quoted throughout this section. Quotes have been added to provide meaning for a common perception shared by some of the research study participants. The first category to be presented is declining enrollment.

Declining Enrollment

A very difficult problem for rural superintendents was declining enrollment. The category had two themes: losing students and programs; and closing schools.

Losing Students and Programs

Superintendents are upset about losing students and offering adequate programs. One superintendent expressed frustration with losing programs and in turn losing more students. "We have a declining enrollment and a lot of students have left because we don't have the same programs, we can't offer as many sports, we don't have cheerleaders, we don't have Future Farmers of America, we don't have an

agriculture program or whatever else they are interested in at the moment and that has really affected our enrollment." Declining enrollment means a significant loss of funding because funding is calculated on a per pupil rate in the finance formula. In the focus group one of the superintendents brought up the challenge of knowing "how small is too small."

In general, superintendents indicated that decisions must be based upon what is best for children, and one superintendent took that notion a step further and commented, "Sometimes you have to say this is the least destructive decision for kids and then make the best of it." Making cuts in some districts happened by attrition and others had to go through painful reduction in force proceedings. One superintendent lamented about a shared decision that he was making with his elementary staff on making cuts. District cuts often mean larger class loads for teachers. "Teachers have a hard time continuing to fund the music position when their class sizes are getting bigger."

The literature review reveals that while U.S. public schools enroll 27 percent of the nation's public school children, only 23 percent of the dollars are allocated to those children. The literature also indicated that as state coffers become smaller and smaller, less funding will be available to create or maintain an equitable resource distribution. Further, Kathleen Cotton (1996) reported that from 1940 to 1990 the total number of elementary and secondary public schools declined 69 percent, and at the same time the number of school districts decline by 87 percent. This indicates a very significant demographical change in rural America.

Many rural counties, particularly those with already low-population density, are seeing massive depopulation as birth rates decrease, death rates increase, and farm economies remain discouraging. Formerly healthy communities are being transformed into rural ghettos, with high unemployment, high levels of poverty, violence and despair. Sadly, this was clearly illustrated in many photographs. In each community, I photographed the downtown area, and all of them had multiple vacant buildings. One photograph was very revealing about the change in the agriculture based economy. The photograph was taken of an abandoned ranch that was left to decay. As I looked at the photograph I wondered what happened to the ranch, what happened to the people, the animals, and what was the land being used for now. I wonder what the ranch was like in its prime. Like most ranches, it probably employed many people, and the way of life was based upon the cycles of agriculture. When a major economic shift takes place, there is usually a major affect in the school districts where the shift is occurring.

Because of depopulation and changing demographics, life in rural Wyoming is more apt to change than stay the same. Even more alarming is that all of this is happening in very isolated areas where it often goes unnoticed by policy makers and those who could provide assistance. Rural people have been victimized by the exploitive national economy and realize how little help they can expect from somewhere else (Berry, 1987). Unfortunately, education policy often adversely affects rural places. Research efforts sometimes too undermine improvement in rural education. Too little attention is paid to the circumstances that exist in rural places, and very little is done to help citizens persist in their improvement for the sake of the community (Howley, 1997).

Closing Schools

Closing schools in declining rural communities is a very difficult challenge for a superintendent. Rural areas face the threat of consolidation, loss of per-pupil

funding, few instructional resources, teacher and administrator quality issues and declining school facilities or difficulty securing funds for repair and construction. One superintendent in the interviews expressed grief about closing a school: "We are closing two elementary schools and combining it into a third. When I drive through the community in 50 years what is the town going to look like? We are closing two schools and combining it into a third. "We have had classes of 4 or 5 and by combining we have class sizes from 13-16 with a two track school. We combined a middle and high school into a new 7-12 school." One community had only 20 students remaining in a school that was built for 500 students. This particular change was a result of the volatile extractive mining industry in the state.

One photograph depicts a large, but modern, school building left vacant in a community that went from boom to bust in a period of about ten years. The building was surrounded by a tall, barbed wire fence, and a no trespassing sign. Windows were broken, siding was falling off the side of the building, and a tall pile of tumbleweeds blocked the entrance to the front of the building. The community was in a similar state of depression. All that remained was also bar and a lone gas station on Main Street. Blocks of ranch style homes built in the 1970's were left to disintegrate from the harsh Wyoming winds.

Another superintendent indicated that the community is still "smarting" from closing a school twenty years ago and shared that small rural communities hold onto their schools tenaciously. Along with depopulation of rural areas school facilities present another problem, the smaller the district the more likely it is to have a building with a feature in less than adequate condition (Schwartzbeck, 2003).

In my field notes, I wrote about a joint meeting between the state's School Facility Commission and the education committee of the legislature. One superintendent expressed concern that major maintenance funding for the districts was based upon a per pupil ratio. She indicated that she had only enough money to repair one section of the school's leaking roof. This type of dilemma is an accurate picture of what happens so often to small rural schools with declining enrollments. When funds are based upon the number of pupils the economy of scale causes shortages in funds such as this.

According to one study, school facilities may have as strong an effect on student performance as family background, socioeconomic status, school attendance and behavior (Educational Commission of the States, 1998) Sixty percent of rural schools have at least one major building feature in need of replacement or extensive repair because their school facilities are frequently ignored, neglected, or under-funded (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 1995)

Isolation

A second major category that emerged was isolation. Three themes emerged from this category: professional development; transportation; and mobility.

Professional Development

 Superintendents were consistent in the view that the classroom teacher is the most important factor in student achievement. In the interviews all five of the superintendents indicate that professional development initiatives are difficult to implement because of isolation and aren't the quality that is really needed. "Teachers are unable to take classes and participate in workshops because of limited access. With on-line professional development teachers feel very isolated."

Transportation

In a rural state such as Wyoming, transportation is going to be a significant part of doing business in rural schools. Transportation is completely financed by the state and the quality of the system is observable. Transportation did not emerge as a challenge for the superintendents in the interviews and did not emerge in the focus groups. Transportation was addressed in the literature review. The literature indicates that research and redesign have improved the safety of school buses. However, one researcher indicates that the health issues of children riding buses have never been explored (Zars, 1998). Bathrooms do not exist on buses, no food is offered, and the time on buses is time that young children are normally actively engaged in play.

My field notes share an account of a bus ride in 2002 for a special needs child living in a remote ranch at a high elevation. The bus driver arrived at 5:45 A.M. to attend to his morning safety routine. Snow had fallen overnight and temperatures were looming near zero. At around 6:15 A.M. we climbed into the bus and headed for the ranch. I sipped my coffee and chatted as we drove down the paved road. When we turned onto the gravel, I gave up my coffee knowing that it would end up on my blouse. I had not driven this road or been on this particular ranch. The parents of this child were ranch hands and were living close to what they referred to as 'calf camp'. The road was treacherous. When we were about half way up the road I asked the driver if we were nearly there. He laughed and said, no. A one-way journey, I found out takes at least an hour if the roads are good. The radio was on but it was incomprehensible because of the road conditions. We continued up the road at what had to have been a 45 degree incline. A herd of elk were feasting on the right side of the road in the distance. We reached what seemed to be the end of the road. There was an area in front of a cattle guard that had completely washed away leaving a four foot deep hole. The driver was aware of the hole from a previous trip and maneuvered the bus to the right to avoid the hole. Finally, we arrived at the home. The mother and child were bundled in winter clothing waiting in the front yard. The child was in his walker with his book bag attached to the back of his walker. He maneuvered the walker across the rocks, almost running to see "Mr. Bus Driver" as he called out to him with open arms. The driver walked out the greet the child and we were recited a list of all of the calves that had been born in the past 48 hours and between his deep belly laughs we were told a story about cow that got a bucket stuck on her head yesterday. The child was small enough to use a child safety seat. The walker was on the back of the bus so that he could use it to get through the school hallways. I sat next to the child and we read a book, sang songs and recited ABC's on the decent down the mountain. One of the photographs that I took depicts him sitting in his car seat and with the snow covered peaks, which were almost purple when the sun reflected upon them, in the background. I made a note in the field notes that living remotely is both a gift and a curse.

Another researcher discussed the historical roots of busing and indicated that from 1900-1920 the demand for student transportation increased dramatically as the consolidation movement gathered momentum (Killen & Sipple, 2000). The notion of consolidation driving transportation was affirmed by another researcher who indicated that consolidation prospectively shapes features of the ride and compounds hypothetical risk factors (Howley, 2001). Howley also indicated that hypothetical risk factors vary systematically by poverty and minority status.

Mobility

Mobility was another surprising and significant issue that emerged in the interviews, the focus group and was supported in the literature review. The literature review indicates that high student mobility occurs as frequently in rural districts as it does in urban districts. This fact, coupled with the fact that nearly half a million children in the rural Midwest are living in poverty, and thousands more living just above the poverty line, heightens the risk of frequent mobility and academic failure. Families in rural communities are at an increased risk of becoming mobile toward metropolitan areas. This mobility is likely because of the single industry nature of the rural community limits economic flexibility when the industry, or economic stronghold, of the community is in jeopardy (Paik & Phillips, 2002). The literature also indicates that rural workers, on average, earn four-fifths of their urban counterpart's salary.

One superintendent explained that her 100 student district had a 65% mobility rate. A superintendent in the focus group was exasperated by the mobility and indicated that, "If the dynamics in our small districts have changed. Mobility is increasing. We had such a drive to support the allegiance to the community, but now people go to another community to get the other program. The allegiance to the community is starting to break down. The ranching families are gone and replaced by the convenience shopper. I could be on the football team and the scout will notice me somewhere else. Families sometimes move to the school that has the best program for their kids."

Rural vs. Urban

Rural vs. Urban emerged as a category, from which two themes emerged: federal mandates and bureaucracy. Rural vs. Urban emerged as a category because of the differences that are found in the two. Initiatives like No Child Left Behind (2001) were developed in response to problems in urban schools. Public policy is often very insensitive to rural schools and to rural communities for that matter. The responses were heavier in some categories than others.

Federal Mandates

Federal mandates were on the minds of superintendents in the focus group and in the interviews. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) put the opportunity to learn on the forefront of educational policy. The plan includes stronger accountability for results, expanded flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. The intricacies of the law have been burdensome to education in all sizes of districts.

All of the superintendents indicated that it was a catalyst to change in their districts. In the focus group one superintendent commented: "NCLB is about accountability and focus. It is not necessarily bad. I see the lack of funding as the negative part. I think it aided administrators in painting a picture in how to move forward. A significant problem is that in the end NCLB will narrow the curriculum and will stifle what we have had in education. We are copied throughout the world. The Japanese are trying to be more like us, and we are looking to them to help us be more organized. We are better because of what happens in the curriculum. NCLB is too prescriptive." Two superintendents indicated that that in a small district, the

details make it very difficult. One followed with, "You don't have extra help to help with the paperwork. There is no room for whining, you just have to pick up and go with it. 'Just get'er done.' We have to play the cards we are dealt. But, yeah I like it." The other superintendent followed with, "It's a great vision. You can't argue against it, but the devil is in the details. Is NCLB coercion or best practice? I don't have a problem with the concept, but it is being forced down our throats. It doesn't fit rural schools."

One of the struggles is Adequate Yearly Progress. "The small number of students creates additional problems. In the interviews one superintendent indicated that with larger numbers your chances of being efficient are pretty good, but if you have 25 first grade children and five are special education and maybe two or three have parents who don't believe in schooling, the numbers are going to dictate whether or not you make AYP." Fortunately, Wyoming has chosen to use confidence intervals in its calculation for AYP. Coladarci (2002) noted that the volatility of scores can be controlled somewhat through the use of confidence intervals. With confidence intervals, small schools are not put at a disadvantage for being small. Also in the literature review, Tompkins (2003) discussed the problems of NCLB. She highlighted the requirement to publish data even though subgroups in rural schools are too small to formulate any valid conclusion. Interestingly, she added the misuse of statistics to judge school performance is hitting hardest the schools that serve the most vulnerable students in the politically weakest regions of the country.

Multiple roles

Superintendents in rural schools take on multiple roles and manage multiple deadlines and priorities. One superintendent, indicated that it would be nice to have a secretary. "I currently serve as superintendent, special education director, title one director and federal grants writer. A secretary would be nice. My secretary is my business manager and he has his own job because he is the business manager." In the focus group one of the superintendents expressed frustration that implementing NCLB is a full time job and "then you have to fit everything else in." Deficiencies such as these in rural schools make the job even more difficult when one considers the accountability facing superintendents, coupled with financial concerns and multiple roles that superintendents must manage.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy was a significant concern for the superintendents in the interviews and in the focus group. One superintendent who had served in another state said, "If I could change anything, it would be to lessen the bureaucracy. We're told that we have local control, yet everything we do is state mandated, that's the biggest paradox there is! There is nothing we can do on our own in our school and if there were something I could change, I would leave them as they are without all the bureaucracy, but that will never happen." All states are struggling with the implementation of NCLB (2001). Some states have less bureaucracy than Wyoming. Some of the practices in Wyoming have not only been burdensome but have been devastating to small rural schools as portrayed by one superintendent in the interviews. "The paperwork for the state is overwhelming. Besides being burdensome, they aren't always sure what they want and what they want changes from month to month. The state expects the same kinds of people, positions and processes no matter

what size school. The state tattooed our district with a conditional accreditation for a missing piece of data. It wasn't that we didn't turn stuff in on time, it wasn't that we hadn't done the right stuff, it's just not the way they wanted it!" According to my field notes, getting a conditional accreditation resulted in a large amount of negative press from newspapers putting even more pressure on already stressed superintendents. Some of the superintendents who led districts that were given conditional accreditation lost the support of their board and communities and ended up losing their jobs.

Board and Community

Board and Community emerged as a major category. The responses were limited to the interviews and observations. Newspapers abound with articles about school board meetings, frustrated, angry parents and problems. In the literature review, it was noted that in March of last year, the Durham, North Carolina school board voted 4-3 to eliminate public commented on issues not listed on the board's meeting agenda. This came after a series of monthly meetings at which residents ignored the rules, engaged in name calling, and yelled out comment in the middle of board meetings (Chmelynski, 2005). Conversely, according to another publication cited in the literature review, "how the public is treated at your board meeting can either alienate people or make them feel welcome and important." All of the superintendents had frustrations with various issues involving their boards or their communities, and each handled it differently. One superintendent expressed disfavor in general for boards of education and referred to them as "the biggest hindrance in public education." Another superintendent was treated very poorly by the board, "Our board meetings are televised and you know they (two board members) would ask questions mainly to embarrass me."

Communication in rural communities adds to the difficulties that superintendents face. In a rural community, there are strong family connections and the relatedness increases the flow of information. One superintendent indicated that "citizens are quick to spread rumors but slow to ask questions and find out what really happened." Another indicated that petty grievances accumulate and vindictiveness takes over and you lose support. One superintendent had a very proactive response, "I ignore small town politics. I guess part of my ego says that they don't know my business. They don't know the facts. I don't get into sparring matches with the newspapers. I've been called a liar and fraud at public town council meetings. But, there is a reason for saying that. They mask the facts if they attack a person. They are allowed to speak and attack in public."

Response to the challenges

Superintendents have so many challenges that finding the answers to those challenges is often a daunting task. Superintendents were more likely to talk about the challenges than the celebrations. Research Question 2. How are superintendents responding to the challenges? The category emerged as the theme celebrated accomplishments. The responses in this section were limited, but enthusiastic.

Celebrated Accomplishments

Superintendents had a variety of ways that they were celebrating

accomplishments, and some were based upon building new schools, handling difficult situations and another was using place based learning. Superintendents were pleased when they saw the results of their hard work and leadership. One superintendent was pleased with the increases in student performance. "I think at this time, probably student performance on the WyCAS, kids that have done well on that. Our middle school had the biggest increase in performance in the state." Another superintendent was pleased that the district changed to a focus on improvement: "You know, we were one of those districts that did the paperwork, sent it to the state for accreditation and none of it made a difference in the classroom. We finally got everyone to understand that we need to be data driven. We need to be doing all of this stuff like accreditation, NCA and the whole process for the sake of kids. I mean for the sake of us being an excellent school." A photograph shows a reading chart with hundreds of books and a race between teachers and students to see who would have the most at the end of the school year. Students and teachers were taking responsibility for becoming better readers.

The *Brown Center Report on American Education* (2003), rural schools are generally performing quite well, scoring above average in most cases. According to this report, it is impossible for these data to tell us much about why rural student do so well. Almost all of the test score advantage was lost when regression analyses controlled for schools' racial composition and percentages of student in poverty. A slight slippage in rural students' scores from fourth to twelfth grades shows up in previous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in reading as well as other subjects. Rural students appear to do better on achievement tests in elementary school than in high school.

School dropout rates for grades seven through twelve and diploma graduation rates for twelfth graders provide a readily assessable measure of an important student outcome: staying in school and earning a diploma. In the literature review, Funk and Bailey (1997) indicated that the median high school completion rate in Nebraska is 85 percent. They noted that the probability of graduating from high school increases as school size decreases. High school completion is highest in the smallest schools. Districts with 600-999 students have the lowest rate at 80 percent, and those with fewer than 100 have the highest completion rate at 97 percent. The researchers noted that one should consider that the negative impact of a high school dropout goes far beyond school cost inefficiencies that result from schooling children who do not graduate. Certainly failing to graduate from high school is associated with a number of other social and economic costs such as increased need for public assistance, lower rates of labor force participation, lower wages and an increased likelihood of incarceration.

One superintendent was proud of the success that he had bringing the community into the school. "I find that a lot of rural people are intimidated by school. So you have to get them into schools and make them a part of it. You build on strengths. You know, up north trapping and fishing is their strength and you invite them in to teach students how trap a muskrat or deer or how to tan a moose hide, and there is a learning that can take place." Across rural America, according to the literature review, youth are responding to some of the most pressing issues in their communities. In partnership with adults, young people have created day care centers, saved wetlands, gathered oral histories from elders, established entrepreneurial businesses that bolster local economies and testified before town councils and state legislatures on numerous civic issues. Their powerful hopes have the potential to strengthen rural communities and their schools (Cervone, nd).

The Alaskan Rural Systemic Initiative has made significant gains in student achievement on the CAT-5 math test using place-based learning compared to schools who are not engaged in the practice. Alaskan Rural Systemic Initiative helped create curricula that focused on connecting indigenous and western cultures. One particular school had the lowest test scores in its district and a large percentage of its children between the ages of 12 and 16 were not attending school. After implementation every child began attending school, and test scores rose dramatically. In fact after only a few years of implementation, the schools' third graders received the highest scores statewide on the Alaska Benchmark test for third grade, and six seniors passed all three sections of the High School Graduation Qualifying exam. Some students raised their reading level by more than a year in only five months. The principal attributed the change in attitude and achievement to place-based learning.

In another community where logging is an important part of the local economy, 125 students conducted a snag survey over four years with the Oregon Department of Forestry. The term "snag" is used by loggers and refers to trees and stumps to revitalize animal habitat. In this community, students helped to calculate how many trees and stumps remained in logged areas. After measuring, students logged their finding into an Oregon Department of Forestry mapping and data program. What the students learned about measurement and calculation allowed them to come within a tenth of the actual measurements recorded by professional surveyors (Loveland, 2003).

According to my field notes, one Wyoming district had a couple of powerful place-based projects. One project was a joint study with the U.S. Forest Service and an Environmental Science class. The study was a paired plot forage utilization study that determines the amount of annual plant growth consumed by livestock and wildlife, and determines which animal utilized the grass and measures the quantity. The forage in both grazed and un-grazed plots are clipped and weighed prior to and following the grazing use periods of cattle and elk. The clipped forage is then weighed and compared, grazed vs. un-grazed, to determine the percentage and amount of use by each species. Students climbed into a 4-wheel drive school SUV and headed through the mountains to an area that was being measured. A photograph reflects a group of 7 high school students, bundled in heavy coats, gloves and hats, from a tiny school giving me a thumbs-up, all with huge smiles. In the background is beautiful view of the mountains and patches of wildflowers. It was apparent that the students were passionate about their work, proud that they were doing something that was meaningful and helpful to the forest service and developed memories that would last a life time.

Another project involved the controversial wolf population in the Yellowstone ecosystem. Students started with a research question and found ways to answer the question through surveys that went to local district patrons that asked if they had seen any wolves, had they experienced any damage to livestock because of the wolves, and what their opinions were about the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone. The study involved interviewing local ranchers, wildlife advocates, scientists, and rangers from the National Park. The teacher noted that one student in particular who had been failing her class and several others who had deplorable attendance records, made a drastic turn around when their passion was tapped into with this project. The failing student was a true cowboy. He loved the land and loved to rodeo, but hated school. When surveys came in, he was the first to read them and record the data. He spent hours in her classroom working on the project. A photograph of this student shows him putting pins into a topographical map on locations where according to surveys

from area residents, wolves had been sighted. While this is only one story, there are many others like it. When learning is contextualized into something that is familiar and their learning has a purpose, student engagement and achievement will soar.

Data Analyses Summary

This study examined the challenges of the rural superintendent and how rural superintendents were responding to these challenges. In order to answer the two research questions, I incorporated three qualitative methods of inquiry or research tools: focus groups, interviews, and observation. The data collected were analyzed to find emerging categories and themes. The data were then triangulated to confirm or find differences among the categories and themes from the different data collection methods. These categories and themes were then synthesized and used to discuss findings for each research question.

Chapter 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 6 presents the results, implications for actions, and recommendations for further study. The chapter includes a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover how rural superintendents view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing external demands and changes in community demographics. The two main research questions were:
1) What are the challenges of the superintendency in a rural Wyoming school district?
2) How are superintendents responding to the challenges?

The methodological design of this study was a multi-case study format to create portraits of five rural superintendents, the challenges they face, and their responses to those challenges. The three research tools included a focus group, interviews, and observation. The results supported the findings and conclusions.

The units of data from focus groups, interviews, and observations were coded, analyzed, and then sorted into categories for each of the two research questions. I then organized the data in each category and reorganized within the categories. This analysis of the data resulted in categories and themes for each research question. I reviewed the data a final time to make sure that all of the data were represented accurately within the categories and themes for each research question. Finally, I made a comparison with findings from the review of literature to determine which categories and themes were supported or not supported in the literature.

The data from the analyses fell into five themes: declining enrollment, isolation, board and community relations, data-driven instruction, and rural vs. urban. The participants in the interviews and in the focus group had much more to say about the challenges than what they were doing to address the challenges. The superintendents were most proud of changes they had made to improve instruction in their districts. The challenges involved professional development in the context of isolation; declining enrollment and closing schools; rural districts vs. urban districts and federal mandates; rural vs. urban and school facilities; rural vs. urban and serving in multiple roles; rural vs. urban and state bureaucracy and finally, as a response to the challenges; celebrated accomplishments.

Conclusions

What are the challenges to the superintendency in rural Wyoming? Rural superintendents have a very difficult and sometimes thankless job. Besides lower salaries than their urban and suburban counterparts, rural superintendents have even more challenges with the depth of accountability at the state and federal levels. Furthermore, sometimes there is even a lack of respect for positions in rural schools. The upcoming sections draw conclusions about a) declining enrollment; b) school buildings; c) political issues; d) accountability; e) civility; f) responding to challenges.

Declining Enrollment

Declining enrollment is a serious problem all over the country. Declining enrollment translates into declining population in rural America. Massive depopulation is the result of depressed farm economies and declining birth rates. Farm families are no longer able to rely on farm income for their livelihood. Many are moving to cities in search of work. Declining enrollment often results in closing of schools that in turn, causes a loss of community life. Superintendents feel a sense of guilt for having to close schools. They are well aware that the community will probably never recover and be a viable community again. Some of the school closings result from the replacement of inadequate facilities.

School Buildings

School facilities across the country are aging. When Wyoming's School Facility Commission visits the community, district patrons are often on edge wondering if it is going to close their local school. The commission is charged with updating the aging infrastructure of the Wyoming schools based on a formula for equity and adequacy. Unfortunately, local patrons have very little say in the process and are often angered by the loss of local control.

Political Issues

There are serious political issues in rural communities. Loss of a school is one of many. As declining population looms over a rural community, any challenge seems to quickly cause assumptions to be made, tempers to fly, and finger pointing. Rural superintendents are often the brunt of emotional abuse. If information is incorrect, the relationship between citizens and the school and specifically the superintendent is challenged further.

Accountability

As a result of federal involvement in education and the accountability that came with it, the Wyoming Department of Education has added to the challenges that rural superintendents face by adding bureaucratic constraints. It seems that the expectations for accountability and the processes for measuring accountability are the same in all districts across the state whether the district has 13,000 students or 90 students. In general, the superintendents believed that the state is too bureaucratic and local control was reserved for states other than Wyoming. Two of the five superintendents had served as superintendents in other states. One superintendent who had served in another state noted that if he could change anything, it would be to lessen the bureaucracy. The paperwork for the state is overwhelming. The state expects the same kind of people, positions, and processes, no matter what size school. At the federal level and at the state level, accountability is a burden for rural schools. One size does not fit all, and revisions that make sense for rural schools would certainly be welcomed across the state and across the country.

Civility

The superintendents all talked about dysfunction, communication challenges and outright emotional abuse. This lack of civility in these communities needs to be a concern for members of every board of education. Additional training is critical for board members to protect the superintendent and to provide leadership within the community to respond to the challenges. Rural schools need to have stability within their administrative teams. Without this stability, systems and processes collapse, and each new administrator must rebuild these unless the administrative team has been in place numerous years and has systematized the process. It is entirely possible that the lack of civility is somehow connected to declining populations, depressed economy, and hopelessness.

Responding to challenges

Responding to the challenges proved more difficult for superintendents than naming the challenges. Research has suggested that small rural schools have a number of advantages for academic achievement including a higher graduation rate. Distance learning offers the promise of very limited curricula offerings to almost infinite offerings. These extend to both students, and also to teachers who are seeking professional development opportunities or advanced degrees. Place-based learning is another powerful tool that can strengthen engagement by contextualizing the curriculum around community life. The data indicated that superintendents respond to the challenges in a variety of ways. Data-driven instruction was one of the ways that superintendents felt that they were really making a difference. The superintendents were pleased when they saw noticeable results in student achievement data. One superintendent talked about authentic pedagogy and utilizing the community as a focus of study. This superintendent knew that this was good practice but indicated that he was not as successful implementing this in Wyoming.

Implications for Action

The extensive information shared about the challenges of the superintendency in rural schools demonstrates the urgent need for action. The upcoming section describes some work that has potential for making a difference for rural schools. The implications for action include a) professional development; b) place-based learning; c) university superintendent preparation programs; d) No Child Left Behind; and e) avoid consolidation.

Professional Development

There is a need for additional professional development to assist rural schools in capitalizing on the strength of being rural and small. It appears that much of the practice in the schools is not much different from what might be seen in a larger community, except the numbers of children is smaller. Rural schools, though isolated, have a unique opportunity to share in relevant professional development activities. This can easily be done by sharing with neighboring districts or through district education. Professional development of this sort should be offered with a menu of options to enable rural districts to maintain local control but benefit from low cost options of sharing.

Place-based learning

I wondered why the superintendent was unable to implement authentic pedagogy in Wyoming when it was successful other places? Authentic pedagogy or sometimes called place-based learning, community based education, or pedagogy of place is one of the most promising practices in rural education. Using this mode of learning, students become community developers, gain a deeper understanding of what it takes to live in a democratic society, and revitalize community life. The process is as simple as contextualizing the curriculum around the community. Students who benefit from authentic pedagogy are more engaged and are able to deepen their understanding of the concepts they are learning because it is contextualized into something that they know and understand, their community.

University Superintendent Preparation Programs

Superintendent preparation programs, particularly in rural states such as Wyoming, need to prepare professionals for the multiple roles that rural superintendents must manage. Perhaps superintendent preparation programs should include coursework that specifically addresses educational politics. In addition, superintendents need to be prepared to lead the community and the school in a manner that advances rather than destroys the community. With declining populations and out migration of young people, rural superintendents have a unique opportunity to help sustain the community through economic development activities and through youth entrepreneurship within the curriculum. Youth vitality and commitment to the community by the youth are two aspects of economic development that the school must play a part in. Place-based learning offers promise to rural schools that is not as easily utilized in larger schools. When superintendents support place-based learning activities they might notice significant improvements in both engagement and achievement of their student body. These are among the few initiatives that have made an impact on depressed rural communities. Superintendents need to focus on what rural schools do well and move toward that end.

No Child Left Behind

Rural schools and communities are fragile and vulnerable. It seems that challenges like No Child Left Behind (2001) further crush the well being of the rural school. Accountability in rural schools should be based upon individual performance and not based upon what a group or subgroup can do. Rural teachers and administrators are unable to escape accountability with their local partners. Confidence intervals are helpful, but accountability must be adjusted. No Child Left Behind (2001) was developed to address problems in urban schools. Perhaps one size does not fit all, and the law needs careful revision to respond to the unique needs of rural schools in a more appropriate manner.

Avoid Consolidation

Consolidation destroys communities. No Child Left Behind (2001) presents serious challenges and is often expensive and unfair to rural schools. Public officials must realize that remote rural schools are not going to benefit from the economy of scale and need to be funded accordingly. The emphasis on accountability has

channeled already limited funding into mechanisms to show accountability that are costly and often inappropriate to small cohorts of students. The law needs to be changed to lessen the stringent reporting requirements.

No child should have to endure more than a one hour bus ride. Consolidation efforts must consider distances that children have to travel to attend school. There is need to upgrade school buses with rest room facilities, and children should be provided a healthy snack on the way to school and on the way home. This could easily be provided through school lunch programs. Distance education programs assist rural schools in operating a comprehensive curriculum. Rural administrators must be flexible and creative in managing their distance education program. Many distance technologies are under-utilized because administrators find it difficult to coordinate schedules.

Recommendations for Further Research

Superintendents need to focus on what they do well and move toward that end. Rural places are good places, places where all citizens share a voice in what happens, places where schools are the center of community life, where every child is known by name, and where the neighborhood is a laboratory for applied learning and for democracy in action. If rural superintendents are ready to accept the challenge, perhaps rural schools can be a source of hope and possibility for a better tomorrow in our public schools.

Additional research needs to be done to discover the best practices for small, rural communities; managing change in rural communities to prevent dysfunction and incivility; and best practices for rural states in meeting the needs of a large number of small rural schools. Another area that would be worth examining is the effect of No Child Left Behind (2001) on small rural schools and determining if it has increased consolidation.

The rural superintendency is one of the most difficult jobs in education. The research for rural education is limited, and there is much to learn to help turn around the plight of rural America. Schools, after all, are the last bastions of democracy and the opportunity to participate and learn about democracy is most easily accessible in a small rural school. To echo the words of Wendell Berry (1987), if change is to happen in education, it might well happen in the periphery in the places inhabited by the citizens of a vulnerable locale known as the rural community. At the center of such places you will often find a school. A positive relationship between the school and the community is the most significant key to the survival of both. If those who argue that change will likely occur in the margins or on the periphery are correct, perhaps rural schools offer a sense of hope and possibility for a better tomorrow in the world of public education.

Appendix A

June 2, 2008

Dr. Roger Wilmot
Institutional Review Board
Laramie, WY

Dear Dr. Wilmot:

I am writing to you and the Institutional Review board to request permission to use data from a previous study whose chief investigator was Dr. Robin Dexter, an assistant professor of Educational Leadership. A request was written from Dr. Dexter to the Institutional Review Board on October 22, 2004 and the research was conducted on November 18, 2004. The title of the study was "Voices from the Field, Phase 3: Re-conceptualizing the Rural School District."

I have approached Dr. Dexter about using the data for the purpose of my own dissertation entitled. "How do Wyoming rural superintendents respond to and view the challenges brought about by increasing external performance demands on their schools." Dr. Dexter has agreed to allow me to use this data.

In addition, as a follow-up to the focus group I conducted interviews with some of the participants and I would like to extend the focus group to include these interviews. I have attached a copy of the research participant letter for the interviews.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Surface

Appendix B

To: Institutional Review Board
        Roger Wilmot, Chair
From: Robin Dexter
Date: October 22, 2004
Re: Research proposal

Project Title
Voices from the Field, Phase 3: Re-conceptualizing the Rural School District
Superintendency

Principal Investigator
Robin Dexter
Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership
McWhinnie 307
University of Wyoming
Phone: 766-4006
Email: rdexter@uwyo.edu

Project timelines
The data will be collected in November of 2004. The data will then be analyzed and
described with a projected completion date of February 2005.

Purpose
The purpose of the research study is two-fold. Initially the study will be to find out
how superintendents from rural settings describe their perceptions of and experiences
with the challenges of the superintendency in rural school districts in Wyoming.
These results will be folded into a study being conducted nationally that addresses
how the areas of social justice, democratic community, and school improvement are:
(a) understood by current superintendents with in present high stakes accountability
environments in educational settings, (b) how professors of educational leadership
programs might use the findings to better connect theory to practice, and (c) how the
scholarly community and practitioner perspectives might facilitate further dialogue
between these two different educational groups.

Description of sample
Participants will include practicing superintendents in the state of Wyoming from
school districts with a student enrollment of less than 700. The focus group will
include a minimum of 5 participants.

Procedure
Twenty-one superintendents will be contacted by email and invited to participate in a
90-minute focus group to be held in conjunction with the WY State Board of
Education Conference in Casper, WY, on November 18, 2004. The email list was
developed using the Wyoming Education Directory listing of superintendents and
enrollment data. Participation will be strictly voluntary. The investigators anticipate
10 attendees for the focus group. Participants will be informed that there are focus
groups like this one being conducted in different states to collect data for a national
study. A statement will be handed to each participant stating the purpose of the study,
as well as, contact information of the investigators. The primary means of data
collection for this study will be through tape recording and transcribing of
participants' responses to the focus group questions. Data from the focus group
interviews will be saved in a Word document with personally identifiable information
removed. The audio tape(s) will later be transcribed for data analysis of emerging
themes. After the transcription has been completed, the tape(s) will be destroyed,
leaving only the transcription copy.

Identification of Subjects

Focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All of the results will be kept confidential and stored in a secure, locked place by the investigator. Only the principal investigator will have access to the actual tape recording of the focus group interview, along with the individual demographic forms of participants. Once the tapes are transcribed, personally identifiable information will be removed and demographic information transferred to the transcription, the tape and the demographic sheets will be destroyed. The transcription will be sent to Dr. Gary Ivory (principal investigator of the national study) as a Word document for the national project investigators to have access the data collected. All participants' names will be substituted with participant 1,2,3, etc., to ensure confidentiality, and results and information from this study will not be released in any way that may reveal the identification of participants. Participants in this study will be informed that this is a collaborative research project and that their data will be shared with other colleagues and researchers only for analysis purposes to identify common themes.

Benefits

The benefits of this project are that this study promotes collaborative research among professors and practicing superintendents across the nation. The study involves promoting, sponsoring, and disseminating research on the essential problems of schooling and leadership practice. The results will be used to positively influence local, state, and national educational policy. The information resulting from this study will be of value to superintendents in small rural school districts as well as the scholarly community associated with preparation of superintendents.

Risks

The risks involved with participation in this study are minimal. Participation is voluntary and every precaution will be taken to ensure that focus group participants feel at ease and know that at any time during the interview they may request that the tape recorder be turned off due to sensitive information being shared. Additionally, since superintendents will be representing their views, and not those of their school districts, participants will be instructed verbally to maintain the confidentiality of what is being said in the focus group. The study is not seeking institutional data, but rather data from individual superintendents.

Appendix C

The consent form to participate in the focus group, demographic information sheet, opening speech, and focus group protocols are attached for review.

Consent Form

1. **Title:**
   Voices From the Field, Phase 3: Re-conceptualizing the Rural School District Superintendency

2. **Investigators:**

   Robin Dexter, Asst. Professor
   University of Wyoming
   Dept. of Ed. Ldrshp. #3374
   1000 E. Univ. Ave.
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   Jeanne Surface, Superintendent
   Park Co. Sch. District #16
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   William Berube, Professor
   University of Wyoming
   Dept. of Ed. Ldrshp. #3374
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   307.766.6825

3. **Purpose**
   The purpose of the research study is two-fold. Initially the study will be to find out how superintendents from rural settings describe their perceptions of and experiences with the challenges of the superintendency in rural school districts in Wyoming. The results will be folded into a study being conducted nationally that addresses how the areas of social justice, democratic community, and school improvement are: (a) understood by current superintendents with in present high stakes accountability environments in educational settings, (b) how professors of educational leadership programs might use the findings to better connect theory to practice, and (c) how the scholarly community and practitioner perspectives might facilitate further dialogue between these two different educational groups.

4. **Procedures**
   The primary means of data collection for this study will be through tape recording and transcribing of participants' responses to the focus group questions. Data from the focus group interviews will be saved in a Word document with personally identifiable information removed. The audio tape(s) will later be transcribed for data analysis of emerging themes. After the transcription has been completed, the tape(s) and individual demographic sheets will be destroyed, leaving only the transcription copy.

5. **Risks**

The risks involved with participation in this study are minimal. Participation is voluntary and every precaution will be taken to ensure that focus group participants feel at ease and know that at any time during the interview they may request that the tape recorder be turned off due to sensitive information being shared. Additionally, since superintendents will be representing their views, and not those of their school districts, participants will be instructed verbally to maintain the confidentiality of what is being said in the focus group. The study is not seeking institutional data, but rather data from individual superintendents.

6. **Benefits**

The benefits of this project are that this study promotes collaborative research among professors and practicing superintendents across the nation. The study involves promoting, sponsoring, and disseminating research on the essential problems of schooling and leadership practice. The results will be used to positively influence local, state, and national educational policy. The information resulting from this study will be of value to superintendents in small rural school districts as well as the scholarly community associated with preparation of superintendents.

7. **Data Collection and Storage:**

All of the results will be kept confidential and secure and only the people working wit h the study will see your data. The tape(s) will be destroyed after the transcription has occurred and any transcriptions with personally identifiable information on them will be destroyed.

8. **Contact Information:**

For related problems or questions regarding our rights as a subject please contact one of the investigators listed under number 2 of this consent form.

9. **Consent statement:**

I have read the preceding information describing this pilot study. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am 18 years of age or older and freely consent to participate. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant:

_____ Date: _____

Signature of Lead Investigator:

_____ Date: _____

Appendix D.

Focus-Group Questions

Opening Question:	Each of you please tell me who you are, where your district is, and one of your interests outside school.
Transition Question:	Think back to an experience with school leadership that made a strong impression on you, either positive or negative. Please share it with us.
Key Questions:	Superintendents talk about doing what's best for students. Tell me about your experiences with that.
Key Questions:	What has "No Child Left Behind" meant for you as a leader in education?
Key Questions:	There is a piece of paper in front of you. Write an answer to this question and then we'll share our responses with one another: What does it mean that other people want to have a voice in decision making?
Key Questions:	What strategies work to maximize the advantages of being a rural superintendent?
Key Questions:	What are the challenges specific to the rural superintendent? Specifically issues related to equity and knowledge base
Key Questions:	What resources are available to support the rural superintendent?
Key Questions:	What responsibilities are specifically related to the rural superintendent? Community relations – economic development-declining enrollment-
Key Questions:	How can IHE support the rural superintendent? Knowledge base-current and future best practices
Ending Questions: Summary question	Moderator gives a two- to three-minute summary of the major issues covered and then asks, "How well does that capture what was said here?"
Ending Question: All things considered question	Of all the issues we discussed here today, which one is most important to you?
Ending Question: Final Question	Is there anything about educational leadership that we should have talked about but did not?

Appendix E.

Research Participant letter for the Interviews

Dear

I request permission to include you in a study entitled *Discovering how rural superintendents view and respond to the challenges brought about by increasing external demands and changes in community demographics.* This study will examine phenomena of how superintendents view and respond to challenges.

This study is being conducted with the direction and approval of my Doctoral Committee at the University of Wyoming. The study is part of the requirements for a University of Wyoming doctoral program.

Your permission to include you in this study would be very much appreciated. You have the right to withdraw your permission at any tine without penalty. The procedure for the study involves confidential interview with superintendents. There is no compensation for participating in the interviews. Your name and your school will be withheld and responses will remain confidential.

Please sign the brief form below and return in the self-addressed, stamped envelope enclosed. If you have any questions regarding the study or would like more information, please contact me at (402) 934-5311 or Dr. Bill Berube at 307-766-6825. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in the study, please contact Dr. Roger Wilmot, Chair of the University of Wyoming Institutional Review Board 307-766-5320.

Sincerely yours,

Jeanne Surface   Dr. Bill Berube
Doctoral Candidate   Professor of Ed.
Leadership
Email: surface1980@cox.net   Email: Berube@uwyo.edu

Signed_____
Date_____

Appendix F.

List of questions for Superintendent interviews

1) What is your most celebrated accomplishment while serving this district? what are you most proud of?

2) What has caused you to be the most angry? Frustrated? Have you considered leaving? Lately?

3) How is your district affected by the isolation? How have you overcome this?

4) If there was something that you could change what would it be?

5) What have you done to help your district address the financial challenges of a small district?

6) First, are you from this area? If not, where are you from originally? How are you handling small town politics? What has been the most challenging?

7) What changes have you made in your district in response to NCLB ? Do you think that these changes have been positive for your district?

8) What would make your job more manageable?

9) How have you addressed the challenges of being rural/remote that would be helpful to other rural Superintendents?

10) What important piece of advice would you give a new Superintendent going to a very small district?

11) What challenges have you met that you know are inappropriate but cannot be resolved because of state or federal mandates? How have you addressed these? And have you ever felt caught between the board and the sate?

12) Is there anything you would like to add?

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