

# Getting Off the List: Leadership, Learning, and Context in Two Rural, High-Needs Schools

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## Abstract

In this article, we report findings from two cases of rural, high-needs elementary schools in the Southeastern United States that successfully improved learning outcomes for their students. As illustrated by our findings, a combination of effective teacher professional development, focused student learning initiatives, and enhanced community and family involvement contributed to the removal of the schools from priority and below average designations. In addition to illustrating the leadership practices that positively influenced improvement efforts in these two schools, and expanding the nascent body of scholarship on context-responsive leadership, our findings serve as a starting point for a larger project centered on the nexus of school leader agency in increasingly diverse cultural contexts.

## Keywords

school leadership, context, rural education, high-needs elementary schools, accountability

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The population of school-aged students in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse due to internal demographic shifts and global population migrations. Evidence of these demographic shifts can be found in rural communities amid challenging geographic, economic, historical, and social conditions. For instance, many of the rural schools located along the Interstate-95 corridor in South Carolina have endured long-standing and legally documented economic inequities. Currently, many of these schools, and others like them, face serious teacher recruitment and retention as well as leadership sustainability problems. Notwithstanding these challenges, such high-needs schools are still held accountable for student outcomes on standardized evaluations.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2013), approximately 30% of public schools in the United State are rural. One of the challenges associated with rural and high-needs schools is recruiting and retaining experienced leaders (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). As such, understanding how school leaders are able to overcome the challenges of leading rural, high-needs schools is a matter of equity for a large portion of America's students that requires further investigation (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017).

Many leadership scholars have examined effective practices in high-needs schools since the publication of the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) and the emergence of the effective schools' movement. Some of the more recent scholarship has emanated from international research networks such as the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP; <https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/>) and the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN; <https://isldn.weebly.com>). Scholars within these networks have sought to identify generalized, yet nationally relevant, effective school leadership practices (Gurr, Drysdale, & Goode, in press). Although numerous scholars associated with the ISSPP and the ISLDN have conducted research on effective leadership in high-needs schools, few of these scholars have focused specifically on successful leadership in rural contexts, where leaders encounter unique affordances and challenges (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013).

In this article, we report the findings of two case studies of successful leadership in high-needs, rural elementary schools in South Carolina. The case studies provide evidence of effective school leadership practices that led to one school being removed from the state's list of priority schools, the lowest performing schools, and the other improving from its rating of "below average." The findings contribute to the extant literature on effective school leadership and further an understanding of how school principals draw on their own knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead in contextually responsive ways. The cases also serve as a first step in a larger project aimed at understanding the role of school leader agency in addressing the unique contextual challenges encountered by educators in high-needs schools. The larger project draws on Bourdieu's (1977) notion of agency, structure, and habitus and the ISLDN study methodology to answer two overarching research questions: (1) How do principals and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in

high-needs schools? and (2) How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?

## Literature Review

In the following section of our article, we discuss the literature related to South Carolina's accountability context and effective leadership for rural, high-needs schools. We then discuss the role of context in successful school leadership using our conceptual lens of context-responsive leadership (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2009, 2011). After describing our methods, we present findings from the cases of Peach Tree Elementary School (PTES) and Station Elementary School (SES). We conclude our article with a discussion of how the school leaders were able to successfully improve their educational outcomes and ratings in contextually responsive ways.

### *Neoliberal Policies, Economic Challenges, and South Carolina's Rural Schools*

In recent decades, neoliberal policies with their emphasis on open market competition and individual responsibility have dominated economic and education policies in the United States. These policies can be seen in *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*, the persistent criticism of schools and their leaders in the media, and externalized accountability mandates. State policy makers supportive of federal policies like *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* argue that schools need higher standards and evaluation measurements of quality as determined by their students' performances on standardized tests. From a policy perspective, individual leaders are responsible for the quality of their educational institutions.

South Carolina has received national attention for the challenges associated with its public education system. These challenges are exemplified by a 21-year school funding court case (*Abbeville County School District et al. v. the State of South Carolina*) where the state's supreme court ruled that the plaintiffs, rural, and impoverished school districts were not "minimally adequately funded" as required by law but later dismissed its own ruling when certain judges were replaced, leaving the districts uncertain of their futures (Tran, 2018). For many years, the rural school districts associated with this case, and particularly those located along the I-95 corridor, which is often referred to as the "Corridor of Shame" (Ferillo, 2005), have struggled with inadequate funding and declining support from local governments due to low property values, plant closings, and diminishing tax bases. The Corridor is also home to eight of the state's poorest counties (Ferillo, 2005) and to *Briggs v. Elliott*, one of the cases consolidated by the U.S. Supreme Court into *Brown v. Board of Education* (Tran, 2018).

In South Carolina, schools are rated based on student performance on annual state assessments of English-language arts, math, science, and social studies. Schools receive ratings of unsatisfactory, below average, average, good, and excellent. The lowest performing schools are designated as priority schools. Priority schools receive

support from the State Department of Education in the form of teacher professional development, technical assistance, and supplemental funding. Schools are removed from the priority school list when student achievement improves to the point where the schools are no longer among the lowest performing in the state. Schools that receive a rating of below average are those that are in jeopardy of not meeting the state standards for progress.

### *Effective Leadership in High-Needs Schools*

School leadership is widely regarded as critical to the organization and operation of effective schools. Recent support for this recognition can be seen in Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which affords states greater flexibility in supporting the development of school leaders. (Herman et al., 2017; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). At the heart of school effectiveness and school improvement research conducted over the past four decades (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Lezotte, Edmonds, & Ratner, 1974) is the idea that schools and school leaders can indirectly transform inputs from the external environment, including parental involvement, to outputs, most recently defined by externalized evaluations and formative accountability. In other words, effective schools are considered effective organizations conceptualized as open systems (Scott, 2015).

Principals in effective schools have been found to develop a clear school mission, monitor student progress, protect instructional time from interruptions, and maintain high standards for teachers and students (e.g., Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Murphy, Weil, Hallinger, & Mitman, 1985). This body of work led to an emphasis on instructional leadership practices, such as the supervision of teaching and building school culture, that indirectly affect student outcomes (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

Much of the foundational instructional leadership literature characterized the principal as a single, directive leader of curricular and instructional matters. Subsequent studies, conducted in the 1990s in the wake of policy shifts toward decentralization, supported a greater emphasis on shared or collaborative approaches (e.g., Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003). For instance, Leithwood and Riehl (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of effective school and leadership studies over three decades and identified four core leadership practices that were necessary but not sufficient for effectiveness in any context: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. More recently, scholars have illustrated how principals can influence student learning indirectly by enacting practices that enhance teaching effectiveness (Heck & Hallinger, 2014) as well by combining both instructional and transformational leadership practices in accord with the school context to improve and sustain school effectiveness (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016).

## Leadership in Context

Building on the work of Leithwood and Riehl (2005), numerous scholars have since noted the importance of school leaders adapting the core leadership practices to suit their contextual environments (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018; Klar & Brewer, 2013, Klar & Brewer, 2014; Okilwa & Barnett, 2018; Pashiardis, Brauckmann, & Kafa, 2018). Some of this research has illustrated the contextual factors that influence leadership practices. Hallinger (2018) identified six types of school contexts: institutional, community, sociocultural, political, economic, and school improvement. Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) detailed propositions for guiding contextually relevant practices. These propositions included acknowledging and being sensitive to context and flexibility in the application of leadership strategies. Importantly, Clarke and O'Donoghue also highlighted the need for leadership preparation and development activities to enable contextually relevant leadership practices.

Other scholars have reported context-responsive leadership practices at the district level (Bredeson & Klar, 2008; Bredeson et al., 2009, 2011). Importantly, Bredeson and his colleagues (2011) noted that superintendents' leadership practices were "both embedded in and influenced by leadership practices" (p. 2). That is, rather than adapting a particular practice or style, the leaders demonstrated a range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, which they drew upon to meet their unique contextual challenges. These leaders demonstrated an acute sense of contextual literacy, which they utilized to both react to and proactively shape their contexts.

In their analysis of how superintendents acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to lead in context-responsive ways, Bredeson and Klar (2008) developed a multidimensional framework. The framework included five interacting dimensions: personalized role, professional knowledge, purpose, people, and place. Bredeson and Klar found that the superintendents *personalized* their roles in ways that allowed them to maximize their unique backgrounds, values, perspectives, and skill sets. The superintendents drew upon their *professional knowledge* about teaching and learning, politics, and policies to ensure highly effective learning environments were in place for all children. The superintendents brought a clear sense of *purpose* to their work that guided their activities and which they communicated to other stakeholders. They also had a deep understanding of *people* and the importance of developing trusting relationships with others and knew that the work of schools is conducted with and through relationships with others. Lastly, these context-responsive leaders were aware of the *place* in which their practice is situated. That is, they had a thorough understanding of the history, geography, economics, politics, and culture of their settings and the timing of their interventions.

While effective school and district leaders flexibly draw on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead in context-responsive ways, much of the scholarship from effective leadership studies involved analyzing large data sets or national samples from surveys or small studies in urban schools. As a result, there are relatively few studies that provide rich, thick descriptions of successful school leaders' background,

experiences, practices, and internal contexts, what Bourdieu (1990) called *habitus*, or the external contexts, or *field*, in which their practices are enacted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Successful principals in high-needs schools must effectively balance accountability demands with concerns for stakeholders (Peck & Reitzug, 2014). This increased accountability context has also created interest in how school leaders effectively lead school improvement in high-needs schools across national contexts. Scholars associated with the ISLDN have responded to this interest by conducting international comparisons of effective practices in high-needs schools (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018; Murakami, Gurr, & Notman, 2018).

### *International Studies of Effective School Leadership (ISLDN)*

The ISLDN was developed as a joint initiative of the British Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration Society and the University Council for Educational Administration (Baran & Berry, 2015). The initiative aims to significantly contribute to knowledge in the field of educational leadership by facilitating an international comparative study of how those involved in school leadership are supported in their preparation and development as leaders (Barnett & Stevenson, 2011). The project emerged as a result of rising global interest in cross-national school leadership research on school leader preparation and development (Barnett & Stevenson, 2011; Lumby, Crow, & Pashiardis, 2008).

The ISLDN has grown since its inception, and members are currently conducting research in over 20 countries with two areas of focus: leadership in high-needs schools (the lens we use for this study) and leadership for social justice. In the ISLDN, high-needs schools are deemed to be those with one or more of the following attributes: a high percentage of individuals from families with incomes below the poverty line, a high percentage of school teachers not teaching in the content area in which they were trained to teach, a high teacher and/or leader turnover rate, a high percentage of nonnative language speakers, a high percentage of historically and/or socially excluded groups, a high percentage of Indigenous groups, a high percentage of students with learning differences, a lack of access to basic physical infrastructures, and a situational high need based on an event such as a natural or man-made disaster (Baran & Berry, 2015).

The ISSPP was founded approximately 10 years prior to the ISLDN, with similar research designs; both ISLDN and the ISSPP researchers interview key stakeholders with standardized interview protocols to develop multiperspective cases of leadership and learning in schools. Scholars associated with the ISSPP extended the literature on effective school leadership to an international level, examining similarities and differences among the ways principals contribute to school success (see, e.g., Jacobson & Day, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Murakami-Ramalho, Garza, & Merchant, 2010; Ylimaki, Bennett, Fan, & Villasenor, 2012). In reviews of ISSPP (Gurr, 2015) and ISLDN research (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018; Gurr et al., in press), Gurr and his colleagues

identified that effective principals adapted core leadership practices in accord with their school contexts. Importantly, they found, like Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) and Bredeson et al. (2011), that leaders of high-needs schools adapt their leadership practices in contextually responsive ways.

While Gurr and Drysdale's findings affirm previous research on effective school leadership and context-responsive leadership, in particular, it remains necessary to understand better *how* leaders are able to lead in context-responsive ways (Bredeson et al., 2011). Furthermore, and notwithstanding the increased focus on high-needs schools in policy and research, there remains limited research on effective leadership in rural, high-needs schools. This paucity of research on rural school leadership is key, given that leading rural schools entail meeting unique contextual challenges (Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Some of these contextual challenges include geographic isolation (Downes & Roberts, 2018), limited resources (Lock, Budgen, Oakley, & Lunay, 2012), smaller numbers of available teachers and leaders (Downes & Roberts, 2018), and difficulty retaining principals (Halsey & Drummond, 2014). Furthermore, Sullivan, McConney, and Perry (2018) noted that such inequities as teacher and leader shortages can lead to students in rural schools being disadvantaged and that this disadvantage can contribute to lower academic outcomes. As few ISLDN research studies have delved into leadership in rural, high-needs schools with changing demographics, teacher shortages, high leader turnover, and policy pressures to quickly improve academic outcomes, through this study, we seek to contribute to this body of literature.

## **Research Methods**

We employed qualitative methods to develop this multisite case study (Merriam, 2009) in order to understand how (Brooks & Normore, 2015) school leaders respond to the challenges in two rural, high-needs schools. We utilized a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) that featured the use of publicly available data and key informants to identify schools that met the following criteria: (a) public elementary schools, (b) a poverty index at or above the state median, (c) designation as a priority or below average school for at least 2 years, (d) academic success as defined by removal from the priority list or an increase in academic rating, and (e) a principal who had been serving at the school for at least 3 years and was determined to have played a role in the school's improvement process. We selected two schools for our study, PTES and SES. All names used in the study are pseudonyms.

Our data collection methods primarily included semistructured interviews with the principal and teachers as well as focus groups with community members, using protocols adapted from the ISLDN. In connection with the two research questions, the focus of the interview questions was to understand the background of the school, the community, and the story of change at the school, as well as the principals' and other's contributions to leadership and learning at the school.

At PTES, we conducted semistructured interviews (Patton, 2015) with six students, the current assistant principal, current instructional coach, former principal, former assistant principal, and one district administrator. We interviewed the current principal twice. We also conducted one focus group with community members and another focus group with current teachers and staff at the school. At SES, we conducted two interviews with the current principal and district-level administrators (including the school superintendent). We also conducted single interviews with five teachers, a school board member, and the current president of the school improvement council. The interviews and focus groups at both schools were conducted between June and October 2018.

We digitally recorded the interviews and transcribed them in their entirety for analysis. During our first round of coding (Saldaña, 2013), we separated into two teams with each team using open coding to inductively code for preliminary themes. We then met as a whole team to discuss and refine our preliminary themes. Following this, we began a second round of deductive coding based on our agreed upon themes. After another research team meeting to discuss the continued development of the findings, we formed three new research teams, which consisted of pairs of members representing each of the original teams. Each of the three teams focused on one of the research questions and selectively recoded all of the data in relation to their respective research question and developing themes. In the final stage of analysis, the teams compared and contrasted the findings between schools and the context-responsiveness of each principal.

## Findings

In this section, we present the findings of our two cases in relation to each research question. We begin our presentation of the findings with a brief introduction of each school setting. We conclude this article with a discussion of the findings.

### *PTES in Peach Tree School District*

PTES is located in a small, rural town. The per capita household income for the county is US\$22,695 with about 18% of the population living in poverty. Peach Tree has approximately 350 students, 63% African American, 26% White, 5% Hispanic, 5% two or more races, and 1% Asian. The poverty index for the school is approximately 83%.

For many years, Peach Tree's principal, Ms. Traynor, was described as having a strong personality and a solid grasp of curriculum. During Ms. Traynor's time as principal, Peach Tree was viewed by the community as a "solid elementary school" with good leadership. However, in the 2007–2008 school year, the state's rating for the school changed from a consistent "average" to "below average." Midway into the first half of the following school year, Ms. Traynor left for a position at the district office, and a former assistant principal at the school, Mr. Xander, became the



principal. After Xander's second full year at Peach Tree, the school was placed on the priority list due to its poor academic rating. By the end of Xander's fifth year, the rating returned to "average," and PTES was removed from the list. During the fourth year of below average performance, Tina Fuller arrived at PTES as the assistant principal and became the principal 2 years later, when Xander was moved to another school in the district. At the time the study was conducted, Fuller was in her fourth year as principal of PTES.

### *Principal's Contributions to Individual and Organizational Performance at PTES*

Mr. Xander's and Ms. Fuller's contributions to individual and organizational performance centered on increasing the instructional capacity at PTES. This emphasis began with Principal Xander and a refocus on teaching and professional development, precipitated by the System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP), which had been implemented using resources provided by the State Department of Education. Principal Fuller continued this focus on professional development, utilizing her experience as an instructional coach to model instruction and provide teachers with personalized feedback on their instruction.

*Refocusing on teaching.* In the year prior to PTES being identified as a priority school, the district received the grant to implement the TAP system. Principal Xander, Assistant Principal Gomez, and the subsequent Assistant Principal Fuller all credited TAP with having a significant role in the turnaround of PTES. Principal Xander particularly credited TAP with providing structure that refocused the school on teaching through increasing the use of data to inform instruction and by explicitly guiding the professional development for teachers.

*Providing professional development.* Using data to inform instruction occurred in weekly professional learning sessions, referred to as clusters in the TAP system. Xander reported that this format helped them "get restructured" and that it led to the development of a "true" professional learning community. In her first interview, Fuller noted that she believed people "can't do what they don't know how to do. So, you start there." When Fuller arrived at PTES as an assistant principal in 2012, she maintained the focus on professional development through TAP as her primary approach to addressing the teaching and learning challenges. Although she noted that when she arrived she found a culture of teaching as "private practice," she recognized the benefits the weekly embedded professional development provided for teachers in every grade level through the cluster meetings. Fuller also credited Roberts as being "instrumental" in creating a positive "culture and climate" related to teachers' professional development.

*Adopting a coaching approach.* In addition to receiving professional development in grade-level clusters, teachers benefited from more personalized support through modeling and feedback provided by Fuller and Roberts. When Fuller arrived at PTES, she brought over 10 years of instructional coaching experience. She described coaching as a “constant formative process rather than [an] evaluative [one].” She also noted that the previous 2 years of teachers being observed through the TAP system led to them being “used to people coming in and out of their classrooms.”

In the teacher and staff focus group interview, teachers acknowledged Fuller’s role as a coach and the impact it had on their teaching. One teacher, Jillian, noted that “She will listen to you [and] offer any advice. She’s really good at wording things in a way that makes you think about them instead of her really giving you an answer.” Fuller saw modeling and providing feedback as key components of coaching. In her second interview, she noted that she and Roberts would ask teachers “to do things and to try things, but it was never without a model and feedback.”

*Modeling and providing feedback.* In her second interview, Fuller described “the modeling part” as one of the leadership practices that had been particularly important to the success of the school. Rebecca, a kindergarten teacher, reported that Fuller provided the faculty with valuable support when she modeled in the classroom alongside them. She said Fuller “does not mind getting in the classroom, getting her hands dirty with the rest of us. I mean, when she started teaching us more about the guided reading, she would come in and model.”

Providing feedback on teachers’ lessons was part of the TAP observation model utilized by both Xander and Fuller. Principal Xander said he used the postobservation feedback sessions that are part of TAP as opportunities for “real conversations” and providing feedback. He found that over time, teachers became accustomed to the process and started asking for feedback. Xander felt that the process of observing lessons and providing feedback was one of the practices where they got the “biggest bang for the buck” at PTES.

### *Impact of the Internal and External Contexts at PTES*

Internal and external contextual factors greatly influenced individual and organizational performance at PTES. The limited nature of students’ household resources presented a constant challenge to teaching and learning. However, the federal, state, and district resources made available to the school were effectively utilized to ameliorate many of these challenges.

*Limited household resources.* Poverty in the community surrounding PTES contributed significantly to problems experienced by the children in the school. Many students and their families lacked adequate food and other necessities. With the help of community organizations, the school sent home over 100 food bags a week, paid utility bills, and bought coats, shoes, and soap. Many students lived in unstable homes that forced them

to take on adult responsibilities. Unreliable relationships left some children feeling anxious and unsafe. One school member described a student who routinely “shuts down on Fridays because he does not know who will be at his house. He says, ‘I don’t want to go home.’”

The struggles these children faced made the job of the teachers especially challenging. Mr. Smith, the current assistant principal explained, “You could get the best teacher from the best undergrad program, but if they’re not ready to deal with the poverty issues, willing to deal with . . . whatever else comes through that door, I just think . . . it’s a tough ride.” Due to the influence of limited household resources, PTES developed a culture of care in which all the adults worked to make the school a safe place for students. As one of the teachers explained, “We focus a lot on educating the whole child and the social and emotional needs . . . So, if we can meet their social/emotional needs, the academics are going to come along.” Ms. Fuller said it very simply, “We have to nurture them and they have to know that they’re loved, that they’re safe.”

*Federal, state, and district resources.* Resources are critical to a school’s ability to deliver educational services, especially if the school is at risk of academic failure. As a Title 1 School, PTES had supplemental funding from the U.S. Department of Education, and, as a State Priority School, additional funds were also available from the State Department of Education. These resources were utilized to adopt TAP. A teacher described TAP as being focused on good teaching and noted, “bringing that back to the forefront and making us conscious again of those different elements that are best practice kind of pulled us back up, too.”

A variety of factors positively and negatively influenced teaching and learning at PTES. The two factors that appeared to have the greatest influence on teaching and learning were limited household resources and federal, state, and district resources. The faculty and staff at PTES were able to overcome limited household resources and utilize available resources through the collaborative contributions of successive principals. The principals’ contributions were related to refocusing on teaching, providing professional development, adopting a coaching approach, modeling, and providing feedback.

## **Case Study 2: SES**

### *SES in City Edge School District*

SES is a public school nestled in a small, rural town. The per capita household income for the county is US\$20,762 with about 21% of persons in the county reported to be living in poverty. Station elementary has 300 students, about 85% African American, 10% White, 4% Hispanic, and 1% two or more races. The poverty index for the school is approximately 88%. From 2006 to 2012, SES was rated by the state as “below average” meaning the school was in jeopardy of not meeting the standards for progress

toward the 2020 SC Performance Vision. From 2013, the rating improved to “average,” meaning the schooling was meeting the standards. The superintendent of City Edge School District, Mr. King, and the principal of SES, Ms. Bolt, were hired in the summer of 2012.

### *Principal’s Contribution to Individual and Organizational Performances at SES*

Ms. Bolt’s contribution to individual and organizational performance can be summarized with her activities around the mission or purpose, including building relationships with the community and cultivating a family focus within the school. At the same time, and perhaps shaped by the policy discourse, Ms. Bolt developed a competitive environment for academic and extracurricular activity. This sentiment can be seen in her statement, “Station Elementary needed to be the best with academic outcomes and competitions like Robotics.”

*Teaching is their mission.* The teachers, community members, and Ms. Bolt saw working at Station Elementary to be their mission. A school board member established a nonprofit in order to give back to Station Elementary since her children had attended the school. Throughout the interviews, teachers, parents, community members, and the principal identified educating children as an inner core mission or purpose. This collective perspective on the school mission was evident in activities, such as the establishment of the nonprofit organization, and the creation of free libraries, clubs, and other various activities to serve the total child.

*Close-knit community.* One of the elements that fostered student learning at SES was that the school had a close-knit community. The principal shared, “It’s a very small community but everyone knows everybody. Most of the kids that go here, their parents went here. Their grandparents went here.” Not only did the community come to the school, but the community invited the principal and the school to be a part of the town’s events. When Ms. Bolt was invited to speak at local churches, her response was: “Sure, as long as you come to one of our things.” The school has been invited to participate in parades and special holiday functions in the community. At each of these community functions, the greater community interacted with the students, teachers, and the principal.

*Family focus.* Ms. Bolt divided the teachers and the students into houses or “families.” Every member of the school, apart from the principal and assistant principal, were members of a family. The aim of families was team building and developing relationships within the school. The students and adults worked on various academic, team-building, and school spirit goals in accord with Bolt’s vision of educating the total child. A teacher described the process of learning about one’s family when as she said, “The entire school meets in the gymnasium where each student’s family is revealed . . . . The student body and teachers cheer as the student walks to the front and

is welcomed to their family.” In addition to dividing into families, one of the ways faculty and staff educated the total child at SES was by designating 30 min each day for Whatever I Need (WIN). During WIN time, students were able to go to any adult and seek out the assistance they needed.

### *Impact of the Internal and External Contexts at SES*

Despite the high levels of poverty, the district received substantial tax dollars from a large manufacturing facility based in the county. Superintendent King described City Edge School District as a “high-poverty community with substantial resources.” The kinds of resources ensured the schools within the district received support for various initiatives. The district was able to leverage these dollars to provide programs for the schools.

**Resources.** The administrators at SES provided the resources that the students and faculty needed in order to be successful. For example, after the local public library was closed, the school librarian volunteered to open the school library during the summer so students could check out books. She also conducted various summer reading activities, in which parents were also encouraged to participate. The superintendent and district office personnel financially supported SES with initiatives like one-to-one technology, providing every student with a Chromebook. Ms. Bolt described the many resources that were also provided to teachers when she stated, “We’re back at school and everyone walks in the door with US\$250 from our general budget, plus the state gives them an additional US\$250, so it’s US\$500. You’re walking in being able to get the resources that you need.”

**Limited household resources.** Superintendent King described the impact of poverty on SES as follows: “You’ll see lots of parents who are, obviously, struggling financially. And so when you’re struggling financially, you obviously can’t devote the kinds of energy that you or I could in terms of cultivating the academic talents of your children.” In addition to financially supporting the school, the district office personnel built relationships with the administrators and teachers at Station Elementary so that they were working together.

At SES, internal and external resources played a significant factor in the school’s academic improvement. This improvement was due in large part to the contributions of the principal and other stakeholders who developed a close-knit community that reflected a family. Furthermore, this environment supported a strong commitment to teaching as the mission of the school.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Contextually, PTES and SES were similar—small, rural schools with majority minority populations and high-poverty rates. They were both consistently performing below

average on state evaluations. Both had strong, intergenerational ties to the community, especially local churches. Unlike many rural, high-needs schools along the I-95 corridor and elsewhere in South Carolina, both PTES and SES received adequate funding to support student learning. The schools also shared a number of similar challenges rooted in their surrounding rural environments. In response to these challenges, school leaders at PTES and SES focused on providing for students' needs both inside and outside the school environment.

These school and community partnerships illustrated the embeddedness of the schools in their communities as well as the value of the schools to the communities. The principals' understanding of the importance of these relationships and their efforts to nurture and capitalize on them are consistent with other research on successful rural school leaders (Klar & Brewer, 2014) and illustrate a contextual understanding of place (Bredeson et al., 2011; Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). District support of the schools was also key to their success and occurred in the form of funding and assistance with personnel matters. Such consistent and sustainable support provided programs to support change and increased morale at the schools through demonstrating the district's and community's commitment to the success of each school.

There were also a number of similarities and differences in the leader's backgrounds and the ways in which the leaders chose to lead school improvement in their respective schools. In both case studies, culture and climate, a data-informed environment, high expectations, professional learning opportunities, strong relationships, and valuing the total child were key factors in fostering student learning in these high-needs schools. Many of these practices are reflective of core leadership practices (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005) and consistent with findings from Gurr's meta-analyses of ISSPP and ISLDN case studies (Gurr, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2018; Gurr et al., in press).

Positive school cultures were critical to increases in achievement and encompassed the expectations by which group members gauged their performances. Ms. Bolt from SES and Mr. Xander, and later Ms. Fuller, from PTES, took steps to increase expectations in their schools. The higher expectations of teachers, staff, and students combined with the individualized support to assist students are consistent with other successful leaders of high-needs schools (Gurr, 2015). Ms. Bolt, drawing on her personal experience, initiated a competitive environment as a way to increase expectations. Mr. Xander took personal responsibility for the low performance of his school and inspired his teachers to use data and professional development to raise expectations. Ms. Fuller focused on building relationships imbued with high expectations for the students, teachers, and staff. While the schools utilized different methods, they created an atmosphere of high expectations that elicited the best from everyone.

Not surprisingly, instruction was also an important part of student learning in both schools. At SES, "families" served a role similar to that of TAP Cluster Meetings at PTES. These groups created the space to support students and for teachers to use data as a source of reflection, to learn from each other, to align their lessons, and to improve overall instruction. These actions illustrate in part how the leaders adapted

the practice of building instructional leadership capacity to meet the needs of their schools (Day et al., 2016).

Another important aspect that fostered student learning in both cases was the ability of the school leaders and teachers to build relationships with the students, families, and community organizations. Ultimately, those relationships helped create campus cultures that demonstrated caring and love for children and adults. This culture permeated across both schools, and it was evident that parents and others valued the principals' and teachers' efforts to develop "the whole child." Both schools took measures to ensure that the social, emotional, and physical needs of students were met as they recognized that those needs were a precursor to student learning. These actions on the part of the school leaders illustrated how they used their own strong senses of purpose, understandings of place, and commitments to developing trusting relationships to benefit their students (Bredson & Klar, 2008; Gurr & Drysdale, 2018).

One of the major notable differences between the cases was that at PTES curricular improvement was a major part of the school's success, while at SES curriculum was rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, the principals at both schools adopted systematic approaches to using data to inform instruction. At PTES, the principals utilized the structure of TAP to guide instructional improvements. As reported, several stakeholders at PTES found TAP refocused the school on teaching through the regular collection and analysis of classroom data, observations, and weekly cluster meetings that provided a forum for feedback and professional development for teachers. At SES, Principal Bolt collected her own data when she identified an instructional issue. Principal Bolt also created a team that met weekly to discuss instructional matters. During these meetings, they used these data to inform the instructional changes in the school. Some of these changes included supporting teamwork through common planning periods for each grade level. Both sets of actions provided support for teacher development in ways that aligned with the schools' needs and ongoing activities.

The primary differences in the ways the principals enhanced individual and organizational performance in their high-needs schools can be seen the way they drew upon their own experiences, values, and backgrounds (Bredson & Klar, 2008) or habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). At PTES, Principal Xander was known as an effective manager and a disciplinarian. However, he recognized the need to focus on instruction and became an active learner and participant in the implementation of TAP. When Fuller arrived at PTES with her many years of experience as an elementary school teacher and instructional coach, Xander, recognizing her skill set, offered to take responsibility for many of the duties typically delegated to assistant principals. This allowed Fuller to begin working with and alongside teachers in the classrooms immediately upon her arrival. At SES, Principal Bolt drew on her experiences growing up in a family of "preachers and teachers." She saw teaching as her mission and combined that passion with her competitive spirit from years of experience as a former collegiate athlete. Principal Bolt also brought with her previous experiences working in low-income, inner-city schools.

Indeed, the differences in the principals' varied life experiences were apparent in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they drew on to lead change in their respective schools. At PTES, Principal Fuller ensured that decisions made in the school were centered on what was in the best interest of children, even though this was sometimes at the expense of the adults in the building. She also fought the preexisting mind-set that children from low-income households are unable to behave appropriately or excel academically. She strongly emphasized the need to do more than love and care for the students. This approach is reflective of her purpose and the way she personalized her role, Fuller's holding both students and teachers to high expectations, and modeling her expectations for teaching and interacting with students was an approach made possible by her strong instructional background as a former coach. In this way, she adapted her approach for achieving high expectations based on her professional knowledge (Bredeson & Klar, 2008). At SES, Principal Bolt also worked to create a culture of high expectations for student learning. These expectations included a focus on caring for the whole child in an attempt to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of the students. To accomplish this, Principal Bolt instituted a school-wide behavioral and academic support system to ensure this approach to developing and supporting students was instituted throughout her school. The implementation of this initiative was consistent with Bolt's commitment to developing a positive school culture.

As can be seen in these two examples of successful leadership in rural, high-needs schools, there was a marked difference in the principals' leadership practices. At PTES, Principals Xander and Fuller created a collaborative environment for teaching and learning. At SES, Principal Bolt established a competitive climate for students in and out of the classroom. Even though they adopted different leadership approaches, both principals set high expectations and utilized external resources to help students excel. These schools were also successful in part because the principals were able to utilize their understandings of their contexts and to draw on their personal knowledge, skills, and dispositions to adapt core leadership practices to suit their unique circumstances.

These findings have clear implications for leadership practice and preparation. In particular, they affirm the need for effective school leaders to be contextually literate and to utilize this literacy to both respond to and proactively shape their school contexts. While the school leaders in this study demonstrated contextual literacy, sensitivity, and flexibility to their school and community contexts, as suggested by Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017), it is important to consider how and when leaders can be supported in developing these capabilities. As such, these findings also have implications for leadership preparation programs and in-service professional learning opportunities for school leaders. In particular, these implications suggest that leaders need to be encouraged to develop an awareness of contextual factors and their influences on teaching, leading, and learning in their particular contexts. Additionally, practicing and aspiring leaders need to be assisted in developing a range of leadership



practices and approaches in order to lead in accord with their situations (Bredeson et al., 2011).

Although these findings illustrated how educators draw on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead rural, high-needs schools in contextually responsive ways, further research is required to more deeply understand this phenomena. In particular, it is necessary to understand how leadership preparation programs and other providers of professional learning can assist leaders in understanding how their personal and professional experiences influence their leadership practices. It is also important to understand how to assist school leaders in developing the capacity to understand and shape the contextual factors that influence teaching and learning in their unique contextual settings. Although larger scale studies are needed to understand how context-responsive leadership development occurs, so too are smaller scale, in-depth studies that can allow for the explication of the how and why of context-responsive leadership development, such as studies that utilize narrative inquiry and oral history. Future research on this aspect of school leadership is important to conduct to support the development of contextually literate leaders equipped to provide equitable learning opportunities for the children in the 30% of America's schools situated in rural communities.


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