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# education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

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Volume 31 Number 115

October 17, 2023

ISSN 1068-2341

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## Rural District Leaders and Place in the Shadow of the Pandemic: Refining the Conceptualization of Leadership of Place as Caring<sup>1</sup>

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**Citation:** Walls, J., & Zuckerman, S. J. (2023). Rural district leaders and place in the shadow of the pandemic: Refining the conceptualization of leadership of place as caring. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 31(115). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.31.8059>

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the tensions between rural community needs and politicized state-level school closure mandates. District leaders faced competing demands of meeting the basic needs of vulnerable families, supporting the mental health of students and teachers, protecting the health of all community members, and creating new opportunities for learning. This study examines how rural district leaders responded to these challenges through the lens of caring. This lens highlights how district leaders responded to their contexts, as well as their perceptions of student, family, and staff needs in ethically grounded and politically savvy ways. We draw on semi-structured interviews with 12 rural district leaders in eight districts. District leaders in this study described caring as something that is intentionally enacted and identified several aspects that contributed to a caring district: a welcoming culture, taking an interest in individuals, prioritizing wellbeing, developing relationships, extending empathy and grace for people, and helping individuals see themselves

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<sup>1</sup> This study was supported by an American Education Research Association Educational Research Service Grant.

as part of a larger community. Leaders made efforts to set the tone for and model care, build relationships with students, teachers, parents, and community members, and enact servant leadership to support others. We conclude by examining the ways that applying an ethic of care illustrates how leaders identify needs and the strategies they use to respond to those needs in a responsive, place-attuned way.

**Keywords:** rural education; leadership of place; care ethics; district leadership; COVID-19 schooling

### **Líderes de distritos rurales y lugar a la sombra de la pandemia: Refinando la conceptualización del liderazgo de lugar como cuidado**

**Resumen:** La pandemia de COVID-19 aumentó las tensiones entre las necesidades de las comunidades rurales y cierres politizados ordenados por el estado. Los líderes del distrito enfrentaron demandas contrapuestas para satisfacer las necesidades básicas de las familias vulnerables, apoyar la salud mental de estudiantes y maestros, proteger la salud de todos los miembros de la comunidad y crear nuevas oportunidades de aprendizaje. Este estudio examina cómo los líderes de los distritos rurales respondieron a estos desafíos a través de la lente del cuidado. Esta lente destaca cómo los líderes distritales respondieron a sus contextos, así como a sus percepciones de las necesidades de los estudiantes, las familias y el personal de manera éticamente fundamentada y políticamente inteligente. Nos basamos en entrevistas semiestructuradas con 12 líderes de distritos rurales en ocho distritos. Los líderes distritales en este estudio describieron el cuidado como algo que se implementa intencionalmente e identificaron varios aspectos que contribuyeron a un distrito cuidado una cultura acogedora, interesarse por las personas, priorizar el bienestar, desarrollar relaciones, extender la empatía y la gracia a las personas y ayudar a las personas verse a sí mismos como parte de una comunidad más grande. Los líderes se esforzaron por marcar la pauta y modelar de cuidado, construir relaciones con estudiantes, maestros, padres y miembros de la comunidad, y promulgar un liderazgo de servicio para apoyar a los demás. Concluimos examinando las formas en que la aplicación de una ética del cuidado ilustra cómo los líderes identifican las necesidades y las estrategias que utilizan para responder a esas necesidades de una manera cuidada que también sea sensible al lugar.

**Palabras-clave:** educación rural; liderazgo de lugar; ética del cuidado; liderazgo distrital; escolarización durante el COVID-19

### **Líderes distritais rurais e locais à sombra da pandemia: Refinando a conceptualização da liderança do local como cuidado**

**Resumo:** A pandemia de COVID-19 aumentou as tensões entre as necessidades das comunidades rurais e os mandatos politizados de encerramento de escolas a nível estatal. Os líderes distritais enfrentaram exigências concorrentes para satisfazer as necessidades básicas das famílias vulneráveis, apoiar a saúde mental de estudantes e professores, proteger a saúde de todos os membros da comunidade e criar novas oportunidades de aprendizagem. Este estudo examina como os líderes dos distritos rurais responderam a estes desafios através da perspectiva do cuidado. Esta lente destaca como os líderes distritais responderam aos seus contextos, bem como as suas percepções das necessidades dos alunos, famílias e funcionários de formas eticamente fundamentadas e politicamente inteligentes. Baseamo-nos em entrevistas semiestructuradas com 12 líderes distritais rurais em oito distritos. Os líderes distritais neste estudo descreveram o cuidado como algo intencionalmente implementado e identificaram vários aspectos que contribuíram para um distrito solidário: uma cultura acolhedora, interesse pelos indivíduos, priorização do bem-estar, desenvolvimento de relacionamentos, extensão da empatia e graça às pessoas e ajuda aos

indivíduos. vêem-se como parte de uma comunidade maior. Os líderes envidaram esforços para definir o tom e modelar o cuidado, construir relacionamentos com alunos, professores, pais e membros da comunidade e implementar uma liderança servidora para apoiar os outros. Concluimos examinando as formas como a aplicação de uma ética de cuidado ilustra como os líderes identificam as necessidades e as estratégias que utilizam para responder a essas necessidades de uma forma responsiva e também sensível ao local.

**Palavras-chave:** educação rural; liderança do lugar; ética do cuidado; liderança distrital; escola durante o COVID-19

## **Rural District Leaders and Place in the Shadow of the Pandemic: Refining the Conceptualization of Leadership of Place as Caring**

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the tensions between rural community needs and highly politicized state-level school closure mandates. District leaders faced competing demands of meeting the basic needs of vulnerable families, supporting mental health of students and teachers, protecting the health of all community members, and creating new learning opportunities. Educational leaders repeatedly recalibrated logistical and instructional plans amidst the shifting pandemic conditions (Hayes et al., 2021; Lochmiller, 2021; Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020). Like many state-level policy decisions that fail to consider rural districts (Schafft & Jackson, 2010), blanket closure policies were inequitable in communities where infection rates remained lower and where infrastructure limited access to internet and services such as food distribution.

This study examines how rural district leaders responded to these challenges through the lens of caring. In particular, we ask:

- 1) How did district leaders describe their approach to creating a caring environment in the context of COVID-19? And,
- 2) How was district leaders' approach to care shaped by their rural community context and the needs of their district?

Caring is a two-way relationship that responds to expressed or perceived needs (Noddings, 2012) and serves as a vital component of academic and social support for student success and community well-being (Louis et al., 2016). Leaders contribute to caring through individual relationships and by creating a culture of caring (Ryu et al., 2022). This lens highlights how district leaders responded to their contexts, as well as their perceptions of student, family, and staff needs in ethically grounded and politically savvy ways. By focusing on district's leaders' conception of caring, we seek to move beyond previous flat conceptualizations of rural superintendents (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) by examining how district leaders center the multitude of educational and health needs of children and community.

This study occurred during fall of 2020 and winter of 2021 when state policy requirements in the state where the study was conducted mandated social distancing in a way that made it difficult for schools to operate in person. For the most part, leaders in this study were resistant to blanket closure requirements either because spread of COVID-19 in their rural and small communities was low during the time of the study or pressures to reopen schools in person for a variety of reasons. In response, these leaders often sought to navigate a middle path by picking and choosing which state-level policies met their needs. For example, they sought special permission from the state department of education to open in person or navigated social distancing and transmission indicators in ways that allowed some students and adults to return to school. Yet, they also embraced other state policy priorities, particularly state-level guidelines requiring social and emotional learning to be adopted in schools. In both cases, district leaders were responding to the

perceived needs of their students, staff, and broader communities. We argue that examining leadership from a lens of ethical care augments place-based conceptions of leadership by clarifying the ways that leaders identify and respond to contextual needs.

### Leadership in Rural Districts

District context, including geography, organizational scale, and community demographics, shapes the work of district leaders (Glass et al., 2001; Howley et al., 2014). While there is increasing recognition that place is crucial in the roles and actions of school leaders (Hallinger, 2018; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020), our conceptual understanding of district leadership has often remained context-free.

Studies of the rural superintendency tend towards descriptive analysis (e.g., Copeland, 2013) of these district leaders' roles as managers, planners, listeners, communicators, and community activists. This has led to McHenry-Sorber and Budge's (2018) identification of the "the contemporary rural superintendency" as "a practice in need of a theory" (p. 1). The authors trace the evolution of research on rural district leadership across two waves. Worth noting is that these waves of interest co-evolved alongside the changing conceptions of the rural school "problem," shifted from questions of effectiveness to efficiency, and more lately to equity (Biddle & Azano, 2016). As with the conceptual evolution of the rural school "problem," waves of rural superintendent research occurred along with changing conceptualizations of place-based education (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014; Sobel, 2004).

According to McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018), the first wave of rural superintendent research analyzed the beliefs and behaviors of superintendents from an insider/outsider dichotomy that focused on the way that leaders' positioning relative to the community enabled and constrained their approaches to enacting change. The second wave focused on rural superintendents as *leaders of place*, and, more frequently, as *critical leaders of place*. Furman and Gruenewald (2004) coined the term "critical leadership of place" as a power-attuned and activist approach to place-based leadership. They argued that critical leaders of place focused on five practices: shaping the cultural politics of the school, negotiating borders, supporting community-based learning, securing resources, and professional development.

Although this original conception was not limited to rural leadership practice, it was quickly adopted by scholars of rural leadership as well (Budge, 2006). Budge (2006) noted that while rural district leaders were often strongly invested in a place as part of their own identity, they simultaneously saw that place as an obstacle to students' success and flourishing. Critical leadership of place was argued to move beyond a "zone of tolerance" where local values existed in a separate sphere from the professional aspirations of educators to an approach to leadership where professional expectations and local expectations are critically engaged with one another with the aim of improving quality of life (broadly understood) within a community (Budge, 2006, p. 7). Later researchers highlighted the possibilities of rural leadership of place for successfully negotiating the tensions between local desires and external educational mandates (Budge, 2010; Zuckerman et al., 2018), and for practicing activist leadership that is attuned to both social inequities in a place and responsibility to that place as an ecosystem (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014).

It has been noted, however, that critical leadership of place remains more of a normative theory of leadership practice rather than as an empirically based theory of how rural district leadership is practiced (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020). When leadership actions are analyzed along the dimensions of critical leadership of place, leaders often run aground on community political concerns (McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020). For example, Rey (2014) found that superintendents who sought to position education as a means for

students to escape intergenerational poverty and bring economic development to the community ran afoul of community values. Critical place-based education has also been challenged on theoretical grounds as flattening both the people and the thinking of the people in a place, and for setting “place” as artificially separate from the regional, national, and global context in which it exists (Nespor, 2008).

McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) conclude their essay with two suggestions for sharpening our theoretical understandings of rural district leadership. First, they suggest that greater attentiveness to the professional socialization of superintendents will produce greater insight into the political maneuverings that superintendents engage in; this will nuance our understanding of superintendents as not resisters of non-local influence or “functionaries of the state,” but as political actors negotiating between the two. For example, past research has pointed to rural superintendents’ belief that principals would need to understand and integrate into the social fabric of the rural community they served to credibly navigate the pressures they faced, underscoring superintendents’ own role as political operators (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Preston et al., 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Second, McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) suggest a need for richer epistemological perspectives to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a *critical* leader of place in ways that move beyond admonitions to either always reject or always embrace local or external preferences to a more politically dexterous understanding of superintendents’ actions. These perspectives insist that we attend in new ways to the relationships between schools and communities. For example, Schafft (2016) explicitly positions rural educational systems as a cornerstone of rural community development policy more broadly. Villa and co-authors (2021) in a special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* related to rural school-community relations point to schools as both reproducers and disruptors of rural identity and what it “means” to be rural.

## Analytical Framework

Considering the above, we adopt an analytic framework that brings together community-aware educational policy in rural districts (Casto et al. 2016) and ethics of care and caring (Noddings, 2012; Tronto, 2010) to elucidate the ways in which rural superintendents attended to the needs of their local communities, teachers, and students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Community Aware Policy

Casto and colleague’s (2016) conception of community aware educational policy is centered on thick conceptions of human development, over the thin needs espoused in contemporary neoliberal educational policies (Casto et al., 2016). For example, Casto and co-authors point to the neoliberal emphasis on assessment and accountability, as well as the emphasis of individual success as manifestations of a “thin” conception of human need that similarly narrows our understanding of the purpose of schools to workforce development and technical approaches to problem solving. Other scholars have pointed to the ways that thin conceptions can serve to dehumanize students and communities, particularly those already experiencing profound inequities (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

In contrast, thick conceptions of human need emphasize local agency, identity formation, well-being, community, social support, and relationships and thus broaden our understanding of the purpose of schools’ functions. Educational leaders play a role in counteracting neoliberal forces and humanizing schools (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018) to support community aware educational policy at the local level.

To do so, educational leaders need to navigate competing expectations (Honig, 2006), including the tensions between the needs of rural communities and the demands of distant policymakers (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). In navigating these competing interests, district leaders engage in buffering, or protecting their districts from external policy demands, as well as bridging, or seeking external resources to meet local needs (Honig, 2006; Zuckerman et al., 2018). These choices and how they are made implicate both district leaders' caring stance (Ryu et al., 2022) and their political orientation to how districts might act to center thick conceptions of human development, relationships, and community (Zuckerman, 2020). Put differently, community-aware education policy implementation is a means of grappling with external policy mandates that seeks a broader understanding of how we should shape schools through attention to relationships and community development.

Scholars have argued persuasively that political tensions and challenges are inherent in leadership of rural schools and districts (Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015; Sutherland et al., 2022). These contests can arise from disagreements over the purposes of education, how schools are financed, and from broader class cleavages within the community (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). In general, rural superintendents in one study found it easier to interact with internal stakeholders than with external (Holmes, 2021). In a study of the multi-district rural superintendency, Hall and McHenry-Sorber (2017) found that the superintendent spent over half of his time engaged with political tasks managing conflicts both within and between rural communities. Furthermore, political concerns often imbued even instructional and managerial aspects of the job with a sense of being fraught. In recent work, Sutherland and co-authors find that rural school leaders in the U.S. south must act as political "bridges" in order to counteract community discourses that perpetuate inequity and racial exclusion (Sutherland et al., 2022).

We suggest that the inherently political position in which rural district leaders find themselves in a position where they must both align, to the extent possible, their conception of community needs with community political will, and when their own conception of needs is at odds with the community, calculate what may be politically possible. A politically attuned approach to care ethics may offer a means to enact community aware education policy in a way that attends to the needs uncovered by a critical place-based leadership.

### **Care Ethics, Caring Leadership, and the Rural Superintendency**

The foundational insight of community aware policy is that decision-makers must have insight into the deep/thick needs of their community as opposed to a thin/instrumental understanding of those needs. The meeting of expressed and inferred needs in an authentic, relational, and responsive way is a core tenet of care ethics (Noddings, 2012; Tronto, 2010).

Although there are different and competing ways of conceptualizing care, there is widespread agreement that caring responds to the expressed or inferred needs of the one receiving care; if efforts at care are not responding to needs, then they are not caring (Noddings, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). In organizations, leaders most often enact caring by attending to the needs of the people within that organization and trying to foster conditions that meet those needs (Noddings, 2015). Past research in rural education has identified schools as important loci for meeting the needs of rural communities and for community development more broadly (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Zuckerman, 2020). In this study, we draw on insight from four conceptualizations of caring in organizational and educational leadership: research on the politics of care in organizations (Tronto, 2010), research on authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999), and emerging research on *critical* care (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Wilson, 2015) and *radical* care (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). Although these notions of caring are often aligned, there are distinctions

between them as well; it is well beyond the scope of this study to fully integrate these differences, and we focus instead on the theoretical light each sheds on the caring beliefs and practices of rural superintendents.

First, care ethicists focusing on care in organizational settings have argued that the complexity of organizations characterized by policies, routines, and procedures that meet the needs of multiple stakeholders can present challenges to efforts at care within these settings because care is so dependent on particularity and contextual responsiveness (Tronto, 2010). The result is that the shape of care in organizations is inevitably a political question shaped by the preferences of who holds power in that setting (Tronto, 2010). The upshot can be a mismatch in the experiences of those who need care and those who intend to offer care even when both sides are well-intentioned, simply because of disagreements over what caring looks like (Tronto, 2010), or a “flattening” of care as those responsible for leading the organization create routines and procedures that are inequitably responsive to the needs of those within the organization. These tensions may be present in any organization charged with caring for others but may be especially acute in rural settings where leaders are grappling with tensions between community preferences and external demands.

Second, Valenzuela’s (1999, 2005) work on authentic care underscores the need for caring to be responsive to people just as they are. Valenzuela (1999) suggests that much caring in schools is aesthetic in that care is made contingent on certain ways of acting, believing, and being. This instrumental, conditional approach to care often subtracts resources from students— for example, Valenzuela points to expectations that bilingual students speak only English in class as subtracting linguistic resources. In contrast, authentic care demands reciprocal trust and vulnerability from both sides of a caring relationship (Valenzuela, 1999). This implicit distinction between care that embraces students and families as they are as opposed to care that contingent on certain ways of thinking about and doing school can be applied to rural leadership as well.

Finally, scholars have advanced conceptualizations of *critical* care and *radical* care. The tenets of critical care hold that caring is culturally situated, for example, Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) point to “the Latina/o cultural value of *personalismo*” which emphasizes warm and friendly interpersonal relationships as a component of care for Dominican families and students. Critical caring can also act as a resource for activism and achieving political aims in the context of constraint (Wilson, 2015). While critical care has typically been applied in analyses of urban schooling to explain the ways that minoritized communities resist oppression, we recognize the parallels to rural district leadership and the importance of school-community relations in smaller districts. For example, Wilson (2015) indicates that critical care, “move[s] beyond one-on-one relationships to emphasize the importance of one seeking to rectify injustice in socially and culturally relevant ways given children’s and communities’ needs and experiences” (p. 10).

Radical care is similarly focused on seeking change for students and families, though it is rooted in a “radical politics that provides spaces of hope in precarious times... radical care engages histories of grassroots community action and negotiates neoliberal models for self-care” (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 1). One tenet of radical care involves “strategically navigating the sociopolitical and policy climate” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 269) by plumbing the policy environment for potential affordances while also strategically resisting pressures that disadvantage one’s immediate stakeholders. Central to the success of this balancing act is a clear moral vision for what one aims to achieve, even if realizing that vision is subject to profound obstacles (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). This aligns with a sophisticated understanding of rural superintendents as political actors: moral agents whose margin for action is bounded.

Although there is limited existing inquiry into district leaders’ caring leadership generally, and for rural leaders in particular, this has been an area of recent inquiry. One recent study concluded

that caring district level leadership is focused on the social, emotional, and mental health and well-being of students and staff, and is relational, systemic, environmental, and needs-driven (Kennedy & Walls, 2022). Recent work has also suggested that there is an increased expectation for relationally focused forms of leadership among rural district leaders in contrast to leadership grounded in deference to expertise (Holmes et al., 2021a). Furthermore, superintendents' communicative approach considerably shapes stakeholders' sense of their goodwill, competence and trustworthiness (Holmes et al., 2021b).

The contextual grounding of care and the ways that caring relationships demand activism on the part of the one-caring are thus a powerful lens through which to understand the actions of rural superintendents confronting the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we attend to how rural district leaders conceive of and enact a community of care while navigating competing demands.

## Research Design and Methods

This study involves a secondary analysis of qualitative interview data (Gladstone et al., 2007; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). The first author had carried out data collection for a study focused on how district leaders support caring schools (Kennedy & Walls, 2022). The study had been planned and funding secured prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 2020. With some reconfiguration (i.e., shifting interviews from in-person to Zoom), the study was allowed to proceed in the fall of 2020 and winter of 2021.

During an initial review of interview data, the first author was struck by both the practical differences in how rural districts approach the pandemic (e.g., they were likely to have begun the school year in person, which was in stark contrast to the approach of more urban and suburban districts), and by the ways that rural district leaders talked about balancing the needs of their community with state-level policy mandates. The first author is naïve about rural education research and rural educational leadership, so he reached out to the second author who has considerably more experience and knowledge conducting research in rural contexts.

Examining the data from the rural and small districts separately addresses the importance of context in educational leadership and provides knowledge that is of interest to rural communities where some 9 million American students reside (Biddle et al., 2019). This is particularly true considering the COVID-19 recovery rhetoric regarding the effects of school closures (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Engzell et al., 2021) and focus of national attention on the experiences of urban schools as normative.

Yet, the issues raised in this study are not *uniquely* rural (Coldarci, 2007): certainly, leaders in other contexts struggle with balancing local needs and policy mandates (Koyama, 2014), what it means to be a caring leader (Smylie et al., 2016), and how to practice contextual, place-based leadership (Riley, 2013). However, we argue that applying the lens of caring and “meeting needs” to rural district leadership practice holds potential for sharpening our understanding of the relational and political practices of rural district leaders and contributes to theorizing of rural district leadership. As Biddle and co-authors (2019) argue, “by seeing space relationally, rather than categorically... it becomes easier to make meaningful connections across existing research” (p. 11). The findings of this study regarding how leaders navigate state policy and local policy preferences is important for people in rural places because this tension is often a complex and formidable challenge for rural district leaders. Below, we offer greater detail on the participants in this study and the districts where they work, describe our data collection and analysis procedures, and our approach to ensuring trustworthiness of our results.



## Context and Participants

The data for this study came from a grant-supported project intended to deepen research partnerships with educational organizations. Consequently, all the districts and participants in this study come from a single western state. We acknowledge that the experiences of these district leaders may not be representative of district leaders across the United States. However, one countervailing advantage is that each of the district leaders in this study faced the same set of state policies, and thus differences in their responses were due to local conditions rather than state-level contextual differences.

The original dataset included districts in a variety of contexts, from medium-sized cities to suburban towns; however, for the purposes of this study we have analyzed only the interviews of leaders in rural districts. For this secondary data analysis, we utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches to defining rurality (Longhurst, 2021), including National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) classifications based on population size and distance from urban areas and district leaders' own descriptions. Four of the districts were primarily classified as rural by the NCES. Three other settings were classified as "Town: Fringe," but, the leaders identified them as rural without prompting by the interviewer. For example, one spoke about efforts to standardize the curriculum both within and between schools and noted, "so it's an interesting issue of size in a small, smallish rural community." Another spoke about emphasizing equity and noted, "[our district] is a small rural community and I think we're on that journey." The final district was classified by the NCES as "Town: Distant." However, the town in question is further from any metropolitan area than any of the other districts in our sample; it would take one approximately two-and-a-half hours to drive from the town to a city. Consequently, we included this district in our sample as well. The demographic details of the districts are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*District Demographic Information*

District	NCES Locale	Number of Students	% Students of Color	% Low SES	Who did we speak to?
District 3	Town: Fringe	5,103	27.1%	49.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> </ul>
District 5	Rural: Distant	1,470	12.3%	48.2%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> <li>• Special Services Director</li> </ul>
District 6	Town: Distant	2,636	32.5%	29.6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> <li>• Assistant Superintendent</li> </ul>
District 8	Town: Fringe	1,830	25.6%	55.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> <li>• Assistant Superintendent</li> <li>• Student Services Director</li> </ul>
District 9	Rural: Remote	153	8.5%	34.6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> </ul>
District 10	Rural: Distant	872	9.3%	20.9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> </ul>
District 12	Rural: Fringe	2,564	11.2%	47.9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> </ul>
District 13	Town: Fringe	1,342	15.1%	27.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent</li> </ul>

Across the eight districts, 12 total interviews were conducted. In each of the eight districts we interviewed the superintendent, and subsequently asked which other leaders at the assistant superintendent or director level were responsible for supporting caring schools. In three of the eight districts the answer was “no one” simply because the superintendent was the only district-level leader. In two districts, the assistant superintendent declined to be interviewed. In the other three districts we interviewed at least one additional person beyond the superintendent. All eight of the superintendents were white men, while all five of the non-superintendent leaders were white women.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The interviews for this study were conducted over Zoom Videoconference software between October 2020 and December 2020. They ranged in duration from approximately 45 minutes to approximately one hour and 15 minutes. Although none of the questions were specifically focused on the leaders’ rural context, certain questions were likely to elicit reflection and stories about how the rural setting of the district shaped the leaders’ thinking and action. For example, we asked, “how do you engage the broader community in building caring and supportive schools for students?” and, “what have you observed about the value dilemmas people in the district have faced in responding to COVID?” We also asked questions about communicating intentions and priorities with the community. Because we employed a semi-structured approach to interviewing intended to “to understand themes of the daily world from the subject’s own perspective,” participants’ musings on how the rural nature of their districts shaped their approach to leadership often led to additional prompts and follow-up questions from us, which deepened our understanding of participants’ thinking (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Data analysis used a modified version of Hall and co-authors’ (2005) suggested approach to collaborative qualitative inquiry. In this approach, consensus on findings is established dialogically, as authors meet, debate, and discuss the results of their individual analyses (Hall et al., 2005). This approach made sense because this is an example of an *insider/outsider* team: the first author’s naïveté with respect to rural educational research was contrasted with the second author’s deep experience in rural educational research (Beals et al., 2020). Through conversations, the authors could explicitly check one another’s reasoning and assumptions. In keeping with the Hall and co-authors (2005) approach, we first did an individual thematic reading of the entire set of interviews, and then met to compare our analysis. From this, we established four inductive *categories* that emerged from our reading (competing demands, equity, institutional landscape, and interpersonal relationships) and two deductive *categories* that emerged from the literature (place-based leadership approaches and the multiple roles of district leaders). We then re-analyzed the interviews using an open coding approach with the intention of categorizing codes into one or more of the analytic categories we established (Saldaña, 2009). We then met once more to lay our individual analyses side-by-side and debate/discuss our findings with the intention of coming to a consensus. This discussion was very generative, for example, the second author convinced the first author that there was not sufficient evidence to find that “systems of care” often effectively became synonymous with the people running those systems. The findings presented here reflect the consensus that emerged from this discussion.

### **Trustworthiness**

In alignment with the conventions of quality in qualitative research, we aim to establish trustworthiness via transferability, confirmability, dependability, and credibility (Shenton, 2004). To improve the transferability of our research, we described both the districts and the interview

participants of our research, with particular attention to how we decided the sense in which districts were rural so that readers and other researchers can decide for themselves the level of contextual alignment (Biddle et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Similarly, we endeavored to establish dependability and confirmability by giving a detailed account of the inception of this study, the data collection and analysis procedures, and the context in which data collection took place (Shenton, 2004). We acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic likely created a set of concerns and pressures that are (we hope) unlikely to be repeated soon. In other ways, though, the conditions created by the pandemic were simply a more acute and intense distillation of the pressures regularly faced by rural district leaders. We took three intentional steps to bolster the trustworthiness of this research. First, we collected data using well-established qualitative interview techniques (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) and employed probes and follow-up questioning techniques to clarify participants' meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Second, because both authors separately coded the interview data, we could scrutinize one another's conclusions and engage in "analyst triangulation" (Patton, 1999, p. 1189). Finally, we engaged in member checking with our interview participants to ensure that our conclusions aligned with the ideas they meant to convey (Miles et al., 2018).

## Findings

We present our findings in four parts. First, we address the ways that district leaders described the foundations of care in their districts, moving from the more surface level elements of care to the deeper and more interpersonal levels. Second, we describe the behaviors and strategies used by superintendents to facilitate a caring district climate. Third, we point to the ways that district leaders navigated both local and external political pressures in pursuit of their vision of care. Finally, we present district leaders' descriptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to reassess their priorities and practices, which led to a renewed emphasis on care and well-being. Figure 1 displays our findings for district leaders' descriptions of care at the district level and their own contributions to a culture and system of care.

As we describe in greater depth in the sections that follow, the descriptions of care proceed from relatively more surface level to deeper levels that describe the tenor of relationships, and the actions of leaders to support caring in their district are both direct and indirect. The political approach that superintendents describe mirrored the direct strategies they used to build systems of care, mixing relational compromise with advocacy on behalf of their communities.

### **The What: Foundations of a Caring District Culture**

District leaders described three tenets that comprise a caring district culture: caring as welcoming and belonging, caring as interest, and caring as empathy and grace. The first of these elements is relatively more "surface level" in that it describes the context in which caring relationships can take root, but the latter two elements represent a deepening of care because they describe the nature of the relationship itself.

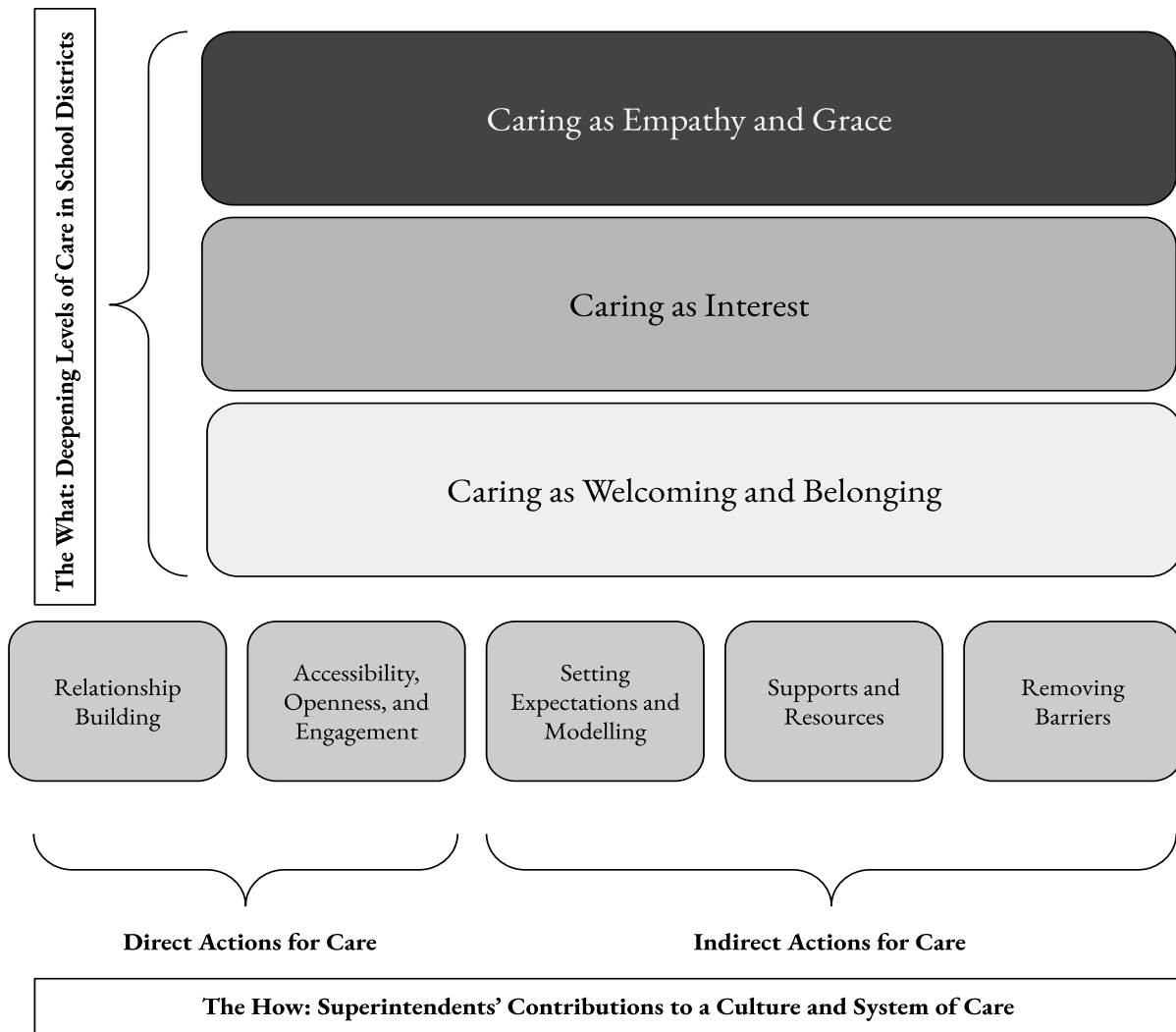
#### ***Caring as Welcoming and Belonging***

Administrators described caring as intentionally enacted and contributing to the feeling or "vibe" of a school via friendly and welcoming interpersonal interactions. For example, the superintendent at District 3 described a caring school as a place where "You just get that sense that the people are friendly, they're caring, they're concerned, they ask questions, they try to help you, the way they treat you." Superintendents at Districts 10 and 12 described this sense of welcome, friendliness, and helpfulness in customer service terms, drawing the parallel to Walmart and Home

Depot greeters. Superintendent 5 described this as a sense of welcoming and invitation that makes people “comfortable right away.”

**Figure 1**

*The “What” and “How” of Superintendent Support for Care in Rural District*



Similarly, Superintendent 9 stated from the front office to custodians and cooks, there is a sense that people are “happy to be there no matter what their job,” and that from the front office staff to the custodians and cooks, people treat one another in a positive, friendly, cheerful manner. Several superintendents identified the importance of bus drivers as setting the tone with a welcoming smile or a warm goodbye as the first and last school staff member students see each day.

Superintendent 8 described caring not as a program to be implemented, but rather a way of being that is “daily, constant, and ongoing.” While he stated that caring “can’t be canned” and that “You can’t fake caring...you got to live and breathe it,” he stated that caring is something that is demonstrated through how you treat people. For Superintendent 12, caring was demonstrated “When students know that you have a servant’s heart, that you’re there to help connect with them,

make a personal relationship with them, and to serve them, then you know that's the feel when you walk into a building or a classroom.”

In addition to how people treat each other, Superintendent 5 and 6 described the importance of visual markers, messages, and symbols, such as “artifacts that represent a value system around relationships and belonging and love and hope and care” and “messages in the hall or displays of student work that focus on caring or hope or encouragement or positivity.” During school closures in the spring of 2020, the superintendent of District 8 reported taking this outside the school, “We did poems, we did pictures of kids, we did parades, we took pictures of our food service staff, who is still delivering lunches. We just did that every single day. It was called the daily uplift.” He reported in fall 2020, that these daily uplifts were back “by popular demand.” This approach to caring was a daily way to draw people in and help them feel connected to the larger district of which they were a part.

Superintendents described the importance of caring as creating a sense of belonging inside and outside of the school buildings. The superintendent of District 12 reported, “Everybody wants to feel like they belong. Everybody wants to feel like they're important.” At District 5, the superintendent stated, “We're trying to help our students, our families, our staff, feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves that they matter, that they're valued and that they're cared for.” Inside the school walls, the superintendent of District 5 reported the importance of creating a sense of unity by listening to different ideas and perspectives, as well as demonstrating empathy. He stated, “That if we operate as a team, we operate as a community, we use our relationships, we're going to be able to get through, and it's only going to make us even stronger.” In this way, coming together as a school community was seen to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Superintendent 6, this sense of community extended beyond the school, stating “Caring is just not limited to an individual school or district, but caring is really more than just a school, it is a community.” He described this as giving back to the community and families that were struggling during the pandemic by providing weekend food pantries and a weeks' worth of meals for Thanksgiving break. This superintendent felt involving students in this work was very important and felt that efforts like this were a form of reciprocity with the community.

Visual markers also contributed to a sense of belonging through matching t-shirts and slogans. For example, the superintendent of District 5 said, “we're trying to help our students, our families, our staff, feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves that they matter, that they're valued and that they're cared for. That we can develop a bond between staff and students, between students and each other, between families in the schools and the district, if we focus on trust and love and unity. Really, the 'Believe' talks about believing in the mission above our own self-interest.” The superintendent of District 5 used “team” as a “mantra that summarizes our core values... it's a really approachable, easy to understand message of what we're trying to do. Everyone's been on teams. You can think of great teams they've been on, not so great teams they've been on.” The team motif was accompanied with apparel that included “Team [District Name]” printed on it. Similarly, the assistant superintendent at District 8 described the superintendent and other staff wearing t-shirts that read “Inclusion is our love language” as a way to support the district goal of creating a more inclusive school community. She continued, stating “if you do that preventative work again and create an environment of loving, inclusivity, everyone belongs, then people don't have that unsafe feeling of, 'I'm not safe here. I don't belong here.’” In particular, she saw creating an inclusive school environment as a way to reduce bullying. These visual representations of belonging were a way to draw people together and help them to collectively engage in the work of care and support.

Superintendents explicitly stated that contributing to this feeling of welcome is the job of everyone in the building:

In terms of culture and climate that I want to be a part of is every educator, teacher that is, every staff member, paraeducator, food service, bus driver, secretary takes on the mindset that whatever it takes to help you succeed, I want to be about that. That's the type of inclusive and cohesive glue that creates systems where it lessens the number of cracks for kids to fall through.

Together, the broad intention of creating a sense of welcoming and belonging is to create a system where students cannot “fall through the cracks.” However, the general climate of welcoming and belonging was also only a context or container in which caring relationships can thrive; the next two elements of care describe the tenor of these relationships.

### ***Caring as Interest***

Superintendents described taking an interest in students, teachers, and families inside and outside of school as a way to demonstrate caring. For example, the superintendent at District 5 described this as

You know enough about what's going on in their life, that you can ask them, ‘Oh, how was the game. I know you scored 12 points last night, great job.’ Or, ‘I read the paper that our band made it to state and congratulations,’ or ‘I heard your mom's struggling with their health. I'm so sorry to hear that.’ Little things like knowing people and what's going... and taking just a second to show that concern in that investment.

Likewise, the superintendent at District 13 reported the importance of connecting with students: “You listen to the interactions; it's not surface level.” He described teachers, coaches, and staff members talking to kids about their sports games and other activities. He connected these interactions to relationships between individuals, stating, “It's all about relationships, and that's teacher to teacher, staff to staff, staff to student, students to staff.” The superintendent of District 10 similarly described caring is taking an interest in individual's success as whole person, stating, “People genuinely care about you, and they care about your success. I'm not talking like mathematics success, necessarily. I'm talking about who you are, what makes you tick, and that people are genuinely there to serve you.” This approach to caring underscored the ways that leaders sought to take a non-instrumental approach to relationships, and instead authentically in students and staff as people.

Other district leaders described care in terms of particular aspects of students that are known. For example, at District 12, the superintendent stated, “What I'm very passionate about is knowing every student by name, by strength, and by need. If you're doing those three things, knowing every single one of your kids by name, by strength, and by need, that in the end is the heart of a caring system.” In addition to having those relationships himself, the superintendent of District 12 reported a goal of “ensuring that every student has that meaningful relationship with an adult, that classroom teacher, again, paraeducator, counselor, principal.” He described these connections as “intentional” and noted, “We're really intentional about seeking those kids on the margins and ensuring that some of these kids who are a little bit more reticent to build relationships and to get to the kids who maybe need us most.”

The description of this intentional interest in individuals as the heart of a *caring system* emphasizes caring as something that is enacted. This intentionality was also seen at District 3, where the superintendent described the high school staff identifying students with whom they had a

relationship with and those students who did not have a positive adult relationship and developing a plan to make sure the latter group of students had positive adult relationships at school. Although he described this as “natural relationships and rapport,” it was clear that superintendents made a concerted effort to get to know their teachers, students, and family members. Furthermore, superintendents sought to systematize this care by noticing where it was missing or unfulfilled and correcting it.

Lastly, the superintendent at District 8 extended this interest in individuals to his staff, reporting he believes he demonstrates care by taking an interest in his staff, knowing their names, remembering their names, and sharing jokes. At District 9, the superintendent described this operating like a family and the importance of recognizing what people have been through during the last year. Likewise, at District 13, the superintendent reported the importance of “knowing [teachers’] stories and checking in” and stated, “that doesn’t happen overnight.”

### ***Caring as Empathy and Grace***

Finally, superintendents also described caring as empathy and extending grace to individuals within interpersonal relationships. For example, at District 10, the superintendent stated, “Having a lot of grace and reminding yourself to give a lot of grace is a great way to show that you really truly care about other people.” He likened this grace to recognizing that “the very small percentage of an iceberg is what you can see above the surface line of the water and that there’s this huge mass of ice right underneath the surface. I think that is true for kids, staff, for parents.” Superintendent 10 reiterated the importance of showing grace during the pandemic, stating “that these are hard times for people, they’re dealing with a lot of things going on, we don’t know what’s underneath the surface of the water, but we should almost go into every situation knowing that there is something underneath the surface.”

Similarly, at District 3, the superintendent reported that the “art and craft of being an administrator” is considering the circumstances of children in discipline. Likewise, at District 6 the assistant superintendent reported the importance of considering what kids are going through outside of school and expressed a desire for more flexibility in the system for students and staff alike. At District 8, the superintendent stated not only is there a need to extend grace to students and teachers, but for individuals to have grace with themselves during challenging times.

### **The How: Superintendents’ Contributions to a Culture and System of Care**

This section addresses superintendents’ actions and strategies to build a culture of care in their district. We identify relationships building and accessibility, openness, and transparency as superintendents’ direct behaviors to promote caring, but district leaders also act indirectly through setting expectations and modeling behaviors, providing supports and resources, and removing barriers.

#### ***Superintendents’ Relationship Building***

Intentional relationship building was a critical component of district leaders’ contribution to a culture of care. Four leaders in this study used a phrase similar to “meeting people where they are” to describe their approach to relationship-building. In some cases, this phrasing was used in reference to the character of the relationships, but in other cases it was describing actual tools for communicating and developing relationships. For example, the superintendent of District 12 described using robo-calling to reach out to district staff and parents and adding family nights to the schedule. He added, “your plan, if it truly is balanced, it needs to be multifaceted, because families are connecting with schools in such different ways now. I think even just in the time, my 27 years in

schools, it really has shifted from a pull culture where we pull people into our schools and expect them to come to us to a push culture.” This consistent, multi-faceted, and often creative approach to outreach was essential to superintendents’ relationship building.

### ***Accessibility, Openness, and Engagement***

In addition to their intentional efforts to build relationships, the superintendents we spoke to also reported certain dispositions and approaches to their work that helped them connect with staff members and community members. The three most common were accessibility, openness, and engagement. For example, the superintendent of District 9 reported that he tries “to touch base with everybody at least once a day. Walk around and say, hi, poke my head in the classroom... It’s when I don’t see somebody for a couple of days that I start to really worry.” This approach to being proactively open and engaged was important for staff members to feel well supported.

Other district leaders reported accessibility and engagement with the broader district community as well. The superintendent of District 3 suggested that one major challenge with the closures associated with COVID-19 is that he was not able to attend many community events. He said, “typically, I’d try to get to concerts, and soccer matches, and basketball games, and just to be around where our community members are so that I can connect with them and hear questions, concerns, those types of things, Lions Club and Kiwanis Club and all those things that we typically do.” This visibility in the community was seen as an important conduit for informal relationship building and the exchange of information. The superintendent of District 5 described a more formal approach when he talked about hosting “board dinners” where they “intentionally invite different stakeholder groups to eat dinner with [them] before board meetings.” This engagement fosters reciprocal exchanges of information that allowed superintendents to better meet the needs of the community.

### ***Setting Expectations and Modeling***

Superintendents viewed their role in supporting a culture and system of care as setting the tone and modeling care, as well as setting expectations. For example, at District 3, the superintendent reported the importance of setting expectations of acceptable behavior and expectations for all staff. Additionally, he reported the importance of modeling these expectations, by “showing that with our administrators, living that kind of thing as well as a superintendent, how I treat people, how we interact.” Additionally, he noted the importance providing tools along with this modeling, describing how the director of teaching and learning recently shared articles and podcasts with the leadership team to provide “ideas of things they could do with staff related to maintaining a positive atmosphere and lifting people up during this time.” He continued, “we try to model some of those examples and then give them tools that they can actually go use so that they’ve got something at their disposal.” Similarly, he described setting the tone by reminding principals to uplift their teachers, but also uplifting the principals, in his words, “because I know for them to be able to support others, I have to support them. This year I think it’s really been at the forefront of our thinking just because of the difficulty with the pandemic.”

At District 6, the superintendent closely echoed this sentiment when he remarked, “that whole relationship component this and modeling that and caring for that leader, caring for the staff members, taking time to know them, that that’s really important that you have to model it in order for it to become a reality.” He described that his relational interactions set a tone for how others should strive to interact as well. For these superintendents and others in the study, their personal approach to caring and supportive interactions were an important component that flowed through the system to engender a climate of care.



### ***Supports and Resources***

In addition to dispositions toward openness, accessibility, and engagement, the leaders in this study also sought to build a culture of care more directly via providing supports and resources to teachers and the broader community. The superintendent of District 6 described that a major part of his job was “be trying to get to schools those things that they need that make a difference with students’ education, whether that be materials or maybe technology.” He elaborated that during the pandemic, he had worked to ensure that all students had internet access either in their home, via a hotspot, or eventually by bringing some students back to school so that they could access reliable internet. The superintendent of District 5 suggested that providing supports and resources was an essential way to meet students’, families’, and teachers’ basic needs for safety and security “so that they can get to the next day where they feel like they’re part of the plan.” This emphasis on the direct provision of supports and resources to meet needs is directly aligned with the emphasis of an ethic of care on meeting expressed or inferred needs.

### ***Removing Barriers***

In addition to providing resources and supports, the leaders in this study also described removing barriers as an important aspect of their efforts to build a culture of care. For example, the superintendent of District 12 noted that “there are so many things that educators are being asked to do, so many things our schools are being asked to do and oftentimes people feel like there’s layers of bureaucracy, there’s layers of things that are in their way to doing that.” He strives to give his staff members the freedom and time to build strong relationships with students by helping to remove bureaucratic barriers to that work. While some leaders talked about removing bureaucratic barriers that get in the way of forming caring relationships, other leaders spoke about mental barriers. For example, the assistant superintendent of District 6 suggested that she was working to help teachers reduce the sense that they needed constant academic press, particularly during the pandemic. She suggested that “there is no reason to do that” and was striving to “take that off people’s plates.” Removing mental barriers that pushed teachers to live their professional identity in decontextualized ways was one way that she was working to build a system of care.

### ***Care and Politics in the Place-Conscious Rural Superintendency***

The district leaders in this study balanced political navigation with care by creating a warm and welcoming community, and by being available, but they still also worked to do what was right for their district. Relationships helped smooth the way for making hard decisions. The superintendent of District 9 likened this process to accumulating relational capital when he said, “in the community, again, the blessing is that I’ve been here, I’ve made enough deposits in the community that people haven’t necessarily agreed with where we are or some of it [but] not once have I been personally attacked.” This relational resource was especially helpful when delivering news that was disappointing to some members of the community. The superintendent of District 5 described the importance not of his own individual relationships, but of the cultural orientation toward empathy. He noted, “I like to err on the side of unity. In my outreach, in my correspondence, ever since we were closed in March, we have expressed this saying, ‘COVID-19 is a polarizing topic. Multiple perspectives exist.’ [Our district’s team] culture is going to help us navigate it because when you think about the best teams you’ve ever been on, it involves empathy. It involves an openness to different ideas and a flexibility.” The same strategies that district leaders used to improve the district’s capacity for care were also useful political strategies for managing disagreements within the community and between the community and outside stakeholders.

On the other hand, the desire to meet community needs also pushed superintendents to advocate for their districts. Although the superintendent of District 9 described using relationships as a way to buffer bad news, he also described his strong moral sense of the need to keep schools open during the COVID-19 pandemic:

It was just a matter of, 'This is what's right and by God, we're going to open and I'm going to fight for this.' I just made the statement early on in the summer, 'We will open when school starts. We are going to be open.' Word came out the week before school that we were going to be able to open our elementary school, but not the middle school, and high school. I just basically said, 'That's not acceptable,' and had conversations with the Department of Health and had conversations with our insurance carriers. I said, 'We're going to open. My plan is to open, my community wants it. It's what is right for everybody, but it's really right for our kids and for our community.'

In their efforts to care, district leaders neither found themselves navigating what one superintendent called the "political dance" of the job "balancing that line of community, parents, students, staff... is hard sometimes when you can decide one way or another, but both ways are correct and both ways aren't." District leaders described circumstances where they advocated on behalf of the needs of their community with external stakeholders, but also described situations where close relationships helped them to manage disagreement and disappointment. In short, for the district leaders in this study efforts to care did not produce an "either/or" choice between support of community and implementation of external policy regimes, but a "both/and" situation that required wisdom and savviness to navigate.

### **COVID-19 as an Opportunity to Revisit Priorities**

Although the leaders in this study universally described COVID-19 as a source of stress and distress, they also identified lessons that they could draw from the pandemic and use in the future. These lessons fell into three broad categories: a renewed emphasis on wellbeing, a focus on flexibility and individualization, and being more aware of the student experience in school and how it shapes engagement. These categories were often interrelated (rather than mutually exclusive) and were tied together by an emphasis on (re)humanizing education.

#### ***Emphasizing Wellbeing***

One way that leaders found a silver lining in the pandemic is that it renewed their emphasis on the well-being of students and that of families and staff members. For example, the superintendent of District 6 said that the pandemic led them to redouble their efforts on the overall mental health support model they employed in their schools. Similarly, the superintendent of District 7 reported that the pandemic had led them to dramatically accelerate the pace of implementing social-emotional learning programs. He stated, "Trying to get some of those concepts into place, and really focusing on that SEL at times was difficult at certain levels, but the pandemic I think forced us into, how do we think about supporting students and families in their social-emotional needs across every grade level? There's been some things that have changed within our system because of it, that I think it's moved quicker than it probably would have without the pandemic." He added that he expected that this emphasis would remain strong after the pandemic as well. The renewed focus on wellbeing displaced some focus on academic press.

Superintendents reported taking an interest in the social-emotional well-being of their teachers, along with keeping all members of the community healthy during the pandemic. For some, such as Superintendent 10, this was identified as "adult self-care," to help teachers overcome the higher-than-normal levels of exhaustion so that they can be their best selves for students. Likewise,

Superintendent 3 reported attending to helping teachers to self-care and take care of themselves, not just during the pandemic, but during the normal stressors of a school year. He talked about the importance of uplifting and supporting principals and helping them do the same for teachers. This included messaging to teachers ahead of the winter holidays to give themselves permission to take time for themselves and their family and disconnect from work.

For the assistant superintendent at District 6, this permission was something they felt should be given by administrators, stating, “You have to help care for them by saying, ‘You know what, you need to take the weekend, and not turn on your computer.’ And say, ‘I mean that.’” They continued, “I care about you and I’m worried about you and you need to get some rest and need to have some space away from this.” But more than just expressing concern, this district administrator added the need to help teachers take things off their plates and focus on what mattered most. At District 9, the superintendent described this as releasing the steam valve through silly activities such as dress up days, human scrabble, bingo, and a coloring contest “that relaxes everybody a bit.” For him, having fun was paired with “temperature checks” once a month with faculty and serving as a counselor to teachers. At District 8, this was taken further as district leaders provided free mental health services to staff through their partnership with a local university that placed counseling interns on site in district schools. As the superintendent of District 8 noted, “we want to take care of kids and staff, and it’s a wellness program for our community, our staff, as well as our students.” This approach reflected the superintendents’ commitment, to the extent possible, to be a resource for well-being not just for students but for adults and the broader community as well.

### ***Focusing on Flexibility and Individualization***

The rural leaders in this study also pointed to new possibilities for flexibility and individualization that had been unlocked by the pandemic. The superintendent of District 13 suggested that, “brick and mortar is good for many of our kids, but not all our kids. I think this platform has given us opportunities to learn how to do things differently.” Several leaders remarked on the issue not being whether one modality was better or worse, but that different modalities for learning may be more useful for certain students at certain times. For example, one superintendent suggested that Zoom might allow for older high school students to do more service learning or work experience learning by not always tethering them to an at-school check in. On the other hand, some leaders suggested that the pandemic revealed the potential power of in-person learning in a way that educators may have previously taken for granted. One superintendent remarked, “I think it [has shown] that value of what school is to everybody. We as educators were miserable... we did not get into this to get on a bus and deliver food and homework.” Thus, while leaders pointed to new opportunities for flexibility, they also pointed to renewed in person pedagogy as well.

### ***Attention to Student Experience and Engagement***

Leaders in this study suggested that the altered instructional settings during COVID-19 led them to think anew about aspects of the student experience, from engagement, to discipline, to grading practices. For example, the superintendent of District 6 suggested that the district’s discipline statistics were quite positive during the early return to in-person schooling and added, “wouldn’t it be nice for when kids are all back, if we didn’t just say, ‘Let’s let go of that stuff.’ This a natural time for that to happen, for us to get rid of whatever some of the ridiculous rules are.” This openness to reevaluating the purpose and utility of the rules extended to practices around student engagement as well. The superintendent of District 5 suggested small class sizes enabled teachers to, “know those kids better than ever. They know what makes them tick. They feel safer to get involved” and that some of the new engagement techniques could continue to be useful even once class sizes increased. These leaders often pointed to the ways that the pandemic illustrated the

contrast between compliance and engagement; the superintendent of District 8 suggested that the pandemic helped his district to implement standards-based grading to ensure meaningful student learning rather than compliance learning. Each of these leaders found that the pandemic helped them to uncover ways to improve students' experiences in school that could be enduring.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine rural district leaders' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lenses of caring and community engaged educational policy. We posited that the complex and rapidly changing conditions of fall 2020 and winter 2021 produced an environment where community desires and extra-local policies were frequently at odds (Hayes et al., 2021; Lochmiller, 2021), and demanded an attentive, flexible, and politically savvy response. One intention of this study, by making use of the unique context produced by the pandemic, was to gain further insight into how rural district leaders act as "critical leaders of place" (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) and to explore how district leaders conceive of and meet the needs of community members, students, and staff. To do this, we engaged the concepts of community engaged educational policy and caring leadership (Casto et al., 2016, Rivera-McCutchen, 2021).

Using this compound lens, we found that the district leaders in this study centered care in their leadership, describing intentional, systematic efforts to care for students, staff, and their communities at large. These efforts focused on relational virtues such as empathy, welcoming, generating a sense of belonging, and well-being. Often, these efforts at care were contrasted, in the context of the pandemic, with educational policies that address thin conceptions of human development, such as accountability and academic press. An overarching focus was on drawing people into the fold of the school so that the school could better support their needs. This served as evidence of an authentic approach to care, rather than a more transactional and instrumental approach (Wilson, 2015).

In carrying out this work, district leaders generally used three aspects of caring to engage community aware leadership: their intentional approach to personal/relational leadership, building systems of care, and directing their attention to particular challenges. First, the leaders in this study prioritized caring by taking an interest in students, teachers, and community members, as well as through extending empathy and grace to all in the school community. These leaders also sought to prioritize well-being and a sense of belonging in the school, seeking to make school both a safe and welcoming space for all, even in times of heightened anxiety and crisis.

Secondly, the intentional enactment of care by district leaders served as a model for the behaviors expected of others in the building, contributing to a culture of care. They furthered a culture of care through efforts to meet the needs of those in their districts, removing barriers, and providing supports and resources. In turn, superintendents often sought to provide direct resources and support to build capacity for care (Schafft, 2016). They did so by deepening the conception of need by turning their attention to issues outside the school walls. For example, leaders' outreach to the community during the fall of 2020 was often focused on learning with specificity about the needs of their community, from internet access to food insecurity. The sensitivity and accuracy with which they could ascertain needs influenced their ability to negotiate possible solutions. In circumstances of limited resources, this approach allowed them to be more aware of and responsive to their communities.

Within this culture of care, superintendents sought to be visible both within the school walls and with the community at large, seeking out a multitude of ways to connect in person and using technology. Through these actions, the dispositions of leaders in this study offer a means to build more trusting relationships (Tschannen-Moran, 2017) and more nimbly navigate community politics

(McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020). The strategies that leaders employed to build caring within their districts – and in particular their direct relationship-building and commitment to openness – also served to both manage political disagreement within the community and to push external stakeholders and policymakers to be more flexible in meeting the needs of rural communities.

Third, their enactment of care and focus on well-being provided a foundation for these district leaders to take a critical appraisal of assessment and accountability practices that often promote the opposite of well-being (Casto et al., 2016). By reassessing and shifting the perspective of teaching and learning as “heart work,” these district leaders enacted the community aware educational policy described by Casto and colleagues (2016). This approach also demonstrated evidence of critical care in what they increased focus on during the pandemic (wellbeing), and what they focused less on (academic press; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Wilson, 2015). Resisting external accountability policy this way can be viewed as taking a political stance and community-activism in which these district leaders pushed back on policies created by those ‘from away’ (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). In doing so, these district leaders considered teacher, student, and community members wants, needs, and fears in making the decisions that they felt were best for their own districts. Further, through their efforts to build relationships and shared identity, these district leaders clearly prioritized a thick conception of human development (Casto et al., 2016).

The enriched understandings of student, staff, and community needs engendered by the above dispositions also generated currency as leaders build systems of care and support (Noddings, 2015). These systems often started with examining relationships with individuals but became systematized as leaders examined where relationships and relational supports were strong, and where they were weak. We also found that leaders’ very high levels of institutional literacy were crucial to leaders’ ability to remove barriers and provide supports to staff, students, and community. Although leaders sought to act in the best interests of their community, understanding institutional functioning helped them to do so.

Across these three aspects, leaders grappled with the challenges and uncertainties of the pandemic in similar ways. However, we do not suggest that rurality is a monolith. Instead, this study focuses our attention on the ways in which school leaders must be responsive to their local communities, rural or urban. For example, superintendents demonstrated a fine-grained responsiveness to the different ways rurality affected their communities, from the protection from contagion provided by community isolation to addressing the need to develop their communities’ internet connectivity and digital tools. Examining rural district leaders’ pandemic response via an ethic of care provides insight into the ways that district leaders sought to meet needs in a relational, well-being focused way, but the approaches that they took were diverse and responsive rather than representing a one-size-fits-all approach to “rural district leadership” This underscores that being a “leader of place” is about leading in a particular place, not the *category* of place (Budge, 2006, 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). However, one common thread amongst the leaders in this study was that the way they conceived of their place changed their margin for action: place may be understood as a set of political possibilities that are open and foreclosed.

In conclusion, this study of rural district leaders during an extraordinary time of crisis, advances our knowledge of how a critical leadership of place might be enacted, through an ethic of care and community aware educational policy. Efforts to creating caring systems and a caring district culture appear also to be a political resource for superintendents to understand, manage, and advocate for the preferences of their communities. This study also sheds light on the potential for community aware educational policies to promote more fulsome approaches to well-being in educational institutions. In practice, the leaders in this study sought to act as leaders of place by advocating for exceptions to one-size-fits-all policies that ran counter to the needs of their

community as the leaders perceived them (Casto et al., 2016). On the other hand, leaders did not simply resist outside policy, but also used intentionally constructed systems of care to manage local disagreements- which underscores the importance of flexible and responsive district policies for care (Sutherland et al., 2022).

Future research would do well to elaborate on critical leadership of place as an ethic of care paired with community aware policy during “ordinary” times and continue to clarify the ways in which the role of rural district leaders is both similar and different from that of district leaders in other contexts. As this study was conducted in a single state policy context, a broader sample of district leaders could yield greater insight into how community aware policy and an ethic of care interact with a multitude of state policy environments.

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Volume 31 Number 115

October 17, 2023

ISSN 1068-2341

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