SEXTON, CRYSTAL L. Ed.D. The Integration of Church and State: An examination of rural school and church partnerships. (2021)
Directed by Dr. Kathryn Hytten. 132 pp.

Though faith-based organizations provide a unique opportunity for rural public schools to share responsibility for student success among community stakeholders, partnerships between public schools and churches in the twenty-first century are complex. In part due to this complexity, limited qualitative research has been conducted in this area. As a result, this qualitative interview-based study was designed to investigate effective partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations.

In my findings I described the existing collaborations between the public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community and examine the strengths, limitations, and impact of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations. First, as a result of my study, I identified six primary types of existing partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations within the community, each with a different collaborative focus. Those existing partnership focuses were food insecurity, school supplies, clothing and resources, financial support, academic support, and mentoring.

Next, I identified several strengths and limitations of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations. While stakeholders perceived that there were many strengths of the partnerships, eight perceived strengths of existing partnerships emerged during my study. Those partnership strengths included shared mission, partnership liaisons, bi-vocational personnel, legal safeguards, ethical safeguards, communication, consistency, and appreciation. In addition to the perceived strengths, participants also noted several limitations of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the community studied. Throughout my research, I identified five perceived limitations of existing partnerships

within the community related to pandemic restrictions, availability of funds, availability of participants, lack of direct information, and limited high school partnership.

Finally, my findings suggest that the collaboration between local public schools and faith-based organizations impacted all stakeholders. To begin with, participants noted several impacts on the public school as a result of partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations. These impacts primarily related to finances, student achievement, social and emotional support, character education, and teacher morale. Participants also highlighted the impacts of the partnership between public schools and faith-based organizations on the church. These impacts included increased service opportunities, spiritual growth of members, greater awareness, and potential church growth for the participating church. Finally, stakeholders perceived that the successful collaborations had meaningful impacts on the community. These impacts on the community centered on creating strong citizens and instilling pride, hope, and a sense of community among residents.

THE INTEGRATION OF CHURCH AND STATE: AN EXAMINATION OF RURAL

SCHOOL AND CHURCH PARTNERSHIPS

by

Crystal L. Sexton

A Dissertation

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Greensboro

2021

Approved by

_____
Dr. Kathryn Hytten
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Crystal L. Sexton has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Kathryn Hytten

Committee Members

Dr. Brian Clarida

Dr. Tiffanie Lewis-Durham

September 29, 2021

Date of Acceptance by Committee

September 29, 2021

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Across the United States public schools are engaged in the noble endeavor of contributing to the development of an educated citizenry and forming democratic dispositions in students. Educators spend hours rehearsing math facts and practicing phonemic awareness with beginning learners. Each day teachers stretch students' imaginations and challenge learners to critically examine the world around them. Schools are laboring to strengthen our nation; however, they cannot be expected to bear the burden alone. Research and practice suggest school and community partnerships are essential to improving schools and increase student success.

In her educational research, Epstein (2001) defines partnerships as collaborative efforts in which "educators, families, and community members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes" (p. 4). According to Epstein (2001), partnerships should prioritize students and "recognize the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for children's learning and development" (p. 4). It is this shared responsibility among stakeholders that will provide students with the greatest opportunity for success in school and life.

Unfortunately, while school and community partnerships are essential for student development, rural public schools often struggle to establish the same types of partnerships as urban or even suburban schools due to their low population density. Additionally, rural communities are often geographically isolated and have limited access to the large businesses and corporations that often support and partner with schools in more densely populated areas. Partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations are one way for rural public schools to form collaborative relationships within their community and share responsibility for student success among stakeholders.

Problem Statement

Though faith-based organizations provide a unique opportunity for rural public schools to share responsibility for student success among community stakeholders, partnerships between public schools and churches in the twenty-first century are complex. Rosenblith and Bailey (2007) argue that "more so than at any other time in our nation's history, we are confronted with difficult issues concerning the appropriate place of religion in state sponsored schools" (p. 96). Many educators are searching for collaborative partners, but they struggle to navigate faith-based partnerships, and in particular, the mandate to separate church and state.

Because of fears of overstepping legal boundaries of separation, many schools and churches avoid partnerships altogether, while others use the collaboration to push their religious beliefs, however consciously or directly they do this. According to Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison, and Hsiao (2017) many overburdened school personnel throughout the United States "seem to misunderstand the law to forbid any direct discussion of religion in the public schools and often avoid the subject altogether" (p. 4). On the other hand, some communities in areas with large numbers of evangelical Christians "subvert the law, in violation of the principle of nonestablishment, when they seek to use the machinery of the public schools to advance a religious mission" (Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison & Hsiao, 2017, p. 5).

Despite the difficulties many public school educators encounter when navigating faith-based partnerships, there are churches and schools who have been able to form and sustain successful collaborations. Rosenblith and Bailey (2007) argue that for as many newspaper headlines that criticize the further destruction of the wall of separation between religion and government, "there are many examples of non-newsworthy stories of educationally valuable,

constitutionally permissible, and socially and culturally desirable work" taking place between religious organizations and public education (p. 96).

As a public school administrator and church member in a small rural community, I have seen many attempted partnerships between faith-based organizations and local schools, some of which seem to end before they even begin. I've seen other partnerships intentionally abuse the law or the other party and cause tremendous damage. Fortunately, I have witnessed far more partnerships between rural public schools and religious organizations executed well, in a manner in which all stakeholders benefited. It's these mutually beneficial, constitutionally appropriate collaborations and the lack of existing research surrounding them which lead me to investigate the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. Contemporary researchers have examined various types of school and community partnerships, as well as detailed exemplar practices and processes needed to create strong relationships among stakeholders (Epstein, 2001; McAlister, 2013; Gross, et al., 2015; Krumm & Curry, 2017; Sanders, 2003; Stefanski, et al., 2016). There has also been some research on the impact of rurality on school and community partnership (Budge, 2006; Casto, 2016; Hartman, et al., 2016; Odell, 2017; Tieken, 2017; Zuckerman, 2019). However, limited research exists in the area of partnerships between rural public school and faith-based organizations (Kaplowitz, 2015; Lovelady, 1992; Torrence, 2005; Tripses & Scroggs, 2009). This study was designed to investigate effective partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations, including their strengths, limitations, and impact each of the stakeholders involved.

3

Research Questions

  The following research questions were used to guide my study:

1. What types of effective partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations exist in rural school districts?

2. What are the perceived strengths and limitations of partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations?

3. How have the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations impacted the public schools, churches, and rural communities?

<div align="center">

Methodology

</div>

  In order to answer the research questions listed above, I conducted a qualitative study to examine stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. First, I conducted twelve semi-structured individual interviews with school, church, and community leaders. I also conducted a focus group which included representatives from the school, church, and community. After conducting the interviews and focus group with the selected participants, I transcribed the recordings and coded the transcripts for important key words, topics, issues, and ideas. I then looked for themes in the data that I collected that helped me to better understand the nature, strengths, and challenges of these partnerships.

<div align="center">

Background Context

</div>

  To be able to gain a better understanding of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations, it is important to examine the historical relationship between public schools and the church, including the many federal and state laws surrounding the relationship. Additionally, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the current issues of

contention related to school and church partnerships and the history of school, family, and community partnerships in the United States.

Early History of Religion and School

The complicated relationship between public schools and religion in the United States dates back to the founding of our nation. Many of the early settlers who left their country of origin and made the difficult journey to the new world had strong religious beliefs. According to Bindewald (2015), "a large majority of the early European settlers in what came to be the United States, from Puritan New England to the Anglican southern colonies, were Protestants" (p. 96). As the settlers established the new colonies, they expected that their religious beliefs would be taught to their children alongside other educational content. Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison and Hsiao (2017) explain that "in the early days of the republic, most Americans believed that education was the responsibility of parents, churches, and, in some cases, states" (p. 3). Not only were parents responsible for training young children, but the church also had an obligation to provide instruction.

Since there were "no federal laws relating to the role of religion in public schools" during the early days of our nation, states were empowered to utilize public schools to teach religious principles (Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison & Hsiao, 2017, p. 3). Bindewald (2015) writes that "the earliest publicly supported schools arose in Massachusetts in 1647, with the enactment of the Old Deluder Satan Act (1647)" (p. 96). The Act was designed to help "produce informed citizens who could read the Bible for themselves, despite the best efforts of 'that old deluder, Satan [who seeks] to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures'" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 96).

The relationship between church and state was officially addressed when our nation's forefathers drafted the United States Constitution. Bindewald (2015) explains that "the First

Amendment to the United States Constitution contains two Religion Clauses, which are commonly referred to as the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause" (p. 96). The amendment states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibit the free exercise thereof." Prioritizing it before any other amendment, the founders ensured that citizens were not only protected from government instituted religion, but also free to practice their chosen faith.

According to McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014), although the first amendment provided guidance to the federal government in regard to religion, "the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in 1868, specifically placed restrictions on state action impairing personal rights" (p. 23). The Fourteenth Amendment states "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." In addition to the provisions of the First Amendment, the Fourteenth Amendment ensured states would not infringe on a citizen's personal liberties.

Though there was clear federal guidance on the freedom of religion, there was little federal involvement in education. Bindewald (2015) states that "from the earliest days of the Republic, education was seen as a responsibility of the states and of the people, and not of the federal government" (p. 96). McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) also add that "education is primarily a state function" (p. 24). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many states worked to develop tax-supported systems of education. According to Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison, and Hsiao (2017), during this time "most public schools in the United States came to be dominated by Protestant Christianity" (p. 3). Additionally, the common school movement, led by Horace Mann, "solidified the prominent position of nonsectarian Protestantism in the growing system of American public schools" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 96).

Church and School in the Twentieth Century

However, in the twentieth century continued immigration altered the religious demographics of many American cities. As a result, "majority mainstream Protestants increasingly sought to accommodate the diverse demands of a religiously pluralist society" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 96). During this time period fundamentalist also "became increasingly concerned about the impact of the schools' superficial treatment of the Bible upon America's young people" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 97). This pressure from multiple groups led the U.S. Supreme Court to redefine the relationship between public schools and faith-based organizations.

While the First Amendment Religion Clauses applied only to Congress, federal courts in the United States would ultimately take "an active role in efforts to clarify the appropriate role of religion in the public schools" (Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison & Hsiao, 2017, p. 2). According to Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison, and Hsiao (2017), in the 1940s, for the first time, the Court "adopted Thomas Jefferson's metaphorical 'wall of separation' between church and state when it incorporated the Establishment Clause through the 14th Amendment, which prohibited state and local governments from infringing upon the rights of American citizens (Everson v. Board of Education 330 U.S. 1, 1947)" (p. 3). McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) point out that Jefferson's metaphor was "used widely by the federal judiciary for more than thirty years following *Everson*, even though this phrase does not appear in the First Amendment" (p. 24)

Over the next several decades the Court would seek to clarify its interpretation of the Establishment Clause and its application to American public schools. Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison, and Hsiao (2017) argue that "most significantly, the Court would declare unconstitutional the practices of devotional religious instruction in public grounds, official school prayer, and school-sponsored Bible reading and devotional activities" between the years

of 1948 and 1963 (p. 4). By 1970, the Court had clearly ruled that "school employees were 'agents of the state,' who, when in the performance of their professional duties, were prohibited from promoting or inhibiting religion (or nonreligion)" (Bindewald, Sanatullova-Allison & Hsiao, 2017, p. 4).

Later, in the 1971 *Lemon v. Kurtzman* case, the Supreme Court developed a three-part test to assess Establishment Clause claims. The test is commonly referred to as the *Lemon* test (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes, 2014). McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) explain that in order to withstand scrutiny, governmental actions must "(1) have a secular purpose, (2) have a primary effect that neither advances nor impedes religion, and (3) avoid excessive governmental entanglement with religion" (p. 24). The tripartite test was consistently used by the courts in Establishment Clause cases involving schools until 1992 when the endorsement and coercion test gained favor. Under the endorsement standard, a governmental action "will be struck down if an objective observer would view it as having the purpose or effect of endorsing or disapproving of religion" (p. 24). The coercion test "bases an Establishment Clause violation on whether there is direct or indirect governmental coercion on individuals to profess a faith" (p. 24). However, McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) argue recent "support for church/state separation seems to be waning, even in school cases where separationist doctrine has been the strongest" (p. 24).

The Court also sought to clarify its interpretation of the free exercise claim and its application to American public schools through multiple court decisions. McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) state that in 1972, "in the most significant school case involving a free exercise claim, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the Supreme Court exempted Amish children from compulsory school attendance upon successful completion of eight grade" (p. 26). While they

noted one of the primary functions of the state is to create an educated citizenry, the Court "nonetheless concluded that parents' rights to practice their legitimate religious beliefs outweighed the state's interest in mandating two additional years of formal schooling for Amish youth" (p. 26).

Current Issues of Contention

Many argue that the current relationship between public schools and the church remains problematic. Rosenblith and Bailey (2007) maintain that "perhaps at no other time in recent memory has the issue of religion in the public square been as contentious and as prominent as it is today" (p. 93). Much of the debate between the two groups revolves around issues related to curriculum, proselytizing in school, or financial aid for faith-based schools.

Several of the controversial issues that exist between the church and public schools today center around the curriculum taught in school. While numerous curriculum disputes have arisen, evolutionary science has undoubtedly been the most contentious subject. Bindewald (2015) suggests that in the last century "progressive measures in the public schools, including the movement toward scientific efficiency" have ultimately "pushed the teaching of Protestant morality further into the margins of the curriculum" resulting in increased tension between the two groups (p. 97).

Prior to the 1950s, several states had banned the teaching of evolutionary science, because it conflicted with the biblical account of creation. However, in response to the launch of Sputnik in 1957, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act which "called for a renewed focus on math and science education and, among other initiatives, funded the publication of new textbooks that gave much more direct treatment to the topic of evolution" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 98). The new focus on evolution led to an increase in antievolution bills set

forth by conservative Christians. In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled that "laws banning the teaching of evolution were unconstitutional" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 98). As a result, fundamentalist sought to encourage "the passage of laws that would require the teaching of their views alongside evolution in biology classes" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 98). According to Bindewald (2015), "challenges to one of these laws led to *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* (1982), in which a federal court ruled that balanced treatment or equal time between creation science and evolution science amounted to an unconstitutional establishment of religion" (p. 98).

However, disputes over teaching evolution and alternative theories continues today. McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) argue "some of the recent controversy has focused on teaching intelligent design (ID), which supporters distinguish from creationism because the ID doctrine contends that human beings are too complex to have evolved randomly by natural selection" (p. 48). Despite a federal judge ruling that "ID did not qualify as actual science" and pointing out ID "had failed to generate peer-reviewed publications and had not been subjected to testing and research" supporters believe the controversy surrounding evolution should be taught in school (Bindewald, 2015, p. 98). Additionally, teachers have recently encountered legal and professional challenges including lawsuits and termination related to their expression of their personal beliefs on the origin of humanity (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes, 2014).

Presently, fundamentalists are also initiating censorship campaigns related to select curriculum and instructional materials (Bindewald, 2015). McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) argue that "in addition to evolution, central targets have been sex education, values clarification, and outcome-based education, but few aspects of the curriculum have remained untouched by such claims" (p. 49). According to McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes

(2014), "sex education classes have been particularly susceptible to charges that an antitheistic faith is being advanced, but courts have found that the challenged courses do not denounce Christianity and instead present public health information that furthers legitimate educational objectives" (p. 49). In addition, the use of the popular *Harry Potter* book series in a reading class has been challenged due to allegations the book promoted Satanism and the occult (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes, 2014). Situations involving the celebration of Earth Day, role-playing during drug prevention lessons, and creation of worry dolls have also made their way to federal court as supporters on both sides of the debate continue to advocate for their position.

Many of the other controversial issues that exist between the church and public schools today center around the idea of proselytizing in the classroom and/or school building. Proselytizing occurs when a person attempts to convert another individual to his or her religious beliefs. McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) point out that since "teachers and other school personnel are working with a vulnerable, captive audience in public schools, their actions have been scrutinized to ensure that classrooms are not used as a forum to indoctrinate sectarian beliefs" (p. 34). In recent years, cases involving teacher-initiated Bible study, reading the Bible during school, wearing clothing promoting religion, locker-room prayer, prayer in school, the Pledge of Allegiance, and more have made their way into various courtroom and resulted in varying outcomes (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes, 2014).

Another of the controversial issues that exist between the church and public schools today involves financial aid for faith-based schools. According to McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014), "about 11 percent of all PK-12 students in the United States are enrolled in private schools, but the ratio could change if additional government aid flows to private education" (p. 51). While most states prohibit the use of public funds for religious purposes, a

majority of states provide public aid to private schools, including faith-based schools, for student services. McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes (2014) explain that "the primary types of aid are for transportation services, the loan of textbooks, state-required testing programs, special education for children with disabilities, and counseling services" (p. 51). McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) add that "some of the most significant Supreme Court decisions interpreting the Establishment Clause have pertained to the use of public funds for private, primarily sectarian, education" (p. 51). For example, in *Mitchell v. Helms* in 2000 the Supreme Court ruled federal aid could be used to purchase instructional material such as computers, library books, or other equipment for students in faith-based schools (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes, 2014).

In addition, financial aid used to encourage school choice, including tax relief measures and vouchers, can be used to support faith-based schools. According to McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014), "tax relief measures for private school tuition and educational vouchers have received considerable attention in legislative forums to make private schooling a viable choice for more families" (p. 54). In 2011, the Supreme Court supported Arizona's tax benefit program which allows citizens to claim a tax deduction for contributions to a student's private school tuition, including religious school. Similarly, in 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that parents in Cleveland City School District could use state voucher funds toward tuition at religious schools (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes, 2014).

History of School and Community Partnerships

As the relationship between public schools and the church in the United States has changed, school and community partnerships have also evolved. Epstein (2001) states that "in the late 1960s and 1970s, researchers argued heatedly about whether schools or families were

more important" (p. 39). Ultimately, after much debate, the contributions of both schools and families were recognized as critical to the successful education of children. Epstein (2001) argues that "it became clear that neither schools nor families alone can do the job of educating and socializing children and preparing them for life. Rather, schools, families, and communities share responsibilities for children and influence them simultaneously" (p. 39)

One reason stakeholders embraced the need for shared responsibility is that the demographics of the average family in America began to change during this time period. In the 1960s "more women were graduating from college and entering and staying in the workforce, more mothers were equal with teachers in education, and more parents were active in decisions about early care for their children" (Epstein, 2001, p. 39). Epstein (2001) argues that by the 1970s "other early policies changed basic connections between schools and families, based on demographic data, family demands, and goals for greater nutritional equity for children" (p. 39). As a result of more women working outside of the home, schools began serving lunch for all students and offering free and reduced-price lunch and breakfast to qualifying students.

Another reason Americans began to understand the need for shared responsibility between school and families was the research conducted by James Coleman and his colleagues during the 1960s. According to Kanto and Lowe (2017), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated that the United States Commissioner of Education "conduct a survey on the lack of quality of educational opportunity by race, color, religion, and national origin in the nation's public elementary and secondary school" (p. 571). Kahlenberg (2001) states that "after conducting what was then the second largest social science research project in history- involving 600,000 children in 4,000 schools nationally – Coleman and his colleagues issued *Equality of Educational Opportunity*" (p. 55). While the general assumption of educators at the time was that funding

differences between black and white schools were pervasive and primarily contributed to the unequal achievement between blacks and whites, it was not congruent with Coleman's findings. Instead, the *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, also known as the Coleman Report, showed that "the disparities in funding between schools attended by blacks and whites were far smaller than anticipated" and family economic status was "far more predictive" of student achievement (Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 55). Subsequent research by Coleman continued to reinforce that family culture was far more important than school spending and provided a catalyst for school and family partnership initiatives (Kahlenberg, 2001).

Following the publication of *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, educators increased their focus on parental involvement in schools. Goldberg (1990) writes that James P. Comer, "convinced that the relationship between school and family is at the heart of a poor child's success or lack of it" began his work with family and school partnerships (p. 41). "In 1968, at Yale Medical School's Child Study Center, and with support from the Ford Foundation, Comer developed a school-based management team to help poor families and school 'develop trust and mutual respect'" (Goldberg, 1990, p. 41). He and his colleagues focused their work in two low achieving, poorly attended New Haven schools. They began by developing teams of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators who developed comprehensive plans for each school (Goldberg, 1990; Ramirez-Smith, 1995). Ramirez-Smith (1995) writes that Comer's aim was "a collaborative, consensus-building, no-fault approach to problem solving" (p. 14). He argued that parents "should be brought into the school and given a role" (Goldberg, 1990, p. 41). By the mid 1980's, not only had the two New Haven schools had seen dramatic increases in student achievement and attendance, but Comer's approach was being replicated in other schools across the nation (Goldberg, 1990,).

Support for school, family, and community partnerships continued to increase in the 1970s. Epstein (2001) states that "although it was not one of the initial elements of effective schools, parental involvement was quickly added to an expanding list of components that research and practice suggested would improve schools and increase student success" (p. 40). By the 1980s, "studies began to clarify the amorphous term parent involvement and recast the emphasis from parent involvement (left up to the parent) to school and family partnerships, or, more fully, school, family, and community partnerships" (Epstein, 2001, p. 40).

In 1990, the United States prioritized school, family, and community partnerships and began implementing national and international research initiatives related to these partnerships. The Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning was developed in 1990 "to conduct an active research and development program on school and family partnerships from birth through high school" (Epstein, 2001, p. 40). Additionally, the Center created an International Network of researchers from over 40 nations "to encourage and to share work on many topics related to school, family, and community partnerships" (Epstein, 2001, p. 40). Research on this topic continues to expand each year as scholars work to strengthen partnerships and enhance educational outcomes for students.

In the twenty-first century, school and community partnerships continue to evolve. Currently, many practitioners are advocating for "full-service community schools," which Dryfoos (2005) writes are schools "that have intentionally transformed into neighborhood hubs and that are open all the time to children and their families" (p. 7). Full-service community schools can offer a wide range of services for their community including afterschool programs, health clinics, parental supports, GED programs, computer access for community members, and more (Dryfoos, 2003). According to Dryfoos (2003), "advocates for full-service community

schools believe that achievement scores for many young people will not improve if the children and families are not helped to overcome health, mental health, social, and economic barriers to learning" (p. 204). Furthermore, advocates "believe that schools cannot assume the responsibility for all that needs to be done, but many community agencies are ready to take on that challenge by providing services in schools" (p. 204).

Several pieces of legislation also currently exist in the United States regarding family and community involvement. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, also known as IDEA, allows students with identified disabilities to receive special education services and includes parents as decision makers throughout the process. McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, and Eckes (2014) state that "districts must ensure that the parents have the opportunity to participate fully" as a part of the individualized education program team (p. 175). Additionally, "Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), which was recently reauthorized with the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires schools to work together with parents" (Bertrand, Freelon, & Rogers, 2018, p. 4).

Current Critics of School and Community Partnerships

As the relationship between schools and communities evolved, researchers have begun to critically analyze the partnerships and question some of the goals, perceptions, and measures of success prominent within the collaborations. Many scholars have raised concern over whose ideals and values are prioritized in the partnership. Perkins (2015) explains "school-community partnership rhetoric embraces an idealized notion of community to be attained without addressing whose ideal is being promoted" (p. 318). She writes that school-community partnerships can promote the goals of the school while discounting the ideals of the community. For example, many partnerships are "aimed at improving student achievement" (Perkins, 2015,

p. 326). She cautions that if school-community partnerships continue to function as a tool of social reproduction for the school, then "the goals, desires, cultures, and values of entire communities, and/ or members of communities will continue to be erased, ignored, or constructed as a problem" (p. 334).

Not only have researchers critically analyzed the goals of school and community partnerships, but they have also examined the perceptions of policy makers and educators. Though current legislation encourages parental engagement, many scholars criticize the deficit ideology underpinning these educational policies. Bertrand, Freelon, and Rogers (2018) state "education policy often underestimates parents – especially parents of color and working class parents – depicting them as needy" (p. 4). For example, many federal programs require parent and community input, yet "they characterize some parents as lacking literacy and generally deficient in their ability to support their children in normative while, middle-class ways" (Bertrand, Freelon, & Rogers, 2018, p. 4).

In addition, Perkins (2015) argues "the themes of social control and salvation are evident" in various school-community partnerships (p. 328). Since school personnel can adopt a deficit view of parents and community members, they are prone to using the partnership to attempt to control or save stakeholders. Keith (1995) also acknowledged the deficit view of parents and added that some schools provided integrated and comprehensive services "as if the students, their families, and communities had nothing worthwhile to impart" (p. 172). She argued that "having parents and community members with official, important roles in the school conveyed the message that they had capacities, not just deficits" (Keith, 1995, p. 171). Keith (1995) also suggested that educators should "rethink the service provision model of community schools and find ways to make community members true participants" (p. 173).

17

Researchers have also been critical of the success measures utilized in school-community partnerships. Because academic achievement is often prioritized as a goal in partnership, Keith (1995) questions if educators will ever be able to show partnership participants that they "understand the value of gains in hope and pride" (p. 173). She argues that "we must be concerned about what students learn, but we need to see learning as part of the larger process of community building" (Keith, 1995, p. 173). Other researchers argue that partnerships are only successful if behavior outcomes and student discipline improve within the school and fail to acknowledge additional measures of partnership success (Perkins, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

In this study I utilize Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence as a lens through which I examined the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. Epstein (2001) "developed the theory of overlapping spheres of influence to explain the effects of families, schools, and communities on students' learning and development" (p. 4). She explains that families, schools, and communities all have an effect on those around them, or a sphere of influence. According to Epstein (2001), early sociological theory suggested that organizations were "most efficient and effective if they have separate missions and operate independently" (p. 74). However, she theorized that organizations, particularly families, schools, and communities, were more productive if they allowed their spheres of influence to overlap and began partnering together. Epstein (2001) writes that data from her own research and many other studies "revealed repeated evidence that educators who worked in partnership with families and communities were more effective than those who worked in isolation in improving school climate, teachers' professional behavior, parents' confidence, and students' success in school" (p. 74). She theorized that "a model of overlapping

spheres of influence more completely and accurately depicts and explains the simultaneous influences of schools, families, and communities on students' learning and development and on improving school programs and family support" (p. 74).

Many researchers have utilized Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence when examining issues related to community partnerships. Stefanski, Valli, and Jacobson (2016) affirm the use of Epstein's framework as one of many frameworks used to describe family involvement and list Epstein's six types of involvement which include parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. In addition, Sanders (2014) used Epstein's theory to identify three core principles of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), an organization designed to assist schools, districts, and states in developing successful community engagement programs. Similarly, I plan to utilize Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence as a framework to identify partnership activities between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina and the goals of the organizations involved.

Significance of the Study

Faith-based organizations provide a unique opportunity for rural public schools to share responsibility for student success among community stakeholders; however, as previously stated, partnerships between public schools and churches in the twenty-first century are complex. In part due to this complexity, limited qualitative research has been conducted in this area. Therefore, an investigation of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations, including their strengths, limitations, and impact each of the stakeholders involved is necessary to enhance the existing conversation.

Summary and Overview

In this chapter, I begin with an introduction to school and church partnerships in rural communities followed by a discussion of my motivation for researching the topic. I then described the purpose of the study along with the specific questions and methodology that I used to guide my research. I also provided an overview of the relationship between school and church including the history of separation of church and state. Finally, I discussed how I will draw on Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence as I develop the study and briefly described the significance of my research.

In chapter two, I examine the current literature related to school and community partnerships, rurality, and faith-based organizations. First, I explore literature related to the benefits of successful partnerships as well as exemplar practices and processes needed to create strong relationships between stakeholders. I also examine current literature related to the characteristics, benefits, and potential challenges of rural communities as well as the types of rural school and community partnerships and collaborations typically present. Finally, I examine literature related to the partnerships between churches and schools and the commonalities among rural schools and faith-based organizations, as well as the known benefits and potential legal, ethical, and political challenges associated with collaborations between rural schools and faith-based organizations.

In chapter three, I describe the methodology I used to conduct the research. First, I describe the pilot studies I conducted prior to beginning this research study and how they ultimately impacted my research. I then explain the specific research elements of my study including research design, setting, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis

strategies. Lastly, I discuss measures I have taken to ensure trustworthiness and how I to report my findings.

In chapter four I describe the findings of my study, including the existing collaborations between the public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes community. I also examine the strengths, limitations, and impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations found throughout my research.

Finally, in chapter five I analyze my findings, directly answer my research questions, and discuss implications of my research. In addition, I also make recommendations for stakeholders and future researchers and share final thoughts related to the study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past several decades, a wide range of research has been conducted on community and school partnerships. Researchers have not only identified types of school and community partnerships, but they have also detailed exemplar practices and processes needed to create strong relationships among stakeholders. However, there has been limited research on the church and school partnerships that exist within rural communities and the political, ethical, and legal requirements necessary to navigate these partnerships well. A thorough examination of the current literature related to school and community partnerships, rurality, and faith-based organizations is necessary for stakeholders to develop and sustain strong school and church partnerships in rural communities.

School and Community Partnerships

School and community partnerships have been an important part of the educational system for decades. According to Stefanski, Valli, and Jacobson (2016), "school–community partnerships have long been viewed as a promising way to help struggling students, families, and neighborhoods" (p. 136). Both educators and community leaders across the country recognize the impact of successful partnerships on student achievement and wellbeing and seek opportunities to collaborate when necessary and desirable. Currently, teachers in North Carolina are expected to "improve communication and collaboration between the school and the home and community in order to promote trust and understanding and build partnerships with all segments of the school community" ("North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards," p. 3). In order to provide educators and community leaders with the information necessary to establish and maintain successful rural school and church partnerships, a review of the benefits and characteristics of general school and community partnerships is needed.

Benefits of School and Community Partnerships

      Researchers have identified numerous educational, financial, social-emotional, and economic benefits to developing strong school and community partnerships. First, successful school and community partnerships have several educational benefits for both the school and community. Epstein (2001) emphasizes the educational benefits of the partnerships and argues schools can "enrich their curriculum and instruction and improve the school climate by collaborating with the community" (p. 469). For example, a collaboration which enables community members to serve as guest speakers in classrooms could provide students with content-aligned instruction from experts in the field. Additionally, McAlister (2013) underscores the need for community engagement in struggling schools and confirms the "positive impact of parent, family, and community engagement on student achievement" (p. 37). When schools, parents, and community members partner together, individuals are able to reinforce students' learning both inside and outside of the classroom (McAlister, 2013).

      In addition to the educational benefits for schools, strong partnerships can also have a positive impact on the community's educational beliefs. To better understand strong community partnerships and inclusive educational delivery systems, Gross, Haines, Hill, Francis, Blue-Banning, and Turnbull (2015) conducted focus groups with forty community partners from five different schools. The researchers found that the community partners in many of the schools they studied "emphasized how the culture of including all students and providing all students an excellent education profoundly influenced how they perceived disabilities and how they used their new knowledge in other settings" (p. 18). When community partners observe teachers and students including all learners in the educational setting, despite their disability, their educational perceptions can be altered. Furthermore, community members can then act on these new beliefs

and replicate inclusive practices in their town. As a result of their study of strong community partnerships and inclusive educational delivery systems, Gross et al. (2015) argue "learning about the inclusive culture in their schools was a major benefit for the community partners" (p. 19).

There are also financial benefits to developing strong school and community partnerships. Sanders (2003) writes that schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students due to the increasing responsibility placed on our educational system. She argues these additional resources "are housed in students' communities" (p. 162). While some community members may be able to provide monetary support to the school, others provide support in creative ways. For example, community members with specialized skills may choose to donate their time to complete a project which allows the school to save their limited financial resources for other expenses. As one of the outcomes of their focus-group study, Gross et al. (2015) found that "schools benefitted from the increased resources, supports, and relationships resulting from the development of trusting school-community partnerships" (p. 18).

In addition to improving instruction and providing needed resources for schools, researchers also indicate strong community partnerships can improve the overall health, skills, and talents of both parents and students (Epstein, 2001). According to Stefanski, Valli, and Jacobson (2016), who used a grounded theory approach to track the similarities and differences that emerged in the existing school-community partnership literature, many partnerships "attempt to literally 'wrap' services around and into the school itself" (p. 147). Wraparound services may include individual or family counseling as well as medical and dental treatment for students. Additionally, Sanders (2003) argues "because of changes in the structure and function of U.S. families and neighborhoods, many children and youth, regardless of socioeconomic

background, are growing up without the social capital necessary for their healthy development"

(p. 163). Effective school and community collaborations create an opportunity for students to

develop positive caring relationships with community members characterized by the sharing of

knowledge, guidance, and values (Sanders, 2003).

Another benefit of school and community partnerships for students is that the partnership

can expose students to potential career opportunities within their town. For example, a

partnership between a high school and a local welding company that facilitated semester long

internships would provide students with an introduction to a potential trade that may be

unfamiliar to them and allow them to learn job specific skills. Epstein (2001) argues one of the

expected results of collaborating with the community is that students will gain an increased

"awareness of career options for future education and work" (p. 414). Since many proponents of

school and community partnerships assert that the "primary responsibility of schools is to

prepare the nation's workforce," exposure to career opportunities is a significant benefit

(Sanders, 2003, p. 162).

Effective partnerships can also provide students with skill development opportunities.

Epstein (2001) claims one of the expected results of collaborating with the community is that

students will demonstrate "increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and

extracurricular experiences" (p. 414). For example, students may be able to strengthen their

programing abilities through a community sponsored after school robotics club. The skills

students acquire through the club would help to prepare them for a programing or engineering

career in their community. In addition, Sanders (2003) argues "jobs in the 21st century exist in

increasingly complicated environments and require workers who are competent beyond basic

skill level. Students need advanced language, technical, and communication skills to succeed in the kinds of jobs that are currently available" (p. 163).

Characteristics of Successful Partnerships

Not only have researchers identified several benefits of successful partnerships, they have also detailed exemplar practices and processes needed to create strong relationships between stakeholders. According to research on the topic, several factors promote the development and sustainability of strong community partnerships. First, effective collaboration between schools and community organizations is built on a shared vision between all stakeholders. Sanders (2003) writes that shared understanding is a necessary component of partnership readiness and allows school communities to successfully work together. Sanders (2003) further argues it "is necessary to promote shared understanding of the partnership's goals while avoiding misunderstandings and the consequent resentment" (p. 166).

In addition to a shared vision, partnership liaisons are also critical in the development and sustainability of strong community partnerships (Krumm & Curry, 2017). A partnership liaison is the individual responsible for coordinating the partnership activities; this person serves as a connection between the school and community organization. Sanders (2014) explains partnership coordinators are "the 'glue' that held the district's partnership programs together" (p. 243). Gross et al. (2015) suggest that a principal or school leader should serve as the liaison between the school and the community in order to sustain school and community partnerships, because school leaders have the unique opportunity to foster relationships with community members at PTO meetings, athletic events, and more.

Another factor that contributes to the development and sustainability of strong community partnerships is communication (Krumm & Curry, 2017). As a result of their research

of school-community partnerships in inclusive schools, Gross et al. (2015) concluded that "all community partners valued communication and deemed it essential" (p. 25). Whether it is through weekly phone messages, social media posts, newsletters, or another forms of outreach, both schools and community members want to be able to share and receive information in a timely manner. In addition, communication involves listening to community members and families (Gross et al., 2015). Sanders (2003) further maintains that "a plan for open communication and resolving differences" is necessary for partnerships to be successful (p. 166).

While there is a great deal of agreement among researchers on factors that contribute to the development and sustainability of strong community partnerships, Sanders (2014) uniquely emphasizes the factor of principal buy-in for effective collaboration. Principals can show their support for partnership initiatives in a variety of ways. For example, the principal may choose to incorporate school and community partnerships into the school improvement plan or provide professional development to strengthen teachers' community engagement skills. Sanders (2014) argues that a principal's active support of school and community partnerships is "critical to its ability to successfully implement partnership activities focused on school goals" (p. 248). Similarly, DeMatthews (2018) emphasizes the importance of school leaders in developing and sustaining strong school partnerships in his qualitative case study of the leadership practices of a school leader in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. In his study, he "provided examples of how a school leader crafted school policies and built parent expectations and trusting relationships" (p. 190).

Rural School and Community Partnerships

While the available research illuminates several common forms of school and community partnerships as well as factors that contribute to successful partnerships, it is important to note that rural school and community partnerships are unique and are impacted, both positively and

negatively, by the rural context. In order to adequately understand the distinctiveness of rurality, it is necessary to examine the characteristics, benefits, and potential challenges of rural communities as well as the types of rural school and community partnerships and collaborations typically present.

Characteristics of Rural Communities

Researchers have identified several unique characteristics of rural communities including depressed economic conditions, geographic isolation and low population density, and the outmigration of young people. First, rural communities are often characterized by depressed economic conditions. According to Budge (2006), "economies, dependent upon agriculture or extraction of natural resources, are weak throughout the nation" (p. 2). In previous generations rural communities were built on small family farms; however, few of those exist today as products can be mass produced. As a result, the revenue generated in rural communities is often negatively impacted, with the wealth and stability of rural communities diminishing. Budge (2006) adds that "these economies have suffered for decades" (p. 2). Similarly, "lower-paying jobs in trade and service industries are replacing living-wage jobs" (Budge, 2006, p. 2). Many families in rural communities are struggling financially and are forced to relocate to urban or suburban areas for higher paying employment opportunities. Hartman, Stotts, Ottley, and Miller (2016) explain that "depressed rural describes communities in which the number of people leaving the area may be high and economic hardship is common" in our country (p. 404).

Rural communities are also characterized by geographic isolation and low population density. According to Hartman, Stotts, Ottley and Miller (2016), "isolated rural refers to places that are far from metropolitan areas and commonly have underdeveloped means of reaching them" (p. 404). Odell (2017) explains that the geographic isolation of rural communities impacts

access to high-speed internet and transportation which further isolates the individuals that reside within the community. Additionally, Odell (2017) argues the geographic isolation and low population density of rural communities create a lack of competition and collaboration among students. He states "disadvantaged pupils in geographically isolated schools and regions with lower population density have lower academic attainment than their peers in less isolated and more highly populated regions" as a result of the geographic isolation (p. 259).

Another common characteristic of rural communities is the outmigration of young adults. In her case study focused on sensemaking in rural school and community partnerships, Zuckerman (2019) found that "like other rural communities, there appeared to be significant tension in wanting young people to succeed but to also stay in the community, and what success looks like" (p. 9). Community members wanted their loved ones to stay with them in their rural town, but felt like opportunities for success were greater in larger cities. Some participants in her study believed "it was important for young people to leave the community and gain exposure to different people and ideas" (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 9). Similarly, Budge (2006) argues that most students leave their rural community to find a family-wage job due to the "changes in economic conditions" (p. 5). Regardless of the motivation behind outmigration, young adults are leaving rural areas at a significant rate and many do not return to their communities. Budge (2006) examined the influence of rurality and sense of place in an interview-based case study with young adults who had left their rural communities and concluded those who left their rural community for opportunities in larger cities were hesitant to return to their rural town. They "viewed such homecoming as a sign of failure" (p. 6).

Benefits of Rural Communities

In addition to the many unique characteristics and challenges of rural communities, there are also several benefits to living in a rural context. First, individuals who reside in rural communities often have a strong sense of place. According to Budge (2006), there are six habits of place associated with rural communities. These habits include connectedness, development of identity and culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and activism and civic engagement. Those who live in a rural community often feel more connected to each other and their town and are more likely to become involved in community activities. Budge (2006) also confirms that the concept of place "appears to be more pervasive in literature on rural schools and communities than urban and suburban places" (p. 3).

Another benefit of rural communities is that their small size allows residents to care for and support one another. Budge (2006) describes rural communities as caring and points out that these communities exhibit a "sense of extended family" (p. 6). In her study of a rural community Budge (2006) also found that "leaders described the district and community as a place where one can belong. Teachers tended to know not only their students, but their students' family members as well. Educators formed close relationships with each other and were known in the community" (p. 6). These close relationships allow community members to provide support for one another when needed. Hartman, Stotts, Ottley, and Miller (2016) highlight the support community members can provide in their research of students who experience mistreatment in southeastern Ohio. They explain that it was "close and supportive community bonds that help to facilitate swift reactions to issues of child maltreatment" (p. 408).

Potential Challenges

Despite the research establishing the unique characteristics and benefits of rural communities, rural schools often face significant barriers when developing school and community partnerships. These barriers include a limited access to partnership opportunities, a distrust of outsiders, and educator perceptions. To begin with, financial partnerships are often difficult to create due to the limited access to large businesses and corporations. While small businesses and civic organizations are able to partner with rural schools in their community, their resources are often restricted due to the socioeconomic status of many citizens. According to Casto (2016), the geographic isolation, declining population, and poverty that characterize many rural communities "place rural schools in the difficult position of needing to play a broader role in the community while also having fewer resources to draw upon" (p. 144).

In addition to the limited partnership opportunities, rural community members often distrust those outside of their community. Tieken (2017) states "outsiders have often entered rural communities with grand promises for better futures, only to erode local responsiveness and self-determination, leaving the school a little less 'us' and a little more 'them'" (p. 217). Rural community members can perceive visitors from urban or suburban areas as being unaware and disrespectful of the values and beliefs associated with rurality and can be hesitant to establish trusting relationships with these individuals. In her interview-based case study of rural school-partnerships, Zuckerman (2019) found that "participants identified study trips outside their rural community as a strategy for bringing new information into the developing partnership" in order to combat the distrust of outsiders (p. 8). Instead of inviting outsiders with new ideas into their community, the participants in the study acquired new information through study trips to other

communities and then used voices inside the community to present the new knowledge (Zuckerman, 2019).

Rural schools can also face significant barriers when developing school and community partnerships as a result of educator perceptions. In rural communities, teachers and administrators may consider parents and community members to be deficient in the skills prioritized by the school. Sebolt (2018), who taught English learners for nineteen years in Southwest Virginia writes that "deficit perspectives prevailed among many teachers" with whom she worked (p. 132). She added that "teachers expressed that they believed the parents do not value education because they are not involved in traditional ways (e.g., attending PTA meetings and Back-to-School Night, assisting with homework)" (p. 132). In their multi-phase analysis of surveys from over 600 principals and interviews with over 30 principals, Bertrand, Freelon, and Rogers (2018) found "principals often constructed parents in terms of deficiencies and as needing to learn" in order to better support school goals (p. 2). They caution that if principals continue to "reproduce deficit social constructions of parents, schools will lose out on key actors who can help advance equity" (Bertrand, Freelon, & Rogers., 2018, p. 3)

Types of Rural School and Community Partnerships

Researchers have identified various types of successful school and community partnerships. While these types of partnerships are not limited to rural communities, each type of partnership can be found within a rural setting. Gross et al. (2015) and Sanders (2003) suggest partnerships with businesses are one of the most popular types of school and community collaborations. For example, a business may donate money to purchase and enhance classroom libraries in order to encourage students to enjoy reading (Gross et al., 2015). Sanders (2003)

32

states that partnership activities may also include "providing mentors for individual students, donating school supplies, and funding awards for improved student attendance" (pp. 165-166).

University partnerships are another common type of school and community partnerships found in current literature. These partnerships can provide schools with student teachers to work within the classrooms. Additionally, colleges and universities can offer schools instructional support, professional development, and continuing education opportunities for employees (Gross et al., 2015). According to Sanders (2003), university partnerships have "the potential to increase the collaborative capacity of the key stakeholders through the provision of professional development" (p. 166).

Another increasingly popular type of school and community collaboration is social services partnerships. For example, healthcare, child advocacy, mental health, or juvenile detention agencies may choose to partner with schools and provide their services to students or families at the school. This type of partnership provides agencies with a convenient location for their clients to access services and allows students and families to receive much needed resources (Gross et al., 2015). Skrtic and Sailor (as cited in Sanders, 2003) state that the increase in school and social service partnerships is a result of "the observations of educators and other human services professionals that if children's basic needs are not met, then these children cannot respond to even the best efforts to promote their learning through education" (p. 170).

While business, university, and social services school and community partnerships are common, individual researchers have described additional types of partnerships. For example, Sanders (2003) identified service-learning partnerships as another popular form of school and community collaboration. Examples of service-learning partnerships could include allowing students to plant a community garden or volunteer at local hospitals. Gross et al. (2015)

recognized partnerships between schools and non-profit organizations or local municipalities as additional types of collaboration. DeMatthews (2018) describes a significant partnership between the US Consulate and an elementary school on the Texas border in his case study of the leadership practices of a school leader in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. According to DeMatthews, "the partnership provided small amounts of funding for computers and teacher resources, but the Consulate also donated furniture, computers, and office supplies" (p. 182). Local civic organizations such as fire stations, police departments, government organizations, and churches serve the same populations as schools so the partnership between the two is very natural.

Rural Schools and Faith-Based Organizations

Although researchers describe several types of rural school and community partnerships and collaborations, the partnerships between rural schools and faith-based organizations are uniquely rich and complex. In order to sufficiently understand the intricacies of the partnerships between churches and schools it is necessary to examine the commonalities among rural schools and faith-based organizations, as well as the known benefits and potential legal, ethical, and political challenges associated with collaborations between rural schools and faith-based organizations.

Common Characteristics

While few researchers have analyzed the collaborations between schools and faith-based organizations, these partnerships are often promoted in rural communities. Kaplowitz (2015) states "school-community partnership advocates have long encouraged the development of school-church partnerships" (p. 256). One reason the partnerships are often promoted is that both organizations have a high degree of influence within rural communities. Public schools not only impact the students enrolled, but also the families and neighbors of their students. Casto (2016)

writes there are particular "calls for schools to be involved in community development efforts,"

because the impact of a community school is so great (p. 143). Similarly, churches have a

significant impact on a wide range of residents within a rural community. Torrence, Phillips, and

Guidry (2005) claim "few institutions have the level of potential to reach a greater percentage of

the population than faith-based establishments" (p. 161).

In addition to a high degree of influence within a community, rural schools and faith-

based organizations often share common goals, including the development of thoughtful, kind,

well-adjusted, educated, and caring neighbors. Lovelady (1992) describes a community in rural

Mississippi in which schools, churches, and other community organizations "united for a

common cause: to help students succeed" (p. 55). She argues "community empowerment is

everybody getting involved for a common cause" (p. 56). Likewise, Tripses and Scroggs (2009)

detail the successful reading, tutoring, and mentoring partnership between an individual

congregation and their community and credit the success of the collaboration to a shared

purpose. According to the researchers, both church members and school personnel agree "the

shared purpose of the collaboration is the well-being of the students" (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009,

p. 92).

Benefits of Partnership

Researchers have not only highlighted common characteristics of rural schools and faith-

based organizations, but they have also identified mutual benefits of their collaboration. First,

when rural schools and faith-based organizations partner together, multiple stakeholders are

engaged in reinforcing moral and ethical conduct among students through behavior expectations

and character education programs. Lovelady (1992) writes churches "need the school to assist in

teaching morals, ethics, and values to children and families" (p. 56). Kaplowitz (2015) also

acknowledges the benefit of the collaboration and states "religious institutions are intended producers of religious capital and are well-positioned to partner with schools" (p. 256). She explains that religious capital "includes the skills and experiences that are accrued by individuals to make them proficient in the religious environment" such as moral and ethical knowledge and the ability to form friendships with fellow church members (p. 244). She argues that if schools seek out partnerships with faith-based organizations, "the potential for religious capital enrichment among school members may be immeasurable" (Kaplowitz, 2015, p. 257).

In addition to reinforcing moral and ethical conduct, partnerships between rural school and faith-based organizations can provide stakeholders with opportunities for social action. For example, Kaplowitz (2015) describes a school partnership event in a Jewish community called Mitzvah Day. While the event was initiated by the synagogue, the local schools partnered with the faith-based organization and elementary through high school students engaged in service activities for the day. According to Kaplowitz (2015) "while the school has a history of exemplary work in the area of social action, this is a clear example of the synagogue setting a direction for its own religious growth and bringing the school along on it journey" (p. 249). Tripses and Scroggs (2009) also describe an increased awareness of the social issues present within a community as a result of a church's relationship-based partnership with their local elementary school. Community members involved in the partnership "came to care deeply about the conditions of life experienced by the children" in the school (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009, p. 94).

When schools and faith-based organizations partner together, stakeholders' faith can also be impacted. Tripses and Scroggs (2009) state both church members and school personnel reported that their faith was impacted as a result of the collaboration. The researchers report

"volunteer leaders and congregation members characterized their involvement with the school as a ministry and as expressing their faith within the neighborhood" (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009, p. 85). Furthermore, "the principal noted that his involvement in this collaborative program has deepened his faith" (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009, p. 85)

Additionally, rural schools and faith-based organizations are able to increase their support network when they partner together. According to Kaplowitz (2015), the effective school-synagogue partnership found in her case study of a Jewish day school "highlights the degree to which the school members are in a network of mutual support that is inclusive of the congregants" (p. 250). Though the school is affiliated with a religious institution and does not hold the same separation doctrines as a public school, she provides a powerful example of the support network available as a result of the collaboration between the school and synagogue. She explains that "when an alumni parent contacted a senior leader at the congregation to receive assistance in arranging an appointment for her son with a well-regarded surgeon, a network of communal capital and a web of social connections were accessed on her behalf" (Kaplowitz, 2015, p. 250).

Another benefit of the partnerships between rural schools and faith-based organizations is the access to volunteers. Public schools often struggle to provide enrichment activities for their students; however, in a mid-sized city in Illinois, volunteers from the local church collaborated with educators to create an after-school program. Tripses and Scroggs (2009) explain that "what began as a relationship-based, letter-writing initiative in second grade expanded exponentially to include a focus on reading, tutoring, and mentoring, as well as enrichment activities not previously available at the school or in the community" (p. 78). Kaplowitz (2015) states "many partnership advocates encourage the development of the school-church, presuming that such

partnerships can be established with ease, due to the large number of churches in many

communities and the large volunteer base churches can mobilize" (p. 241).

Potential Challenges

Even though there are significant benefits to rural schools and faith-based organizations

partnering together, there are also noticeable legal, ethical, and political challenges. To begin

with, public schools must navigate a legal landscape in order to successfully partner with faith-

based organizations. Currently there are several federal and state laws that govern the

relationships between public schools and churches. For example, the First Amendment of the

United States Constitution ensures that the government shall not establish or prohibit the free

exercise of religion. At the same time, Rosenblith and Bailey (2007) explain that "although we

hold fast to the first amendment's disestablishment clause, we are also reminded that the Court

has made it clear that the study of religion is, in fact, permissible (Abington School District v.

Schempp)" (p. 96).

Rural schools also face ethical challenges when partnering with faith-based

organizations. Rosenblith and Bindewald (2014) claim public schools have an ethical duty to be

"safe places where intolerance and discrimination on the basis of arbitrary reasons are forbidden"

(p. 601). However, this safety can be challenged when public schools collaborate with churches.

The church's traditional interpretation of scripture on religious issues related to marriage,

homosexuality, and abortion can alienate individuals and make them feel unsafe. Rosenblith and

Bindewald (2014) argue "religious matters," which may be brought up in partnership activities,

"pose a particular challenge to public schools committed to civic, democratic education because

they tend to be the most intractable types of beliefs, claims, and worldviews" (pp. 601-602).

Furthermore, the researchers state that "when we consider that young people are particularly

vulnerable to indoctrination, that public school populations include students from a range of religious backgrounds, and that school attendance is compulsory" there is an ethical need to protect the interest of students and society (Rosenblith & Bindewald, 2014, p. 603).

Additionally, there are political challenges for collaborations between rural schools and faith-based organizations. According to Rosenblith and Bailey (2007), "many people feel at once threatened by public school norms and entitled to infuse their particular religious and political ideologies on the public school" (p. 95). At the same time, political groups in the United States "have coopted the conversation about the appropriate place for religion in public education and have reduced it to a handful of hot button issues" (Rosenblith & Bailey, 2007, p. 95). Issues like evolutionary theory and school prayer have aggressive advocates on each side, each with their own political agenda. Consequently, Rosenblith and Bailey (2007) argue there is a "political dimension of educational policy and curricular decision making" (p. 95). Stakeholders must consider this political dimension prior to entering into partnership activities. For example, a school may need financial support for an annual science field trip; however, they may not be able to partner with a local church if the learning outcomes of the trip involve concepts related to evolution. In order to ensure students are able to participate in the annual trip, the school may need to pursue alternate partnerships or modify the destination of the trip due to the political challenges.

Conclusion

In summary, researchers have identified numerous types of school and community partnerships and detailed exemplar practices and processes needed to create strong relationships among stakeholders. Additionally, available literature highlights the distinctiveness of rurality, as well as the types of school and community partnerships and collaborations typically present in

rural communities. However, there has been limited research on the church and school

partnerships that exist specifically within rural communities and the skills necessary to navigate

these partnerships well. A few researchers have detailed commonalities among rural schools and

faith-based organizations, as well as the known benefits and potential legal, ethical, and political

challenges associated with collaborations between rural schools and faith-based organizations. A

qualitative study of the stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and

faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina would add tremendous value to

the existing research.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. In this chapter, I discuss the design of this study as well as the practices and processes I used throughout my research. In addition, I describe my pilot study of public schools and faith-based organizations in rural communities and how my initial investigation impacted the methodology utilized in this study.

Pilot Study

As a rural public school administrator, I initially became interested in partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations as a method of increasing community involvement within my school. Having lived and worked in a rural community for years, these partnerships seemed to be a simple solution to the problem of engaging more family and community members in supporting the success of our students. However, as I began to navigate the collaborative efforts, I was intrigued by the complexity of each individual partnership. I knew that I was interested in examining these unique partnerships further. As I began to think further about the direction of this study, my interest quickly extended beyond the partnership activity itself to also include the perceptions of the stakeholders involved and impact of the partnership on the school, church, and community.

I began my research by identifying several individuals with knowledge of school-faith partnerships from Oaks, North Carolina (all names of people and places I use in this study are pseudonyms) and inviting them to participate in my pilot study. Two of the participants were school leaders from one of the four schools in the South Lakes community. I selected them as participants because they had direct knowledge of school partnerships within the South Lakes

community. They were also able to discuss the impact of the school-faith partnerships on the school and the community. Additionally, three church leaders within the South Lakes community participated in the pilot research. I invited each of these participants to be a part of my initial research due to their direct knowledge of school partnerships within the South Lakes community. They were each able to detail existing partnerships as well as discuss the impact of the school-faith partnerships on their church and the overall community.

During my pilot research I used two data collection techniques. First, I conducted a total of three semi-structured interviews, two with school leaders and one with a church leader. While I had a predetermined list of questions, the semi-structured approach allowed me the flexibility to adjust as needed throughout the interview. I also conducted a small focus group with two different church leaders. The focus group provided an additional opportunity for me to examine emerging themes from the individual interviews and witness the conversation between participants in order to assess if this would be a good technique to use in my study. All of the interviews and the focus group lasted approximately one hour each.

While conducting these initial interviews, I noted several perceived benefits of individual partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations. Participants spoke at great lengths about the partnership activities and the positive impact each activity had on the school, church, and community. However, they also readily acknowledged challenges to developing and sustaining these collaborative efforts. Conducting the pilot study confirmed for me the value of this work, of interviewing people about their experiences, and the need to examine the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations with a critical lens. I also learned that both interviews and focus groups would be good data collection techniques, allowing me rich information to answer my research questions. Building on the pilot studies I

conducted, I designed a qualitative study to examine stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina.

Research Questions

My study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of effective partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations exist in rural school districts?

2. What are the perceived strengths and limitations of partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations?

3. How have the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations impacted the public schools, churches, and rural communities?

Research Design

Qualitative research is primarily focused on understanding how people interpret phenomena and make meaning of the world around them. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). In addition, Creswell (2016) states "the heart of qualitative research is, I believe, a central phenomenon (or topic) we wish to explore" and how the phenomenon is described and viewed by the participants (p. 6).

Though the descriptions of qualitative research are wide-ranging and there are various research models and methods, researchers agree there are common, broadly shared, characteristics of qualitative studies. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research is characterized by the following:

1. Focus on Meaning and Understanding: Qualitative research is focused on how people make meaning of their experiences and understand the world around them.

2. Researcher as the Primary Instrument: The researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data.

3. An Inductive Process: Qualitative researchers gather data to construct theories or concepts rather than testing hypothesis.

4. Rich Description: Research consist of rich descriptions of context, participants, and events to convey their finding rather than numbers. (pp. 15-18)

In order to examine stakeholder perceptions of partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a specific rural community in North Carolina, I used a basic qualitative study as the design of my research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "in applied fields of practice such as education, administration, health, social work, counseling, business, and so on, the most common 'type' of qualitative research is a basic interpretive study" (p. 23). The overall purpose of a basic qualitative study, like any qualitative study, is "to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 24). In a basic qualitative study, the data is often collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Once the data is collected, the researcher analyzes the data to find reoccurring themes and patterns. Mihas (2019) explains "there are no rigid procedures or requirements for how researchers use codes, memos, and analytic techniques, but investigators must be transparent in their methods and demonstrate how these are best suited for the inquiry at hand" (p. 5). The researcher then reports the findings of the study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "findings are these recurring patterns or themes supported by the data from which they were derived" (p. 25). While I focus on a specific rural community in my basic qualitative study, I

hope that my findings may be applicable to similar contexts where rural educators and faith-based personnel across the nation work to create and sustain mutually beneficial partnerships within their own communities.

Setting

The setting for my study is Oaks, North Carolina, a small rural town located in southern Lake County. I selected the town of Oaks due to the rural demographics and the prominence of school-faith partnerships I have observed within the community. As previously mentioned, I used pseudonyms for the location, schools, churches, and community members throughout the study to protect the identity of the participants and the community.

According to the 2010 US Census data, the town of Oaks has a population of approximately 1,600. The town has experienced minimal growth over the last decade with the population at approximately 1,500 in 2000. According to 2010 US Census data, the largest industry for residents in the Oaks area is manufacturing followed by educational services. 2010 US Census data also indicates that there is little racial diversity in the town of Oaks with 98% of residents being White. The predominately white community has a median household income of approximately $36,000 with 20% of residents living below the poverty level. Less than 80% of the residents over the age of twenty-five have a high school diploma (Data Access and Dissemination Systems, 2010).

The town of Oaks is served by Lake County Schools. This district consists of thirty-six schools serving approximately 18,000 students. The school system is divided into seven geographical feeder patterns. Each feeder pattern contains two or three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The South Lake feeder pattern consist of Oaks Elementary, Elm Elementary, South Lake Middle, and South Lake High. During my study, South Lakes

Middle and High School were combined into one school, operating under one administrator. Each school population is between 250-400 students and is representative of the town of Oaks described above.

Despite the small population, numerous faith-based organizations are located within the town of Oaks and the surrounding community. Over twenty-three churches are listed in the directory of the local newspaper from five different denominations. In addition, the three early childhood education centers located within the town are facilitated by and housed in churches.

Participants

I choose several individuals with knowledge of school-faith partnerships from Oaks, North Carolina as participants in the study. While the participants represented various backgrounds, professions, and genders, all participants selected for the study were white as is reflective of the community of Oaks. Each of the participants held at least one leadership role within the school, church, or community. In some cases, participants held roles in multiple areas, including some who are leaders in all three contexts.

The first group of participants were school leaders from the schools in the South Lakes community. I interviewed four school leaders, including two administrators and two lead teachers, from the schools. The school leaders selected included the principal for Oaks Elementary and an assistant principal from South Lakes Middle and High School. These administrators had between two and five years of experience in their current school and were responsible for promoting positive community partnerships. Additionally, I interviewed the lead teacher at South Lakes Middle and High School. This participant had over fifteen years of experience and was responsible for facilitating many of the community partnerships within the school. She is the only administrative participant interviewed who also resides within the South

Lakes community. Since I currently serve as the principal of one of the schools in the South Lakes feeder pattern, I interviewed a lead teacher in my school. She had over fifteen years of experience at the school and had worked as both a classroom teacher and lead teacher. Administrators and teacher leaders were selected due to their direct knowledge of school partnerships within the South Lakes community. The school leaders were also able to discuss the impact of the school-faith partnerships on the school and the community.

In addition to interviewing school leaders, I also interviewed church leaders within the South Lakes community. All of the church leaders were pastors in the South Lakes community and represented a wide range of religious denominations including Methodist, Pentecostal, and Wesleyan. In addition to their position as church leaders, two of the participants were also employed within the local public school. All of the church leaders interviewed were selected because of their direct knowledge of school partnerships within the South Lakes community. Each served as the contact person for one or more current partnership activities between the local public schools and faith-based organizations. As a result of their involvement, the pastors were able to detail existing partnerships as well as discuss the impact of the school-faith partnerships on their church and the overall community.

The final group of participants for my study was community members. I interviewed four residents of Oaks who served in leadership roles within the town government or local community. The community leaders included the mayor of Oaks, a publicly elected school board member, the Communities in Schools coordinator, and a board member of a childcare center. I selected these participants based on their knowledge of school-faith partnerships and familiarity with the community they represent. While the community leaders had varying levels of

involvement in the partnership activities, all of the community leaders were able to discuss the impact of the school-faith partnerships on the community as a whole.

After the initial interviews, I conducted a focus group comprised of school, church, and community leaders to better understand the impact of school-faith partnerships. The focus group consisted of five participants from the three stakeholder groups who had not been previously interviewed as part of my study. Participants included a former principal in the South Lakes community, a Lake County district office administrator, a church youth leader, a church volunteer, and the editor of the local paper. During the focus group, I shared my initial analysis of the interviews in order to gather new thoughts and insights as well as ensure that my preliminary analysis is trustworthy.

Data Collection

During my research I used two data collection techniques. First, I conducted a total of twelve semi-structured individual interviews with school, church, and community leaders. I also conducted a focus group which include representatives from the school, church, and community. To begin with, I interviewed twelve individuals with knowledge of school and church partnerships within the community using a semi-structured approach (Appendix A). Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. According to Kvale and Brinkman (2009), "the research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest" (p. 123). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further explain that a semi-structured approach "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 111).

After my preliminary analysis of the individual interviews, I conducted a focus group lasting approximately one hour. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "a focus group is an

interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic" (p. 114). I scheduled the focus group after the individual interviews in order to provide an opportunity for me to examine the emerging themes from the individual interviews. The purpose of the focus group was to confirm initial themes and explore topics about which I wanted more information or clarification. I created a set of questions for the focus group; however, I left room for the conversation to develop naturally and extend beyond my questions (Appendix B). Parker and Tritter (2015) encourage this approach stating that during a focus group "the researcher plays the role of 'facilitator' or 'moderator,' that is, facilitator/moderator of group discussion between participants, not between her/himself and the participants" (p. 26).

Data Analysis Strategies

After conducting the interviews and focus group with the selected participants, I utilized a service to assist with transcription. Once the interview and focus group data was transcribed, I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy while listening to the audio file. After ensuring accuracy, I coded the transcripts for important key words and ideas. According to Mihas (2019), coding is a common technique in data analysis that "allows researchers to identify meaningful topics, relationships among them, and possibly a larger explanatory schema" (p. 5). Next, I grouped the codes into categories and developed themes based on the groupings. I explored these themes in relation to the literature on community partnerships, especially those among schools and faith-based organizations, and Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

Positionality

Throughout the data collection and data analysis process, it was critical for me to reflect on my position in relation to the study and my potential biases in order to ensure trustworthy research. It is important to note that I am a lifetime resident of the Oaks community. In addition,

I am also the principal of one of the schools in the South Lakes feeder pattern and attend church in the Oaks community. In this section I will discuss the potential biases of my positionality.

First, as a school leader in the South Lakes feeder patter I have initiated several partnerships between rural public schools and local faith-based organizations. With limited access to industry or institutions of higher learning, churches are often one of the most available resources in my community. In my role as an educational leader, I have solicited the help of religious organization to meet a variety needs within our school such as clothing and food for students, financial support for field trips, and mentoring of at-risk students. In my experience, the school has benefited from each of these partnerships, so I am inclined to permit additional school and church partnerships based on my previous experiences. In collecting and analyzing the data for this study, it was important for me to be aware that my positive experiences as a school leader with school and church partnerships are unique to me and could have influenced my interpretation of the data, for example, leading me to more easily see the benefits of these partnerships than any complicating issues.

Also, as a church member in the Oaks community I have enjoyed participating in partnerships with each of the schools in the South Lakes feeder pattern. In my experience, partnership activities like purchasing back-to-school resources for teachers or collecting food for families of at-risk students have provided church members with local service opportunities. Due to my involvement with church partnership activities, it was necessary for me to be aware that my familiarity with church partnerships could result in potential biases, again predisposing me to see these partnerships as good and necessary.

In addition, as a result of living, working, and attending church in Oaks, I have developed close connections with many of the community members. While the familiarity may have

allowed participants to communicate openly during interviews and focus group, my proximity to the participants may have also created opportunities for me to influence the participants' responses. They also may have been reluctant to critique any aspects of the partnerships. While striving for impartiality is important, I am aware that my proximity to the case being studied may have impacted my interpretation of the findings. I made every effort to be mindful of my potential biases throughout my research and implemented a variety of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Trustworthiness

I utilized various strategies throughout my research to ensure trustworthiness including triangulation, member checks, and a reflexivity journal. According to Creswell (2016) "triangulation refers to building evidence from different sources to establish the themes in a study" (p. 191). Researchers can also use multiple methods, investigators, or theories to confirm themes. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) support the use of triangulation and state that it is "a principal strategy to ensure validity and reliability" (p. 246). In my study I collected data from multiple stakeholder groups including school leaders, church leaders, and community leaders in order to obtain an accurate account of the phenomenon. In addition, I used two methods of data collection, interviews and a focus group, to ensure the trustworthiness of my research.

Another strategy I used during my research to ensure trustworthiness is member checks. According to Creswell (2016), "member checking is when the researcher takes back to participants their themes or entire stories and asks the participants whether the themes or stories are an accurate representation of what they said" (p. 192). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) add "participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives" (p. 246). As part of my study, I provided

individuals with copies of their interview transcripts and invited them to review the transcript to ensure it accurately reflected their views. While I intended to revise the transcript and provide an additional opportunity for review to the participant if he or she suggested a particular response should be edited, none of the interview participants indicated a need for revisions. In addition, I brought preliminary themes from individual interviews to the focus group for feedback. While the focus group participants were not the same as the individuals interviewed, this strategy provided an added opportunity for participants to ensure the overall themes were accurately portrayed.

In addition, I maintained a reflexivity journal throughout my research to ensure trustworthiness. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), reflexivity is "examining one's own conceptual lens, explicit and implicit assumptions, preconceptions and values, and how these affect research decisions in all phases of qualitative studies" (p. 121). After each interview and focus group I reflected on my potential biases and recorded my considerations in a digital format to make my study more trustworthy. Often, my reflections related to my relationship to the participant or the partnership activities discussed. For example, after an interview with a church leader I questioned if I limited his descriptions of existing partnership activities as a result of my familiarity with the participant and the partnership activities. I wondered if richer descriptions would have been provided by this individual if I would have allowed for extended wait time instead of continuing the conversation. Similarly, after an interview with a school leader, I questioned if my familiarity with the partnership activities discussed prohibited me from acknowledging partnership limitations. Creswell (2016) supports this strategy and states "a qualitative account becomes more valid if we know the biases and beliefs the researcher brings to the study and how these biases and beliefs shape the researcher's interpretation" (p. 192).

Limitations

While I used various strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of my research, there are still limitations to this study. One limitation is that I am a lifelong resident of the Oaks community and an administrator at one of the schools in the South Lakes feeder pattern. Though the proximity to the community provided unique access to stakeholders and a familiarity with the partnership activities described by the participants, it also impacted participant's responses. For example, participants seemed unlikely to provide critical responses to my questions due to the fact that they know I am in involved both in these partnerships and as an administrator in one of the schools.

Additionally, the community of Oaks is small and homogeneous. As I mentioned earlier, according to the 2010 US Census data, the town of Oaks has a population of approximately 1,600 with 98% of residents being White (Data Access and Dissemination Systems, 2010). As a result, all of the participants selected for the study were white and drew from their experiences within predominately white schools and churches. It is important to note that while the participants I selected reflected the demographics of the community, they do not reflect the demographics of the state or nation.

Finally, the strategies I used to identify participants for my study limited the data I was able to collect. For instance, I used criterion-based and convenience sampling in choosing to interview school, church, and community leaders who I knew had knowledge of partnerships between school and faith-based organizations. However, since these leaders were directly involved in the partnership activities their perspectives might not be an accurate representation of the community as a whole.

Reporting of Findings

I report the finding of my study in chapter four, which I divide into three subsections that align with my research questions. In the first section of the chapter, I describe how existing partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations are defined, created, and sustained in this rural school district. The second section of the chapter includes findings related to the perceived strengths and limitations of partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations. Finally, the last section includes findings pertaining to how partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations impact the public schools, churches, and rural communities.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. In this chapter I describe the existing collaborations between the public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes community and examine the strengths, limitations, and impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations.

Existing School and Church Partnerships

Before examining the strengths, limitations, and impact of effective partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations, it is necessary to understand the collaborations that currently exist between the public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes community. As a result of my study, I have identified six primary focuses of existing partnerships within the community. Those partnership focuses are listed below:

1. Food Insecurity

2. School Supplies

3. Clothing & Resources

4. Financial Support

5. Academic Support

6. Mentoring

I discuss each of the existing partnership focuses below. Additionally, at the end of this section, I also highlight some additional partnerships that do not fall into the six main categories.

Food Insecurity

The first focus of existing partnerships between public schools and faith-based organization in Oaks that emerged was the collaborative efforts targeting food insecurity.

According to a school principal, churches in the community provide weekly food bags to elementary students identified as needing food assistance. She explained:

> They collect donations from around the community and they get monetary donations from the church to go shopping for food. And then every Friday they deliver over, they bring over here in a wagon, our food that we send home. We serve about 40 families a week with that food. And they also serve through the entire summer too, which has been really helpful. So that is one of the best partnerships that we've, that we've had.

Similarly, churches supply the other elementary school in the South Lakes feeder pattern with weekly food bags for 20 families. One school leader noted that the "backpack program, which provides a backpack of food for needy children over the weekends" is, in her opinion, "one of our most successful partnerships." Likewise, several church leaders echoed the sentiment. One in particular said, "I think that's the, it's the greatest thing."

While the backpack program is only implemented at the elementary level, all schools in the feeder pattern partner with local churches to provide food boxes for families over extended school breaks. A local church leader emphasized that "there's just a constant need" especially over the holidays. A school administrator remarked "at Thanksgiving that they're able to give Thanksgiving dinners to families that would not have a Thanksgiving dinner."

In order to meet this need, a school leader explained that local faith-based organizations partner with her school, working specifically "with our school counselor and our school social worker getting food boxes for our needy families, putting those together, delivering them, contacting the families, et cetera." According to one local preacher, school and church personnel work together to identify "the staple food items that everybody pretty much eats." For example, when preparing food boxes, he has found that "everybody likes macaroni, everybody likes soup,

you know, so we, we throw those in there and we have spaghetti, spaghetti noodles, peanut butter and jelly." Another minister praised the partnership by stating:

> It's been several times whether it's the middle school or here at Elm Elementary that the schools have called upon us to help provide food especially during some long breaks. And, and it's just been really, really a blessing to us to, to have that partnership that we know that our own kids and our community are getting fed.

Additionally, a secondary school leader stated that the food boxes have been especially beneficial during the pandemic related school closures. She explained:

> Right now, especially right now with our students being in the situation where they are, where they are on the A day B day schedule, most of our students are home at least three or more days by themselves. And I would imagine, or I know teenagers eat a lot more and the families just do not have the money to purchase those items. So a lot of times when we do request certain specific donations, we ask for things that our students can cook any kind of pop, top kind of meals, macaroni, and cheese, ramen noodles. So those things that our students would feel confident in cooking and would be able to.

In collaboration with local faith-based organizations, both elementary schools and the middle school in the South Lakes feeder pattern have established pantries within their building to meet food assistance needs within their community. A school leader at the middle school described the origin of their pantry. She stated:

> When we began our food pantry, we had a local church that wanted to know how they could help our students. And that was one of the things that we created and that we asked for were food donations. And so they would bring in canned food items that local churches would collect and then donate to our school.

Furthermore, one minister in particular has written several grants in order to support the pantry. He believes that "when you're talking about children just needing food to get by for a week or something of that nature, and several thousand dollars can go a long way." In addition to food supplies, the pantry also includes many other grocery store supplies like toothpaste, shampoo, soap, and laundry detergent. One school administrator reported that a church leader "just brought in buckets full of laundry detergent and food." She added, "I mean, our pantry is busting at the seams because of what the churches are doing for us."

School Supplies

Another prominent focus of school and faith-based partnership I found in the Oaks community was school supply partnerships. According to research participants, each fall several local churches join together to host a Benefit Concert and School Supply Drive for the area public schools. A reverend in the South Lakes areas described the success of Benefit Concert and School Supply Drive:

> It's well attended. We truly invite anybody to come hear gospel music, or, or a similar type of music concert in order to come together and provide school supplies for those that may need them in the upcoming year or in that timeframe. And a combination of, of just people together to community coming together. It has been a huge success sometimes, you know, tripling previous year's amount of, of school supplies and monetary donations. And it's, it, it gives us almost an opportunity to celebrate, to keep the children in our community that's going to be able to go back to school and, and have knowledge from the faith-based community that we're starting them with the tools that they need to learn that year. And just an amazing thing to see people from outside of the community to come in and support because they want to make a difference.

As part of the event, community members are encouraged to collect school supplies such as pencils, paper, crayons, scissors, and so forth to bring to the concert. The collected school supplies are then given to the schools in the South Lakes community to use throughout the year. A community leader also celebrated the success of the annual concert for school supplies. She stated:

> [The pastor] saw the need for you know, supplies and things like that. And so he started having you know, a benefit concert in order to kind of like, kind of like a food drive, but it's a school supply drive, you know, essentially. And, you know, I think being from that church and having the majority of them be teachers, they understand that need. And so that's been a successful thing, you know, for, for Southern Lake County is that, that having that concert and, you know, not only is it something they are, you know, giving to the community and feeling good about that, talking about the church members, but they also get to enjoy an evening of music and fellowship.

Other churches in the Oaks community also support public school students with specific schools supplies throughout the school year. One pastor explained, "we actually have like 20 backpacks right now that are still in the church for people that may have a lack in what they need for." While these resources were prepared for elementary aged students, the church also provided school supplies, like graphic calculators for older students. The pastor stated, when "you're seventh to eighth and ninth [grade], you start getting specialty items, so we have a few calculators that are still floating around that have gone out."

Clothing and Resources

Partnerships involving clothing and resources were also present in the South Lakes feeder pattern. For example, many churches provide clothing donations to each school. One school

leader explained "there's been several times where we've gone through our clothing closet and actually given them a list of shoe sizes or jean sizes or even socks things that we need from them." Another principal added, "whether it's food or tennis shoes or jackets, or, I mean, there's, there's a lot that we get for our kids from churches."

Several of the participants also highlighted the partnership between Project Santa, a church affiliated non-profit, and the area schools. The collaboration provides K-12 students in need with winter coats. One school leader described the partnership:

> Each October we partner with them. And actually, when I say we, our middle school, our high school, and both of our feeder elementary schools partner with them to reach out to our students and their families to see who needs a winter coat. And then what we do is we collect those forms that the parents are informed and we collect them, get the sizes contact our people at Project Santa, and we get those items and then bring them back to our students for them to have.

Another school administrator celebrated the eagerness of the Project Santa volunteers to meet the needs of all students. She praised the organization and exclaimed "they are phenomenal. I mean, they are down to even sizes." Likewise, she also acknowledged the contributions of school personnel in the partnership. She said "people watch to see who has a coat, who doesn't. I mean, teachers, other adults in the building, just survey as kids are coming in and see who needs a coat."

Not only does Project Santa provide winter coats, but the organization also partners with local schools to identify families in need of assistance with holiday gifts. The mayor of Oaks explained that while Project Santa partners with schools in a variety of ways, "their mission is to help children at Christmas time." According to a school leader, school staff are able to facilitate

access to this resource by providing "families with the contact information for Project Santa's, if they need assistance with Christmas items."

Financial

Financially focused partnership activities between public schools and faith-based organizations were also noted within the Oaks community. While these collaborative efforts varied based on the church involved, many included a benefit meal or concert similar to the Benefit Concert and School Supply Drive discussed earlier. One pastor explained the prevalence of this type of fundraiser in rural churches prior to the pandemic stating, "any time a church has a big mission or something that they want to raise money for, then a meal can, can be provided in order to help raise those funds." The mayor of Oaks also added:

> I know that our church, we have a barbecue dinner in the fall of the year. And it goes for various different, different events, different things. Not always for the same, for the same focus. I know that in this town, people that are down on their luck, that they, for example they're a cancer person, or they've had a fire they've lost quite a bit of property. People hold events for those kinds of things all the time here in Oaks.

One of the most discussed benefit meals was a series of community breakfast meals. The sponsoring church hosted a monthly breakfast, designating the proceeds from each month's breakfast to a different school in the South Lakes feeder pater. A pastor involved in the fundraising efforts described the event as an "all you can eat buffet breakfast and all proceeds to go to each school." He added, "they gave to each school, you know one of the breakfasts, it was right at $2,000. I think one of them was $1,700, one of them was $1,800, but I think one was $2,200 and one was $2,000." An elementary principal who received financial support for her school from one of the benefit breakfasts explained that she "encouraged all of my staff to go

and our community to go" and participate in the fundraising efforts. As a school administrator, she was grateful for the support and stated, "they gave us just every, all of the proceeds that they made from that breakfast. They in turn, just wrote a check to the school, which was a couple thousand dollars, which was awesome!"

Likewise, many other benefit meals and concerts were held in the Oaks community. Prior to the pandemic, one church collaborated with the high school athletic boosters to organize a gospel concert in which the money raised would be donated to the school athletic programs to purchase uniforms and other athletic necessities. The pastor organizing the event shared that "the whole goal with that is to fill the church with people that can put a donation in the you know, in the offering plate and which would be a benefit to the boosters." He added, "we want to be able to present a nice big check the boosters, and it's a win-win for everybody. It's good for the kids. It's good for the school. And I think it's good for the church." In support of the benefit meals and concerts, another minister explained "the whole concept for, for faith-based of, of coming together and sharing, breaking the bread together, and then using that opportunity to help others is just a very good, solid concept, whether it's theological or just people wanting to be a part of it."

Pastors and church leaders also partner with school leaders to financially support public schools through grant writing. A local minister shared that "probably unbeknownst to, unknowingly, to most of the teachers I've been writing grants for five years." He went on to say that the grants "started off as grants for food for the weekend programs that would bring food in for the backpack program," but in collaboration with school leaders he has since used grants to support other school-based opportunities. According to the minister, "using that grant, grant

writing experience, and then applying it to the current situation, I mean, even if it was just $500... That makes a big difference."

Additional, faith-based organizations are often eager to contribute unrestricted monetary donations to the local public school. For example, church leaders collaborated with middle school leadership to provide gift cards to local restaurants and businesses as a behavior incentive for students. The school leader explained the partnership:

Another church actually provided us with several different gift cards that can be used either to purchase… things that we need. So, we are implementing PBIS in the middle school and starting it in the high school and one of the rewards that we would like to purchase are gift cards and candy. And so we can use those gift cards to purchase those items for our students for rewards. So, one of the things that we know that our students like are gift cards to local restaurants, or even to GameStop or some other place like that. So when we talked with one of our churches that gave us some gift cards, we asked them if it would be okay if we use those gift cards for [behavior rewards]…. they were a hundred percent behind us all now, whatever our students need to be successful that's the bottom line for everyone.

Similarly, school administrators are often contacted by churches wanting to make financial contributions. One principal highlighted the willingness of churches to support her school saying, "I get churches that will call and say, Hey, do you have a need? Or, you know, if I wanted to pay off lunch balances, can I do that?" She added that she received "several checks for lunch [debts] in the past and random donations from people who call" and simply want to help.

Academic

Another primary focus of many of the partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern is related to academics. Schools and churches in the area collaborate to provide academic opportunities such as field trips, early childhood education, and afterschool or summer programs to local students. To begin with, several participants spoke about their ability to provide field trip opportunities to students in the public school. For example, one minister described an eighth-grade trip to the Civil Rights Museum:

> We just happen to have the right connections through the faith base community with the civil rights museum and how to get people in and out, especially kids. And there were some teachers that were involved and some pastors that were involved that were willing to make the opportunity available and the churches and one grant that I worked on help fund it. And we just obviously looked forward to being able to do more things like that because we think it just for a small community, a lot of kids may have never got an opportunity to see some of that.

Another preacher also described the Civil Rights Museum field trip as a great educational experience for students. He explained, "there's a lot of views on racism, but what we found when we applied for that and got that, that trip paid for, [was] that our students were not even aware of the civil rights movement." He continued, "even though it's taught, they weren't as aware." Similarly, local churches also joined together to support elementary school students' field trip to Tweetsie Railroad as culminating event to their yearlong literacy program. An elementary school leader described the partnership:

> So we sent out letters to local churches a few years ago and there was quite a few, I'm not sure how many, I'm thinking around 15 letters that went out to different churches and just

asked for any kind of donations to help provide this trip for our kids. Cause it was to

Tweetsie. So that's kind of a lot, for the kids here it's a once in a lifetime opportunity,

plus we were doing charter buses, so our buses wouldn't have to try to drive up and down

a mountain. And we had the trip completely funded by different churches that would turn

in money and even groups within the church, like the women's group or WMU or WAM,

they would always go on their own or Sunday school classes within the church would

provide extra too and they'd send it here. And then we would be able to purchase what we

need to with it.

School and church leaders also spoke of other field trip opportunities including trips to "a

horticultural place" and a trip to the state capital, Raleigh. In reference to the trip to the Raleigh

trip, one minister stated:

We organized a trip to Raleigh and they sat in the Supreme Court room with Justice

Newbie. Who's now the chief justice for North Carolina and Justice Newbie hosted us.

The kids got to sit as a panel on the benches of the Supreme Court in North Carolina.

They, he presented to them a case that was in the public record, and they got to rule on

the case and they, they, he, according to Justice Newbie, they ruled in the same way that

the Supreme Court of North Carolina rule for that particular case.

While many of the trips required financial contributions from local churches, one minister

emphasized, "it's not all about throwing money at it, but it's about opportunities."

Not only do faith-based organizations supplement the academic programs of school-aged

children with field trip opportunities, but they also offer valuable academic support to children

before they enroll in public school through early childhood education. The mayor of Oaks

identified three low-cost faith-based early childhood education programs within his community

stating "I think they do a great job. They're all about headstart." He went on to praise each of the three programs sharing, "I think it makes a heck of a difference. It's got to. I know you can see it with… the kindergarten kids coming in. You can pretty much tell they've been to a preschool at one of these churches." One school leader, whose child attended an early childhood education program provided by one of the churches in Oaks was grateful for the support her daughter received prior to enrolling in school. She stated that church workers "even integrated some kindergarten curriculum in there such as Letterland and worked with her on a lot of different things that she wouldn't have normally had if she wouldn't have went to that daycare."

In addition to early childhood education opportunities, several churches in Oaks provide free after school programs for students. For example, one minister shared about the origin of a community health and mentoring program that provided support for students after school.

> We saw a lot of kids that were getting out of school and going home to parents that were either not there or who had taken care of themselves with some substance. So the students were wandering the streets and we partnered several teachers, couple of retired teachers, high school students that were quality students and opened up an afternoon program for them to come in and get homework help, a meal and a mentor.

While some afterschool programs were offered at churches, other faith-based organizations rent space at the local school to provide after school opportunities for students. One elementary principal shared that a church rented her facility afterschool for "a 1-hour program, once a week on Wednesday afternoons."

Faith-based organizations have also partnered with public schools in Oaks to provide summer opportunities for students. One church designed a Leadership Academy focused on

increasing career and college readiness skills for middle school students. The pastor of the church described the Leadership Academy:

> What we did in, in that program was we developed high school leaders and we gave the high school leaders, the authority. And then we provided the substance of finance, the facility and a pretty much a mentor state for them. And we, we had three curriculum they could choose from. And I remember that when they chose a curriculum on Roots and Wings. And they allow these, these students who were from that, they were recommended to us because they didn't have a lot of, of parents that went to college and they pick the Roots and Wings. They wanted to, they spent a week searching their ancestry and then they spent a week searching career possibilities.

During the pandemic, local churches have also provided academic support in a various ways. Some churches have been able to increase internet access for students to complete their assignments by providing hotspots to families or by opening up their WiFi during traditional school hours. Other churches provided facilities for students to work remotely during the school closure. According to a church leader, "when the school shut down last year, and there were families that had no way to provide any assistance to the kids that are now remote we were able to open up the basement of our church." He shared that his church supported eighty-two students during this time. Another community leader commented that while students were working remotely at the church, church staff were in "constant dialogue back and forth with the teachers to make sure that the kids are getting their work done, getting it done correctly, and that they understand what their work is."

Mentoring

The final focus of school and faith-based partnerships that emerged was mentoring. Each school within the South Lakes feeder pattern utilized volunteers from local churches to mentor students in various ways. At the elementary level, school leaders shared that mentors often spend time getting to know students during lunch. One participant explained:

They come and we had people that would come in as lunch buddies and they would meet with specific kids during the week, maybe once a week on a certain day. And then they come and just spend lunch with them and just talk to them about whatever and then they would form and build that relationship.

At the secondary level, both the middle school and high school participate in a mentoring program called Communities in Schools. The site coordinator recruits volunteers from the community, primarily from local churches, to serve as mentors to at-risk teens. According to an administrator, "Communities in Schools brings in people to volunteer and work with students to provide what they need to provide somebody to look up to somebody who is a safe person." One pastor applauded his congregation for their participation in Communities in Schools and shared, "we have probably a dozen that have served as a mentor through Communities in Schools. And even though they aren't direct professional ministers, they are parishioners who have been directed and engaged in making sure it is beneficial."

When discussing mentoring at both the elementary and secondary level, one reverend commented that this was one of the more difficult, yet rewarding partnership focuses to implement and shared "it's hard to make it happen, but when it does happen, it's a wonderful thing." He added, "getting certain people to volunteer and matching them up with the people that need the help is hard, but when it does work out, it can really be nice."

Participants also shared other partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations that do not fall into one of the categories discussed above. For example, churches open up their facilities to host events for the school. One community member commented that the church was always "eager to host anything for the school, you know, like any kind of dances or anything." She also added that other church facilities or resources have been made readily available. She explained "if we needed the pavilion or anything like that," or "when we put the fashion show on, the church donated all the chairs for the fashion show." On another occasion, a church "donated the helium tank for a school festival with all the balloons." School leaders shared about activities designed to boost staff morale such as "treats for the teachers to make them smile" or an optional "Bible study that a lot of my staff members attend."

School and Church Partnership Strengths

With the large variety of partnership activities present in the South Lakes feeder pattern, many participants agreed that the relationships between public schools and faith-based organizations in Oaks were strong. While stakeholders perceived that there were many strengths of the partnerships, eight perceived strengths of existing partnerships emerged from the interviews and focus group. Those partnership strengths are listed below:

1. Shared Mission

2. Partnership Liaisons

3. Bi-Vocational Personnel

4. Legal Safeguards

5. Ethical Safeguards

6. Communication

7. Consistency

8. Appreciation

I discuss each of the perceived partnership strengths below. Additionally, at the end of this section, I also highlight some added strengths stakeholders noted that do not fall into the eight main categories.

Shared Mission

One of the first perceived strengths that emerged during my study was the stakeholders' shared mission of helping others. Simply put, one school leader explained that "ultimately you're helping others. It's just, what building are you in? Are you in a church? Are you in a school?" When asked why schools and faith-based organizations should partner together, one reverend further explained the idea of a shared mission. He stated:

> I think it is, it is a natural fit from the, from the fact that regardless of the, the faith, majority of the faith-based community has a true desire to, to help those that may need a little help along the way. And, and we've we find, especially in [our] denomination, that that is part of our calling as a pastor to, to reach out and, and to see if there's ways that we can help, especially those that are maybe not quite doing so well off as some of the others. That need just a little help, whether it's food or clothing, so that they can, they can feel the pride of being a part of the school.

One community leader commented on the shared mission of the individuals involved in the partnerships when she said "they all, I believe every single, even a coach, a high school coach, he starts out believing and wanting to help kids. He wants to coach them. He wants to see them grow. You know, they're all that way." She concluded her thoughts by sharing "it has to be, it's not for the money. Yeah. That's not what it's for." Similarly, a pastor in Oaks noted that while the

recipients of the aid may differ, the mission of compassionately helping others in their

community is the same. He explained:

> They both have a compassionate concern for families. You guys deal directly with
>
> students, but you deal just as much with families as you do a student. Churches do the
>
> same thing. We, we minister to the grandparent all the way down to the newest grand-
>
> baby and when, when both are looking for the same.

> Participants also acknowledged another shared goal of the organizations to create moral

citizens. One school administrator explained that both public schools and churches have the

"same calling… [to] make those good citizens." Similarly, a pastor added:

> We've got the same goal. If we want safe schools, we want schools where students have
>
> good moral character and all of those things that are brought about by [Christian values].
>
> To me, that's what Christian values emulate. And so it's the same goal on the same team,
>
> the same page. And once again, there, yeah, there are boundaries and there's things that
>
> you can and cannot say and do and so forth, but it's, you know, I think we've got a
>
> common goal.

Because of the shared mission of the two organizations, many felt the partnerships between

public schools and faith-based organizations were a natural fit. In fact, in reference to the goals

of both one pastor remarked, "I just think they go hand in hand."

Partnership Liaisons

> Throughout my research, stakeholders also perceived the use of liaisons between schools

and faith-based organizations as a strength of the existing partnerships. Most, including a pastor

from the South Lakes community agreed that it was "good if one person was the liaison." A

school leader explained why a partnership liaison is needed arguing that if "you have a lot of

different people doing the same thing, then you don't know what everybody else is doing." She went on to clarify, "it's easy to step on toes or, or overlap or get too much of one thing and not enough another. So I do feel like that one specific person needs to be in charge of it."

However, not of the schools in the South Lakes feeder pattern utilize the same personnel as their partnership liaisons. Some school administrators feel more comfortable assuming this role themselves, while other schools rely on support personnel. One school administrator explained, "I would think it would have to be a leader in the building who felt that there was a lot for both sides to gain," while other administrators encouraged more flexibility. One principal explained her role:

> I think it's important that I always know what's happening because I don't want things to be, you know, churches to be donating anything to a certain class or a certain grade level that I'm not aware of. But at the same time, I have a lot of people in my building who have strong ties with different communities and different churches. And so I want to be able to trust them and I do trust them, but I want it to be able to allow them to say, you know, I'd love to take this to my church and see what we can do and, and bring that back, you know, to the school. And so I want them to be able to do that because sometimes knowing someone is, is much more significant than, you know, me just making a phone call. So it goes two ways. I want to know what's happening, but I think it's okay sometimes to have multiple people, if they have a strong tie to that organization.

According to one principal, schools that utilized support personnel as the partnership liaison, relied on a variety of individuals depending on the activity. She stated, "sometimes I might pass it on to my school counselor or to my social worker or, you know, kind of having them be the contact person instead of me." In his experience working with schools in the South Lakes feeder

pattern, one church leader explained that, depending on the partnership, the liaison has "been multiple different people, but a lead teacher or a counselor or a principal/vice principal. Somebody that has truly invested their life in the seeing children be educated and knows that the welfare of the child makes a difference."

In addition to the partnership liaisons present within the schools, many administrators felt a point of contact was needed in each organization. In practical terms, one elementary principal explained that "there's usually just a contact here and a contact there and we email and just communicate throughout the year." Without the partnership liaisons, one administrator warned that the partnerships may dissolve. She argued:

> I think that if you have a contact at the church and a contact at the school that you
>
> maintain… But if you don't have that point of contact, it's just open-ended it. And it can
>
> go away. You don't have that connection.

Throughout the study, participants highlighted the shared characteristics of many partnership liaisons including their commitment and servant's heart. When ask his thoughts on what contributed to successful partnerships, the mayor of Oaks quickly highlighted the commitment of those involved stating, "Oh, I think it's I think it's the people without a doubt. Yeah. They want to, we want to live in a good community and I think these people are willing to do whatever it takes to provide for that." A pastor explained that there are "plenty of people that will do a little, but there's always one or two individuals that just see that it's such an important part of their community from the faith-based side of it, that they make it a priority." He went on to describe these individuals as champions due to their commitment level adding:

> Invariably it seems that we always meet a couple of individuals or an individual at a
>
> school that just has such a passion for seeing the children be, you know, in a better

situation, or such a passion for not seeing them struggle that you'll run into that champion that that's willing to go just a little bit further into her daily job at school and, and reach out to other people.

Additionally, many of the partnership liaisons were also described as having a servant's heart. At the school level, one pastor expressed "it really does depend on the heart of the educator or the lead educator that is involved." Likewise, in describing a partnership liaison's actions, a school administrator remarked it "was a love rather than a duty" which motivated the individual. In speaking of her pastor, one community member stated that he not only "has a servant's heart," but also added:

> I believe our pastor has taken it to a different level with his giving and the way that he serves here at, at Elm Elementary and Southern Lake County. Really at the, at the middle school and high school level too. You know, anytime there's been a need, he's been, I feel like he's been attentive to that. And tried to, you know, serve, serve the families the best that he could with, you know, no other purpose than to serve.

Bi-Vocational Personnel

One of the most interesting perceived strengths that emerged during my study was the prominence of bi-vocational ministers and educators in the South Lakes community. The participants interviewed spoke of more than a dozen individuals who worked in both the public school and local church. In the school system, their roles included teacher, substitute teacher, bus driver, assistant, coach, and volunteer. In the church, their roles were primarily pastor, youth pastor, or children's ministry director. Of the participants included in this study, three were employed by both the public school and local church.

Participants shared that many factors including financial need, time availability, required skills, transferability of skills, and employment opportunities for women contributed to the prominence of bi-vocational ministers and educators in South Lakes. The first factor, financial need, is a direct result of the rurality of the area. One community member stated, "a lot of times [ministers] have to have two jobs and because, you know, financially they just can't make it on being a small-town community preacher." She also added:

I know a lot of times our, our churches are smaller around here. They're more community-based churches. A lot of times those churches, when it comes to the [financial support], or I guess those pastors and being paid, that can't be the only job that they have. They have to have other jobs outside of their pastor roles. And so, I think that's why a lot of our ministers, you know, in this area have to do different things, you know, they coach basketball and coach, you know, and preach on Sunday.

One pastor explained that given the current economic conditions in most rural communities, "churches financially are less and less able to support full-time pastors [and] because of that, you know, many, many other many pastors look to do a bi-vocation opportunity." A school leader and resident of Oaks also agreed that financial need contributed to the prominence of bi-vocational pastors. She shared, "I don't feel like that a pastor can stand alone on probably the salary that they make, just being a pastor of a small church... So I feel like that they have to have another job." She added, "and to be honest with you because of where we live, I can't think of a pastor that doesn't have another full-time job to help support their family."

Due to the small size of many churches, ministers in rural areas can also have extra time to pursue bi-vocational opportunities. According to the mayor on Oaks, these ministers "have a little time to do that with it rather than working at a factory or somewhere like that. I think it's

75

just their nature to want to help the community whenever they can" and they have the available time in their schedule. A bi-vocational minister serving in both a local church and public school in Oaks explained:

> The bi-vocational pastor is more common than it used to be. It probably hadn't been [or] probably wasn't that common in this particular area. But I I've, I've seen several, if nothing else, I know quite a few pastors that at least, or substitutes or bus drivers or something in that nature. But I think that you know, that is a, a super way, if a pastor has time to volunteer or to make themselves available or to, you know, go through the certification to be a teacher. Yeah. Because more and more churches are bi-vocational churches.

Similarly, educators typically have greater flexibility in their schedule during weekends and summer months when churches would need the maximum number of workers.

In addition to the financial need and availability of many faith leaders and educators, a similar value system also encourages many to pursue bi-vocational opportunities. The participants interviewed described the bi-vocational ministers and educators in the Oaks community as giving individuals who desired to set a positive example in their community. Simply put, one community member stated, "they're just good people." Another added, "they give whether it, no matter what their role is, givers give and, and, you know, maybe it's just, I don't know, they're servants, whether it be they serve kids or whether they serve God." In order to be a successful bi-vocational minister, one reverend explained that a person must be "willing to, to do something for a living that is more than just for one's own self-gratification, to help others." A bi-vocational minister cited his and his wife's desire to set a positive example to others as one of their reasons for working in both the local church and school. He explained that

it "gives us an opportunity to be a role model. And to still be doing ministry even when you're not the pulpit." He added, "my goal is to emulate what I what I think is right. And so that in the community would be just setting an example of what I believe exemplifies a born-again believer."

Another factor that contributed to the prominence of bi-vocational ministers and educators in the South Lakes community is the transferability of public-school employees' skills. As pastors are often reassigned to various churches, they, along with their spouses, must be able to secure supplemental income new locations. Education-related jobs, such as a teacher, bus driver, or substitute teacher are readily available in most areas within the nation. One pastor explained:

> I also believe that there's a very practical part to that. The average stay in a church for a senior pastor or lead pastor is just under three years. And it's hard for a spouse if that other spouse in ministry is moving or needing to move significantly across the state or sometimes across a region of the country there are very few occupations for that spouse that are readily interchangeable. And education is probably the top of the list for a teacher in, in North Carolina to be able to pick up a teaching position in South Carolina or Virginia or Georgia is not as difficult as it might be someone in another middle management field. Okay. So I think practically there, there are a lot of things that work well between a ministry family that has a spouse as a pastor and a spouse.

Another practical factor that encourages female church leaders and educators to purses bi-vocation opportunities is the limited availability of employment opportunities for women in the South Lakes feeder pattern. In the Oaks community, males typically seek employment in

agriculture, construction, business, public safety, or business. However, women primarily find employment in education or health care. A school board member shared:

> It's interesting, you know, when you sit, when you sit down and think about our community and in that, but, you know, I mean, we're the, we're the biggest employer in Lake County. And then with that being said, there's not a lot of jobs in this particular area, you know, you know, especially for women you know, we've got implement companies [that manufacture attachments for agricultural equipment] out the wazoo, but when it comes to, you know, maybe mothers or women in general, maybe they tend to lean towards school system.

One pastor reinforced the limited employment opportunities for women adding that in the Oaks community "we have several [families] where the one spouse is a pastor and the other spouse is an educator."

Legal Safeguards

Stakeholders also considered the presence of legal safeguards within the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations a strength of the collaboration. In the Oaks community, many of the safeguards in place related specifically to the establishment clause and free exercise clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution. First, participants described the legal safeguards corresponding to the establishment clause, which prohibits the public school from trying to establish or force religion on others.

School, church, and community leaders all emphasized their understanding of the legislation separating church and state. For example, one minister shared, "we love to tell people and let them hear the stories of Jesus Christ, but the school setting is not specifically that place." Another school leader explained, "it's not like they come and they try to preach the gospel to

anybody, but they're just trying to provide for their community. I think it would be the same if it was another business doing it besides the church." According to an elementary school principal, though her school hasn't "really had any conflict in terms of like people wanting to push in," she is aware of the necessary legal safeguards and "wouldn't ever want a family or a student to feel like we're pushing something on them." She added that she was "always very careful with any donations" the school receives and that she felt the support "comes from a sense of, I want to help you and I want to help your kids."

Study participants also provided examples of the legal safeguards corresponding to the establishment clause. One school board member recounted a situation in which she had to ensure legal safeguards were in place for the schools in Lake County. She explained:

> Gideons wanted to come into the school. Okay. And so, we allow them, the Gideons, to place literature at our tables. Okay. But they were wanting to come into our schools and set up set up a booth. They weren't wanting to really necessarily have exchanged conversation, but just be there, present to hand out these materials.

In order to navigate the situation, the board member recalls "hearing the information from cabinet." The cabinet members, along with "really good board attorneys" advised her that if we allow the Gideons into the school to do this, then we have to allow the atheist, or we have to allow this group who we may not want influencing our children." She added, "you can't pick and choose when you have a policy, you can't pick and choose who that policy applies to." Ultimately, the faith-based organization was "still allowed to bring their stuff in and put it on the community table."

A principal in Oaks provided another example of legal safeguards related to the establishment clause. She shared that while the existing partnerships operate within the legal

79

parameters of the First Amendment, legal safeguards were particularly valuable when a new partnership activity was being formed at her school. She stated:

> One of the trickiest situations I have with that was I had a church that was renting out my cafeteria weekly to do an afterschool program, which was great. But then they wanted to come set up at my family nights and try to recruit families and kids. And it just, it, it, I didn't, I wasn't comfortable doing that because I didn't want parents and families to feel like that was synonymous with coming to Oaks.

In addition, she explained that the organization asked "to bring their services into the building or, you know, distribute this flyer or can we play this song and this music in the car rider line." In order to ensure her school was not promoting a particular religion or church, the principal "had to make sure it was very voluntary and they had to do their own publicity." She explained:

> I encourage them to share it on their social media sites. I did not share it on our school, social media site, but I encouraged them. You know, I said, you're welcome to spread the word through the community and talk to families. And you know, if you want to sit out, not in the car rider line, but down the street, you know, and hand out flyers, like that's fine. You know, it just can't be on school property. And they were very, they were very understanding with that. But I just, I encouraged them to publicize as much as they could, but knowing that I couldn't make an announcement, you know, during the day encouraging people to come.

Additionally, the principal required the church to utilize the same procedures as any other organization renting the facilities after school including completing a Facility Use Agreement and paying the assigned rental fees.

In addition to the legal safeguards corresponding to the establishment clause, participants noted that stakeholders adhered to the free exercise clause which protects citizen's rights to freely practice their religion. Most participants, including one bi-vocational preacher who also worked for the school system indicated that when conversations involved religious content, he "always let it be student initiated." Another bi-vocational minister who also works for the school system shared, "I know I can't get on the school bus and, and, and try to cram religion down kids' throats. You know, if they ask me, then I can, that opens the door that I can share with them." He further explained:

> I don't I don't push anything like that. I mean, if a student were to ask me, I realize where my boundaries are and you know, when, when you know, I had a student the other day, you know, say "Is this all you do is drive a bus." "No, I also pastor a church." "Really? Well, where do you pastor?" So I told them and I said, "Hey, we'd love to be able to have, you come out and see it sometimes," you know, that type of thing. But I realized that I can't, every kid when they're getting on the bus, say, "if you died today, do you know where you are going, would you go to heaven or would you go to hell?" Obviously, you can't, you don't do that. You know what I'm saying? And, and I would say most people would realize where, where that boundary is.

Similarly, the coordinator of the middle and high school mentor program noted that in her work supervising mentors she has witnessed some students initiating conversations with their mentors about church. According to her, she has "noticed these kids ask, "Do you go to church?" I can hear what they ask these mentors. And they'll say, "Do you go to church?" And the mentor will say, "Yes, I go to so-and-so and so-and-so." She explained that if students ask addition questions

about the mentor's church or religion, the mentor can provide an answer about his/her church or beliefs.

When establishing formal partnerships between schools and religious organizations, participants from both organizations indicated that they consulted legal or financial counsel as a safeguard to ensure partnership stayed within the bounds of the law and that the interest of their organization was protected. A pastor in Oaks shared his experience:

> What we do is, is we have applied for and have been granted as a, as a church, a 501 C3 tax status. That tax status does not come with any restrictions on the communication of religious information, nor does it restrict us in the way that we operate within providing means into the needs of our community… [When establishing an after-school program] there were regulations for us on how we were to do that. If, if we were to get grant monies to do that, then we would be restricted on how we could how we might be evaluated in the way that we dealt with the religious side of it. So we established a second nonprofit… So that if there were, and we literally, we literally did it for legal reasons. If someone sues The Center, they can sue us for everything we've got our, our balance month to month was about a hundred dollars, because every dime that came in, went straight to help other people. Right. And because we established it, they couldn't come back and sue our church for that, because it wasn't, our church. It was the entity of The Center. So we, we got dot our I's and cross our T's to make sure that we're in legal compliance with everything that we're asked to do.

While he provided several examples of his church utilizing lawyers to navigate partnership opportunities, one pastor acknowledged that "churches don't usually get sued because churches don't have structure basis and financial basis that, that make it worthwhile. They would, they

would spend more money on the lawyers then they would ever get out of any of the local churches." He added, "school systems on the other hand can run them all the way through the state."

Ethical Safeguards

The presence of ethical safeguards also emerged as a strength of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern. While many boundaries were established to promote ethical collaborations, specific safeguards were in place to protect the safety and privacy of students. For example, according to a school leader, schools ensure the safety of their students by requiring all volunteers "to get a background check and everything." The coordinator of the middle school and high school mentor program also confirmed "mentors have a background check done on them." She also shared that signed parental permission is required for any student to participate in the mentoring program or travel off campus. A bi-vocational minister and educator explained that there are "all types of ways to make sure that nothing goes awry. You know, there's all kinds of, you know, the background checks, there's always to have two people involved. There's always safeguards to make sure that everything's safe."

In addition to ethical boundaries that ensure safety, schools and churches also strive to protect the privacy of stakeholders in particular partnership activities. In many partnership activities, schools identify at-risk students and churches provide some form of support or aid. As a result, it is necessary that information related to income level or ability level remain confidential. In order to protect the privacy of students, in partnerships involving potentially confidential information, schools in the South Lakes feeder pattern limit interaction between students and church members. For example, one church member shared that "with the backpack

program, we really don't actually get to know or meet the children." A school principal confirmed the school's efforts to protect student confidentiality stating, "they certainly don't know who it's going to… the sponsors don't know anything about the children that they're serving." According to a middle school leader, "the students do not have any interaction with the individuals that deliver the items to the school." A church leader who participates in many food insecurity partnerships noted that 'principals and teachers and guidance counselors they help us keep that line separate." In mentoring partnerships where it is beneficial to share some confidential student information, such as student grades or attendance, parents are required to sign permission forms prior to their student's information to be shared with a mentor.

Additionally, many churches provide food and supply resources to students anonymously. According to a school leader, staff members tell students "that local churches donated that, but we don't even tell them what type of denomination or anything that provided the items for our students. So we really, truly tried to keep them separate as much as we can." Similarly, another school leader shared, "the kids don't know right off the bat, that it's churches that are giving it to them. They just know that it is available for them." A pastor confirmed that his church often donated anonymously stating, "I don't think it really has to, they really have to know it came from a church as long as they know that someone donated this and someone cares."

For the faith-based organizations in the South Lakes area, confidentiality and anonymity are second nature. A minister in Oaks believes these ethical safeguards are "something that is, is kind of part of the DNA, I guess, of other things that the church does." He shared that the church partnered with other non-profit organizations where church members were not given information about the recipient they were supporting. One church member explained, "a lot of things we just

do because we've been asked, but we not really knowing the people personally or not being involved in what's going on behind the scenes, we just do it because a need was expressed." Additionally, a pastor in Oaks suggested that his church refrains from seeking recognition or applause for providing aid in order to protect the privacy of the recipient. He shared:

When we go on mission trips, we, we served, we served a thousand meals to homeless in Charlotte, this, this past summer, all the way up, we just started the winter thing. I'm not going to publish that picture because that's exploiting the person that's already been exploited their whole life.

Communication

Another perceived strength that emerged during my study was the degree of communication between partnership participants in the South Lakes community. According to study participants, constant and clear communication is key to the successful partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern. Multiple school leaders described their "constant communication" or "constant contact" with partnership participants. One secondary leader explained, "we are very quick to call [the pastor] and he's very quick to call us. And I think if communication breaks down, then, then it's not going to be a success." One pastor explained, "I think that is one of the things that has made this particular opportunity work very well. Communication has been very clear. When that communication ceases, then it's hard for people on either side to realize the benefit." The mayor of Oaks echoed this view sharing, "I don't think you can over-communicate. I think communication is a big thing. The more you communicate, the more people understand." He added, "understanding is always important when you have a need and people want to know why you have a need for something. I think that plays a big part of it"

85

In addition to the constant and clear communication between school and church leaders, several pastors emphasized the needed for communication between individual churches when partnering with local schools. A pastor explained:

> Everybody needs to be aware of [partnership needs] and communicate, and then they need to communicate with the church. And then, then I think it's really important for whoever is, is leading the church group to develop a really close relationship with the other churches, all churches, and, and find out what they have to offer, you know, and just tell us what we need. If you do that, I think most needs can be met.

As churches communicate with each other about partnership activities, they are able to more successfully meet the needs expressed by schools.

Consistency

Stakeholders also considered the consistency of the partnership participants a strength of the collaboration. Participants shared churches were consistent partners for resource-based partnerships including those related to food insecurity, school supplies, clothing and resources, and financial support. One school leader explained "we've had donations from, from others as well, but it's not as consistent as this, this group of churches." According to a church leader, churches in the South Lakes community are dependable partners for schools because "they're going to always be, they're reliable." She added churches are "a good source to go to because they're going to stand by what they said. And if they can't, for some reason do whatever they said they would do, they would find someone to take their place." Most importantly, she believes that when partnerships are established between rural public schools and faith-based organizations "nobody just says I'm done and just quit."

Similarly, participants acknowledged the importance of consistent partners for mentoring relationships. One pastor explained that "having that consistent person" to serve as a mentor for an at-risk student was a key to the success of the mentorship program. He shared one of the goals of his church is "to be able to provide [students with] that walk alongside mentor, that person that comes on a consistent [basis], it doesn't have to be every day, but they're consistently there." He added that the mentor should not give "the pipe sunshine of everything's going to be okay, cause you can't promise that." Instead, they should simply be consistent, listen, and care for the student.

Appreciation

One of the most unique perceived strengths that emerged during my study was the emphasis partnership participants in the South Lakes community placed on showing appreciation for one another. One community member compared showing appreciation for partnership participants to watering a garden, stating "just like with any good, good garden, you water it and you maintain it." Participants shared several examples of how their organization had shown appreciation during the partnership, including inviting members from the partnering organization to speak during events. A local minister explained

> There's been times in the past where I've had school teachers and principals come and speak to congregations not to get into the private life of, of kids, but just to let the people in the congregations know that their assistance and their resources are being used wisely and that it is making a difference in our children's lives. That it is a very worthy, very worthy partnership that the church members can feel good about endorsing and help not only provide resources, but provide the work that goes into creating those resources.

A bi-vocational minister and teacher explained his practice of writing partnership participants thank you cards after each partnership activity. The participant recalled that after sending a note of appreciation to one partner, he received a surprising message back. According to the study participant, the recipient of the thank you card "said in all the time that we've been helping schools in two or three different counties, we have never gotten a [thank you] like that." An elementary school leader also suggested that students can play an important role in showing appreciation to partnership participants. She commented that showing your appreciation should be prioritized, "not only just from the, the adults, but having the kids show some appreciation for what's given."

Participants also shared other perceived strengths of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations that do not fall into one of the categories discussed above. For example, one pastor shared his belief that partnership leaders originally from the Oaks community were a strength of the collaboration. He argued that "in some cases where you have those roots, then that makes it a little more personal." Another bi-vocational minister felt faith-based participants' passion for working with youth was a strength of the partnership. He commented that the desire to "reach students at a critical age" was one of the factors that contributed to his work in both the public school and local church. Additionally, the mayor of Oaks cited the community focus of partnership participants as an asset of the collaboration. According to him, participants are "concerned about our community. They want to participate. They want to be part of it."

School and Church Partnership Limitations

In addition to the perceived strengths, participants also noted several limitations of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes

feeder pattern. Throughout my research, five perceived limitations of existing partnerships within the community emerged. Those partnership limitations are listed below:

1. Pandemic Restrictions

2. Availability of Funds

3. Availability of Participants

4. Lack of Direct Information

5. Limited High School Partnership

I discuss each of the perceived limitations below. Additionally, at the end of this section, I also highlight some additional limitations that do not fall into the five main categories.

Pandemic Restrictions

While several perceived limitations of school and faith-based partnerships were identified throughout the study, the most frequently mentioned limitation was the restrictions placed on schools and churches during the global pandemic that occurred during my research. During the pandemic, government leaders and local organizations established various health and safety regulations in order to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Participants described the health crisis as "the biggest hurdle" facing school as church partnerships adding, that the restrictions have "really thrown a monkey wrench" into many of their plans. For instance, in order to maintain public health, Lake County Schools prohibited non-essential visitors and travel for the school year. The Communities in Schools Coordinator reported "mentors aren't allowed to come in school." According to a school principal, schools "have not even readdressed [mentor partnership] this year because they can't come in the building" The Communities in Schools Coordinator also explained:

COVID has limited us yes. From field trips and community service and raising money,

that kind of stuff. But if we didn't have COVID, we could do whatever we wanted to do,

you know, go on any field trips we wanted to do all kinds of community service work.

Additionally, many other partnership activities that require large gathering were halted as

a result of COVID-19. For example, many of the benefit meals and concerts were canceled this

school year. In reference to the community breakfast benefit, one participant stated, "we haven't

been able to do that this year with COVID." Similar statements were made about the concert to

support the athletic boosters; however, churches were able to host the Benefit Concert and

School Supply Drive as a drive-in event. According to one pastor, organizing and conducting

fundraising events is difficult during a pandemic as churches are "really struggling to keep the

doors open just to have regular church services and doing all the protocols we're having to do

right now with that."

Availability of Funds

Another perceived limitation of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based

organizations that emerged during my study is the availability of financial support. When

questioned about partnership limitations, the mayor of Oaks responded, "Unfortunately, I would

have to say probably financial. I think that's a burden here. I do. It's hard to raise up [financial

support]." He recalled an example of purchasing uniforms for the football team, stating "it's

pretty tough to raise that kind of money. And I really applaud people that get out there and try to

do that." Despite the limited availability of financial support, participants acknowledged the

successful financial partnerships already in place in the South Lakes feeder pattern. One pastor

stated, "the limitation of the funds available will always be, be there because nobody has

unlimited funds and especially in the community we're at now, but there may be other things that

can be done to bring forth resources." Another pastor added, "there's a limitation as to the resources available, but we've been mighty blessed with, with that. I can't believe it, but we have."

Availability of Participants

Participants also viewed the inadequate amount of available time and personnel as a limitation of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations. One school administrator argued schools "don't have as many people as we truly need. We don't have as much time as we truly need." In reference to mentoring partnership, the coordinator of the Communities in School Program stated:

I don't have as many mentors as I would like. And it has to do with the kids' schedule and people being able to work with it with their schedule. You know, I try not to pull kids out during math or English or if it's chemistry for high school, something that's hard… We would love for all of our children have mentors, but sometimes that just doesn't always work out with the mentors. You know, their scheduling and I want mentors to meet with the child regularly every week at a specific time because children rely on that. They like that set time and they know that that's when their mentor is going to be there.

Another community leader suggested that school and faith-based partnerships could be improved by getting "more hands involved" in the partnership activities.

Lack of Specific Information

The lack of specific information was also a perceived limitation of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations that emerged during my study. Church members occasionally gather materials to donate to schools based on their preferences or

knowledge of school without knowing if the resource is currently needed. One principal explained:

> I've struggled with, sometimes people will call me and they're like, we've got book bags and crayons and index cards and all that. And sometimes, you know, I have a closet with like 50 book bags in it. And so, it's fantastic. I never want to turn anybody away, but sometimes one of the limitations I think is them not knowing what it is that we need. You know, and then like, if we say, well, actually we really need this. Well, we're just going to bring you some goodie bags, you know, for the like, sometimes it's, it's what they want to give us. Which isn't always what we need, I think is a limitation.

A local pastor also viewed lack of specific information as a potential limitation and stated, "since we're not in direct contact with the job then, then we, we may not have the foresight to know exactly what other things could be done in, in the future." He added:

> You know, I have no doubt in my mind that there's plenty of good Christian or good religious spiritual people that want to help their community. And many of them telling me all the time that they just don't know what to do. They don't know how. They don't see the opportunity.

Another school leader also acknowledged the limitation and suggested schools "be specific about their need, because it is very easy for people to think they know what the children need, but unless A, they have children or B, they have children that age, they really don't."

High School Partnerships

Participants also viewed the lack of high school partnerships as a limitation of the collaboration between public schools and faith-based organizations. Many of the existing

92

partnerships in the South Oaks community are focused at the elementary and middle grades level. A high school administrator explained:

> I think it's a huge missing piece. I think it it's there on the peripheral, but it hasn't it's kept there. It hasn't been welcomed in, I mean, there's a clothing closet at the high school, but it's not nearly what the clothing closet is at the middle school... They'll tell you at the high school level, they're very quiet about their needs. And I also think that at the high school level, the teachers are not as... I don't want to say caring, nurturing, that's it.

School personnel believe there are several reasons for the limited partnerships at the high school level, including student reception. According to one administrator students feel "they're big, they're grown. They don't need help." She added, students are reluctant to express needs saying "they don't need anything. They don't, if they don't eat, they don't eat." She believes this is because "the older they get the more of an embarrassment it is. And they think they start taking on the responsibility themselves, which is a shame because they need to be able to depend on people." Additionally, a school administrator emphasized the difference in teacher support at the high school level arguing that "once you hit high school as an educator, you're more of information based" as opposed to the whole child approach of the elementary and middle school.

Participants also shared other perceived limitations of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations that do not fall into one of the categories discussed above. For example, one minister shared that in specific partnerships such as after school programs, transportation was a limitation for many students. According to another pastor, rurality was a limitation. He explained:

> In some ways the rural is always a little bit more difficult for partnerships, because I guess by the time we get information to some of the people in the community that there's

a need many, many times that opportunity is well passed. And so we, we don't, especially

with some older congregations, we don't have the ability to do things quite as quickly.

We're not as close together.

Additionally, a third minister expressed his belief that the lack of positive publicity limited

partnership development. Despite the many positive partnerships that exist between public

schools and faith-based organizations, the preacher felt "nobody gets to hear." He suggested,

"that's the age of the narrative and that's where we live. We don't live in the age of news. We live

in the age of narratives… you're not going to get the publicity unless it's just negative publicity."

Impact of School and Faith-Based Partnerships

In addition to the many perceived strengths and limitations of the existing partnership

activities present in the South Lakes feeder pattern, participants agreed that the collaboration

between local public schools and faith-based organizations had impacted all stakeholders. In in

the section below I discuss the perceived impacts of the partnership between rural public schools

and faith-based organizations on the public school, church, and community.

Impact on Public School

Throughout my research participants noted several impacts on the public school as a

result of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the South

Lakes feeder pattern. These impacts on the public school primarily related to finances, student

achievement, social and emotional support, character education, and teacher morale.

Finances. The first impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-

based organizations on the public school that emerged during my study related to finances.

Participants believed financial partnership activities extended the school's limited resources and

provided for budget flexibility. An administrator argued that the partnerships between rural

public schools and faith-based organizations are "a natural fit, because we know funding is low." According to one pastor, the school is able to extend its budget through its partnership with the school because when "budgets run low, it doesn't hurt to have that, that resource that's on the edge of it." For example, if the rural public school has exhausted its allocated funds for paper, administration can reach out to church leaders to secure the necessary instructional supplies for students. One school leader recalled the financial support her school received in order to ensure students had access to an educational field trip which exceeded the school's budget. She explained students were "able to experience things they wouldn't normally get to experience on the field trip," because the budget was subsidized.

In addition to extending the school's limited resources, several participants claimed existing financial partnership activities provided for budget flexibility. A local minister commented that schools operate from "budgets that are very fixed." However, he suggested that due to the donations received, church "budgets provide for a lot of benevolence." Since federal and state funding are often restricted to specific expenditures, financial support from faith-based organizations can allow for purchases not previously permitted. Many grants and donations from businesses also have restrictions on how the funds can be allocated. According to a school leader, "there's more restrictions with businesses and what they can donate or provide rather" and how it can be used. She added, "churches kind of have a little bit more freedom with that. I feel because a lot of theirs is based on donations." In reference to an existing financial partnership activity, one bi-vocational minister highlighted that "this was money that the school could actually do what was most needed with. It was free money, meaning it was money that the school could freely direct."

Student achievement. Several of the participants in my study believed the partnership between schools and faith-based organizations had a positive impact on student achievement. Many of the partnership activities are designed to provide students with the resources they need to be successful in the classroom. For example, school supply partnerships ensure students have access to the materials they use regularly in the classroom. According to one school leader, "if our students don't have the tools that they need to be successful in the classroom, then they're not going to be a successful student." In reference to the food insecurity partnership activities, one pastor shared, "I think that if students' needs are met, like we tried, we'd want to do and try to do, then I think that students are more ready to learn and more able to perform." He added, "trying to take a standardized test hungry" leads to lower outcomes for the student.

In addition to providing the resources students need to be successful, partnership between schools and faith-based organizations had a positive impact on student achievement by increasing the instructional time students receive. One school leader noted that the clothing closet at her school increased the instructional time of students in her building since students did not have to leave each time they needed to change clothes. She explained it is "better for them to stay here, to not leave and come back and for instruction" or worse, leave for a clothing issue and not return for instruction that day. Similarly, mentoring partnership activities also aim to increase students' time in school. The Communities in Schools Coordinator shared that "the whole goal [of the program] is to keep kids in school, to not quit." Another school leader stated that financial partnerships which allow schools to purchase incentives also increase the amount of instructional time some students receive. She explained:

> If we can get them to come to school and reward them for that, or provide an incentive
> for them to come school or when they are at school to complete their work and basically

just follow the rules, if we can get them to do that, then overall, they're going to be

successful.

Furthermore, early education partnerships increase student achievement by increasing

school readiness. One pastor shared that the childcare center associated with his church used the

same phonics curriculum as the public school in order to support student's performance in the

classroom. He stated:

> We buy curriculum. We have the, we have the curriculum that you guys use in your
>
> kindergarten and first grade. Letterland. That goes through for, for our K-4. And, and
>
> boy, that was really good to have whenever we came into this too. We just, we had
>
> people already, they were adept to Letterland and kids were coming in and they were
>
> already familiar with how to make some of that.

By incorporating the same phonics curriculum into their preschool program, the church supports

the academic achievement of the participating students.

***Social-emotional support*.** Participants also felt partnerships between schools and faith-

based organizations had a positive impact on student's social and emotional well-being.

According to an elementary school principal, existing food insecurity and supply partnerships

improve students' self-esteem. She shared, "they feel like people are paying attention and that

they matter and they're important. And that's why we do it because we want them to feel like

they matter and they are important." Another school leader believes those partnership activities

that support her school's clothing closet provides students "with a sense of security. And like in

case they get embarrassed with anything, they can go and put on something new. They don't

have to sit in and all day or, you know, wear something wholly if they're embarrassed."

Mentoring partnerships also have a positive impact on students' social and emotional well-being. A bi-vocational minister explained:

> They feel like it's a, I think they feel like it's a safe place… It creates a relationship that they may not have had a relationship like that before they know that someone cares about them. It's a time when someone can hold them accountable and it's a time when they can get snack if they're hungry. And I think it's just the time that they are made to feel comfortable and wanted and know that somebody is, somebody is pleased with. It always makes you feel good to know somebody is pleased with what you're doing. And then if they're not if they're not making it, then some, you know, if the person is able, they can help them, help them with what they need, but then also they can motivate them, you know, give them a lot of motivation

Character education. In addition, partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations also impacted the character education at the schools. Participants expressed that the partnerships reinforced morals, encouraged cooperation, and taught racial equality. According to the participants, most of the character education involving morals happens informally through mentoring. A local pastor explained, "in [mentoring] relationships, getting that opportunity to speak into their lives and speak into their situations and listen to their situations, that's the greatest part of those." While there may not be a formal character education curriculum, the conversations between students and mentors can reinforce biblical morals and values. A bi-vocational pastor explained "the biblical moral values is people that are nice or they're kinder. They're not violent. They're you know, turn the other cheek forgiving and so forth." He added, "the more people with what I would call godly morals and values and traditional morals and values are influencing young people" through mentoring, the greater the

98

impact. He argued, "with men and women of faith in the school systems, if that can make an impact in a student's life, then, then it's going to be a good impact."

Additionally, partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations encourage cooperation among students. An early-education provider in the South Lakes community provided an example of how their program developed cooperation skills in students. She shared:

> As far as getting along in the classrooms goes, say that the kids were not wanting to share, not wanting to be part of the group. When you have, when you have them in a faith-based program like that, they know that that the right thing to do is to treat people how you want to be treated. They're taught that.

In addition, the Communities in Schools Coordinator believes that the relationships students form with their mentors "leads children in directions of finding how to work problems out positively and how to rely on someone other than yourself." Through conversations with students, mentors are able to reinforce stills such as communication, listening, collaboration, sharing, and conflict resolution. She stressed that "learning how to handle that temper. Learning, how to choose better words, learning how to just [use] common everyday manners" was essential to a student's future success.

Partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations also support racial equity education. At South Lakes Middle School, one bi-vocational minister recalled an academic partnership activity he coordinated which allowed students to travel to the Civil Rights Museum and explore topics of racial inequality. He shared:

> We had one student that we, we were watching the movie and they were coming across the, during the civil rights movement, they were marching across the bridge at Selma and

they were beating them back with sticks and stuff. And she screamed out, started crying.

We had to call her mom. But her mom was, her mom was all right. She said she was fine

with it, but I had no idea that it would, I feel like they, she was that moved by that. Some

others had to be moved by it too and, and maybe we made some progress there. I know

that that's a, that's just a touchy issue, but it does exist. And anything we can do to bridge

the gap between, show we're all the same, really, we're all the same. And anyway,

anything we can do bridge the gap there. That was great.

When asked why this particular partnership activity addressing racial equity education through
academic field trips was supported by the local church, the bi-vocational minister argued one of
the priorities of the church was to raise awareness of racial issues in rural communities. He
explained:

The church feels like that fit, fit rural areas. Because Duke Endowment is, that's how

James B. Duke, that's how he wanted it. He wanted to reach out to the rural church. And

the church feels like, that rural areas sometimes are isolated and do not fathom the depth

of social and racial inequality. And, and I, I think it was just to, I think it was to the

church, I think it's just important not to try to not to really push anybody into anything,

but just to raise awareness, just to make sure that, that they were, you know, that, that the

students were aware and realize that we're all one and we, and the bottom line is I think

just, just to, you know, love makes the world go around. That's just what, and, and we,

we're called to love one another in our differences, you know. In our differences, we're

still the same.

Similarly, a pastor commented "we're always looking for people to have equality and fair

treatment as Christians through Jesus Christ." He added, "He made himself available to all

people and we feel like [the field trip] helped represent for them, some different ideas that they may not see, and the diversity of all people."

Teacher morale. Participants also felt partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations had a positive impact on teacher's morale. Partnership activities centered around food insecurity, clothing, and school supplies often provide comfort to teachers who would otherwise worry about their students. One community member explained, "just knowing that they're taken care of like that, it gives them a reassurance." According to an elementary school leader, "a lot of times you go home, and you just think about, and you worry about these kids and things, but then, you know, you kind of had that little ease of mind knowing that things are provided from here." She added, at some schools "teachers pay [for] a lot of stuff out of their pockets to provide for the kids. And so, you know, here we have stuff that we can just go grab and they can give it to them anytime they need, because we have a surplus of items for them." In addition, volunteers also increase morale and promote teacher wellness. A pastor in the Oaks community shared that in his experience, "the school is always needing support staff, somebody to come in and read to the kids, the, give the, give the teacher a minute to, to collect their thoughts."

Impact on Local Church

Throughout my research participants highlighted several impacts on the local church as a result of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern. These impacts on the church included increased service opportunities, spiritual growth of members, greater awareness, and potential church growth for the participating church.

Service opportunities. The first impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations on the local church that emerged during my study related to service opportunities for church members. Participants believed partnership activities related to food insecurities, clothing, and school supplies provide an opportunity to fulfill the church's calling to serve other people through helping those in need. According to one local pastor, "we are doing what we're called to do as Christians, as far as helping the least of the helping those that are in need or those that may not have other opportunities." A bi-vocation pastor shared, "I think it is just indicative of the ministry that Jesus lays out for us to reach out to the least of these." He added:

> If the church doesn't have a way to reach out and be what we're called to be, we're nothing. I mean, if we don't have that's it's, I think it probably works, the way it's supposed to work is probably we're supposed to search for opportunities. And I think God just lays them out there for us. And then that's our calling and we can just grab them up and go with it. And, and if you, if you're not doing anything you're not serving, you know, it's less purpose. There's less purpose. What's the point if you're not going to, if you're not really fulfilling your calling, then what is the point?

Additionally, one minister explained that mentoring partnership activities also provided an opportunity to fulfill the church's calling to serve. He shared:

> When a person hears and hears and hears, but never has a place to apply that knowledge, it's, I don't know that you can call that learning, right? Our, our final stages of discipleship are hands-on where you serve. And I think it gives our, our church people, the opportunity to fulfill what scripture says a good community looks like the, the grandparents, teaching the grandchildren the grandmother who can come in and, and, and

take a young girl under her wing and, and show her what a lady is, right. Show her how

to, how to navigate difficulty. Right. That same thing with that, that that person who

never had the biological ability to have a child, but God is still placed in them, a

nurturing spirit.

Many school leaders echoed this believe with statements like, "I feel like that they, churches

want to give back to their community, they want to support where they live" and "I just think it

helps fill that that desire for them to serve." A school board member added, "churches want to

serve, and we have kids who need to be served, period. That's just as easy as it gets."

Spiritual growth. Another impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and

faith-based organizations on the local church that emerged during my study related to the

spiritual growth of church members. According to the Communities in School Coordinator,

many mentors volunteer because they feel it "helps them grow spiritually." She explained,

"people who [mentor], that's their gift. Their gift is people, to understand people. And they're

using their gifts and they're growing spiritually. They're becoming more connected with God."

She also shared, "you get blessings from helping other people. And I think all these people that

are church going mentors, I think they, it blesses them to see these children happy and mature

and grow." Another community member suggested partnership activities allow church members

to grow spiritually, "to do good, to be fulfilled, and to know that you're doing God's work."

Awareness. Partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations also

increase the awareness of the local church. For example, many food insecurity, clothing, and

school supply partnership activities expand parishioners' awareness of students' need. An

elementary school principal stated, "it just makes you think outside of yourself, that there are

other people. Maybe you don't have to worry about it, but other people do, so be aware. I think it

103

makes people aware. Yeah. We're not alone." A bi-vocational minister explained, a "few years ago when we were made aware of those studies of the hunger in this area and the, the needs, I think I think that opened people's eyes to a lot of things that they cannot believe, and I still can't believe myself exist." According to one principal, sharing student needs has been an eye-opening experience for many church members. She recalled:

It's been very eye opening for them as I have shared needs. You know, we've got a family with six kids, here's what we need, you know, and it's been, it's been good for them to kind of see how they can serve others. I mean, you know, personally speaking, like they've come to me and said, "Wow, that's really great." Or, "can we help this family, you know, what do they need?" And when I send them a list of they need socks and underwear and shoes, and then, you know, they're like, "Oh, we thought we were going to get like, you know, games and toys and all this stuff." But so it's, I think it's just eye opening for them to see the communities that they're serving.

In addition to increasing church member's awareness of the needs present within the community, collaborative efforts between public schools and local faith-based organizations also increase the awareness of partnership activities. One pastor shared that individual partnership activities can "brings other people wanting to be involved." According to him:

They may say, well, you know, 'We didn't think schools and churches could work together. We didn't think they could partner.' And then they say, 'Yeah, that that's going on in my area.' And that hopefully promotes more opportunity for people to become involved.

A school principal echoed the benefit of partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations increasing member's awareness of partnership activities. She shared, "I think it's always good for them just to see what's happening in their local community and in their schools."

Church growth. Church growth also emerged as an impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations on the local church during my study. Though each of the stakeholders interviewed recognized the importance of strong legal and ethical boundaries between public schools and faith-based organizations, various participants acknowledged the indirect benefit for churches of increased membership as a result of their collaboration with public schools. For example, an elementary school principal shared, "our churches have gained some families who maybe would not have attended church or gone to a service, because they feel comfortable because they've met people and they want to further that relationship." She also added, "we have lots of families who receive financial support and other support from the churches outside of school as well, which sometimes leads to families joining church communities." According to a community member:

> Church is different these days, especially here, you know, you've got these mega church things blown up, but we don't really have those around here. It's very Southern country, either Baptist or Methodist or whatever, and it's not always appealing to some. I think we've kind of, when it comes to faith based, it's different than it was years ago. And so, maybe if they do get a person that comes through their door or, you know, a grateful parent, to add because, well, and especially with COVID, I mean, churches have really lost membership and struggling and things, to try to sustain. But you know, so anything that they can do to make, you know, to get somebody through the door, to help build their

mission up, then build the relationships with the community and then that's definitely a benefit for them.

Similarly, a bi-vocational minister in the Oaks community argued that a reputation of participating in partnership activities also supports church growth. He explained, "any church wants to keep a good name of the community, have your face out there as being community oriented" and be thought well of when families are seeking to join a faith organization. One elementary school leader also suggested, witnessing existing partnership activities between public schools and faith-based organizations might "encourage others to, to start attending church or to go and be part of their activities as well."

Impact on Community

Throughout my research, participants also noted several impacts on the community as a result of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern. These impacts on the community centered on creating a strong citizens and instilling pride, hope, and a sense of community among residents.

***Strong citizens*.** The first impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations on the community that emerged during my study related to creating strong citizens. Many participants expressed that developing strong adults was a shared goal of the partnerships. For example, one administrator stated, both the school and church "want the same thing, but you have to come at it from two different ways. So, if you actually could do it together, that would be a complete encompassing of the child to guide them." A community member added, "our teachers and our parents and those people who are so important in our early years, that's what helps us build strong adults."

106

Primarily, participants focused on the impact rural public schools and faith-based organizations had on the future strength of the citizenry. Stakeholders argued that the partnership activities not only developed students' academic skills, but also equipped students with democratic dispositions such as compassion and service. Participants agreed that creating well-rounded citizens positively impacted their community. A pastor in Oaks shared his belief that "well-rounded community-minded spiritually-structured families and students…changes a community." Another pastor echoed this sentiment and stated:

I think it creates a well-rounded moral citizen and, and I think we need in this world of deficiencies, we need all the extras that we can get. And so any, any way that we can work together and create better people, better citizens for the world, we need to do it. And the need is greatest right now, greater than it's ever been. And it gets wider and wider.

He added that the partnership "makes for good citizens… that's a part of the big circle that produces good citizens well-rounded citizens for the community."

Stakeholders also commented that the collaborative efforts between public schools and faith-based organizations promoted a sustainable citizenry for the future. According to a school leader, church members participate in partnership activities because "they know that they're helping our kids be successful because eventually those students are going to be the one supporting the community when they're older." She added, "you have to invest in your community if you want it to be sustainable." One school leader explained, students are "going to eventually give back more into their community and hopefully becomes a cycle where they recognize that at some point or another someone had to help them and it's their turn to help someone else." Community members agreed, with one stating students "also need to learn to

107

give back. You can't always take, take, take, take, you have to learn how to give back. And that's, that's being a good person. Learning how to give back."

Pride. Another impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations on the community that emerged during my study involved pride of the residents. According to the mayor of Oaks, partnership activities within the community, including school and faith-based partnerships, are driven by community pride. He suggested, "it's a pride thing. I think it's a genuine concern to make our schools as good as we can possibly make them, you know, I think pride's got a lot to do with it." He added, "the people that live here are proud of our schools. We're very proud. And I know I am. I'm always impressed when I'm around the school" and want to ensure our students are as successful as possible. A local minister explained it this way:

> One of the things, you know, right off is when a community sees that the churches and schools can put aside any other potential differences of ideology, and can work together for the good of children, the good of education, for good of kids to be really all they can be in their holistic life. That I think the community itself has to be somewhat proud of that.

Hope. Partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations also instill hope in the citizens. According to one community member, there are people "that don't have anything to really, to believe in and to hold onto and seeing that type of love and that type of service, that that's a glimmer of hope for some." An elementary school leader argued that partnership participants continue to be involved in collaborations between public schools and faith-based organizations because they are hopeful for the future." She shared, "they're just so

willing to jump on it and provide, because they know this is the future in this community. It's what's in these buildings."

Sense of community. Additionally, partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations impact the community by creating a stronger sense of community among residents. Throughout the study, many participants similarly stated that the collaboration "brings the community together" and "builds the community." They argued that when organizations collaborate, the shared purpose promotes a sense of togetherness. A school administer provided an example of the sense of community, stating:

> It's like a joining of hands that when say somebody is out to eat or somebody at [the grocery store], and you can see kids walking around and they're people from church are able to say, "Those are kids that go our schools and they're in our community. And that's who we're helping." I think it brings it a full circle. It solidifies it.

Additionally, an elementary school principal shared, "it just kind of forms like a cohesive relationship for the entire community." The mayor of Oaks also explained, "it instills a family-type atmosphere throughout the town. It makes a nice difference. People care about each other here."

Conclusion

In this chapter I described the existing collaborations between the public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes community. Additionally, I examined the strengths, limitations, and impact of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations. In the next chapter, I will offer some conclusions from the study as well as reflect on the research questions associated with this study. I will also discuss the implications of my findings and suggest recommendations for stakeholders and future researchers.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a rural public school administrator, I initially became interested in partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations as a method of increasing community involvement within my school. In my community, these partnerships seemed to be a simple solution to the problem of engaging more family and community members in supporting the success of our students. However, as I began to navigate the collaborative efforts, I was intrigued by the complexity of the partnerships.

As I explored the literature surrounding public school and faith-based partnerships, I discovered that educators are searching for collaborative partners, yet they struggle to navigate faith-based partnerships. Many schools and churches avoid these partnerships altogether out of fear of overstepping the legal boundaries related to the separation of church and state, while others use the collaboration to unconstitutionally promote their religious beliefs. However, researchers also suggest that despite the difficulties many public school educators encounter when navigating faith-based partnerships, there are churches and schools who have been able to form and sustain successful collaborations. In light of this literature, I began thinking further about the direction of this study. My interest quickly extended beyond the partnership activity itself to also include the perceptions of the stakeholders involved and impact of the partnership on the school, church, and community.

During my research study, I examined stakeholder perceptions of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. The following three research questions guided my study:

1. What types of effective partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations exist in rural school districts?

2. What are the perceived strengths and limitations of partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations?

3. How have the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations impacted the public schools, churches, and rural communities?

While I have broadly addressed these questions throughout my findings in the previous chapter, I directly answer each question in the following section.

<div align="center">

Research Questions Answered

</div>

Research Question 1

What types of effective partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations exist in rural school districts?

As a result of my study, I identified six primary types of existing partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes community, each with a different collaborative focus. Those existing partnership focuses are food insecurity, school supplies, clothing and resources, financial support, academic support, and mentoring. Partnership activities focused on food insecurity, such as the backpack program at the local elementary schools or the food pantries located in the elementary and middle schools are designed to provide nutritional support for families with limited access to food resources. Similarly, collaborations between local public schools and faith-based organizations focused on school supplies, like the annual Benefit concert and Supply Drive, or clothing, like Project Santa's Coat Project, provide supplementary resources for students in need. Financially focused partnership activities provide monetary support to local schools and include benefit meals, benefit concerts, grants, and other financial contributions. Schools and churches in the area also participate in academic partnership activities such field trips, early childhood education, and afterschool or summer programs for

<div align="center">

111

</div>

local students in order to enhance the educational experience of community youth. Finally, schools and churches collaborate through mentorship-focused programs like Lunch Buddies and Communities in Schools in order to connect students with positive role models.

While many of the partnership focuses identified in my research are present in the existing literature, rurality had a significant impact on the specific partnerships present in the Oaks community. To begin with, according to current literature, community partnerships between public schools and businesses, universities, and social service agencies are common in the United States. However, due to the geographic isolation and low population density of the Oaks community, local public schools have limited access to these organizations. Fortunately, public schools in the Oaks community are able to collaborate with many local faith-based organizations due to their prominence and accessibility within the community.

Additionally, rural communities, including Oaks, North Carolina, are often characterized by depressed economic conditions. The diminishing wealth and stability present within the community has resulted in economic hardship for many community members. As a result, many of the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations focus on providing basic resources, such as food, school supplies, and clothing to families in need. Partnerships focused on financial support, academic support, and mentoring off-set the decrease in local funding provided to the school system by provide supplemental support to the local school system.

Research Question 2

What are the perceived strengths and limitations of partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations?

112

With the large variety of partnership activities present in the South Lakes feeder pattern, participants agreed that the relationships between public schools and faith-based organizations in their community were strong. While stakeholders perceived that there were many strengths of the partnerships, eight perceived strengths of existing partnerships emerged during my study. Those partnership strengths included shared mission, partnership liaisons, bi-vocational personnel, legal safeguards, ethical safeguards, communication, consistency, and appreciation.

Partnership strengths such as shared mission, partnership liaisons, and communication are common throughout the existing literature. For example, Tripses and Scroggs (2009) found that church members and school personnel had a shared mission of "the well-being of the students" during their successful reading, tutoring, and mentoring partnership between an individual congregation and their community (p. 92). Sanders (2014) explains partnership coordinators are "the 'glue' that held the district's partnership programs together" (p. 243). In addition, in their research of school-community partnerships in inclusive schools, Gross et al. (2015) concluded that "all community partners valued communication and deemed it essential" (p. 25).

However, bi-vocational personnel, consistency, and appreciation are strengths of public school and faith-based partnerships that are unique to this study. As a researcher, I would argue that each of these perceived strengths are directly related to the rurality of the community studied. For instance, according to the participants, bi-vocational personnel are prominent in Oaks because of financial need, time availability, required skills, transferability of skills, and employment opportunities for women. As community and church sizes increase though, these factors are less likely to impact the church leader. Likewise, partnership opportunities are often limited in rural communities leading participants to prioritize consistency and appreciation. In smaller communities, the dependability of individual organizations is necessary since there are

113

limited other partners equipped to fulfill the role. Similarly, organizations are more appreciative of the partnership participants knowing their contributions are unique.

In addition to the perceived strengths, participants also noted several limitations of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern. Throughout my research, I identified five perceived limitations of existing partnerships within the community related to pandemic restrictions, availability of funds, availability of participants, lack of direct information, and limited high school partnership.

Partnership limitations related to the availability of resources such as funds, participants, and information are prevalent in the existing literature. For example, Casto (2016) writes the geographic isolation, declining population, and poverty found in many rural communities "place rural schools in the difficult position of needing to play a broader role in the community while also having fewer resources to draw upon" (p. 144). Despite these limitations, the participants in the Oaks community acknowledged their gratitude for the valuable resources that were available to them. As I mentioned in the findings chapter, one participant shared, "there's a limitation as to the resources available, but we've been mighty blessed with, with that. I can't believe it, but we have."

Though several of the perceived partnership limitations between school and faith-based organizations are found in the existing literature, two limitations were uniquely present in my findings. Participants believed restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of high school partnerships were barriers in the collaboration. Given that this study was conducted during a global pandemic, several health and safety restrictions were implemented in both public schools and local churches. Individuals were prohibited from assembling together in large groups, so many of the partnership activities like benefit concerts or meals were cancelled or

114

postponed. Similarly, student field trips and summer programs were halted due to the mass gathering restrictions. Lake County Schools also limited non-essential visitors. As a result, mentors, volunteers, pastors, and other community members were unable to fulfill traditional partnership roles.

Research Question 3

How have the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations impacted the public schools, churches, and rural communities?

Research participants agreed that the collaboration between local public schools and faith-based organizations had impacted all stakeholders. To begin with, participants noted several impacts on the public school as a result of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations in the South Lakes feeder pattern. These impacts primarily related to finances, student achievement, social and emotional support, character education, and teacher morale. While all of these benefits are found in the existing literature, much of the existing literature focuses on the social and emotional supports and character development achieved through the collaborations. According to Lovelady (1992), churches "need the school to assist in teaching morals, ethics, and values to children and families" (p. 56).

Participants also highlighted the impacts of the partnership between public schools and faith-based organizations on the church. These impacts included increased service opportunities, spiritual growth of members, greater awareness, and potential church growth for the participating church. Though each of these benefits are mentioned in current literature, the research related to this topic is limited. Tripses and Scroggs (2009) uniquely describe an increased awareness of the needs present within a community as a result of a church's relationship-based partnership with

their local elementary school. They argued that members involved in the partnership "came to care deeply about the conditions of life experienced by the children" in the school (p. 94).

Finally, stakeholders perceived that the successful collaborations had meaningful impacts on the community. These impacts on the community centered on creating strong citizens and instilling pride, hope, and a sense of community among residents. As previously mentioned, researchers have detailed the social and emotional supports and character development achieved through school and church collaborations, which ultimately promote the development of strong citizens. However, the other perceived community benefits, instilling pride, hope, and a sense of community, are less evident within the existing research. As a researcher I found these outcomes particularly interesting, noting that current experts on rurality would consider these the intangibles benefits of living and working within rural communities. For example, in her study of a rural community, Budge (2006) found that leaders took pride in describing their district and community "as a place where one can belong" (p. 6). Budge (2006) also confirms that the sense of place "appears to be more pervasive in literature on rural schools and communities than urban and suburban places" (p. 3). What participants perceived as benefits of the partnership between public schools and faith-based organizations in the Oaks community are similar in nature to the benefits of living in a rural community.

Discussion and Implications

Throughout this study I utilized Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence as a lens through which I examined the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in a rural community in North Carolina. Epstein theorized that organizations, particularly families, schools, and communities, were more productive if they allowed their

116

spheres of influence to overlap and began partnering together. The partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations observed in this study confirmed her theory.

According to Epstein (2001), data from her own research and many other studies "revealed repeated evidence that educators who worked in partnership with families and communities were more effective than those who worked in isolation in improving school climate, teachers' professional behavior, parents' confidence, and students' success in school" (p. 74). Through their collaborations, educators in the South Lakes community witnessed similar positive outcomes including increased financing, student achievement, social and emotional support, character education, and teacher morale. Additionally, church members observed increased service opportunities, spiritual growth, awareness, and church growth while community members noted increased outcomes in the areas of citizen development, pride, hope, and sense of community. As a result of this study, it is clear that organizations with overlapping spheres of influence, including rural public schools and churches, can produce increased outcomes for all stakeholders.

Similarly, this study confirms that individuals can utilize their overlapping spheres of influence to produce greater outcomes for both organizations. For example, partnership participants connected to both the rural public school and local church are able to simultaneously use their position in each organization to initiate a partnership activity such as an afterschool program and ensure the activity is mutually beneficial to each organization. Participants from all stakeholder groups in my study identified partnership liaisons and bi-vocational personnel as strengths of the collaboration between public schools and faith-based organizations in rural communities primarily because of their influence in both organizations. These individuals are

able to produce greater outcomes for both organizations, because of their degree of involvement and effect on the activities of each.

While the findings of this study suggest that the positive outcomes associated with organizations and individuals with overlapping spheres of influence are significant for the public school, there is room for improvement within the partnership. For example, though the term partnership was utilized throughout this research, the notion was not fully realized in each collaboration. The term partnership suggests that organizations have a shared role, responsibility, and reward potential within the collaboration; however, this was not always the case. Often the public schools appeared to assume a leadership role throughout the collaboration, independently identifying community needs and leveraging their relationship with the local church to meet the perceived need. Churches appeared to assume the majority of the financial responsibility within the collaboration by agreeing to provide the resources necessary for partnership activities related to food insecurity, school supplies, and clothing. While positive outcomes for each organization were achieved, more equitable roles and responsibilities within the partnership may have provided for a richer understanding of community needs and increased outcomes for all stakeholders.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that the rewards of the partnership between public schools and faith-based organizations are primarily one-directional. In other words, the partnership activities identified during this research, including those related to food insecurity, school supplies, clothing and resources, financial support, academic support, and mentoring were all focused on providing a resource or service for the public school. While participants acknowledged the positive outcomes for the church and community, none of the partnership activities detailed during the interviews and focus group were aimed at providing a

118

resource or service to the faith-based organization. Interestingly, church members participating in this study seemed undeterred by the directionality of the partnership activities noting that opportunities for service, spiritual growth, awareness, and church growth often occur outside of the church walls. Even with the acceptance of one-directional collaborations, there was an overwhelming agreement that the potential for bi-directional partnership opportunities exist between rural public schools and faith-based organizations. As leaders we must continue to pursue these bi-directional partnership opportunities, equipping each organization to contribute to the health and success of the other.

<div align="center">

Recommendations for Practice

</div>

Effective partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations are significantly impacted by each of the stakeholders involved. Based on the findings from my study, I offer several recommendations for school, church, and community leaders who are establishing and maintaining partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations in rural communities.

Recommendations for School Leaders

There are several recommendations for school leaders as they establish and maintain partnerships between public school and faith-based organizations in rural communities including strengthening communication between the organizations and enhancing high school partnerships. While communication was ultimately perceived as a strength of the partnership by participants in this study, they also noted that occasionally the lack of direct information was a barrier. School leaders must capitalize on this strength and seek to mitigate barriers to information by creating systems of regular communication with church partners. These systems of regular communication may include weekly emails, quarterly newsletters, or annual partnership

meetings. By initiating regular contact, school leaders will promote two-way communication between participants and provide opportunities for both organizations to clarify misconceptions and to work together to address the most pressing needs in the community.

School leaders should also identify partnership liaisons and bi-vocational personnel and utilize these individuals as agents of communication. These individuals play a critical role in the success of the collaboration between public schools and local churches and can provide accurate and appropriate information to all stakeholders. If school leaders can use individuals within their school as a point of contact between the public school and local church, then communication between the two organizations will be strengthened.

Finally, school leaders must be clear about their organization's needs, providing specific information to church members. Churches are full of parishioners who want to help meet the needs in their community, including those in the local school, they just need to know what those needs are. School leaders must be able to recognize and communicate the needs of their organization with the local church in order to sustain the partnership between the two organizations.

In addition to strengthening communication, school leaders should seek to enhance faith-based partnerships with local high schools. A large percentage of the existing partnership activities discussed by the participants were focused on elementary and middle school students with high school students only benefiting indirectly. Though community partnerships were present at the high school level, participants felt the partnerships between public high schools and faith-based organizations were limited. In order to address this limitation, school leaders should consider partnering with local churches to provide opportunities for high school students to earn community service hours, such as serving at a local food bank or providing after school

programing. This mutually beneficial collaboration would provide schools with a location for students to fulfill service requirements and help churches, who are often understaffed, with needed volunteers.

School leaders at the high school level should also consider creating partnerships with churches to support post-secondary planning. Traditionally, partnerships that involve post-secondary planning have been made with local business or universities; however, there is room for churches to support families as their student transition to the workforce or college setting. For example, schools may consider asking churches to host informational sessions on college and career planning for their parishioners. School leaders can also facilitate high school student internships with the local church for students interested in a wide range of fields including education and religion.

Recommendations for Church Leaders

In addition to the recommendations for school leaders, I offer recommendations for church leaders as they create and sustain partnerships between public school and faith-based organizations in rural communities. In order to facilitate successful partnerships, church leaders must intentionally educate themselves and their parishioners on separation of church and state legislation. While strong legal and ethical safeguards were perceived as a strength of the existing partnerships, many participants indicated that the legal and ethical boundaries within the partnership were better understood by school personnel. For example, schools primarily led the efforts to protect individual rights, ensure student privacy, and provide safety checks.

Furthermore, though church leaders claimed to have a clear understanding of these safeguards, some used religious language to describe their current work in the public school. For example, one minister stated it "gives us an opportunity to be a role model. And to still be doing

ministry even when you're not the pulpit." While these comments alone do not violate the separation of church and state legislation, they do demonstrate the potential for legal and ethical infringements. Some church leaders also expressed that their parishioners had misconceptions regarding the establishment and free exercise clause prior to becoming involved in partnership activities. Continued education on the separation of church and state legislation would better equip church members to participate in partnership activities.

Recommendations for Community Leaders

Finally, there are recommendations for rural community leaders who will benefit from the collaboration between public schools and faith-based organizations including connecting stakeholders and honoring partnership participants. In light of the potential community benefits of creating strong citizens and instilling pride, hope, and a sense of community among residents, community leaders must take an active role in connecting school and church leaders. This can be done formally, by providing multiple stakeholder invitations to community meeting and events, or informally through conversations with individual leaders. When opportunities arise at the school or church level, community leaders must recognize the potential for school and church partnership and facilitate the initial contact between the stakeholders.

Rural community leaders must also recognize and honor effective partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations. Throughout my study, participants perceived that the appreciation school and church members involved in partnership activities show for each other is a strength of their collaboration. However, community leaders are in the unique position to acknowledge the contributions of both partnership participants. Recognizing and honoring the effective partnerships that currently exist between public schools and faith-based organizations community leaders can continue to promote their continued success within the rural community.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of my study, there are also recommendations for future research related to the partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations. These recommendations include examining the prominence and effectiveness of bi-vocational ministers and educators, studying the impact of partnership efforts on student achievement and student wellbeing, and investigating the adverse effects of school and church partnerships. To begin with, researchers must study bi-vocational ministers and educators further. While this study acknowledges the presence of bi-vocational personnel and their contributions to the partnership between rural public schools and churches, there is much more to be learned about this unique sub-group. For example, we do not know how prevalent bi-vocational ministers and educators are in rural or urban communities. There is also little research to indicate how effective these individuals are in either of their roles and what characteristics could contribute to the effectiveness of bi-vocational personnel.

Additionally, researchers must continue to study the effect of school and faith-based partnership efforts on student achievement and student wellbeing. Though several of the participants in my study believed the partnership activities between schools and faith-based organizations had a positive impact on student achievement, further research is needed to determine the degree of impact the partnership efforts have on student achievement and student wellbeing. For instance, we do not know what student achievement outcomes are most effected by mentoring programs or what resource centered partnership activities have the greatest impact on student well-being. Continued study of the effect of school and faith-based partnership efforts on student achievement and student wellbeing is needed for school and church leaders maximize the effectiveness of partnership activities.

Researchers should also investigate the adverse effects of school and church partnerships. Due to the effectiveness of the existing partnerships in the small and homogeneous community of South Lakes, the findings of this study indicate the collaborations had a positive impact on the school, church, and community. However, there are other locations where the partnerships between public schools and faith-based organizations have had an adverse impact on the stakeholders involved. Research conducted in those communities will extend the current conversation and provide a more complete picture of the partnerships between rural public schools and faith-based organizations, including their strengths, limitations, and impact each of the stakeholders involved.

Final Thoughts

Conducting this research has had a profound impact on me as a school, church, and community leader. As a school principal, I have developed a deeper appreciation for the partnerships that exist between rural public schools and faith-based organizations. For years I have watched these partnerships grow and evolve, but have often been too consumed by the work itself to truly appreciate the value of the partnership. However, as a result of this study I am convinced that the public schools in the South Lakes community, like many other rural public schools, would not survive without the support and efforts of the local churches. Partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations are strengthening our public schools in a significant way and I am extremely grateful.

As a church leader, this study has shown me that there is a wide range of partnership opportunities available for the local church. So often I have felt that the partnership opportunities with public schools were limited for churches; however, the conversations I have had with study participants have proven that the partnership opportunities are actually endless, especially when

124

recognizing that church members are also community citizens who want their community to thrive. Throughout the study, many leaders passionately shared ideas for new collaborations or plans to enhance existing projects and I was reminded that the doors of the public school are open wide for faith-based organizations who maintain the legal and ethical boundaries of appropriate partnership.

Finally, as a community leader this research has taught me to never underestimate the power of individuals working together for a common goal. During one of my interviews a participant wisely shared "the more people you put headed in one direction, the better off you're going to be." This is true of the South Lakes community. There are many people within the local public schools and faith-based organizations who have join together to improve their community, and my hope is that together they continue the work of strengthening Oaks for generations to come.

REFERENCES

Bertrand, M., Freelon, R., & Rogers, J. (2018). Elementary principals' social construction of
    parents of color and working class parents: disrupting or reproducing conflicting and
    deficit orientations of education policy? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *26*, 102–
    102. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3546

Bindewald, B. J. (2015). In the world, but not of the world: Understanding conservative
    Christianity and its relationship with American public schools. *Educational
    Studies*, *51*(2), 93–111. doi: 10.1080/00131946.2015.1015343

Bindewald, B. J., Sanatullova-Allison, E., & Hsiao, Y.-L. (2017). Religion and public education
    in pluralist, democratic societies: Some lessons from the United States and
    Canada. *Religion & Education*, *44*(2), 180–202. doi: 10.1080/15507394.2017.1283193

Budge, K. (2006, December 18). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, and
    possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21 (13).

Casto, H. G. (2016). "Just one more thing I have to do": School-community partnerships. *School
    Community Journal*, *26*(1), 139–162.

Creswell, J.W. (2016). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA:
    Sage Publications.

Data Access and Dissemination Systems (DADS). (2010, October 5). American FactFinder.
    Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/

DeMatthews, D. (2018). School leadership, social capital, and community engagement: A case
    study of an elementary school in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. *School Community
    Journal*, *28*(1), 167-194.

Dryfoos, J. G. (2003). A community school in action. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *11*(4), 203–205.

Dryfoos, J. (2005). Full-service community schools: a strategy—not a program. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2005*(107), 7–14. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.124

Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Goldberg, M. F. (1990). Portrait of James P. Comer. *Educational Leadership*, *48*(1), 40–40.

Gross, J., Haines, S., Hill, C., Francis, G., Blue-Banning, M., & Turnbull, A. (2015). Strong school-community partnerships in inclusive schools are "part of the fabric of the school....we count on them". *School Community Journal, 25*(2), 9-34.

Hartman, S. L., Stotts, J., Ottley, J. R., & Miller, R. (2017). School-community partnerships in rural settings: Facilitating positive outcomes for young children who experience maltreatment. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45, 403-410.

Kahlenberg, R. D. (2001). Learning from James Coleman. *Public Interest*, *144*(144), 54–72.

Kantor, H., & Lowe, R. (2017). Introduction: What difference did the Coleman report make? *History of Education Quarterly*, *57*(4), 570–578. https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2017.32

Kaplowitz, T. (2015). School-church/synagogue partnerships: A comparative case study of religious capital enrichment. *Journal of Jewish Education*, *81*(3), 241–259. doi: 10.1080/15244113.2015.1063035

Keith, N. Z. (1995). The community in the school: can we create community across difference? *Educational Horizons*, *73*(4), 169–73.

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4:

      trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, *24*(1), 120-124.

Krumm, B., & Curry, K. (2017). Traversing school–community partnerships utilizing cross-

      boundary leadership. *School Community Journal, 27*(2), 99-120.

Kvale, S. & S. Brinkmann (2009). Conducting an interview. Chapter 7 in *InterViews: Learning*

      the craft of qualitative research interviewing (pp. 123-141). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Lovelady, I. (1992). The day the mill closed. *Educational Leadership, 50*(1), 55-55.

McAlister, S. (2013). Why community engagement matters in school turnaround. Voices in

      Urban Education, 36(Winter/Spring), 35–41.

McCarthy, M. M., Cambron-McCabe, N. H., & Eckes, S. (2014). *Public school law: Teachers'*

      and students' rights. Boston: Pearson.

Merriam, S. & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*,

      4th edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mihas, P. (2019). Qualitative data analysis. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.

      Available online at education.oxfordre.com.

North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. (n.d.). Retrieved December 8, 2019, from

      https://sites.google.com/dpi.nc.gov/ncees-information-and-resource/teachers?authuser=0.

Odell, E. (2017). Lonely schools: The relationship between geographic isolation and academic

      attainment. *Educational Research, 59*(3), 257-272. doi:10.1080/00131881.2017.1339285

Parker, A. & Tritter, J. (2006). Focus group method and methodology: Current practice and

      recent debate. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 29*(1), 23-37.

Perkins, T. (2015). School–community partnerships, friend or foe? The doublespeak of

      community with educational partnerships. *Educational Studies*, *51*(4).

Ramirez-Smith, C., & Lofland, G. D. (1995). Stopping the cycle of failure: The Comer

    model. *Educational Leadership*, *52*(5), 14–14.

Rosenblith, S., & Bailey, B. (2007). Comprehensive religious studies in public education:

    Educating for a religiously literate society. *Educational Studies*, *42*(2), 93–111. doi:

    10.1080/00131940701513151

Rosenblith, S., & Bindewald, B. (2014). Between mere tolerance and robust respect: Mutuality

    as a basis for civic education in pluralist democracies. *Educational Theory*, *64*(6), 589–

    606. doi: 10.1111/edth.12085

Sanders, M. (2003). Community involvement in schools: From concept to practice. *Education*

    and Urban Society, 35(2), 161-180. doi:10.1177/0013124502239390

Sanders, M. (2014). Principal leadership for school, family, and community partnerships: The

    role of a systems approach to reform implementation. *American Journal of*

    Education, 120(2), 233-233. doi:10.1086/674374

Sebolt, S. (2018). Capitalizing on funds of knowledge to support family engagement. *Kappa*

    Delta Pi Record, *54*(3), 130–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2018.1481660

Stefanski, A., Valli, L. & Jacobson, R. (2016). Beyond involvement and engagement: The role of

    the family in school–community partnerships. School Community Journal, 26(2), 135–

    160.

Tieken, M. (2017). Commentary: Rural histories, rural boundaries, rural change. *American*

    Educational Research Journal, 54(1), 216.

Torrence, W., Phillips, D., & Guidry, J. (2005). The assessment of rural African-American

    churches' capacity to promote health prevention activities. *American Journal of Health*

    Education, 36(3), 161-164.

Tripses, J., & Scroggs, L. (2009). Spirituality and respect: Study of a model school-church-community collaboration. *School Community Journal, 19*(1), 77-97.

Zuckerman, S. J. (2019). Making sense of place: A case study of a sensemaking in a rural school-community partnership. Journal of Research in Rural Education, 35(6), 1-18.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your role in your local school or community. What are your primary responsibilities?
2. What are your initial thoughts about school and faith based partnerships?
3. Have you observed a successful partnership between a school and faith-based organization? If so, please describe.
4. How did the successful partnership begin?
5. How is the partnership sustained?
6. What were the benefits of the partnership between your school and/or church for the school?
7. What were the benefits of the partnership between your school and/or church for the church?
8. What factors contributed to the success of the partnership between the school and faith-based organization?
9. What were the limitations of the partnership between the school and faith-based organization?
10. What could be done to improve the partnership between the school and faith-based organization?
11. How does your organization navigate the legal and ethical issues related to separation of church and state?
12. Is there a partnership opportunity you would like to see implemented in the future? How would this improve your school, church, or community?
13. Why should schools and faith-based organizations create mutually beneficial partnerships?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not had the opportunity to discuss?

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Describe your role in your local school or community. What are your primary responsibilities?
2. How do you define an effective partnerships between a public school and a faith-based organization?
3. How do you create an effective partnerships between a public school and a faith-based organization?
4. In what ways are the partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations mutually beneficial?
5. What are the challenges of partnerships between schools and faith-based organizations?
6. How do you understand the separation of church and state?
7. How does your organization navigate the legal and ethical issues related to separation of church and state?
8. How does rurality impact the partnership between schools and faith-based organizations?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not had the opportunity to discuss?