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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, PRINCIPAL EMPOWERMENT: LEADER PERSPECTIVES IN RURAL GEORGIA CHARTER SYSTEMS, by BROCK R. HOLLEY, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

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PRINCIPAL EMPOWERMENT: LEADER PERSPECTIVES IN RURAL GEORGIA
CHARTER SYSTEMS

by

BROCK R. HOLLEY

Under the Direction of Dr. James Kahrs

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the perspectives of principals leading rural Georgia schools within districts following charter system governance and addresses the overarching research question, “How do rural Georgia charter system principals perceive their level of empowerment in local school decision making?” Georgia charter system governance is available for any public school district in the state and offers empowerment and flexibility at the school house level. Charter system governance operates similarly to traditional charter schools but includes all public schools in the system charter contract. Little research is available on the process of local leader empowerment in rural Georgia charter systems because Georgia is the only state to offer charter governance to districts and charter systems are relatively new having been created in 2007. Rural school systems are defined by the county the district is located in, having less than 50,000 people according to the 2010 census. This multiple case study utilized semi-structured interviews of seven principals in rural Georgia charter systems to understand the level of local empowerment and autonomy perceived by these leaders. Additionally, an internal and external document review took place to achieve triangulation during the data collection process. Internal

documents included the local system charter contract and the governance team documents from the local district. The external documents included the rules, regulations, and by-laws of charter system governance from the Georgia Department of Education and the Charter System Foundation. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes collected through principal interviews and document reviews. Results indicate that principals in rural Georgia charter systems perceive empowerment in decision-making at the local school level. Five major themes emerged during the data analysis portion of the study: charter system governance, system-level support, the principalship, rural impact, and the local community. The results of this dissertation can help guide state, district, and school-level leaders, especially in rural settings, by understanding the perspectives of principals regarding empowerment and autonomy to make decisions in the best interest of the local school and community.

INDEX WORDS: Georgia charter systems, principal leadership, empowerment, distributed leadership, rural schools, multiple case study

PRINCIPAL EMPOWERMENT: LEADER PERSPECTIVES IN RURAL GEORGIA
CHARTER SYSTEMS

by

BROCK R. HOLLEY

A Dissertation

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in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education

Georgia State University

Atlanta, Georgia
2021

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my wife, Jennifer, and our daughter, Julia, for their love, support, and patience. Jennifer, your encouragement and selfless attitude motivated me during the entire doctoral program. You sacrificed a significant portion of your time to accommodate my work and research. You are the best wife I could ever ask for and I thank God for your love and support every day. To my mother, Susan, and my father, Don, for the positive example they collectively set for Trent, Jake, and I. Resiliency, hard-work, and commitment are just some of the values you taught that helped me through this program.

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CHAPTER 1
PRINCIPAL EMPOWERMENT: LEADER PERSPECTIVES IN RURAL GEORGIA
CHARTER SYSTEMS

As with many of the industries in today's world, education and the roles of different actors in education continue to evolve and adapt. As operations and systems begin to change, we realize what works the best and learn from past mistakes to improve students' future outcomes. All disciplines experience the need for reflection and feedback pertaining to growth and development for endeavors to come. The field of education is notorious for facing rapid change and adjustments to policies and procedures. The responsibility of promptly comprehending change is necessary for educational leaders at all levels.

At the school level, the principal is the overarching leader and is accountable for all aspects of school operations. Numerous research articles show that effective school leadership is a strong predictor of student success and second only to direct classroom instruction (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Coelli & Green, 2012; Ni, Yan, & Pounder, 2018). Included in the ever-changing educational landscape is the increasingly diverse population of students schools are serving. While immediate and extended families largely contribute to child development and achievement, many students recognized positive relationships with teachers, counselors, and administrators as an essential factor in school success (Williams & Bryan, 2013).

Due to the significant impact teachers and leaders have on students (Louis et al., 2010; Coelli & Green, 2012; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Ni et al., 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018), the need exists for leaders to be aware of local community issues and needs (Cruzerio & Boone, 2009; Schuman, 2010). Principals and school leaders hold a distinct understanding of local community needs and the instructional and pedagogical skills needed to advance student learning

(Hays, 2013; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Dou, Devos, & Valcke, 2017). As a result, there is a need to understand the perception of empowerment between the central office and local principals, who are tasked to make decisions in their students and the local community's best interest.

Background of the Problem

A shifting educational landscape requires an exceptional skill set for modern-day principals. Gone are the days of principals sitting in their office and merely managing school operations. In addition to the standard management requirements, principals are now trusted to drive instruction and provide distinctive student needs solutions. These diverse school necessities emphasize the local school leader's empowerment to make decisions in the student population and the local community's best interest. Local school decision-making for principals includes, but is not limited to, school finance and budgeting, human resource allocation, and instructional development and supports. The gap between central office decision-making and school-level decision-making presents a problem that can inhibit efficient progress. Whitty and Power (2000) detailed the idea of school districts moving toward decentralization and away from the notion that all schools in a district have the same needs.

Additionally, charter schooling has grown in popularity since first established in the early 1990s (Hunt, 2010). The State of Georgia offers a unique charter option to schools and communities. Much like an individual school can adopt a charter for increased flexibility, school systems in Georgia have the opportunity for applying to become a charter school system, which grants flexibility to all schools governed by those districts (Georgia Charter Systems Act, 2007).

Georgia public school districts have the option of following one of three governance models: status quo system, strategic waiver system, or charter system. Georgia status quo school systems must follow all State Board of Education and Title 20 laws, rules, and regulations. Status

quo systems cannot request waivers from any of these requirements except for a few rare circumstances. Title 20 is the Georgia code section outlining public education's legal responsibilities (Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2). Status quo systems account for the smallest portion of Georgia's public school systems, with only two districts operating under status quo governance. The second governance option available to Georgia's school districts is the strategic waiver governance option, otherwise known as Investing in Excellence in Education or IE2 systems. Strategic waiver systems can waive some of the State Board of Education and Title 20 regulations. Strategic waiver systems are required to have a strategic plan in place and request flexibility in at least one area, including class size, teacher certification, employee salary schedule, or expenditure control. Strategic waivers systems make up the greatest portion of Georgia's public school districts, with 129 systems currently following strategic waiver governance (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The third option for Georgia's public school systems is charter system governance. Charter districts enter into a contract or charter with the State Board of Education, which allows them to request flexibility from most of the State Board of Education rules and regulations and Title 20. Charter systems agree to increased accountability in exchange for waiving state mandate requirements, similar to strategic waiver systems. A critical difference between charter systems and strategic waiver systems is the expectation for local school input for charter system governance. There are currently 48 public school systems in Georgia that abide by charter system governance (Georgia Charter Systems Foundation, 2020).

A gap in the literature exists regarding principal leadership in Georgia charter systems because of the relatively new existence of charter system governance. My goal was to understand better how principals perceive their level of empowerment in Georgia charter systems.

Interviews of principals in Georgia charter systems, reviewing school district charter documents, and reviewing the Georgia charter requirements provided the information needed to gain a deeper understanding of empowerment experienced by principals in rural charter systems. Furthermore, the findings of this study provided a unique look at the perspectives of principals in rural Georgia charter systems regarding their empowerment to make local decisions based on the needs of their students and local community.

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is grounded in the combination of two constructs: distributed leadership and empowerment. The first theoretical construct, distributed leadership, is composed of two essential components. The first component of distributed leadership is the leader-plus aspect, which alludes to the understanding that a successful organization or school requires the leadership contributions of the formal leaders, principals and superintendents, and informal leaders or followers (Spillane, 2006). The second component of distributed leadership is the practice aspect. The practice aspect focuses on the interactions between formal and informal leaders and the settings in which these interactions take place (Spillane, 2006). The leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect form the basis of distributed leadership. The theory of distributed leadership is framed around how leadership occurs rather than who is in a leadership position (Spillane, 2006).

Empowerment is the second theoretical construct used in this study to form a perspective to understand the role of leadership better. Empowerment is defined as "an orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444). Empowerment applies directly to the autonomy in decision-making school-level principals experience in Georgia charter systems. Empowerment is a motivational construct

made up of four key components: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). These four pillars must be present in any leadership interaction to result in empowerment. Georgia charter systems' flexibility and autonomy provide the opportunity for entire districts to empower their school-level principals. Empowerment involves a participatory process between both leader and follower and provides a window of perspective for the research conducted in this study.

The theoretical constructs of distributed leadership and empowerment work together to form an overarching framework with which this study was examined. Distributed leadership and the interactions of central office staff and principals can lead to the perception of empowerment principals experience in their daily work. This framework guided the study and will help readers understand the interactions between principals and central office staff members of rural Georgia charter systems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how principals perceive their level of empowerment and flexibility to adapt to the rapidly evolving needs of local schools and communities in Georgia schools. Over a decade ago, charter school systems were created to provide an option for increased flexibility for school districts (Georgia Charter Systems Act, 2007). Georgia was the first state to create a charter schooling option for entire school districts (Finnigan, 2007) and is still the only state to offer such a governance option for school systems. This study's research was conducted as a multiple case study design due to several research cases being observed to illustrate the same topic (Creswell, 2013).

Overarching Research Question

- How do rural Georgia charter system principals perceive their level of empowerment in local school decision making?

Supporting questions.

- What are the perceptions of principals regarding their charter system's delegation of local school decision making for principals?
- What are the perceptions of principals about the use of charter system flexibility in local school decision making?

Creswell (2013) recommends qualitative researchers use a single, overarching central research question supported by several sub-questions to substantiate the study's purpose. The research questions acted as a guide during the data collection and analysis phase of this study. The research questions addressed the need to gain a deeper understanding of charter system principals regarding local empowerment. The supporting questions further refined the study's purpose and asked what factors affect empowerment and what role does charter system flexibility play in the process of local school decision making. To better understand the role of charter system flexibility, all participants must have educational leadership experience in a charter and non-charter system. This requirement allowed leaders to have professional knowledge of different types of district governance and the impact other models have on school leadership.

Furthermore, the end purpose was to uncover findings of principal's perceptions through interviews, internal document reviews, and external document reviews. Internal documents included individual system charter contracts outlining the mutually agreed upon stipulations of the state and system in becoming a charter system. External documents included the Georgia

Department of Education and Georgia Charter System Foundation requirements of the individual school system to ensure proper accountability and improvement.

Definitions of Terms

Accountability: a process of evaluating schools by holding educators and school leaders responsible for the results of student performance (Bae, 2018).

Charter: a performance-based contract between the state board of education and a local board of education or a charter petitioner (Georgia Charter Systems Act, 2007).

Charter School: a school that holds a contract to perform an educational service for a specific amount of time (Hunt, 2010).

Charter System (Georgia): a local school system that operates under a charter's guidelines (Georgia Charter Systems Act, 2007).

Empowerment (psychological empowerment): "an orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444).

Principal: chief local school leader.

Quintain: the phenomenon in which individual cases are bound together (Stake, 2006).

Rural School Districts: a school district in Georgia that resides in a county with fewer than 50,000 people.

Procedures

This study followed the procedures of a multiple case study. Seven charter system principals in Georgia were invited to participate based on the criteria that they must currently be a principal within a charter school system in Georgia, have at least two years of experience in their current principal role, and have served in a leadership capacity (principal or assistant principal) in both a charter system and non-charter system. A semi-structured interview process

was used during this study, where principals were asked eight interview questions. Internal school system charter documents and external state charter requirements were reviewed to achieve triangulation throughout the study. Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis protocol to identify themes across all settings.

Significance of the Study

The study of rural Georgia charter system principal empowerment is significant due to the uniqueness of this situation. The growing demand for local decision-making and accountability creates a need to understand how principals perceive Georgia's charter system model's flexibility. A better understanding of charter system flexibility can build a foundation for future charter system applications in Georgia and across the nation. This study was conducted to inform educational leaders and state policymakers who have the opportunity to make important decisions about local school decision making, governance, and statewide policy. Additionally, I hope that this research supports our local schools' growing and complex needs, specifically those in rural communities.

Limitations

This study's limitations include the small sample size with the inclusion of the perspective of only seven principals in one state. A small sample size within a qualitative study is not typically generalizable to a larger population. A second limitation may be that some interviews were not able to occur in a face-to-face manner. Finally, my individual bias is a limitation to be aware of as I am employed in a charter school system in Georgia; therefore, my professional attachment to a charter school system could serve as a limitation. The charter system that I am employed in was not used in this study; however, the potential for personal bias is a limitation.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in a two-chapter dissertation format. The first chapter is an introduction and a comprehensive review of the current literature on relevant topics. The second chapter includes a detailed methodology section outlining the study's parameters and findings and discussion sections discussing the principal perceptions uncovered in the research and supporting documents.

Summary

Understanding the perspectives of our school leaders can be a powerful tool in the improvement process of rural Georgia schools. Distributed leadership and empowerment combined to serve as the theoretical framework in which I attempted to understand collective interactions and principal perceptions better. Interviews and document reviews allowed the researcher and readers of this study to gain insight into how local principals interact with central office staff members to make crucial decisions. Finally, by having a better understanding of rural principals' perceptions in Georgia charter systems, all stakeholders may have the opportunity to help support local decision-making in these communities.

Literature Review

Charter Schools & Charter Systems

The idea of charter schools or charter flexibility is a relatively new educational phenomenon. The first charter school was founded in Minnesota in 1991 and has led to charter schools expanding to most states while concurrently enrolling more than 2.6 million students (Hunt, 2010; Ford & Ihrke, 2017). Charter public schools were created to empower school-level leaders and offer flexibility and autonomy for innovation by local leadership (Hays, 2013). Many individuals noticed public education was becoming a standardized model and disallowed for

local flexibility based on student and community needs. Hess (2001) elaborates on this idea in an article about the politics of regulatory accountability by stating, “one key thread defining the charter movement is the desire to free schools from bureaucratic constraints and allow them to operate as close-knit communities dedicated to a shared vision” (p. 143). The purpose of creating charter schools was not to escape accountability but instead find a path offering the opportunity for local stakeholders and community members to have legitimate input into school governance.

Charter schools and charter systems have many similarities and differences when being compared to traditional public schools. Charter education operates on a spectrum of deviance from their conventional counterparts. According to Gawlik (2008), charter school leaders experience significantly greater flexibility for school decision making than traditional public school leaders. However, charter school principals also experience a higher turnover rate than traditional public school leaders (Ni, Sun, & Rorrer, 2015). The work of Gawlik (2008) and Ni et al. (2015) provides insight into the volatility of school leadership in charter organizations. This volatility is due to countless factors and the level of student development being experienced at the school. Those charter schools that do experience success may ask for more input and engagement from a wide variety of stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and other community members (Louis et al., 2010). According to Louis et al. (2010), school influence does not come in fixed quantities, and principals do not lose control as others gain power in local decision-making. School leaders may be wary of involving others in noteworthy decision-making, although it has improved operations and overall student performance (Louis et al., 2010). Charter schools seek leaders who embrace this type of collaboration and embrace the challenge of innovation and change.

Georgia charter systems.

Georgia did not experience charter school change as quickly as other states around the country. The first Georgia charter school began operations in 2004 and has spread to include more than 343,000 students as of 2020 (Georgia Department of Education, 2020). Unique to Georgia is the option of a school system adopting a charter to increase local flexibility in multiple areas, most notably offering statutory reprieves for fiscal expenditures and staffing requirements (Finnigan, 2007). A charter system acts similarly to an independent charter school, with all schools under the district's jurisdiction operating within the agreed-upon system charter.

The Georgia Charter Systems Act (2007) was enacted with the passage of Senate Bill 39 (2007). The legislative intent of this statute states, "it is the intent of the General Assembly to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation by encouraging local school systems to utilize the flexibility of a performance-based contract called a charter" (Georgia Charter Systems Act, 2007). In Georgia, there are three charter educational options (Georgia Department of Education, 2012). The first option is a conversion charter school, which is an existing public school seeking individual autonomy by engaging in a charter contract with the state of Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2012). This school remains a part of a specific school district but may operate under different rules than other schools in the same district. The second charter education option is a start-up charter school. A start-up charter school is a new charter school falling under a traditional school district or the state directly as a state-chartered special school (Georgia Department of Education, 2012).

The final option for charter education in Georgia is a charter school system. For a school system to qualify as a charter system, the local board of education submits a charter or contract with the state board of education outlining the increased accountability the district is willing to

accept in return for increased autonomy and flexibility (Georgia Department of Education, 2012). The state board of education and the Charter Advisory Committee (CAC) review the application, meet with school district representatives, and make a final decision based on the school system's intent and objectives (Georgia Department of Education, 2012).

When a local school board submits a charter petition for approval, it must contain a detailed explanation of district and school-level structures and responsibilities for the principal, governance teams, and local board of education. The Georgia Charter System Act (2007) requires all charter systems to create a school-level governance team with decision-making authority in decisions regarding personnel, finances, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations. Governance teams must consist of parents, community members, and teachers (Georgia Department of Education, 2012). Governance teams encourage shared decision-making among all stakeholders and are used to support the district and individual school's mission. Georgia's constitutional authority states that local school boards have ultimate authority over the school system's control and management (Georgia Charter Schools Act, 1998). The requirement of a governance structure inclusive of various stakeholders is one example of increased accountability in return for increased flexibility from other state and local mandates and regulations.

The state of Georgia expanded flexible governance structures in 2008 by adopting the Increased Flexibility for Local School Systems Act (Kramer, Lane, & Tanner, 2017). This act established the Investing in Educational Excellence option for local districts, better known as the IE2 or strategic waiver option (Kramer et al., 2017). Much like charter systems, IE2 or strategic waiver systems would experience increased flexibility from specific state laws, rules, and

regulations in exchange for increased accountability (Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2-80). A third option offered to local school districts is the status-quo model. The status-quo option provides no deviances from the state board of education rules and regulations. The three accountability options offered by the state of Georgia are distinctive, and local districts have choices regarding the level of flexibility they feel is necessary.

School Accountability

Accountability is critical for all public programs, including education. Bae (2018) defines school-based accountability as “the process of evaluating school performance based on student performance measures and holding educators and school officials responsible for results” (p. 4). Many stakeholders may agree this broad definition does meet the requirements for school-based accountability. However, in the era of high-stakes testing, student performance measures have often been narrowed down to looking at individual student test scores.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was a federal accountability system passed in 2001 to help failing schools across the nation improve (Reback, 2008). As part of NCLB, individual states were required to issue ratings to schools based on pass rates of standardized tests (Reback, 2008). Furthermore, NCLB accountability measures’ focus became directed at students on the margin of passing or failing standardized tests (Reback, 2008). Klein (2017) reinforced this claim stating the United States’ approach toward accountability is based on control, rewards, and sanctions through programs such as NCLB and Title One resources.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed into law and designed to replace NCLB regarding school accountability after it went into effect at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year (McGuinn, 2016). ESSA requires states to continue reporting standardized testing data but allows greater flexibility to individual states in selecting an

assessment (McGuinn, 2016). The federal government grants additional flexibility under ESSA in allowing individual states to pick academic goals for state accountability plans. Accountability plans are then submitted to the federal government to ensure ESSA compliance on the state level (McGuinn, 2016). The federal government created NCLB and ESSA to ensure accountability for states and local schools in providing rigorous academic instruction and making adjustments based on student assessment data.

While the intention may have been a novel one initially, unintended consequences have affected how classroom instruction is delivered, and schools are governed by school and district leaders and local boards of education. A significant shift from NCLB to ESSA was the expansion of state-level flexibility in the area of school accountability (Welsh & Williams, 2018). Specifically, states have more flexibility to examine how they are addressing issues with low-performing schools. In November 2016, a state constitutional amendment was proposed to Georgia's voters to allow the state to take over failing schools and place them in what was referred to as the Opportunity School District (OSD) (Welsh & Williams, 2018). Despite several other southeastern states such as Louisiana and Tennessee employing similar strategies for low-performing schools, Georgia's constitutional amendment failed in the general election (Welsh & Williams, 2018). Opponents of a state-level takeover of low-performing schools suggest that such appropriations weaken the democratic process of local educational governance (Welsh & Williams, 2018). Supporters of state-level takeover feel this may be the only way to support students who lack resources to attend another school (Welsh & Williams, 2018). Regardless of the real intentions behind the OSD proposal in Georgia, accountability is an important concept to explore regarding public educational leadership.

School accountability is not a negative concept, and most public education stakeholders, including classroom teachers and school leaders, encourage an appropriate level of oversight. A balance between accountability and local autonomy serves the need for checks and balances, as well as the freedom to make decisions in the best interest of the local community. Principals with little or no input on terms, processes, and regulations may experience a reduced sense of efficacy; however, too much autonomy without responsibility creates a lack of structure within the organization (Gawlik, 2008). Gawlik's (2008) usage of the term efficacy is similar to Spreitzer's (1995) definition of empowerment that is used throughout this study. Gawlik's (2008) reference of efficacy includes the current feeling an individual may experience. Spreitzer's (1995) definition of empowerment also considers the present sentiment of an individual but also cogitates the motivation of that person to lead people and process in the future.

The goal of charter systems is to increase flexibility in the selection of interventions based on the needs of their specific student population by local stakeholders (Georgia Charter Systems Foundation, 2013). Both charter schools and charter systems have a clearly established contract, or charter, with a governing body. With an individual charter school, that may be a district board of education or board of directors. A charter system's governing body is the State Board of Education and the Georgia Department of Education. Hays (2013) states that this desire for increased autonomy and flexibility does not yield a sacrifice in accountability. Just the opposite is true. Most charters that receive state or local boards of education support are required to follow increased accountability measures when compared to their conventional public school counterparts (Hays, 2013). Klein (2017) conducted a study of autonomy of schools serving disadvantaged communities in four countries: Finland, Germany, United Kingdom, and the

United States. The study found that each country experienced increased autonomy regarding resource allocation and curriculum and assessment for schools serving disadvantaged communities except the United States (Klein, 2017).

Blitz (2011) provides additional support in the governance structures of charter schools and charter systems. Charter school leadership relies on flexibility to organize and lead an individual school in a way that best reflects the local school or district's vision as shared by the local community (Blitz, 2011). Often, charter schools and charter systems are connected to their traditional public school equivalents because the phenomenon of comparing schools has become increasingly popular among those outside of public education. Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000) addressed this comparison issue by maintaining,

The language of accountability via regulation is the only one that many school systems speak, and it is the one that many people have in mind for charter schools as well. But that approach will only make charter schools more and more like conventional schools, crippling their potential to be different (p. 128).

The most common and most accessible form of accountability to obtain is a measure quantitative in nature, such as standardized test scores (Blitz, 2011). This single form of data collection poses a severe challenge to charter school and charter district leaders as they attempt to balance the quantitative accountability measures with the development of innovation.

School accountability is a necessary endeavor to ensure students and communities are receiving an education driven to produce productive individuals who will positively contribute to communities and society as a whole. However, judging schools and individual teachers based on a single test score is insufficient when issuing an overarching accountability summary or grade (Welsh & Williams, 2018). As we see in Welsh & Williams' (2018) mixed-method study of

Georgia's proposed Opportunity School District, certain accountability structures can have negative unintended consequences such as schools tailoring instruction to only items on standardized tests and detachment from local communities due to less local control of school districts. Schafft (2016) outlines the disconnect of accountability when stating, "it is ironic then that in the name of 'accountability', schools have become less and less accountable to the communities they serve, and instead increasingly accountable to institutionally determined state assessment goals" (p. 149). In schools that achieve student success consistently, leaders and teachers pay attention to numerous indicators of student success and adjust as needed (Louis et al., 2010).

Rural Schools

Rural schools are complex organizations experiencing advantages and disadvantages when compared to their suburban and urban school counterparts (Schafft, 2016). We see a gap in rural school exploration when examining previous research between urban and rural education (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). According to Schafft and Biddle (2014), a search of the keywords "urban" and "rural" in the top five educational research journals (*Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Review of Educational Research*, and the *American Educational Research Journal*) published from January 2004 to January 2014 resulted in 64 articles referencing "urban" and five articles referencing "rural" in the title or abstract portions of the article. The discrepancy in rural and urban school research presents an opportunity for future findings around the nature of rural schooling and its effects on students and communities.

The benefits that rural schools offer to their local communities and families are abundant (Schafft & Biddle, 2014; Schafft, 2016). Rural schools often have fewer students offering a more

interconnected community feel. Pendola and Fuller (2018) found that rural schools tend to have a greater percentage of schools with combined grade levels due to lower student enrollment than non-rural schools. In rural areas, schools can be one of the largest employers in the area, and parents are more likely to attend school events and serve in volunteer capacities. Even though poverty rates tend to be higher in nonmetropolitan areas (Schafft, 2016), students from low-income families perform at a higher rate on NAEP math and reading assessments when compared to their metropolitan area peers (Schafft & Biddle, 2014; Schafft, 2016).

Rural leaders.

Relationships forged by school leaders are also important for those leading learning organizations in rural communities. A study conducted by Cruzerio and Boone (2009), which interviewed rural superintendents, yielded responses that show rural community members value close-knit relationships with the school principal. Positive relationships are the foundation for successful rural leadership. Preston and Barnes (2017) elaborated on the idea of successful school leaders by identifying some essential traits. Rural leaders who experience success either by student achievement or public perception focus on teamwork regarding their leadership style (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Furthermore, Preston and Barnes (2017) noted that successful rural leaders form a collaborative relationship with teachers and staff as a group and on an individual basis.

The work of Pendola and Fuller (2018) yielded similar results to those found by Preston and Barnes (2017). An analysis of rural Texas principals and found that less than one third of rural principals remain in the same position for five years or more (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Additionally, the results of the study claimed that rural principals leave their positions earlier and have less stability than non-rural principals. Those results were disaggregated to reveal that less

females served in rural principal roles than their male counterparts; however, female principals serving in rural schools tended to be more stable than males and principals with more teaching experience were more stable than principals with more assistant principal experience (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). The existing body of literature highlights the importance of rural school leadership; however, the lack of principal stability threatens the development of schools in rural communities.

The engagement of stakeholders is important to citizens outside of the school wall as well. Collaboration with parents, students, and community members provides a positive perception of school leadership in rural communities (Preston & Barnes, 2017). A case study of rural principals in Pennsylvania revealed that local school autonomy was also substantial. Schuman (2010) found that principals who encouraged locally-determined curricula were important to rural communities. Pendola and Fuller (2018) summate that “the rural principalship faces a unique set of social features while concomitantly offering particular professional challenges that require specialized skill sets” (p. 5). These studies show that public perception within rural communities is determined by strong, individual relationships and community-relevant decision making. Additionally, rural principals face a unique set of challenges based on the individual school and district in which they lead.

The Principalship

The role of the modern-day school principal has drastically changed during recent decades. Gone are the days of rudimentary managerial tasks and having little to no input on classroom instruction and assessment. The responsibilities delegated to school principals continues to grow creating a pressurized environment where principals have to balance necessary management tasks with effective instructional leadership (Heffernan, 2018). Principals are

fundamental to school-based change due to their ubiquitous influence across the organization, including, but not limited to, teachers' professional capacity, school learning climate, parent-school ties, and instructional guidance (Bryk, Harding, & Greenberg, 2012). While principals do not and should not directly implement all aspects of a learning organization, they are directly responsible for creating an atmosphere allowing all staff members to perform their specific tasks with as much efficiency as possible. The school principal is the designated formal leader; however, other organizational members and external stakeholders play a significant role in local decision making (Ni, Yan, & Pounder, 2018). Furthermore, Hays (2013) elaborates on the leadership needs of distinctive schools by mentioning the importance of creating a particular ethos, attitude, and culture led by the principal.

An integral responsibility of a school principal is to align the daily procedures and practices with the shared mission and vision of the individual school or collective district. According to Louis et al. (2010), principals are most effective when they work collaboratively towards clear, shared goals with district personnel, other principals, and teacher leaders. Embracing a collaborative effort toward school improvement allows principals to avoid micro-managing daily decision-making. Effective principal leadership provides boundaries and direction for individual decision-making, allowing the principal to focus on macro-level improvement measures more frequently.

Schools and education, as a whole, experience constant change requiring principals to balance external, accountability pressures with the internal organization of community and culture building (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Blum-Destefano, 2018). These pressures can be exaggerated for school leaders new to the position or leading schools with prior academic

achievement concerns. Parylo and Zepeda (2014) found four significant characteristics of effective principals:

- Documented features or having a proven track record and being a good manager.
- Instructional and data leadership skills.
- Interpersonal skills and being able to relate to all stakeholders.
- Perceptual characteristics, including a passion for the job and having a shared vision with the school and community.

These four components show the unique skillset and flexibility required by today's school leaders. Long-term successful principals can evolve and embrace a learning mindset to improve their performance in the four areas presented by Parylo and Zepeda (2014). Individual leader experiences generate the motivation for continuous improvement in working with all stakeholders to improve classrooms, whole-school conditions, and intra-community and inter-community connections (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). Principals looking to implement meaningful change understand different communities offer different challenges; however, the need to continually evolve and build positive relationships is critical in all schools and districts.

Meaningful execution of daily tasks by all members of the organization is framed by the collective, agreed-upon mission and vision. A shared vision and mission create a framework for the day-to-day interactions between leaders, teachers, and students. A clearly expressed vision and mission, elevated standards of achievement, distinctly communicated curriculum and pedagogical methodology, a safe and orderly school environment, collegiality among teachers and staff, the practice on examining data to advise future instruction, and engagement of parents and guardians in the school community are all components fostered by principals in successful schools (Hays, 2013). These actions are further reinforced by Hays (2013), with three elements

of school-based leadership supporting high expectations for student achievement. High expectations for student achievement, high expectations for student behavior, and a shared understanding and implementation of the school's mission, vision, and goals by all faculty and staff. The elements presented by Hays (2013) and Parylo and Zepeda (2014) show an overlap of ideas congruent with successful school leadership and common concepts such as instructional leadership and shared ideologies. The elements and concepts presented by Hays (2013) and Parylo and Zepeda (2014) contribute to the foundational makeup of empowerment which served as a theoretical framework for this study.

Principals are central in school improvement and the development of processes contributing to student success. Principal leadership is important and second only to classroom instruction in regards to affecting student learning (Louis et al., 2010; Coelli & Green, 2012; Ni et al., 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Furthermore, Dou et al. (2017) found that principal instructional leadership led to increased teacher self-efficacy. Therefore, the cultivation and development of school leaders have a tremendous impact on our schools and local communities as a whole.

Leader Empowerment

Throughout this section, Spreitzer's (1995) definition of psychological empowerment will be used to provide a context for leader empowerment and its effects on school improvement. Psychological empowerment is defined as "an orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444). For this study, the empowerment focus will be on the principal. Empowerment or sense of control is measured along four different dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). Meaning refers to the professional respect educators believe they gather from

their colleagues for their knowledge and skill. Competence signifies the leaders' perception that they are outfitted with the skills to lead and impact teachers. Self-determination means the feeling of control leaders believe they have in their work and their level of decision-making in critical circumstances. Impact details the perception of leaders that their work makes a difference and has an influence on the school as a whole (Spreitzer, 1995).

The office of the principal offers an opportunity for positive change but relies on several executory factors to ensure change and growth. The perception the leader holds in regards to how their work is received can be a powerful catalyst for future development. Self-efficacy beliefs affect personal motivation in numerous ways, including one's own goal setting, the level of effort they expend, how long individuals persevere in the face of obstructions, and resilience when failures occur (Leithwood, Strauss, & Anderson, 2007). The more a principal or any leader feels they have the trust of their superior and believes in themselves, the more likely they are to remain committed to the organization and the collective goals of the group.

Positive self-efficacy results are reinforced by Shapira-Lishchinsky and Tsemach (2014) who found when leaders see their work as meaningful, feel autonomous in their decision-making, and have an influence on what happens throughout the school; they will likely be motivated to care more deeply about the quality and commitment of their work. Honig and Rainey's (2012) definition of autonomy provides a clearer picture of what autonomy means for principals. Autonomy is the "authority over key decisions about school improvement" (Honig, & Rainey, 2012, p. 466). The positive effects of autonomy and empowerment are not limited to public education. A study of public service employees across several sectors found that emotional states and internal motivations are more important to their quality of work than private sector employees (Garcia-Juan, Escrig-Tena, & Roca-Puig, 2019). The level of autonomy and

empowerment a leader senses can have a direct effect on the daily processes and procedures of a school.

Most of the current literature about school empowerment centers around the principal empowering teachers (Lee & Nie, 2017). However, this study will attempt to examine how district offices empower school-level leaders, specifically principals, to do meaningful work based on the unique perspective of principals. Mania-Singer (2017) completed a qualitative case study in elementary schools of a Midwestern United States school district and found sparse connections, a low number of reciprocated relationships, and a high number of isolated actors between the district central office and individual schools. Furthermore, Mania-Singer (2017) found few strong relationships within the district, revealing a possible lack of trust or a culture in which participants do not feel comfortable intermingling openly with coworkers. The disconnect uncovered in Mania-Singer's (2017) work is concerning considering the district central office is often responsible for budgetary control and human resource allocation for individual schools. Principal efficacy is directly related to the district's contribution of establishing explicit purposes, awarding priority to improving instructional practices, and committing to providing professional development for all staff members (Leithwood et al., 2007; Louis et al., 2010). Knowing principal leadership is one of the most influential aspects of student development (Louis et al., 2010; Coelli & Green, 2012; Ni et al., 2018), districts should continually reflect on the motivation of their work and continuously improve practices to positively impact school-level leadership.

The support and empowerment of district central offices can look different based on the individual needs of the school and leader. Often, the perception of support from the district level can drastically impact the school-level leader's influence. Adamowski, Therriault, and Cavanna

(2007) discuss the idea of the autonomy gap for principals. The autonomy gap is the difference between perceived influence and the real influence of school principals (Adamowski et al., 2007). The autonomy gap can vary from one principal to another based on a myriad of factors and depends on the level of two-way communication between the district and the school. A gap between perceived support and support principals feel in their daily work was also recognized by Honig and Rainey (2012). Furthermore, two main challenges emerged from Honig and Rainey's (2012) work that contribute to the gap between autonomy intent and autonomy recognized: "cumbersome waiver mechanisms" and "complexity of changing policies and practices" (p. 488). Dou et al. (2017) also discusses the autonomy gap and encourages future studies to consider conducting qualitative interviews of principals directly to understand perceptions of the autonomy gap better.

A move to increased school-level influence is concentrated around the idea that all schools have different needs. Decentralization and deregulation of educational agencies at all levels are becoming a trend to move away from a "one best system" model (Whitty & Power, 2000, p. 93). The move toward decentralization and deregulation is one made not only to meet student needs better; but also to assist principals who are working to meet the unique needs of their local community. A multitude of factors contributes to the level of expertise of school leaders who require varying levels of support and empowerment.

A move away from a standard support model can be attributed in part to the different governance structures of districts and schools. Evolving governance structures are visible across the country and in Georgia. For example, charter school leaders often take on the roles handled by traditional district office staff (Blitz, 2011). This increased responsibility is a product of the uniqueness of charter school governance. While empowerment differs from one principal to

another, it is important to understand the need for district central offices to reflect on the level of autonomy granted to school-level principals and how autonomy can affect student development and achievement.

While the literature review provides a context for a better understanding of the current research base available, it also highlights the gaps in the literature require new research. Rural schools, principal empowerment, and Georgia charter systems are all areas with insufficient literature and provide an opportunity for this study to benefit the research community. The literature review conducted for this study was built off of the components of the research questions. The research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review will serve as the guide for the data collection and data analysis sections of this study.

Theoretical Framework

There are two theoretical constructs to frame the importance of leadership within this study: distributed leadership and empowerment. While distributed leadership and empowerment are two different constructs that can be used in a variety of settings, the mutual relationship between the two constructs served as the theoretical foundation of this study. The framework of using these two constructs applies to this study because principal flexibility and autonomy hinge on the central office decision-makers using distributed leadership with school-level principals. If a central office staff can successfully work with a school-level principal to make decisions in the best interests of students, the principal has the opportunity to experience empowerment within the work he or she does daily. This study focuses on understanding the perceptions of the empowerment of principals and school leaders and their perception of self-efficacy to make individualized decisions for their local school and community in regards to finances, human capital, and instruction.

Distributed leadership.

The first theoretical construct used in this study is distributed leadership. Distributed leadership is a refined construct that elaborates on earlier constructs such as collaborative leadership, shared leadership, co-leadership, democratic leadership, and situational leadership (Spillane, 2006). Spillane's model of distributed leadership is composed of two vital parts: leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect. According to Spillane (2006), "leadership is a system of practice made up of a collection of interacting component parts in relationships of interdependence in which the group has distinct properties over and above the individuals who make it up" (p. 16). Distributed leadership is an appropriate and vital perspective for this study because it places practice as the primary focus rather than the individual or a specific title of an individual.

The leader-plus aspect is the first component of distributed leadership and is often the portion of the construct most confused with other similar constructs listed above. The leader-plus aspect claims that effective leadership is the work of the formal leaders and many others who work together to improve the organization or school (Spillane, 2006). Delegating tasks and assigning individuals to lead specific programs is essential to achieving genuine distributed leadership, but it is insufficient if used alone (Spillane, 2006).

The leader-plus aspect is important to form a perspective of leadership, but it does not create the foundation of distributed leadership without the practice aspect (Spillane, 2006). According to Spillane (2006), the practice aspect of distributed leadership focuses on the daily interactions between leaders and followers and the context in which these interactions take place. "Leadership practice that takes shape in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation is central," to an organization experiencing distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006, p. 14). The

emphasis of the practice aspect is not whether leadership is distributed but rather how leadership is distributed (Spillane, 2006).

Empowerment.

The second theoretical construct examined in this study is empowerment. Empowerment is a complex perspective and could be experienced in different ways by different individuals based on one's experience and support structure. For this study, empowerment (psychological empowerment) is defined as "an orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444). According to Spreitzer (1995), psychological empowerment is a motivational construct made up of four key areas: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. The four areas work together to create an overall self-perception of empowerment. A deficiency in one area can significantly deflate the level of empowerment one feels (Spreitzer, 1995).

To understand Spreitzer's (1995) construct of empowerment, it is important to understand the four pillars that make up the foundation of the theory. First, meaning is the alignment of the requirements of the job or role and the core beliefs and values of the individual. Second, competence is a person's individual belief that they can complete the requirements of the job or role. Third, self-determination is the autonomy one feels of their ability to initiate and make decisions based on work processes such as methods, pace, and effort. Lastly, impact is the degree in which an individual feels they can stimulate the strategic and operational effectiveness of the organization (Spreitzer, 1995).

Summary.

The combination of distributed leadership and empowerment creates the theoretical framework that is essential to have when considering the work of this study. The perspective

places equal importance on how distributed leadership is applied within a school district and the empowerment principals experience when successful flexibility and autonomy occur. A systematic approach to distributing leadership within an educational organization could impact the level of empowerment school-level leaders experience. Furthermore, empowerment and distributed leadership are hallmark components of charter system governance in Georgia and for rural school leaders. Distributed leadership and empowerment were chosen to help guide the work of this study based on the research questions. These two constructs are essential to the work of this dissertation by providing a theoretical guide during the data collection and analysis phases.

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CHAPTER 2
PRINCIPAL EMPOWERMENT: LEADER PERSPECTIVES IN RURAL GEORGIA
CHARTER SYSTEMS

Overarching Research Question

- How do Georgia charter system principals perceive their level of empowerment in local school decision making?

Supporting questions.

- What are the perceptions of principals regarding their charter system's delegation of local school decision making for principals?
- What are the perceptions of principals about the use of charter system flexibility in local school decision making?

Method

My research of principal empowerment for charter system leaders in Georgia operated as a multiple case study design. Creswell (2013) defined case study research as “a qualitative approach that may be an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry” (p. 97). During case study research, the examiner investigates a real-life problem or issue, bounded by time and place, through detailed data collection and analysis measures (Creswell, 2013). The quintain, the overarching concept that individual cases are bound (Stake, 2006), in this study was Georgia charter system principals and how they perceived their individual empowerment to make decisions in the best interest of their school and community. Stake (2006) recommended researchers follow three criteria when selecting cases for a study:

1. Is the case relevant to the quintain?
2. Do the cases provide diversity across contexts?

3. Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts?

Multiple principals from different school districts allowed this multiple case study to examine the different perspectives of the same issue. Areas of principal decision-making that may be tailored at the school level included budgeting, human resource allocation, and instructional supports.

A multiple case study was appropriate for research on this topic because the intent of the research problem was to better understand a specific issue within a bounded case at multiple sites (Stake, 1995). Stake (2006) elaborated on the importance of multiple case studies by stating, “the interactions within an entity and across entities help us recognize the case as an integrated system” (p. 3). The specific issue was principal empowerment and the perception of local-decision making power principals have within rural Georgia charter systems. The bounded case used for this study is Georgia charter school system principals.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perceptions of financial, human capital, and instructional empowerment of principals who work in Georgia charter school systems. The level of empowerment (psychological empowerment) is defined as the “orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context,” (Spreitzer, 1995, p.1444). Spreitzer’s (1995) definition of empowerment aligns with the purpose statement included in the Georgia Charter System Foundation bylaws which states that all stakeholders are empowered through the use of flexibility to make to decisions at the school house level (Georgia Charter System Foundation, 2013).

A need for this research existed due to the unique nature of Georgia charter systems. While charter schooling has been around for roughly 30 years (Hunt, 2010), Georgia is the only state in the country to offer charter system flexibility to independent school systems (Georgia

Charter Systems Act, 2007). The distinctiveness of charter school systems in Georgia created an opportunity to research and better understand its intricacies and impact on local-school decision making.

Epistemological Framework

The epistemological framework used to create the foundation for this study was constructivism. Constructivism branches from the field of cognitive science and the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Cognitive development and deep understanding are the main components of constructivism, as well as, viewing the learning process as “complex and fundamentally nonlinear in nature” (Fosnot & Perry, 2005, p. 10-11).

Genzuk (2009) stated that we construct the perspective in which we view the world through our experiences and interactions with others. Case study research is a classic example of constructivism because the study is framed around interviews, observations, and document review (Creswell, 2013). The process of collecting and analyzing data through these measures allows the researcher to examine themes across participant perceptions. Within this constructivism framework, I examined the educational leadership theoretical concepts of distributed leadership and empowerment between charter system district leadership and charter system school principals.

Sample

This study gathered data from a purposive sample. A study using a purposive sample looks to intentionally identify a group of participants who meet a predetermined set of criteria (Stake, 2006). Seven principals were invited to participate in the study based on predetermined criteria. Stake (2006) claims the ideal number of cases to examine for a multiple case study is more than four but less than 10. The criteria used for this sample was:

1. Principal within a rural Georgia charter school system.
2. Two years of principal experience in a rural Georgia charter school system.
3. Participants must have worked in a leadership role (principal, assistant principal, or central office position) in both a rural charter school system and a non-charter school system.

My goal was to interview principals at the high school level. I first identified seven districts who met the requirements of being an approved charter system and rural. Once those districts were identified, I contacted the central office to request permission for research and gain a better understanding of the district Institutional Review Board (IRB) process for each district. Rural districts had to reside in a county with less than 50,000 people as identified by the 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). I then worked with central office personnel to identify if the high school principal in their district met the previously stated criteria. The chosen systems included a diverse student population including but not limited to socio-economic status, race, and school setting. Furthermore, I wanted the chosen districts to be located in different geographic portions of the state to better understand the diverse needs of principals in the State of Georgia. Each district required an IRB proposal in addition the proposal required by Georgia State University.

All participants interested in contributing to the study were provided informed consent approved by the Georgia State IRB. “In requests to district, school, and teachers, the nature of the case study, the sponsor, the activity intended, the primary issues, the time span, and burden to the parties should be made known” (Stake, 1995, p. 57). Any and all participation was completely voluntary and participants could decide to end their involvement in the study at any time. Participants were notified that the interview portion of this study was recorded using multiple devices and transcribed by the researcher. The participants were made aware their real

name would not be disclosed to anybody outside of the study or included in the final report of findings. The job title and level of education served are included in the study to help the reader understand the quintain better.

Data Collection

The first item to review in the data collection process was the individual system charter contracts and local governance team documents for the districts of the principal participants. Every charter school system in Georgia has a charter contract filed with the Georgia Department of Education. One of the requirements of each charter contract is for the system to establish local school governance teams. Governance team by-laws also helped to better understand how the district frames charter system flexibility. The charter contract outlined the specific flexibility the school and system use to meet increased accountability measures. Reviewing system charter contracts allowed me to better understand the perspective and intent of the school district in regards to increased flexibility. Charter system contracts and governance team documents are found on the system website, Georgia Department of Education website, and Georgia Charter System Foundation website.

The second collection of artifacts and documents I reviewed include the rules and by-laws produced by the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Charter System Foundation. Reviewing these documents allowed me to understand the intent in which the state would like charter school systems to apply charter flexibility. Document review allows the researcher to understand activity that the researcher could not witness directly (Stake, 1995).

Finally, the semi-structured interview protocol consisted of eight open ended questions that were asked of all principals participating in this study. The questions were centered around better understanding the perspective of the principal in regard to the quintain. “An interview

should be less about the interviewee than about the case” (Stake, 2006, p. 23). Interviews lasted no longer than 60 minutes and the researcher transcribed all data collected by hand. All interviews were conducted through a virtual meeting platform or in-person and recorded using a stand alone recording device and virtual recording software. As recommended by Stake (1995), times were scheduled immediately following the interviews to organize the facsimile and “interpretive commentary” (p. 66). These interview questions guided further discussion and questioning based on participant responses and prior document review. While these eight interview questions were asked to all participants, data collected from interviews presented an opportunity to ask additional questions in succeeding interviews that were not previously considered by the researcher.

Interview questions.

1. Tell me about how you became a principal.
2. How long have you worked in your district?
3. How do you view your role as principal in a charter school system?
4. Describe the flow of information from the central office to your school.
5. Explain how your system uses charter system flexibility to meet the needs of students as a whole.
6. Describe your level of freedom to make local school decisions based on your individual student and community needs.
7. Describe the level of support you receive from your central office when you provide feedback on your school’s needs.
8. Explain the differences you have experienced from working in a non-charter system and a charter system.

Principal interviews served as the final data collection method in my journey to better understand principal empowerment and the factors associated with flexible decision making for charter school system leaders in Georgia.

All three sets of data collection: principal interviews (school-level perspective), system charter contracts and governance team artifacts (system-level perspective), and Georgia Department of Education and Georgia Charter System Foundation (state-level perspective), allowed for seamless triangulation of data analysis and review. Creswell (2013) defines triangulation as the, “use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (p. 251). Lastly, member checking was used to verify precision and participant intent. According to Stake (1995), member checking is when the participant is “requested to examine rough drafts of writing where the actions or words of the actor are featured, sometimes when first written up but usually when no further data will be collected from him or her,” (p. 115). The use of triangulating data and member checking validated the strength of the findings from the research process.

Data Analysis

During the course of the study, initial analysis was completed immediately after each interview or document review and throughout the course of the study to gain an understanding of emerging topics. Data was analyzed in three forms: researcher memos, coding, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) supported the concept of multiple forms of analysis by claiming that continuous data analysis allows the researcher to consider every new piece of information with all prior information. Each form of analysis supported a more in-depth understanding of the qualitative research gathered during this study.

Thematic analysis allowed me to understand themes that play a role in forming the perspective of rural principals in Georgia charter systems. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 6). The identification of themes did not use a quantifiable rationale but rather showed importance to the overarching and supporting research questions. Thematic analysis seeks to identify patterns across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) present six phases of thematic analysis; however, the researcher should not view these phases as linear. Instead, it is expected that the researcher will move between the different phases as needed to gain a complete understanding of the data set.

Phase one of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis protocol required the researcher to become familiarized with the data. The transcripts provided the researcher with a written, verbatim account of the verbal conversation. This phase required the researcher to conduct repeated reading of interview transcripts and documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, I read the transcript completely before conducting any type of coding procedures. Braun and Clarke (2006) encourage the researcher to take notes and begin thinking about the coding process on subsequent reading opportunities.

Phase two begins the coding process by generating initial codes. After the initial reading of the transcript was completed, the researcher read through the entire data set and identified interesting aspects that formed repeated patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend writing codes on a printed version of the transcript. I printed the transcripts with additional margin area which allowed more room for coding. It was important to attach specific data or quotes to the identified codes. This process helped in the organization process and allowed those quotes to be used in the narrative findings portion of the study. Braun

and Clarke (2006) also state that certain data sets, quotes or codes may fit into multiple themes as the researcher begins to expand the thematic analysis.

The process of searching for identifiable themes begins in phase three. This phase may begin when all data has been coded and a comprehensive list of codes has been established (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I began by sorting individual codes into overarching themes. Some codes continued on to create themes, some sub-themes, and some were discarded. All important codes did not fit into a specific theme area but were included as part of a miscellaneous theme. At the end of this phase, the researcher began to have a clearer picture of main themes; however, it was important that no codes were discarded after this point (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The main objective of phase four is to review and refine the identified themes. At this point, the researcher decided to combine or separate themes as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend two levels of reviewing themes. The first level included reviewing all data at the coded level to ensure a coherent pattern emerges. The second level included reviewing all themes and the entire data set on a broad level to confirm a logical progression of data analysis. Lastly, it was important for the researcher to not over analyze the data and understand when thematic saturation was achieved.

Phase five asked the researcher to define and name themes. In doing so, the researcher defined the essence of each theme and was able to link individual codes and data to the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the researcher was able to synthesize why the data extracts are interesting and were relevant to specific theme. Each theme was included in a detailed written analysis which considered how individual themes complemented the overall study and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The last portion of this phase involved the

researcher assigning names to the individual themes. Names should be “concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23).

The final phase of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis protocol involved producing the report. The goal is to tell the story of the data and “convince the reader of the merit and validity of the analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23). Written analysis involved a look within and across themes including necessary data extracts. The data or quotes should be vivid and easily relatable to a corresponding theme for the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The written report went beyond a description of the data and made an argument for the analysis and its relation to the research questions.

Researcher memos were written immediately after an interview or document review. The memos included in this study were the initial reactions by the researcher. Memos were composed in a narrative form and served as one piece of the categorical and thematic aggregation.

Categories and subcategories were determined by a collective analysis of the researcher’s memos and coding. Coding is a compression of lengthy data to summarize the core meaning or main idea (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Coding took place after the interviews and document reviews.

Coding was conducted by examining the transcripts and attempting to identify consistent categories and subcategories in which all data can be sorted (Strauss, 1987). Categories and subcategories of the coding process were collectively examined to identify relevant themes.

When attempting to understand multiple cases within the same entity, a cross-case analysis was the recommended strategy (Stake, 2006). For this study, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis protocol served as the cross-case analysis. The purpose of a cross-case analysis was not to identify the similarities across cases but rather to highlight the “case-quintain dilemma” (Stake, 2006, p. 39). Stake (2006) refers to the “case-quintain dilemma” as the tension

between the single case being examined and the collection of all cases (p. 1). In the case-quintain dilemma, the case refers to the individual cases being examined and the quintain refers to the phenomenon in which the individual cases are bound together (Stake, 2006). Furthermore, Stake (2006) highlights the relationship between the individual case and the quintain by stating,

Each case is studied to gain understanding of that particular entity as it is situated. The quintain is studied in some of its situations. It is supposed that the complex meaning of the quintain are understood differently and better because of the particular activity and contexts of each case (p. 40).

Final assertions about the quintain were made by the researcher after the cross-case analysis is completed (Stake, 2006).

Trustworthiness

It is important for the work of any study to uphold a level of trustworthiness. Korstjens and Moser (2018) state that qualitative data should be new, true, and relevant. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide specific criteria that were followed in this qualitative case study to ensure trustworthiness. In addition, specific strategies that provided evidence of trustworthiness are included below.

The first criteria for confirming trustworthiness in qualitative research is credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility allows the reader to have confidence that the findings reported are accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two strategies were used to achieve credibility in this study. The first strategy, triangulation, was used by conducting principal interviews, reviewing internal documents from local districts, and reviewing external documents from the State of Georgia and the Georgia Charter Systems Foundation. The second strategy employed was member-checking. As Stake (1995) outlined, member checking is the process of allowing

the participant to review transcripts of the interviews and having the participants confirm those transcripts match the intent of the communication.

The second criteria for protecting trustworthiness is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability examines the level in which the research findings could be transferred to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was achieved in this study by providing a thick description of the principal interviews, document reviews, and data analysis process.

The third criteria for providing trustworthiness is dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability refers to the level of consistency achieved in the study within the data collection and analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of Stake's (2006) multiple case study design and Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis protocol allowed for well-documented, scholarly guidance during this study.

The last criteria used for safeguarding trustworthiness is confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability allows the reader to assume acceptable trustworthiness through neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reporting of the data collection and analysis process should focus on the findings of the data and not the viewpoints or opinions of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was documented by keeping an accurate and detailed record of all data collection and analysis procedures.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are important for the reader to consider. Charter system governance is only offered in the State of Georgia limiting the implications of this study to one state. The researcher interviewed seven principals in rural Georgia school districts. Seven principals provided a limited sample size and may not have offered a broad perspective of rural

Georgia principals in charter systems. Lastly, principals are only one person in the district decentralized decision-making process encouraged by charter system governance. Only interviewing principals provided a narrowed view of understanding how the entire charter system governance process impacts all educational stakeholders in rural Georgia communities.

Summary

The interviewing of several rural principals within Georgia charter systems and reviewing necessary internal and external documents provided the ideal context for qualitative research. “It is difficult to imagine a human activity that is context-free” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 114). Additionally, multiple case study research was appropriate because of the examination of different cases within an overarching phenomenon or quintain. Case study research is framed by the methodological framework of constructivism which seeks to understand the world through our experiences and interactions with others (Genzuk, 2009). A purposive criterion sampling was used to select principals and charter systems that met specific requirements for this study. A semi-structured interview process was used to understand the perceptions of principals and document review was used to understand the local context and state guidelines of charter systems. Finally, analysis of data gathered sought to comprehend the context of individual cases of the quintain and how other leaders in similar circumstances can improve leadership practices.

Findings

Seven cases were reviewed for this study including principal interviews, local, internal documents, and state, external documents. The “case-quintain dilemma” (Stake, 2006) requires the researcher to focus on individual intricacies of each case while critically thinking about the application of the overarching quintain. Each of the seven cases examined presented differences and commonalities among the group. While all seven school systems have made the decision to

adopt Georgia charter system governance models, each offers variance in population, local industries, school principal background, educational needs, and geography. By seeking the perceptions of school principals and examining the complexities of local Georgia communities, I seek to provide an insight at the flexible needs of different communities and potential options for other districts and future policy development.

The findings for this study are reported in two ways. The first portion refers to the case findings. The case findings section introduces the background of each school and community observed as well as an overview of the general findings for specific school systems. The second portion of the findings discusses the quintain themes. The quintain is the overarching phenomenon that all individual cases are bound. The quintain themes will represent the five major themes that were found during the data collection and analysis phase.

Case Findings

The case findings will be examined first to establish an understanding of each local community, school, and principal included in this study. Looking at each individual case will allow the reader to develop a unique understanding of the challenges and resources each community experiences from the perspective of the high school principal. Each case detailed is a rural community with a school system that follows charter system governance in the state of Georgia; however, the diversity of experiences each school and community face varies significantly. Table 1 provides an overview of each research site, participant, and county population range. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participating school districts and high school principals.

Table 1

Study School Districts, Participants, Geographic Location, and Population Range

School District	High School Principal Name	Geographic Location	County Population Range
Cedar County Schools	Mr. Sanders	South Georgia	10,000 – 15,000
Beech County Schools	Mr. Forsyth	Central Georgia	45,000 – 50,000
Magnolia County Schools	Mrs. Emerson	Central Georgia	15,000 – 20,000
Gingko County Schools	Mrs. Frank	North Georgia	25,000 – 30,000
Loblolly County Schools	Mr. Kemp	North Georgia	25,000 – 30,000
Bushwillow County Schools	Mrs. Bulloch	North Georgia	15,000 – 20,000
Cherry County Schools	Mr. Crawford	South Georgia	40,000 – 45,000

Cedar County Schools.

Cedar County Schools is a school district in South Georgia with a total county population between 10,000 and 15,000 people. There is only one high school in Cedar County and it does receive Title I federal funding to support low-income students. As with many South Georgia communities, agriculture is the largest industry in Cedar County with no other major industries present. There are no higher education institutions located in the county.

Cedar County High School is led by Mr. Sanders who was preparing to begin his third year as principal at Cedar County High School. Prior to assuming the role as principal, Mr. Sanders served as an assistant principal for 14 years at Cedar County High School and several

other local school districts as a teacher and school leader. Mr. Sanders has a unique perspective for this study as he has worked in non-charter systems as an alternative school principal, an assistant principal at Cedar County High School during the school system's transition to charter governance, and is now the principal of a fully functional charter system.

Mr. Sanders is a veteran educator who has worked in several surrounding South Georgia school districts; however, Cedar County is the only district he has worked in that follows the charter system governance structure. Mr. Sanders provided the impression that he is well supported by his superintendent and central office staff. Based on Mr. Sanders' responses, his main focus is on the daily operations of running and improving Cedar County High School. He seeks the advice of his district central office for budget questions and potential waiver opportunities related to charter system flexibility. Mr. Sanders feels that the central office and local school have a positive relationship that involves constant communication. Principals and central office staff meet once a month for leadership meetings to discuss a variety of items. Mr. Sanders commented that charter flexibility may not be addressed directly but that adjustments and future plans are made with charter autonomy in mind. Specifically, Mr. Sanders mentioned that the superintendent of Cedar County Schools welcomes honest feedback and challenges from the school level.

The rural impact plays a significant role in the growth and development of Cedar County Schools. Mr. Sanders was extremely praiseworthy when discussing the involvement of local community members and parents. A substantial obstacle that Cedar County Schools is facing is the lack of internet access for all students. The COVID-19 pandemic only highlighted this problem. Cedar County High School was in a position for every student to have access to a physical device. Students were allowed to use their personal device if they had one available.

Students who did not have access to a computer or tablet were issued one by the school. Each student had a technology device to complete work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the problem was over half of the students enrolled at Cedar County Schools did not have access to reliable internet. While Cedar County Schools was able to provide the hardware needed for each student, a large percentage of students were unable to attempt virtual learning during the spring of 2020. Mr. Sanders recognized the learning gap for these students, many of which come from low-income household, will be a significant challenge for teachers and leaders in rural schools across the country.

Beech County Schools.

Beech County Schools is located in the central portion of Georgia with a total population between 45,000 and 50,000 people making it the county with the largest population examined in this study. There is only one traditional high school in Beech County and it does receive Title I funding from the federal government to support low-income students. The major industries in Beech County include mining and manufacturing. Beech County is a rather diverse community because numerous retail and dining options have appeared over the last five years that many communities classified as rural do not experience. However, there are many areas that are undeveloped in the county. Beech County is also home to a state university, a junior college, and a technical college.

Mr. Forsyth serves as the principal of Beech County High School and has done so for two years. Prior to assuming his role as the principal of Beech County High School, Mr. Forsyth was an assistant principal and teacher at two other central Georgia school districts. In addition to leading a high school within a charter system at Beech County, Mr. Forsyth has served in leadership roles as an assistant principal in another charter system and in a non-charter system.

Mr. Forsyth's perspective on the use of charter flexibility was similar to several other principals interviewed for this study. He felt like the daily work of a principal in a charter system school was no different than the daily work of a principal in a non-charter system school. Many items he highlighted during our interview were best practices that any effective principals would discuss and focus on within their school. One of the first topics of discussion centered around instructional leadership and the importance of this concentration for a principal. Mr. Forsyth mentioned that Beech County High School was experiencing poor academic achievement when he assumed the role of principal. He focused on areas to immediately begin improving student achievement. One action item was ample and consistent observations of teachers with feedback. Mr. Forsyth made the comment that many teachers struggled with the amount of observations that were taking place; however, the momentum began to change when positive results were recognized through the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). Joining meaningful instructional observations with the use of student data has resulted in some of the highest CCRPI scores in the area.

Community support and feedback from all stakeholders were important topics for Mr. Forsyth during our interview. Everything from the annual budget to student schedules are provided to teachers, school governance team members, and community members for feedback before they are implemented. Mr. Forsyth was complimentary of his school governance team and the input they provide for school improvement. Mr. Forsyth mentioned that all charter systems may do things slightly different but Beech County includes school governance members on every hiring panel.

Lastly, the rural impact on Beech County is different than many other communities included in this study. Beech County has the largest population of any county included in this

sample and includes several higher education and retail opportunities that most counties considered rural do not have access to. However, Mr. Forsyth did discuss the spectrum of settings in which Beech County High School students reside. As the only public high school in a county with a large land area, some students have no issue with reliable internet while some continue to struggle. Beyond internet access issues, Mr. Forsyth pointed out that many rural communities, including Beech County struggle with adequate healthcare options. Specifically, healthcare options for local residents are rather basic and requires residents to travel substantial distances to receive specialized care. Mr. Forsyth commented that Beech County is lucky to still have an operating hospital but many rural Georgia communities have experienced losses of basic services.

Magnolia County Schools.

Magnolia County Schools is situated in Central Georgia and has a total population between 15,000 and 20,000 people. There is only one high school in Magnolia County and it does not receive Title I federal support. The major economic industries in Magnolia County include utilities and construction. Magnolia County does not serve as the headquarters for any higher education options; however, it does serve as a host for a satellite campus for a nearby junior college.

The principal of Magnolia County High School is Mrs. Emerson. Mrs. Emerson has been the principal at Magnolia County High School for four years. She joined Magnolia County Schools after serving as an assistant principal at several levels, middle school principal, career academy principal, and central office leader in a suburban, non-charter school district.

Mrs. Emerson was able to provide an interesting perspective of working in both a suburban district and a rural district. She commented that she thought her previous district was

small with several middle schools and several high schools. When she arrived at Magnolia County Schools, she was had to adjust to a one high school system and only 3,000 students enrolled in the entire district. Furthermore, Mrs. Emerson highlighted the change in communication structure from a suburban district to a rural district. The communication is very direct in Magnolia County Schools. There are not as many assistant superintendents, director, or coordinators s at the central office level. Mrs. Emerson said that if she needed something from the central office, it was as easy as picking up the phone and calling those individuals. Throughout this study, we find that rural principals experience a more direct communication experience with central office and system level leaders.

Magnolia County Schools was going through the process of becoming a charter system when Mrs. Emerson accepted the job as Magnolia County High School principal several years ago. The biggest areas of flexibility that charter system governance support for Magnolia County High School is teacher certification and course scheduling. Mrs. Emerson has a background in Career, Technical, Agriculture Education (CTAE) and mentioned the importance of small, rural schools having the option to waive certain teaching certifications to hire the right person for a specific teaching role. Mrs. Emerson liked having the option of waiving particular items if needed. She felt as if the charter governance model provided an extra layer of confidence to try new things and adjust based on the needs of the students. Mrs. Emerson commented several times that she felt like some rules suppressed their desire to try innovative concepts or programs in her previous district that did not follow charter system governance.

While Mrs. Emerson was complimentary of the advantages of small systems regarding communication and support, she did recognize there are challenges with being in a rural location. Two examples include having specialists in certain areas that support teaching. In Mrs.

Emerson's previous district, the system had several content area specialists that would provide individualized support and professional development to those specific teachers at multiple schools across the district. In a small district, allocating content area support specialists may not meet the budgetary boundaries of the district. Teachers and school-level leaders in a small district have to creatively utilize other resources to develop rigorous instruction and assessment strategies. The issue of internet access was also a challenge that Mrs. Emerson and her school face. Mrs. Emerson highlighted that she felt the problem with internet access is not related to socio-economic status but more about geographic location within proximity to infrastructure needed to support internet access.

Gingko County Schools.

Gingko County Schools is located in the northern portion of Georgia and has a total population between 25,000 and 30,000 people. There is one high school in Gingko County and it does not receive Title I federal funding. The largest industries in Gingko County are mining and construction. Tourism and fruit tree agriculture also serve as monetary stimulants for an economically diverse community. Like Magnolia County, Gingko County has a junior college satellite campus option available for residents of the community.

Mrs. Frank has served for five years as the principal at Gingko County High School. Prior to assuming the principalship, Mrs. Frank served as the assistant principal at Gingko County for one year after returning to Georgia from a western state where she was a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Gingko County High School is her first experience in working with the Georgia charter system governance model.

While Mrs. Frank uses charter flexibility to support some of the same programs used by other schools and principals, Gingko County was the only case explored during this study that

has begun to use charter funds for student wraparound services. One of the most influential services that Gingko County High School has been able to offer is additional counseling services for students through an external counseling service. Mrs. Frank commented that the school and community was seeing a growing need to support students mentally and emotionally. Charter flexibility in the area of funding allowed them to offer needed counseling services. Mrs. Frank also commented about the mentality and freedom that charter system flexibility offers. She used the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of a situation that will require schools to think creatively to support students. Mrs. Frank recognized that the pandemic was a new experience for everybody but the responsibility is on leaders to maximize student growth and learning during the abnormal time. She felt like having Gingko County Schools following the charter system governance model put them in a good position to pivot as needed in the best interest of students.

Mrs. Frank perceived her setting in a rural, small district had both advantages and disadvantages. Some to the advantages included having a tight knit community and access to system-level leaders when needed. Mrs. Frank commented that her previous school district in another state had over 85,000 student enrolled and over 150 principals. In a school district so large, it is difficult to build a relationship with system-level leaders and your superintendent. Mrs. Frank can call her superintendent or any system-level director directly if she ever needs support. Mrs. Frank did not feel that internet access was a tremendous issue for the students in her district. She mentioned that her school was aware of a small number of students who lacked adequate access; however, they were able to mobilize internet boosters to help the students they identified with internet problems. A disadvantage Mrs. Frank was experiencing was support and participation from parents and community members on her school governance team. She encouraged several parents to join but has not recognized a high level of success to this point.

Mrs. Frank believes a strong school governance team can be a powerful asset for a school and she want to harness that potential for Gingko County High School.

Loblolly County Schools.

Loblolly County Schools is also located in North Georgia and has a total population between 25,000 and 30,000 residents. Loblolly County only has one high school and it does not receive Title I federal funding. The major industries of Loblolly County include agriculture and construction while also supporting a growing tourism industry. Loblolly County is home to a four-year state university which attracts students from all over Georgia.

The principal of Loblolly High School is Mr. Kemp who has been in his current role for four years. Mr. Kemp has been a public educator in several Georgia districts include a teacher, athletic director, assistant principal, and principal in rural and suburban districts. He also brings the perspective of serving in a central office role in another Georgia charter system. Mr. Kemp's diverse background adds value to the multitude of experiences by the principals who participated in this study.

Mr. Kemp brings a similar perspective to this study as Mrs. Emerson from Magnolia County High School. Mr. Kemp also worked in a large, suburban district before assuming the role as a principal in rural charter system. Communication and access to necessary system-level support are advantages that Mr. Kemp perceives in Loblolly County School opposed to his previous district. Mr. Kemp stated that the superintendent's office is just across the street and they talk regularly about ways to improve programs or new ideas. Ultimately, it comes down to does a program or idea benefit students. If it does, Loblolly County Schools tries everything they can to make it happen. Mr. Kemp feels like his superintendent provides him the autonomy to make decisions in the best way that he sees fit.

Charter flexibility supports the autonomy Mr. Kemp receives from his superintendent. Mr. Kemp was able to provide several examples of teachers they have hired who did not meet the traditional certification requirements for Georgia. Most of those hires have been within the CTAE department. Mr. Kemp feels like real-world practitioners provide remarkable value in the area of CTAE instruction. Furthermore, Mr. Kemp felt like many of the students who find meaningful experiences within CTAE classes are students who may enter the workforce immediately after high school. Mr. Kemp is a supporter of hiring the best person to lead those programs regardless of their teaching certification status and charter flexibility provides paths for Mr. Kemp to employ the most qualified individual. Lastly, Mr. Kemp and Loblolly County Schools have used some of the charter funds they receive to improve school branding and engage their local community. Mr. Kemp feels like an engaged community is only going to help support all programs including student achievement.

Bushwillow County Schools.

Bushwillow County Schools is located in northern Georgia and is home to between 15,000 and 20,000 citizens. Bushwillow County has only one high school which does not receive Title I funding. The largest industry is manufacturing due to its strategic location offering access to major cities and shipping hubs. Bushwillow County does not have any higher education options located within the county.

Mrs. Bulloch is the principal at Bushwillow County High School and has completed three years in the position. Mrs. Bulloch is unique among principals interviewed for this study because she has spent the majority of her career in Bushwillow County Schools. Mrs. Bulloch served as the assistant principal at Bushwillow High School for 14 years before becoming principal and experienced the school systems evolution to charter system governance while in the assistant

principal role. She spent the beginning of her career in a nearby school system as a classroom teacher.

Mrs. Bulloch perceived one of the biggest assets for Bushwillow County Schools was the community support and feedback through their school governance teams. She commented how the feedback from the high school governance team has allowed their leadership team to continually reflect on community needs and the response on how programs are being implemented. Mrs. Bulloch does not recognize a daily difference in her work since Bushwillow County has changed from a status quo system to a charter system. The school governance team is probably the area that has impacted her work the most. Mrs. Bulloch commented that Bushwillow County High School utilizes their school governance team members in a variety of ways including hiring decisions.

When discussing rural and small system issues, Mrs. Bulloch discussed the problem the system is experiencing with a declining enrollment. People are leaving Bushwillow County for other communities because of the lack of adequate employment options. Mrs. Bushwillow pointed out that many people may not perceive a declining population as an issue for a school; however, less enrollment means less funding and less allocations for teaching positions. Funding is an area of school operations that many people overlook because it is not directly affecting what is happening in a classroom. The problem exists when a school or system is operating at a certain level based on previous funding and budgets and then that same funding or budget becomes less and less. Lastly, Mrs. Bulloch perceived internet access for students to be a growing issue, especially, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mrs. Bulloch also mentioned how the lack of internet access will affect the unknown needs of students moving forward.

Cherry County Schools.

Cherry County Schools is located in the southern part of Georgia and has a population between 40,000 and 45,000 people. As with all rural school systems examined in this study, Cherry County Schools has only one high school. Cherry County High School does receive Title I federal funding to support students who live in low-income households. The largest industry is agriculture including row crops, timber, and cattle. Cherry County is home a state-supported two-year college and a technical college.

Mr. Crawford serves as the principal at Cherry County High School and has done so for nine years. He served as an assistant principal in another non-charter, South Georgia for several years before coming to Cherry County High School. Mr. Crawford started his career as a classroom teacher and assistant principal in another state before relocating to Georgia.

Based on Mr. Crawford's experience as a school leader in both a charter system and non-charter system, he perceives the daily work to very similar regardless of the governance model followed by the district. However, the flexibility mindset does play a large role in the way Mr. Crawford plans and adjusts to issues that come about. Teacher certification is an area that Cherry County Schools can waive when needed. Mr. Crawford talked about how the geographic location for Cherry County in South Georgia presents obstacles for hiring teachers. He commented that during many years, the Cherry County High School may start the year with several vacant teaching positions because they are not able to find a satisfactory instructor. Throughout this study, we see similar connections of charter flexibility supporting rural challenges such as waiving teaching certifications for specific situations.

Mr. Crawford spoke highly of the community support and higher education opportunities available to the students at Cherry County High School. Poverty and internet accessibility are

two issues Mr. Crawford mentioned during our time together. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted these issues within Cherry County. Mr. Crawford talked about how they felt like they were prepared with all students having access to a device but many students lacked to availability of reliable internet. Mr. Crawford felt like the partnership between the school, community resources, and charter flexibility allow Cherry County Schools to serve their students in best way possible.

Quintain Themes

The quintain theme section provides an opportunity to examine the findings from a broad perspective and make connections across individual cases. There were five themes identified through the data analysis process: charter system governance, system-level support, the principalship, rural impact, and the local community. Each theme will include direct quotes from the principals interviewed and a synthesis of the connections among findings. Throughout the coding process during data analysis, a principal's response may have included commentary on multiple quintain themes. As a result, input from a principal contained within the section of a specific theme may include intricacies involving multiple themes.

Charter System Governance.

Data analysis revealed significant codes regarding charter system governance throughout the interview transcripts. The main areas within charter system governance that were discussed included general flexibility, school governance teams, and implementation of items granted flexibility through the requirements set by the Georgia Department of Education and the State Board of Education. The perception among all principals interviewed was that they experience some level of flexibility at the local level and are involved with their school governance teams.

Ms. Emerson, the principal at Magnolia County High School, shared that a culture of flexible opportunities creates an environment for school improvement:

When I moved here, the district was in the process of becoming a charter district. For me, there is something mental and emotional about knowing that I have the freedom to adjust when needed. We've tried to use the charter a couple of different way. One of the things that has been interesting to me coming through this whole process is that you don't want the word charter to become a separating thing. To me, the charter flexibility just needs to be an enhancement of what we do.

Furthermore, Ms. Emerson outlines the confidence she perceives from being a principal within a charter system:

Like I said, I think the charter gives you a little of a mental or emotional confidence to try stuff. With a charter, you can always say but what if we did this? To me, it's just a different mindset.

Ms. Frank, principal of Ginkgo County High School, discusses her previous system-level governance structures as a school leader in another state and how it compares to the Georgia charter system governance model:

I would take this situation any day, strictly for the flexibility. Even though we don't use it everyday, to know that the flexibility is there if we need it, I think is huge. Of course, there are strings attached to what we can waive but we certainly know it is there.

Depending on how long this pandemic goes on, we are going to need to look at shifting some things and changing some things. I think Georgia has a good thing going.

Through my interview with Mr. Kemp and time spent examining Loblolly County Schools, it is clear that the district seeks ample opportunities to think creatively. Mr. Kemp details how the

flexibility offered through charter system governance provides options when deliberating on how to solve a problem at Loblolly High School:

One of the things that I really value of being where I'm at is flexibility. We're able to do a lot of different things. Here is the litmus test I use for every decision; is it good for kids? If it's a good, sound decision for kids, then we are going to do everything we can to run our building to serve kids. I think the idea of flexibility and being able to hire people and offer the programs we want is huge. Being flexible in every aspect of the school; we try to use that flexibility to the maximum.

Mr. Kemp adds his perception of working in a non-charter system and a charter system. It is clear that he feels some districts get stagnant due to necessary, local compliance requirements.

Mr. Kemp provides specific details of how flexibility is embraced at Loblolly County Schools:

From my experiences in a non-charter system, there are layers of approvals that have to happen organizationally. If you are trying to change something with the curriculum or trying to do something, you have to go through so many approvals to get to yes. It's almost like is the juice worth the squeeze to get there? Or do I just want to forget it and not even do it? That's what I see happen a lot of times in non-charter systems. People are not willing to go through that process to get to yes. At times, things were so stringent and difficult to elicit change. Well you go to a charter system where you're getting funds to be creative. You're getting support to do things in a creative way and you can literally do them in a phone call. There's not a form to fill out. There's not an approval process to go through. For example, I called our Chief Operating Officer and asked if we could do something. All he asked was do you have the money to do it? I told him yes and he said then why are you calling me? In some places that don't have the consolidated funding

options that charter governance provides, you've got to be more tedious about which bucket of money does something come from.

Mr. Crawford provides additional evidence to support the flexibility mindset that many charter system principals experience from their perspective as school principals:

I think it helps us just think outside the of the box more than anything. I think there's not a whole lot of difference. The biggest difference is just the way you think about things.

With charter governance, a lot times it's just the the philosophies that are different. You think differently about ways to solve problems.

Mr. Sanders states how the community positively affects what they do as a charter system. It is clear when interviewing Mr. Sanders that the community of Cedar County plays an active role in the adjustments and changes made at the school level:

A big thing is how involved our community is. When we meet with our governance teams, they are always willing to look for solutions. They speak to the community and let them know the problems or challenges we are facing. I think the community really appreciates the flexibility. We try to do whatever is going to help kids.

Ms. Bulloch provides an insight into the local purpose of school governance teams and transparency at Bushwillow County Schools. Her perspective is interesting and unique from many of the other principals as she discusses how the community is impacted by charter system governance:

The biggest thing is making sure we have input from all stakeholders and making sure that flow of communication goes from the school to the community and from the community to the school so we are not the only ones making decisions. It's important for us to listen to the voice of the people and the stakeholders who are invested in this

community and who are sending us the best kids they have. Personally, that is how I look at charter system governance. Transparency is one of those words that is used a lot but I think as a charter system, transparency is a little more prevalent.

Mr. Forsyth talks about why a school governance team adds value to the school and how multiple perspectives on the team benefit the organization:

What I feel the charter system framework does is gives us our own group of advocates on the school governance team. These people on the governance team, it's people whose kids go to school here. It's people who own businesses in the community and want the school to succeed. It's teachers who teach at the school. We're all coming together with one mission which is to make the school the best it can be. There are no agendas. It's simply this is what we'd like to do. What are your thoughts and feedback? And the team really gives us some great ideas.

Furthermore, Mr. Forsyth provides an account of how individuals are selected for the school governance team and how transitions are handled among the group:

When we have a member step away or rotate off of the school governance team, we go through the election process. We had a teacher retire a couple of years ago in the middle of my first year as principal. We needed somebody to replace him on the school governance team. The first thing I did was put out an email to our faculty asking who would be interested in serving on the governance team. We had a business member leave earlier this year. We actually had a lady who had been coming to our meetings but was not on the governance team. A sitting member nominated her and we went through the election process and she was eventually elected.

Mr. Forsyth goes on to talk about the structure of the governance team and their involvement in school business and future planning:

One of the biggest differences with a school governance team is the training they go through. They don't just show up to pester. I talk to our governance chair quite a bit. She'll call and just ask me a question outside of our formal meetings. Each charter district does things a little bit different. In my former district which was also a charter system, the governance team sat in on some interviews but they did not give real feedback about the hiring decision. Here at Beech, the governance team has an entire interview round with just them.

Ms. Bulloch talked about local structure of school governance teams at Bushwillow County Schools. The state requirements allow for schools and districts to have local autonomy in when meetings are held and to what degree team members are involved:

We meet monthly and in the middle of the day. We have a culinary arts program here at the high school and I've found that I get much better attendance at the governance team meetings if I feed them. Our culinary arts program provides a meal for that group once a month. We ask for agenda items and I send out the agenda and ask for input prior to the meeting. Anytime we are looking to make changes or if there are considerations that have been put forth, we discuss those items. We then turnaround and share that information with our central office. Typically, our school leadership team, school governance team, and central office are all provided input on an idea.

Mrs. Frank frankly discussed some of the struggles she faces with her school governance team as principal at Ginkgo County High School. While many schools are able to enjoy the benefits of

having an involved group of parents and community members, other schools struggle to identify community members who wish to positively contribute on their local school governance team:

The community people we have that are elected to the governance team, I have to beg and plead for them to come. As long as I'm up here and doing my job and things are good, some people don't see a reason to come in here and talk about what we're doing. I see my role as trying to get the information out. Our governance team meets on the third Monday night of each month and anybody is welcome to come sit on the meetings. At times, I feel like our community is saying well I don't want to do that, I just want you to stop doing this or that. I tell them that we have a process and we have a group that allows for that discussion. In the back of my mind I know we have this charter and if people will come I will listen. I want that input but our community doesn't see that as their role.

Mr. Forsyth provides an example of how Beech County High School implemented an innovative and unique course offering based on feedback from a school governance team member:

We had a school governance team member who said I'd like to offer a Bible class at the high school. She said I've done all the research on the Georgia Department of Education website and we can have these classes. She asked if we could do it here? I said yes and we put it on our course request for students to sign up if that was something they were interested in. We had several students who were excited about it but we didn't have Bibles for the class to use. Everybody was bringing a different version of the Bible and the teacher was trying to teach with no standard Bible. I talked to our governance team and one of our members said she would speak with her church pastor. She shows up to the school about three days later and says I've got something for you. She showed up

with 38 Bibles for students to use. We had the class write a thank you letter and we began using those Bibles in class the next day.

Mrs. Emerson stated how Magnolia County High School uses charter flexibility in the area of teacher certification and course scheduling:

We use the big waivers. We waive seat time. My favorite part of the charter flexibility is the ability to hire people who don't have the traditional education certifications. One thing our system elected to not do was we do not waive tenure for teachers. They felt very strongly that was something our teachers needed to have some security in. The other thing is we look at courses and ways to combine courses to make things fit better for our students.

When asked specifically how her high school creatively combines course, Ms. Emerson shared the following:

As we were transitioning to a career academy model, we needed to create a course that we call freshman seminar. We used it for all students to get their first Introduction to Business pathway class started, their driver's education requirements, and their half credit of required health curriculum. And then we were able to add things like YouScience and some other things to help kids figure out who they are. We conglomerated a lot of different stuff into one course. We also that class to offer a look at engineering and manufacturing. Manufacturing is not very sexy and it's tough to get kids to take it. Somebody from the state department helped us create an engineering course that has more variety in it of mechatronics, construction, and things like that. We wanted kids to see a broad view of it all. We wanted something for all kids who took the class regardless

of whether they were to be Georgia Tech bound or technical school bound or workforce bound.

Gingko County High School is using flexibility in a unique way by addressing student needs with charter funds received:

We use a lot of the charter funds we receive for wraparound services. We have an external counseling service who is at the school meeting with a regular caseload but we also added some small group counseling during lunch. During the small group counseling, they address prevalent issues like anxiety or suicide prevention.

In addition to addressing some of the social and emotional needs of students at her school, Ms. Frank demonstrated how academic flexibility is vital for students of different ability levels as well:

Looking at the academic requirements and knowing that Algebra II is not an end all be all for every kid. So, we've used a waiver for technical college readiness to take the place of that Algebra II class for students who meet specific criteria.

Principals and system-level leaders are able to plan ahead regarding potential needs for students both inside and outside of the classroom; however, Ms. Frank shared how her system is making adjustments based on the COVID-19 pandemic that was occurring during the time of this study:

I just met with my superintendent earlier this week about our 200 or so kids who are doing virtual school because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have some seniors who need classes to complete a CTAE pathway and those classes are not offered through our virtual school platform. I asked if we can waive that graduation requirement just for this year for these specific students? It's nice to be able to look at our needs and say this is what we

have and this is what we need to adjust because it's not physically possible to offer those specific CTAE courses.

Mr. Kemp provided a detailed answer as to how Loblolly High School employs charter flexibility for hiring the most qualified teacher for a position. As Mr. Kemp shared, the most qualified candidate may not always meet the certification requirements for educators in Georgia:

The first one is hiring. With hiring, I'm going to use myself as an example. If you pull my teaching certificate right now, you'll see that I'm Tier I leadership certified but not Tier II certified. And I've been the sitting principal in this building for four years. I have a non-renewable NPL certification that my district continues to renew. They hired me off my skillset, not my resume. It's never been a complaint by our board of education, it's never been a complaint by our superintendent, and it's never been a complaint from any of our parents. Our school is big on providing CTAE options and extracurricular options for our students. We've been able to hire business professionals who don't have a teaching degree to come in and teach those very trade specific courses utilizing our flexibility to put people in the classroom. Last year, I was able to hire a gentleman who retired from IBM in Dallas to run our Work-Based Learning program. What better way to teach Work-Based Learning than a person who just retired from the field and wanted a career change? Some non-charter systems may not have even looked at his resume because he didn't have a teaching certificate.

Mr. Kemp added how his school uses charter flexibility in the areas of student classes and program offerings:

So then you transition from hiring to programs and program offerings. Right now in our building we have a recording studio that was donated by a famous alumnus who works in

the music industry. We used our charter to hire the right person to teach that creative music class. Our healthcare teacher is a nurse by trade. Why would I go hire a certified teacher to teach healthcare but has no experience in the healthcare field? We do a capstone and an adulting day for our senior class. We do some creative things on those days and we pay for it with charter funds. It's not cheap to put on. We've received over a quarter of a million views on YouTube and we were on almost every news station in Georgia for our adulting day.

Flexible hiring was a trend among the principals interviewed for this study and allows school to hire teachers in a variety of subject areas as Ms. Bulloch stated, "we've used creative hiring practices in the past. Like with Spanish, we were able to hire non-certified person in that role." Specific teaching areas are more difficult to hire certified teachers than other areas; however, flexible hiring is also needed in certain areas of the state that have a smaller population than other parts of the state. Mr. Crawford outlined how flexible hiring options allow Cherry County to meet the needs of their student based on their isolated geographic location as he shared, "based on our location, we often start the school year with several open teaching positions. Being able to waive certification is an area that really helps us out. Some times we have a tough time finding certified teachers."

System-Level Support.

The level of support principals perceive from system-level leaders is crucial for sound, confident decision-making. Charter system governance was founded on the principle that local school input should be considered when making decisions. Therefore, it important to consider the perspective of principals concerning system-level support and communication in decision making and school improvement initiatives.

Mr. Sanders provided his account of how direct communication and support benefit the work he does as principal:

I enjoy what I do and I work in a great school. We have great people in place that form a good support system. Our assistant superintendent is informed about everything. I make most of the decisions here at the school-level but I run everything by our superintendent. He's always informed. Our central office is always supportive.

Mr. Sanders added a comment specifically addressing the expectation his superintendent has for principals in the district. When the superintendent clearly states his or her expectations, it allows everybody to understand that feedback is accepted and welcomed in pursuit of improvement throughout the district:

When our superintendent took over, he encouraged feedback. He told us to not just give him answers that will satisfy him. He wants open dialogue and for us to make our point. He asks us to go into details and tell him what is going and how we might be able to fix it. They really try to make it work. I really appreciate their support.

Mr. Forsyth stated how he tries to consider the perspective of the system-level leaders to better understand why they might make a certain decision. Even though his primary responsibility is advocating for his school, he understands that system-level leaders have to make difficult decisions that principals may not completely appreciate:

It's going to be about thinking of things from their perspective. Not just what is going on at Beech High School but how does a decision that's made affect all the schools in the district? Picking their brains and talking to successful people in those roles helps me understand why they might make a certain decision.

Mr. Forsyth proceeded to provide details of how his superintendent work together to identify solutions to problems. It becomes clear that the communication within a district can be just as powerful as charter flexibility when thinking of innovative ideas:

Being in a small system has its advantages. I go to conferences and people ask how to do you get away with that? I tell them because I talk to my superintendent and she is on board with it. Other principals tell me that not everybody can just call their superintendent. For example, I can call her right now and if I don't get her, I'll leave her a message and she'll probably call me back in an hour or so. Or she might answer and we might talk for 30 minutes. We have great communication. We talk in the evening time. She might call me at 7:30 at night or text me on the weekend about something. But, it's ok because we're talking. With central office, if I need something done, I just pick up the phone and call. And it's not just me as the principal. My assistant principals know they can call who they need. Sometimes, my superintendent will call my assistant principals and talk to them.

Additionally, Mr. Forsyth talked about how he handles disagreements with his superintendent and they usually are able to find a common ground to move forward. After hearing Mr. Forsyth's response below, it was evident that a healthy relationship exists between the school and system in Beech County:

If the district comes down and says we're going to do this and I feel like this may not be the best thing for our school, I always say I'd like to talk to you about this because I have some other ideas that may be beneficial for the high school. We talk openly about it. My superintendent would probably ask why do you think that is going to be a better way? As long as I have a well thought out plan, then I'm usually allowed to go with it. I have a

program I use for student discipline. Basically, it was suggested that I don't do it. I said look, this is one of the things I believe in because these are the benefits for our school. She came back and said I prefer that you change this one element. Other than that, you can run the program like you want to run it. That's good. We had a conversation; the two of us, behind closed doors. When we we're done, she said that fine. You can do that. I had the answers to her questions laid out and she was fine with it. She always listens.

Ms. Emerson shared comments that were similar to the experiences perceived by Mr. Forsyth in Beech County:

I feel like I have a lot of freedom. It goes back to trust. It helps that we don't have to consider any other high schools in our district. If I feel like there is something that somebody need to know, I inform them. I do feel like everything is very conversational. I feel like the central office trusts us to make good, sound decisions. I told the superintendent when I first came here that I didn't want to be micromanaged. But I also knew that I needed him to trust me. I also told him my job is to keep things off your desk. As we are talking about these COVID-19 pandemic rollout plans for the fall, everything has been conversational. It hasn't just been forced down from the top.

As a follow up to Ms. Emerson's response about the positive relationship between the school and the system, I asked if there were any examples of times when the school and the system disagreed on a topic and how was it resolved. Ms. Emerson commented:

There have been a couple of minor disagreements. One example is our teachers want a math text book. We don't use traditional text books much around here. I'm actually in favor of a text book based on what our math scores have shown. The fear is that your teachers will just be teaching from the book. So, we haven't reached total resolution on

that topic yet. I feel like I can usually advocate for our teachers and tell the system to let us try this. I'm not getting the answer I want right now but I don't think it's something we can't go back to and revisit. It's ok if I don't get my way. There's been a few things like that. A couple of other things that have come up involve discipline issues. We have to be sure that at some point it is communicated to central office so they don't have to turn around say why did you give a kid this or that? I think sometimes I might make some assumptions like well I'm just going to run with that.

Ms. Frank noticed much of the same open communication at Gingko County. She highlighted the significance of the difference she perceives from her previous school district. Gingko County is much smaller than Ms. Frank's previous employer but the desire to converse honestly is apparent in Gingko County:

Our communication is really direct. In my previous district, I never saw the superintendent. Here, I meet with my superintendent almost daily. I can call her or anybody within the central office. It's direct contact. If I need something human resources related, I call the human resources director. I need something special education related, I call that person. It's very, very direct communication. The central office let's us do what we are doing as long as they are seeing things improve which they have over the past five years.

A pattern begins to emerge with Mr. Kemp's response regarding system-level support and communication in Loblolly County Schools. Mr. Kemp's comments show that he perceives a significant level of support for the programs he leads at the high school:

Here, I go straight to the superintendent and pick up the phone. In fact, right before we started this interview, my superintendent walked in and was asking me a couple of

questions about some things. It's one of those things that is very fluid, almost like a conduit, an imaginary conduit from my office straight to the central office which I can actually see from here. I look at the central office as a support structure because I don't have all the answers. I don't plan to. If I have questions, I pick up the phone. When I tell you they pick up the phone 99.9% of the time, they answer the phone. I'm not afraid to ask questions about those things because once again, in this role, you're a moron if you don't ask. There is zero red tape.

The response from Mr. Kemp and similar accounts provided by other principals indicate that charter system governance allows school and districts to move efficiently through a decision-making process instead of spending resources on non-essential procedures. After Mr. Kemp's initial response that exhibited ample communication between the school and the system level, I asked Mr. Kemp why he believed the support was more prevalent in Loblolly County than in his previous districts:

I think the answer for me personally is the relationship I have with my superintendent. The flexibility that we are given with hiring and with all of the programs we offer is just part of that relationship piece. Really and truly, if you have a superintendent that's not willing to try different things, even if you fail, you're never going to get off the ground. I think there is a trust factor here. Four years ago, I'd never been a sitting principal except for in an alternative school. Was he rolling the dice on me? He could put handcuffs on me but those have never been put on. When it comes to spending money, when it comes to hiring people, when it comes to making those personnel decisions that you need to better your school; he says it's your school, run it the way you want. When I first got hired, I told our superintendent, you can take a risk on me or bring in somebody with more

experience. If you choose me, I'm going to do everything I can to make you look good. Well, graduation numbers are up nine points in three years and we have the highest SAT and ACT scores in the history of the school. Our teacher retention rate is 99.4%. I think there is a trust factor that we've built when you do those things.

Lastly, Mr. Crawford shared the philosophy of system-level leaders at Cherry County Schools by stating:

most of the system level decisions arise from the needs of the schools. The high school is kind of the lone ranger because we are the only high school in our district, but our central office is very receptive when we provide feedback.

Throughout the theme of system-level support that emerged through interviews and document reviews, I noticed most of that most principals perceived an appropriate amount of support from their system-level leaders and superintendents. When asked directly how do principals and the central office staff deal with conflict, most principals described a healthy level of respect that typically ended in a resolution both parties could agree on. The combination of charter flexibility and support system-level leadership provides an opportunity for many of the principals who were interviewed to think creatively about current problems and future needs.

The Principalship.

The third theme that emerged during the data collection portion of this study was the perception of the role that principals feel they serve for their school and community. Several principals compared their role as a charter system principal to being a non-charter school leader. Others commented on the autonomy they perceive as the chief leader of the school building. Distributed leadership and empowerment, which serve as theoretical constructs for this study, were important components to include in my interview questions with principals. Mr. Forysth

commented that, “being a charter system doesn’t change what we do day-to-day. I’d say being a principal in a charter system is about the same as being a principal in a non-charter system when it comes to daily activities.” Mr. Sanders’ response when asked to compare charter system leadership responsibilities with those in a non-charter system stated, “I’m not sure how it would be different. Ultimately, you’re responsible for making decisions in the best interest of the school.” Mr. Forsyth added to his original comment by provided an account of how he leads instructional observations at Beech County High School. Mr. Forsyth felt strongly that consistent observations and appropriate feedback are critical to increased student achievement:

We have a standards based form. We call it a paper and pencil observation. We divide the staff into three groups. Every assistant principal has a group of teachers in their direct supervision. They divide their direct report group into three groups. The assistant principal will take one third and do a formal observation on the them, I take a third and do a formal observation on them, and the last third we do paper and pencil observation using the standards-based form. If there is a problem, we schedule a meeting immediately with that person. We then look for improvement the next time we go back.

I offered a subsequent question to Mr. Forsyth asking about the student achievement results he has noticed since implementing his instructional observation system:

It’s tremendous. We were below the state average in every Milestone area when I got here. And I’m talking about 20 points below the state average. I told our teachers that I wanted to be at the state average in everything. Sure, there were people who told me I was crazy. They said these kids come from poor backgrounds. My response was that it doesn’t matter, we’re going to do everything we can to get there. Our kids are going to compete for jobs with peers who do have better resources so we have to get them ready to

compete at that level. At the end of my first year we had two subjects above the state average and every subject was within ten points of the state average. I posted those results at a faculty meeting and everybody couldn't believe it. We went from being one of the lowest performing schools in our area to the highest performing high school in our area.

When asked what she perceived her role to be as principal, Ms. Emerson stated:

I would like to think I view my role as caretaker or problem solver. I like to wrestle with stuff until we figure it out. I want to create a place where teachers are happy in doing their work. That's my focus, my focus is teachers. I love kids and I love to watch them grow. But my work is with teachers. I try to develop a strong relationship with teachers and have their trust so that when we do have to try something different, they are willing to come along with me. So, my role is to create a place where adults can be at their best to help kids.

Ms. Emerson was asked to provide a specific example of when she has had to ask teachers to trust her judgment when they may have been slightly apprehensive about a school change:

When we moved into our new building, we changed over to a block schedule. There was a lot of opportunity for us to talk about instruction and how that would need to change. A lot of risk-taking. The first year I was here, I gave every teacher a poker chip and I told them I need you to take risks. It has been fun to see some teachers who were kind of complacent make some changes. I think we do a good job of trying be very mindful of teacher sanity.

When asked about the level of freedom Ms. Frank experiences to make decisions based on local needs, she stated:

With the adjustments we have been able to make with graduation requirements and wraparound services for our needy students, I think we have that freedom. I'm constantly asking questions about if we can do this or if we can do that. There's freedom but I don't do anything without running it by my superintendent. When I came here there was very little technology available for students and there hadn't been a lot of professional development done with teachers. I've been able to make some decisions that were supported at the system-level.

Mr. Kemp provided a simple response when asked about his level of freedom to make decisions at the local level by asserting, "I have no restraints." Mr. Kemp provided supporting details for why he felt this way:

I genuinely do not have any barriers. The thing I try to do is call our superintendent and ask can we look at this? He'll usually ask if it is best for kids and my response is always yes if I am bringing it to him. In four years, I can't exaggerate, I've never been told no. We did a program that wasn't cheap to do but it was worth it. We instituted a learning lab where kids would stay from 2:30 to 3:30 to get individualized instruction from certified teachers after school. We also fed them and made arrangements with our transportation department to get them home. Our graduation rate went from 88.2% to 96.74%. You can tie those number directly to programs like the learning lab.

Ms. Bulloch shared an experience with slightly more restraint than what Mr. Kemp perceives in Loblolly County Schools; however, she does feel like her system-level leaders work with her to provide options to best serve her students at the high school:

Our superintendent is very supportive and gives us local autonomy. She's a good sounding board for us to make sure that we've asked the right questions or thought about

how a group of people may react to a certain decision. Our central office always listens and will usually let us adjust a system decision to meet the needs of students at the high school. So, we are able to adapt some of the programs that we have and do things a little bit differently because we see a need at the high school.

Mr. Crawford added to the qualitative data collected by many of the other principals in this study by stating:

My role is not much different in a charter system than a non-charter system. My job is to keep the wheels moving. I support instructional meetings, grade-level meetings, and provide assistance to all programs. I try to let our smart people do their job and not get in the way.

Collectively, all principals did not experience any significant changes in the daily responsibilities of being a school leader or principal in a charter system or a non-charter system. Many principals feel strongly that it is their responsibility to improve the school in every area and that autonomous decision making is needed to achieve success.

Rural Impact.

The cases presented in this study represent a wide-range of rural communities. Population and resources available vary based on a myriad of factors. While there are consistencies among the findings, no two rural communities are identical. It is important to note that the sample used for this study represents a geographically diverse group of rural communities. An example of the diversity of rural communities is apparent when reviewing Beech County. Mr. Forsyth provided his account by claiming:

Our community has a perception of being rural. It is rural but it also has urban components. We have three colleges here and several restaurant chains available. But we

also have several mom and pop establishments too. We have several luxuries that you wouldn't expect in a small town but there are places when you get outside of town that is rural. If you ride toward the eastern part of the county, it is very rural. The challenge I see is there are some resource issues that go beyond internet connectivity. We have a hospital here but we don't have access to certain things like an orthopedic doctor.

Mr. Sanders reported that internet access was significant problem in Cedar County that was exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic school cancellations during the spring of 2020. Cedar County Schools was able to make sure every student had access to a technology device; however, Mr. Sanders reported issues with internet accessibility stating, "we had a pretty good bit of students without internet access. It was probably at least half of our students without any type of internet connection." Several principals made a point to showcase the positive that being in a rural system or small system provide. Ms. Emerson offered her perspective and compared her present situation to her previous school district that was much larger:

The best part for me working in a rural, small district is that everything is truly direct. There is a lot of communication. To me, the rural district piece of this is where you can pick up the phone and have real conversations immediately. If I have to run over to the central office for a meeting, it is very easy. I wouldn't give that up for anything. For me, a one high school district is easier to manage. A disadvantage to being in a small system is if somebody has a content specific question, we don't necessarily have somebody I can go to and say what do you think? The other thing is that Magnolia County is a really neat place to live so there is very little turnover with teachers. So when you have teachers that have gone to school and are living and breathing and working in the same place they

don't get an opportunity to see some other things. To me, that can be a disadvantage for a small district.

After Ms. Emerson's initial response to advantages and disadvantages of leading a rural school, I asked her to elaborate on any additional issues or benefits she faces:

The number one thing is that close to half of our students do not have internet access. That blows some people's mind. And it's not even a socio-economic issue. It doesn't matter if you live in a million-dollar house or not, it's all about where the cell towers are located. When COVID first happened, it made me lose my mind. We were having the hardest time tracking down our students. We have technology devices for all of our students but no internet. That's been our biggest issue. Another thing with being rural is that our kids are on the bus for a long time. We have students K-12 on the same bus. Because the county is large, that is how it has to be. These are all things we have to think about if we want to run a program that has kids stay after school. One last thing about being rural. We are struggling to hire teachers of color. There is a task force that is working on it and we're doing everything we know to do but we're not winning. In talking with students, we hear that I have never had a teacher that looks like me.

Gingko County is another example of a rural community that is changing and serves a spectrum of students who come from an assorted range of backgrounds. Ms. Frank provided an insight into the Gingko County community:

We are a very small town. We are a one high school town. The community here in Gingko County is very rural. People are mostly apple farmers or chicken farmers. We are recently seeing a lot of wineries popping up. So, it's a rural community but it is becoming

more hospitality oriented. We also have a lot of the traditional Appalachia families and homes so we have students who are very poor.

Ms. Frank was asked about some specific advantages or disadvantages her community faces and how that impacts the educational opportunities for students at Ginkgo County High School:

I feel our biggest issue is centered around literacy. We have a system-wide grant to help support literacy. About three years ago, we only had 46% of our students at the high school reading on grade level. So, that affects everything. They are doing so much at the middle and the elementary school that we are starting to see huge growth in the percentage of kids who are reading on grade level. The high school teachers are all content driven and they're not reading teachers so we have focused on a couple of different strategies they can use at the high school and they have been receptive to that.

Based on the feedback from many of the other districts examined during this study, I asked Ms. Frank if internet access was an issue for students in her school. She provided the following statement:

We thought when we shut down in March that there was going to be a big divide and that a lot of our kids were not going to have access. We purchased some internet boosters to take to our kids but we found that only about 100 kids didn't have internet access. The internet boosters helped lower that number. It wasn't as big of a divide as we thought.

Bushwillow County was not as fortunate as Ginkgo County regarding internet access available during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Bulloch highlighted the rural impact on Bushwillow County High School by providing her account:

Our internet accessibility is not very strong. That has been a struggle. Other issues include finding opportunities for our work-based learning students within our

community. Transportation is an issue. Activities for our students to participate in our local area are limited. Then you also have to consider our enrollment count. It has gotten a little stagnant. It has even started to decline. So we are little concerned about our future enrollment and what that will affect moving forward.

Ms. Bulloch was to provide her perspective on the role of being a one high school community and if there is a benefit or problem with being in that situation:

I have found that being the only high school is a little different because the central office kind of wants to do a one-size-fits-all model with certain programs. I keep trying to stress that we have different needs and different students. The age of our students is different and the graduation requirements. So, sometimes it's a little bit of a battle to remind them that the high school is different than K-8. But, they are usually receptive and I appreciate the trust they put forth in listening to us and letting us pursue what we can within reason.

While the schools observed during this study are may be located in different parts of the state, the findings indicate many rural charter system principals are facing some of the same barriers and difficulties. Cherry County, located in isolated South Georgia, faces many of the same problems school in North Georgia face. Mr. Crawford gives his perspective on the rural educational impact Cherry County High School experiences:

One of our challenges is staffing. In South Georgia, we are located away from any major interstate. It's a constant battle. Most years, we start the school year is four or five open teaching positions. Most of the time we struggle to find qualified applicants. We're the only traditional high school in our county but we do have a couple of higher education opportunities available to the students in our community. I also think community poverty is an issue. Many of our families are one parent homes so you may not have the stability

that you would like to have. Staffing and poverty are two of our biggest challenges. Right now, we're dealing with technology and internet issues as well. When we went out of school in March, we could get a student a Chromebook but many did not have internet access. The connectivity piece was a big issue.

Based on the perspectives of the principals who participated in this study, being located in a rural community provides unique opportunities and challenges for principals and students. Some of the advantages and disadvantages are prevalent among several rural charter systems while other issues are isolated. Charter systems strive to expand the input from the local school level and from the community. Exploring the individuals needs and benefits these school districts from the viewpoint of the principal provides an opportunity to understand each individual case in a more holistic manner.

Local Community.

The fifth and final theme to emerge from the analysis of data gathered during this study emphasizes the impact that local communities have on rural charter systems in Georgia. In every school district examined, there is only one high school serving the community. The high school acts as a rallying point for many communities around the state. Oftentimes, the school system is also one of the largest employers in the community. The factors listed above coupled with the charter system governance model that encourages community involvement and input in decision-making creates a true partnership among school and community.

When asked how the Cedar County community impacts the high school, Mr. Sanders commented, "the community has a huge impact on our school. They are really involved. Whenever decisions are made, we always consider the community. Sometimes we send out a survey if we are looking at making a change." Beech County has engaged several community

members and local businesses to support the work they are doing to improve all school programs:

When you come up to the school, you can see the Partners in Education sign we have out there. Every name on that sign, which is full right now, is somebody who has donated \$250 cash or made some type of donation. The chamber of commerce is very involved.

The president of the chamber actually sits on the governance team for the high school and for the college and career academy. Higher education is actively involved and we have a good relationship with them for dual enrollment classes.

Beech County has actively recruited community influences to not only donate time and money to the school but also to become a piece of the decision-making process. Mr. Forsyth commented earlier that the local governance team had their own interview with principal candidates before the system made an official hire. Beech County has shown a commitment to creating an environment of collaboration between the school and community. Adding to experience Mr. Forsyth detailed, Ms. Emerson emphasized how important relationships are in her community:

I used to think my previous district was small but coming here I realized it is much different. Magnolia County has historically had a pretty progressive idea of schools and how to do school. The community has been that home town support. I am always amazed by the amount of people who will donate things or stop by to talk. When we were packing up to move into the new high school, I put out a Facebook post and asked if anybody was willing to come help pack. We had all kinds of people showing up to help. We have retired teaches that come back to proctor our Advanced Placement tests. I think there is a good foundation of the community wanting to be a part of the school.

Ms. Frank spoke about the difference she has realized in her current role compared to her previous district as well. She was honest in saying the feedback is not always positive but Ms. Frank does recognize the importance of having an involved community:

I've gotten in a little bit of trouble with the community because they see some of the changes happening and they say that's not how Ginkgo County High School was when I was in school. I try to be respectful of that and I put myself out there in the public because I want people to see me. I'm not hiding anything that I'm doing. I welcome parents to come in and talk about why changes are being made. I think the majority of people would say there are a lot of good things happening at the high school. Being a one high school town, we're the center of everything. The community has an important role here and as the principal I have to recognize the role they play. The majority of people in our community graduated from Ginkgo County High School. They are ingrained here.

Mr. Kemp confirms the perspective of several other principals as he stated the importance of the Loblolly County community in the work his staff does at the high school:

Our community has really rallied around the high school. We're very transparent and that's never been done here. Half of our community and all of our students have my cell phone number. I think if it's important enough for them to call me, they will. If they need something, I'm here for them. A lot of people shy away from that amount of contact. Our kids know they call me if they need anything. The high school has really become the rallying point for the entire community.

Ms. Bulloch makes a noteworthy connection to the community and the school by stating that the school system is the largest employer in Bushwillow County. Naturally, if people work at the school and their kids go to the school, they are going to be involved in school business. "We are

the hub of the community,” concluded Ms. Bulloch. Mr. Crawford recognized that the school always has room to improve but the support of the local community is integral to the improvement process:

The high school is the heartbeat of the community. A lot of what we do is because of the support of the community. We have two local colleges and we have tremendous relationships with them. Our community is always actively supporting what we do. I just want people to know that the relationships we have in this community are amazing. I feel like at Cherry County High School, we have something for everyone. Sure, we face challenges and we can always do better but we are proud of our community.

The local community plays a significant role in any public school; however, the perspective of rural charter system principals features overwhelming support and collaboration between schools and their local community. Data analysis also reveals that principals recognize the importance and seek contributions of the community in the local decisions they make. The findings section of this study was divided into two main parts: case description and quintain themes.

Conclusion

The research questions guided the data collection and analysis portions of this study and included the essential elements of the theoretical constructs of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). This section will use the findings above to form direct responses to the following research questions. I will address the supporting research questions before focusing on the overarching research question at the end of this section.

Overarching Research Question

- How do Georgia charter system principals perceive their level of empowerment in local school decision making?

Supporting questions.

- What are the perceptions of principals regarding their charter system's delegation of local school decision making for principals?
- What are the perceptions of principals about the use of charter system flexibility in local school decision making?

When considering how principals perceive their system's delegation of decision-making opportunities, we notice that this study's participants felt a sense of freedom to make decisions within certain boundaries. Overwhelmingly, many principals shared that they experience consistent, appropriate communication with their system-level leaders and superintendents. Additionally, several participants mentioned the trust or transparency they experienced in their work with system-level leaders. The sense of trust and transparency seemed to align with the theoretical construct of empowerment and Sprietzer's (1995) findings on an individual's work role and context. The parallel between trust and empowerment helped frame this study. Excellent communication seemed to be more available due to each system being a small, rural system and each high school being the only high school within the system. Each principal recognized that charter system governance encouraged this communication; however, being in a small, rural school system allowed communication between the school and central office to occur with fewer barriers than a larger school system may experience.

Evidence of local school decision making was evident through data collection from principal interviews. Mr. Sanders from Cedar County commented that his superintendent encouraged feedback and did not want principals or other central office leaders to simply agree with his decisions or recommendations because he was the superintendent. Mr. Forsyth from Beech County talked about how there have been instances where his superintendent and himself

felt differently about a decision or initiative. Ultimately, Mr. Forsyth's superintendent allowed Mr. Forsyth to implement his ideas if he explained how and why he felt like a decision was best for the school. Mrs. Emerson and Mr. Kemp shared an overwhelming sense of freedom and a lack of barriers to their decision-making process. Ms. Frank, Ms. Bulloch, and Mr. Crawford also provided evidence to support their personal decisions at the local level were supported by the system as long as there was a specific plan in place and progress was communicated to the system-level. Ultimately, principals in the seven rural charter systems examined for this study provided interview data to support empowerment in local decision-making processes.

When considering how principals perceive how their school and system utilize the flexibility granted through charter system governance, we posit various uses by individual schools and systems based on their local, individual needs. A condition of participation for each principal involved in this study was that they have professional experience working as a school leader in a non-charter setting. This condition aimed to understand better the perspective of a charter system principal who has a background of different leadership experiences. Surprisingly, many principals commented that their daily tasks and responsibilities as a charter system principal were not much different than those same tasks in a non-charter system school. However, most principals agreed that they experienced a sense of freedom based on knowing that flexibility was available if and when local needs arose.

When interviewing principals, evidence of flexibility was discovered because of the freedom provided by charter system governance. Principals in charter system schools do not experience a drastically different daily atmosphere than non-charter system school principals; however, each principal commented that the ability to utilize flexibility to solve problems provided a sense of comfort knowing that a solution could be tailored to the local needs. While

each system examined for this study was a rural charter system, the conditions varied significantly. Ms. Bulloch and Mr. Kemp described significantly different needs for their rural schools in North Georgia compared to Mr. Crawford and Mr. Sanders's in South Georgia rural schools. Based on principals' feedback, charter system governance recognizes the vast differences among school systems throughout Georgia by providing local flexibility to individual communities and school systems.

When making conclusions about the overarching research question for this study, it is imperative to consider how the theoretical constructs of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) are embedded within the philosophies of Georgia charter system governance. Charter systems were created,

on the belief that meaningful change in education can occur only if principals, teachers, parents, and community partners are empowered with the authority and flexibility to make decisions at the school house level to best meet the individual needs of each student (Charter Charter System Foundation, 2013).

We see an overwhelmingly positive response to the impact of flexible solutions to problems principals face. Ms. Frank provided a simple but powerful quote by stating, "I would take this situation any day, strictly for the flexibility." Mr. Kemp elaborated on his experience of being in a non-charter system on how tedious the process was to get from an idea to action. "With a charter, you can always say, but what if we did this? To me, it's just a different mindset." During this study, the data gathered from principals align with Blitz's (2011) findings in the literature review. While the daily operational tasks of principals may not be severely different, Blitz (2011) found that charter school or non-traditional public school leaders often take on the roles handled by system-level leaders regarding district decision-making and governance input. The findings

reveal a group of rural charter system school principals who experience and recognize empowerment in local decision making based on local needs.

Discussion

This study was initiated because of the lack of evidence surrounding Georgia's charter system governance model and principals' perspective leading rural high schools in those districts. Mr. Sanders, Mr. Forsyth, Ms. Emerson, Ms. Frank, Mr. Kemp, Ms. Bulloch, and Mr. Crawford were instrumental in providing data for researchers, school leaders, and policymakers to understand how local principals view their role in a Georgia charter system in a rural setting. Stake's (2006) cross-case analysis protocol was used to examine the data collection from principal interviews and document reviews. For a multiple case study, Stake (2006) encourages the researcher to explore the case-quintain dilemma. The case-quintain dilemma ensures that diligence and respect are paid equally to the individual case findings and the overarching quintain findings. Following Stake's (2006) protocols, this study's findings are reported in two main sections. The first section reports the individual case descriptions and findings. The case description is critical because it allows the reader to learn about the individual cases before focusing on the more complex quintain. The second section outlines the predominant themes identified through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis practice.

While all cases are charter systems in rural areas of Georgia, each case includes various factors that separate each case from the group. We see tiny districts like Cedar County, and we see larger districts such as Beech County examined. We have South Georgia districts located roughly 300 miles away from some of the North Georgia districts. Differences in communities, principal background, system-level structure, and student populations are evident among these rural charter systems. The spectrum of needs among individual districts creates a need for local

autonomy. Charter system governance is available to all school districts in Georgia: large and small; rural and urban. Challenges continue to exist in rural Georgia school systems even with the flexibility offered through charter system governance. However, the local decision-making mindset allows all leaders, especially school principals, hope and opportunity to enact meaningful change to better their students, families, and communities.

Thematic analysis methods generated five main themes from the coding process. The five themes include charter system governance, system-level support, the principalship, rural impact, and the local community. With the research question for this study highlighting a desire to understand charter system governance and the selection criteria for participants, including being a sitting principal in a charter system, it was not a surprise to find significant codes within the data referencing charter system governance. Three significant areas within the charter system governance theme emerged: general flexibility, school governance teams, and implementing change. Each principal interviewed recognized the opportunity for flexibility available to them as a charter system principal. I use the word opportunity because the level at which flexibility is used diverges among cases. A question about school governance teams was not directly asked during the interview process; however, many principals chose to address the school and the governance team's relationship.

Triangulation of data between the local, internal charter system documents and the state, external charter system documents shows that each school within a charter system must have a school governance team. The findings section of this study does not include extensive data surrounding the document reviews. State-level documents provided a clear path for systems and schools to become a charter system; however, little information was acquired regarding the relationship between principal empowerment and charter system governance. Additionally,

system-level documents were uniform from one system to another and included a lack of detail of how systems would specifically support principal empowerment. I found both sets of documents to offer little additional value to the data gathered directly from principals. Therefore, this information was not included in the findings section of the study. Principal feedback shows that school governance teams range from being highly effective and appropriately involved in school business to a formality in some cases. Lastly, the implementation of innovative ideas and projects yielded various responses including alterations to student schedules, teacher hiring practices, budget organization, and school culture operations.

System-level support was a theme that included feedback about how principals perceive the working relationship with their central office and superintendent. Charter system governance is a system-wide governance model that provides for all schools within a specific district. The decision to accept charter system governance is typically decided by a group of stakeholders, but it does not allow individual principals the autonomy to consent or ignore the stipulations that come with charter system governance. However, charter system governance was created with the idea that decisions would include substantial input from the local schoolhouse level. Based on this structure, the principal and system-level leaders work closely together. Data analysis revealed mostly positive reports of system-level support to the local schools. Struggles and differing opinions existed in the cases reviewed for this study; however, the general perspective demonstrated the importance of collegial discussions and work between the system and school-level leaders.

The principalship theme focused on identifying how individual principals perceived their role within a rural charter system. A consistent finding was that principals in charter systems do not perceive their daily work responsibilities as different from being a leader in a non-charter

school. Each participant had prior experience as a leader in a non-charter setting and compared experiences based on first-hand knowledge. Ultimately, many principals perceived their role as one that supports teachers and students. Charter system flexibility allowed some principals to think creatively about how to serve those teachers and students best. Still, each principal's perspective was that their ultimate responsibility was to lead teachers and students regardless of which system governance model their district followed.

Like the criteria for being a charter system, each case in this study was located in a rural setting. However, the variance of what rural means to each school and community may look completely different. The needs of a South Georgia charter system school with a particular student population and leading industry may be expressively different than a North Georgia charter system school with a different student population and industry that supports the local economy. Some communities and schools examined for this study struggle with poverty more than others; however, a consistent finding was the lack of available resources that urban and suburban systems have greater access to. Specifically, inconsistent and erratic internet access was mentioned by principals throughout the data collection process. The COVID-19 pandemic stressed this inequity that rural districts face. Lack of appropriate healthcare options, literacy, and transportation were other issues perceived by school principals.

While there were many challenges presented to schools located in rural areas, a consistent strength and area of support were the local communities. Each participant in this study was the leader of the only high school within the system. Many principals perceived their high school as a source of unity within their community. The community's investment in their schools allows opportunities to exist among both parties for collaboration and feedback. All principals

welcomed the support of their local community and perceived community input as a coveted resource.

After conducting the thematic analysis and reviewing each theme individually and as a whole through the lens of the quintain, it becomes clear that the commonality between the multiple cases examined is the flexibility and individual needs rural principals in Georgia charter system high schools experience. While the rural communities and system-level supports may look completely different in a South Georgia system like Cherry County compared to a North Georgia system such as Bushwillow County, both principals are empowered to make decisions and provide input on how adjustments can be made at the school and system level to support students. The opportunity provided by Georgia charter system governance is designed around the allocation of shared decision making tailored to local needs.

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