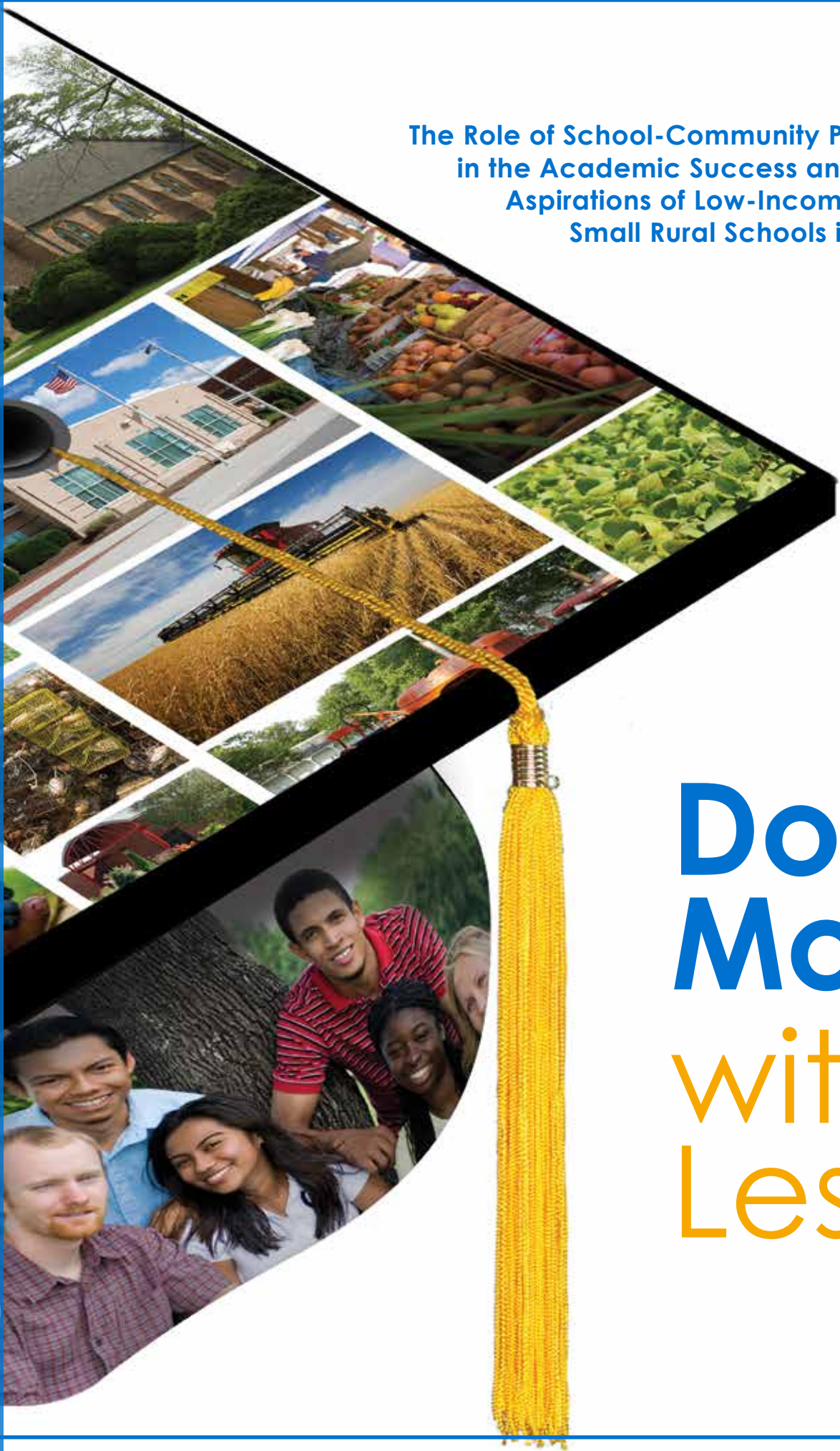**The Role of School-Community Partnerships
in the Academic Success and Postsecondary
Aspirations of Low-Income Students in
Small Rural Schools in Virginia**

Doing
More
with
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Doing More with Less:

The Role of School-Community Partnerships
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Aspirations of Low-Income Students in
Small Rural Schools in Virginia

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Executive Summary

Despite vast differences in the economy, demography, geography, and history of rural areas[1] in the Commonwealth of Virginia, these regions face a similar set of challenges to future growth and prosperity. Compared to fellow citizens in metropolitan areas, rural Virginians are more likely to be in poverty, are less likely to have a bachelor's degree, and on average earn about $20,000 less per year. Despite gains, rural areas comprise 17.5% of Virginia's population, and yet these areas support only 11.5% of the state's jobs. Although agriculture, industry, and resource gathering continue to provide a small percentage of Virginians with good paying work requiring low levels of educational attainment, stakeholders increasingly acknowledge that 21st century careers will require some sort of postsecondary education or training. This educational imperative places additional emphasis and stress on rural schools to prepare students not only to graduate, but to succeed at a two- or four-year college as well. Although many rural schools have been very successful, across the state graduation rates in rural schools are lower than state averages, dropout rates are higher, and fewer rural citizens have a high school or equivalent degree.

Nevertheless, national and state-level policy commissions, advisory groups, and political figures continue to cite the important role that both K-12 and postsecondary education play in the future viability and success of rural areas (Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission, 2010; Edvantia, 2008). Reflective of Governor McDonnell's call for 100,000 additional college degrees over the next 15 years (Executive Order No. 9, 2010), the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) have each developed initiatives designed to improve college and career readiness. Among these plans and programs, SCHEV has focused some of its efforts toward understanding and reducing the social, economic, and educational barriers that impede postsecondary access for historically marginalized and underrepresented groups, including low-income populations, racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation students, and students who speak English as a second language. These barriers typically include a lack of knowledge about high school course selection necessary for college-level preparation, a lack of access to information about college enrollment and financial aid processes, and a lack of encouragement to consider and pursue postsecondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

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[1] Rural can be defined as areas of intensive resource gathering, areas that are non-metropolitan by population, areas where population density is low, and areas where few businesses exist, according to the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission (2001).

Study Background, Focus, and Context

Funded by a federal College Access Challenge Grant held by the Commonwealth of Virginia and administered by SCHEV, this study focuses on understanding the community-level factors that impact student achievement and postsecondary aspirations in six small rural case study school districts in Virginia. The researchers interviewed 79 total participants, including community members, leaders, and school personnel, and conducted a teacher survey in each school district to provide background and context. All six districts met baseline qualifications of size (less than 2,000 students, K-12), demographics (at least 37% Free and Reduced Lunch qualifiers)[2], and location (rural and outlying areas, based on population and distance from metropolitan areas). Districts were selected based on a combination of achievement, demographic, and contextual indicators. Achievement and contextual data for each district revealed a compelling and distinctive mixture of successes and challenges. Therefore, this study resists typifying some locations as "succeeding" and others as "failing." Instead, we conceptualize the districts as representing a continuum or set of continua, struggling in some areas but showing achievement in others. Data gathering focused on aspects of school-community partnerships: formal and informal relationships, resource sharing, and services offered by non-school entities designed to improve the educational and developmental fortunes of local students, particularly those from low-income families. The study was guided by the following research question:

In small rural and outlying school districts in Virginia, what is the role of school-community partnerships in promoting low-income student academic success, postsecondary access, and aspirations for achievement?

This research question was pursued through six sub-questions:
1. What demographic, economic, and geographic environmental factors form the context of the six case study school districts?

2. What types of community partnerships exist in the case districts?

3. In what ways do college access provider organizations relate to and collaborate with schools and other community partners?

4. In what ways do community partnerships, individually and as a group, promote college readiness and ambition in the case study districts?

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[2] Based on 2009-2010 state VDOE data. Although 37% was the state average for that year, participant districts' averages were considerably higher -- between about 55% and 75%.

5. In what ways do school and community policies, practices, and strategies converge to promote student aspirations and academic success?

6. What are the characteristics of effective and ineffective school-community partnerships?

Types and Functions of School-Community Partnerships

The work of K-12 educators is supplemented by community organizations and individuals in a wide variety of ways both inside and outside the school setting. But what exactly does a school-community partnership look like, what does it do, and who is involved? The four lists below (Types of Partners, Types of Activities, Types of Involvement, and Types of Focus) represent four lenses through which the nature and function of school-community partnerships in rural Virginia can be understood:

Types of Partners**:** Categorized by the primary organizational purpose of the partnering group or institution:

1. College access provider organizations
2. Business and industry
3. Non-profit organizations
4. Public agencies and organizations
5. Faith-based institutions and groups
6. Higher education institutions
7. Individuals without affiliation or acting outside of affiliations

Types of Activities**:** Categorized by the services and activities of partners and the needs of students that they meet in support of college and career readiness:

1. College knowledge (information about forms, applications, aid, admissions, etc.)
2. College aspirations (the desire to attend postsecondary education, meet requirements, and overcome obstacles)
3. Academic interest (curiosity and desire to learn and excel in academic areas)
4. Career interest (desire to learn about and prepare for specific future employment opportunities)
5. Life skills (knowledge and skill at abilities such as time management, financial management, and task completion)
6. Basic necessities (needs such as clothing, shelter, food, and other staples)

<u>Types of Involvement</u>**:** Describes the nature of the relationship between the district and partner:
1. Peripheral <------------------------------> Central
2. Simple relationship <--------------------> Complex relationship
3. Short-term <-----------------------------> Long-term
4. Single event <---------------------------> Frequent events
5. Indirect aid <----------------------------> Direct aid

<u>Type of Focus</u>**:** Describes partnership's general target audience (from Sanders, 2006).
1. Student-centered (financial aid, school supplies, scholarships)
2. Family-centered (social services, family counseling, basic necessities, transportation)
3. School-centered (classroom resources, educational programs, volunteering)
4. Community-centered (community service projects, student exhibits and performances)

These four sets of characteristics provide for immense differences between partnerships. Each partnership can be plotted across these four sets of elements, providing a rich framework for analyzing the type and function of partnerships in a given area. For example, some partnerships are annual scholarships or single events intended to support students' college aspirations, sponsored by a local business. A more intensive partnership might involve an ongoing collaboration between the director of a local non-profit organization that is nested within schools who provides mentoring and information about postsecondary opportunities to students, teachers, and administrators on a daily basis.

The Role of Community Partners in College Readiness and Ambition

Given these four general frameworks for conceptualizing school-community partnerships, the central focus of this study was to understand how, in small rural Virginia school districts, community partnerships impacted the academic preparation, college readiness, and postsecondary ambition of low-income students. From the data we identified five roles these joint relationships fill, from specific to general.

First, by supporting students' academic and future career success indirectly through resources given to schools and directly through programs and activities, such as in-school and after-school tutoring, through donations of supplies and materials, through supplementary learning experiences that increased student efficacy, and by reinforcing the value of education through pre-existing social networks.

Second, by offering information and advising on college-going options, by providing assistance with application and financial aid forms such as the FAFSA, and by helping students

to understand college and career options through assessment measures, personal feedback, and other practices that allow students to become self-aware of personal interests and strengths.

Third, by facilitating experiences that contribute to college aspirations and socialization to college life, such as college tours and alternative educational experiences, positive adult influences and mentoring, and introductory academic and training experiences on college campuses that build confidence and familiarity with the college setting.

Fourth, by perpetuating a formal and informal economy of support that meets tangible student needs, such as school supplies, clothing, and funds for trips and uniforms, and intangible needs, such as individual encouragement to excel, and a community environment where messages about the value of educational attainment are echoed and modeled.

Fifth, by supporting a community commitment to the value of postsecondary education that reinforces and augments the goals of the school district. After describing ways that the community is involved in supporting education, one school administrator asserted: "I think it's important that the student sees that the whole community supports the mission of the school, and it's not just the school's mission, it's the community's mission."

Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective Partnerships

Although this study was not designed to evaluate specific programs or program elements, study findings did highlight aspects of partnerships that contributed to better programs, relationships, coordination of resources, and participant perceptions of success.

Characteristics of Effective Partnerships

Within this case study analysis, effective school-community partnerships occurred through the following six behaviors, structures, and perspectives.

First, effective partnerships happened when schools and multiple community partners contribute from their unique resources and benefit from the resources shared by others. In rural areas, financial and human resources can be scarce. Combining resources can result in more meaningful and efficient program delivery. Second, partnerships capitalize on local resources to engage students in new learning opportunities. New learning experiences created in conjunction with historic sites, state parks, and theatrical and musical performance venues can engage students who struggle in traditional learning settings. Third, effective partnerships created services and activities that provided students with new venues in which to gain self-efficacy and demonstrate ability. Non-traditional learning environments allow students to explore their

abilities and develop academic interests that form the basis for academic self-confidence, such as a young lady who discovered she had a passion for poetry at a community college summer session.

Fourth, community partnerships often depend on individual organizational representatives who bring vision, motivation, and unique skill sets to their work, rather than relying only on stock or pre-existing programs. Often the success of partnerships relied on the imagination and adaptability of the single person who locally represents the program. This finding highlights the importance of good hiring practices and a healthy balance of structured expectations with the freedom to adapt to local circumstances. Fifth, effective partnerships occurred when partnerships were sensitive and responsive to teacher and school needs. Whether through volunteer programs that allow teachers to use adults where they are most needed, or 4-H and other organizations that develop class sessions that reinforce SOL objectives, the best partnerships function from trust and open communication between schools and partners. Sixth, a hallmark of effective partnerships was the foresight to use services and activities to meet both short-term and long-term objectives, often simultaneously. In one district, the community education foundation invited back successful high school alums to a fundraising dinner, modeling possible career futures for students and generating financial support for scholarships to substantively buttress those student aspirations.

Characteristics of Ineffective Partnerships

Just as some school-community partnership practices enhanced effectiveness, so three others detracted from optimal operation, or reduced effectiveness. First, and perhaps most obviously, ineffective partnerships are those that are never initiated or are not supported, often because of limitations of participation due to transportation issues, low total population which makes attracting volunteers more difficult, and the often long commute times endured by parents who live in rural areas. Second, ineffective programs happen when facilitators have not taken the time to build relationships and demonstrate commitment to the community, school, and students. On some occasions potential partnerships with organizations from outside the local area have not materialized due to concerns over intentions and control. Informal relationships are the water that turns the wheel in small rural communities, and these bonds must be developed before new programs can begin. Third, when partnerships develop a myopic perspective or fail to take the steps necessary to connect with other partners and develop collaborative relationships, they are less effective. Given the dearth of resources in many rural areas, developing lines of communication may require additional formal structures if informal exchanges do not produce sufficient resource sharing.

In summary, better partnerships are like hubs: points of intersection and convergence that combine resources toward a more potent result. They also are like levers: creating movement and change by capitalizing on existing opportunities, including local cultural, historical, and environmental resources, social connections, and the strengths of other organizations to deliver innovative programming that meets the needs of a range of students. To an extent, less effective partnerships are those that do not develop those connections, or whose personnel do not have this sort of imagination or time for collaboration, resource sharing, and responsiveness to the needs of the local school district.

Key Recommendations

Given these findings and conclusions, we recommend the following action steps, sub-divided into three levels. Each local context is different and we urge stakeholders and policymakers to first understand and contemplate the impact of preexisting local contextual factors such as district size, location, history, economic condition, and educational culture before implementing any of these recommendations. Complete details are provided in the recommendations section of the report.

Recommendations for Small Rural Schools:

1. Develop a Community Relations Committee (CRC) comprised of school personnel, partnership organization members, and community members to publicize school goals and progress, and coordinate larger events, and identify areas of need.

2. Cooperatively develop and support a Community Partnership Coordinator (CPC), a local insider who could serve as an information hub and source for creative resource sharing.

3. Perform a school-community partnership inventory to identify the types and roles of local school-community partnerships as a first step toward improved cooperation and resource maximization.

4. Intentionally involve and design programs to utilize successful alumni in school events that promote academic success and inspire postsecondary aspirations. Improve alumni networks to increase school and community support and to provide academic and professional opportunities to graduating students.

5. Orient new employees to the unique experiences and challenges faced by students from rural low-income families through seminars and community tours.

6. Develop an explanation for the value of academic achievement and postsecondary education for all students, and promote it broadly.

7. Use school buildings strategically to introduce community members to positive events and lay the groundwork for increased community support.

8. Understand and develop appropriate relationships with faith-based organizations.

Recommendations for Small Rural Communities:

1. Develop and support a Community Education Foundation (CEF) to galvanize community support for educational aspirations.

2. Promote community involvement in schools by supporting the development of a Community Partnership Coordinator (CPC) volunteer or part-time position.

3. Prioritize and support school construction and renovation projects.

4. Consider ways to increase involvement of and investment by low-income and minority voices in public life and decision-making (both students and adults).

5. Form a cooperative community preschool to provide crucial early education intervention services for students from underrepresented groups.

Recommendations to Pursue with State Policy Actors:

1. Support the development and growth of Community Education Foundations (CEFs) in Virginia school districts.

2. Support a pilot of the Community Partnership Coordinator (CPC) role, and promote the position statewide as appropriate.

3. Develop rural-specific teacher scholarships to help address the challenges of recruiting new and highly qualified teachers to rural school districts.

Summary Conclusions

This report examines the complex community factors that enable and hinder the academic success and postsecondary aspirations of low-income students in small rural school districts in Virginia.

In the last decade, local and state educational aid has varied with the economic fortunes of the state and nation. Small school districts serving low-income families live closest to the margins and feel the effects of financial gains and losses most acutely. Efforts must be undertaken at all levels of government to ensure that this variability does not disproportionately disadvantage rural schoolchildren.

The findings of this report suggest that the state can best help rural counties, towns, and school districts by committing special resources that allow these smaller communities to maximize and develop their current human, financial, and educational capital. These resources may include, but are not limited to, allocated funding for arts and vocational education, school-community partnership development workshops, community leadership training, educational foundation start-up funds and training, and recruiting incentives (including college scholarships) for teachers with advanced degrees. Empowering communities by supporting the mobilization of locally generated experience, knowledge, and resources is essential to educational attainment and stability.

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Introduction

What does the term "rural" bring to mind? For those from urban locales, "rural" might call up images of the romanticism of a slower pace of life, agricultural or resource-gathering subsistence, and close community bonds. Although some of these generalizations are at least partially accurate, characterizations of rural life as static, staid, and traditional can mask the growth and change occurring in many of these areas. Much of this change has been thrust upon rural and outlying areas by economic, demographic, and technological shifts, placing rural communities at a challenging crossroad of maintaining traditional ways of life and integrating innovations that may help them survive and thrive.

What does "rural" look like in Virginia? The Old Dominion's borders hold considerable geographic, topographic, and demographic variety. From the rolling hills and Appalachian highlands of west-central and northern Virginia, to the coal fields and abrupt mountain valleys of southwestern Virginia, along the Crooked Road to the farmlands of central and southern Virginia and over to the flat open land of the southern Tidewater area and Eastern Shore, the definition of rurality in Virginia is as varied as the land itself[3]. Although Virginia's metropolitan regions represent the areas of largest population concentration, half to two-thirds of Virginia counties or cities are designated as "rural"[4]. Education in rural areas commands a similarly large slice of the state demography, with 31.8% of schools located in rural areas serving almost one quarter of Virginia's students (Edvantia, 2008).

Despite this variety, rural areas in the Commonwealth face similar sets of pressing issues. Among the problems identified by the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission (RVPC) are changes in net migration, shifts in agriculture production and natural resource gathering availability, and loss of a critical mass of business and economic resources (Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission, 2001). Specific indicators show the wide-ranging challenges that face rural Virginians, who earn on average $20,000 a year less than those in urban areas ($35,670 versus $57,978), and experience unemployment and poverty rates that are higher as well (9.1% compared to 6.1% unemployment, and 12% compared to 9.1% poverty rate) (US Department of Agriculture Fact Sheet, 2011). Although such data appears to reflect poorly on the resources and

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[3]For an extensive discussion of what "rural" means in Virginia, see From the Grassroots: Final Report of the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission to the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia (2001, and updated in 2010). The Commission suggests four ways "rural" can be defined: 1.) areas of intensive resource gathering; 2.) areas that are non-metropolitan; 3.) areas where population density is low; 4.) areas where few businesses exist. Each of these definitions is simultaneously accurate and insufficient. Rural is best defined through a variety of measures and metrics, but no single final definition can delineate a rural from a non-rural area. The full report is located at http://www.rvpc.vt.edu/The%20Final%20Report.pdf.

[4] Based on definitions developed by Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Economic Research Service Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCA), using 2000 Census data.

achievement of rural Virginians, the statistics may also hint at the historical reliance on agricultural and resource gathering labor (farming, fishing, mining, and other activities) from which many residents could secure a livelihood with minimal formal education in areas where the cost of living was generally lower and at least portions of food supply needs could be self-provided through farming, gardening, and an informal exchange economy.

Furthermore, rural areas saw a net gain in migration (112,187) in the first decade of the 21st century, even as the state's urban areas experienced slight out-migration (-7,394). Yet despite containing 17.5% of Virginia's population, rural areas supported only 11.5% of the state's jobs (Rural Virginia Center, 2010). The implication of the mismatch between population and employment is twofold: First, as a general trend, shifts in employment options have left rural Virginians with fewer opportunities. Second, at least some rural residents are forced to locate work away from their domiciles, holding important implications for family and rural community life (Rural Virginia Center, 2010).

Educational attainment, access, and resource statistics suggest that the challenges facing the rural education process parallel and may be related to the challenges facing many rural economies. Rural adults in Virginia have lower percentages of high school degree or equivalent completions (77.7%) than urban dwellers (86.4%)[5] and are less than half as likely to have a bachelor's degree (16%) than their urban Virginia counterparts (37%) (Rural Virginia Center, 2010). Rural students graduate at rates (73.2%) well behind the average on-time state rate (86.6%) (Strange, Showalter, & Klein, 2012; Virginia Department of Education, October 11, 2011). Coupled with unemployment, poverty, and other indicators, Virginia's rural schools face immense challenges, yet are often identified as a key component to the future success of rural areas they serve. Reflective of other such reports (Strange, Showalter, & Klein, 2012), the RVPC cited the important role that both K-12 and postsecondary education play in future economic viability, specifically naming increased access to adult and workforce education and improved K-12 school performance.

The role and performance of K-12 and postsecondary education continues to be a point of particular emphasis as an important contributor to the Commonwealth's economic future in all sectors. In 2010, Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell called for an increase of 100,000 additional associates and bachelor's degrees over the next decade and a half to create "…increased educational attainment, skills development, and lifelong learning that will equip Virginians to succeed at the highest levels of global economic competition" (Executive Order No. 9, 2010). Reflective of this mandate, the Virginia Department of Education is currently working with educators and policymakers across all levels of public education to develop new curricular standards and offerings as part of the Virginia College and Career Readiness Initiative,

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[5] Based on 2006-2008 estimates, as cited in the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission Data Update, 2010.

with the goal of "strengthen[ing] students' preparation for college and the work force before leaving high school" (Virginia College and Career Readiness Initiative, 2010).

Over the past decade Virginia's higher education coordinating body, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), has also been working to improve college access and success on multiple fronts. Concurrent with reform efforts at the K-12 level through Virginia's Department of Education, one area of focus for SCHEV has been to understand and reduce the social, economic, and educational barriers that impede postsecondary access for historically underrepresented groups, and in particular, students from low-income families. These barriers typically include a lack of knowledge about high school course selection necessary for college-level preparation, a lack of access to information about college enrollment and financial aid processes, and a lack of encouragement to consider and pursue postsecondary education (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001).

Study Background

In the summer of 2008, the Commonwealth of Virginia was awarded a $1.1 million grant through the U.S. Department of Education's College Access Challenge Grant Program (CACGP). Virginia's CACGP grant, coordinated through SCHEV, aimed to increase access to postsecondary education for low-income and other underrepresented groups. In order to gain a better understanding of existing college access resources in the Commonwealth, SCHEV commissioned a study through the CACGP to identify the number and distribution of public and private non-profit organizations that promote college access by offering information, activities, and other resources that contribute to the postsecondary education aspirations and enrollment of targeted groups. Qualifying organizations were based in Virginia regardless of their funding source, often operated off-site from schools, and in many cases were based in or related to colleges and universities. Examples of such organizations include, but are not limited to, federal TRIO programs, the Virginia Community College System's Career Coaches program, and the network of Project Discovery sites around the state. Historically, college attendance and its associated benefits have been least accessible to traditionally underrepresented populations, including persons from low-income families, first-generation students, persons with limited English proficiency, and persons from a variety of racial and ethnic groups. Through our data collection and analysis process we placed a special emphasis on services targeted at these traditionally underrepresented groups.

Study findings, which identified over 450 access provider instances connected to independent and networked organizations, were then compared to Virginia Department of Education demographic and achievement data to identify the degree to which needs and services were aligned. Findings described the varying sizes, scope of activities, and targeted populations of these college access provider organizations, highlighted the patchwork of services distributed

throughout the state, and called for increased resource sharing and state-level coordination (but not oversight) of these groups. The study, entitled *A Statewide Examination of College Access Services and Resources in Virginia,* began in October 2008 with final report delivered to the State Council in January 2010[6].

Additionally, the access study identified a small set of school divisions serving above the state average percentages of low-income students, but that also boasted student achievement performance indicators at or above state average levels and above those of their peers. The access study also identified other similarly situated school districts with similarly high percentages of students from low-income families that were uniquely challenged by their shifting demographics, local economic conditions, and other factors. The evidence of these impediments was observable in student achievement data, yet in every situation, indicators also showed a mixture of points of struggle and points of achievement and promise.

Purpose of the Study

As part of the renewed College Access Challenge Grant in 2010, SCHEV elected to fund a follow-up study with the authors of *A Statewide Examination of College Access Services and Resources in Virginia*, this time focusing on an in-depth exploration of the school and community factors that contribute to the points of success and challenge among school districts with high percentages of low-income students. Rather than conceptualize the participant school districts as two ends of an achievement spectrum, we chose to think about them as points on a continuum or several continua, based on specific metrics of performance (graduation rates, dropout rates, advanced degree attainment rates, low-income graduation rates, and college enrollment rates for graduates, among other measures). This approach provides two pronounced advantages: first, it eliminates the false perception that school districts are polarized into winners and losers, and instead acknowledges that most school districts, like the people who lead them, are a combination of strengths that can be capitalized upon, and weaknesses that must be managed and improved upon if overall growth and success is to be achieved.

Second, recognizing that most school districts contain this confluence of strengths and weaknesses removes the pall of judgment from the research process, allowing both researchers and districts to focus on developing a robust and fair self-understanding that includes willingness to acknowledge areas where growth and improvement are needed. Indeed, we found that the districts most intent on improvement were also the ones most willing to face their deficits.

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[6] This study is available at www.schev.edu.

This study focuses on six small rural and outlying[7] school districts with high percentages of low-income students. Case districts were selected based on a set of geographic, demographic, and achievement data[8]. The emphasis of the initial college access provider study made it clear that the pathways to postsecondary education are not solely the purview or responsibility of the schools; community organizations and individuals played a crucial role in lending expertise, political will, and human and economic resources to the educational process. In keeping with these themes, this study considers both the schools and the community context of these small rural areas, to explore the following question:

In small rural and outlying school districts in Virginia, what is the role of school-community partnerships in promoting low-income student academic success, postsecondary access, and aspirations for achievement?

This research question is pursued through the following sub-questions:
1. <u>Section One</u>: What demographic, economic, and geographic environmental factors form the context of the six case study school districts?

2. <u>Section Two</u>: What types of community partnerships exist in the case districts?

3. <u>Section Three</u>: In what ways do college access provider organizations relate to and collaborate with schools and other community partners?

4. <u>Section Four</u>: In what ways do community partnerships, individually and as a group, promote college readiness and ambition in the case study districts?

5. <u>Section Five</u>: In what ways do school and community policies, practices, and strategies converge to promote student aspirations and academic success?

6. <u>Section Six</u>: What are the characteristics of effective and ineffective school/community partnerships?

In this study we use the term "community partnership" and "community partners" to refer broadly to the involvement of individuals and organizations, be they public, private, business, or non-profit, that are in some way involved in facilitating or promoting educational attainment and aspirations. Furthermore, in this study we adopt a community ecology model that focuses on the confluence of a range of contextual factors (demographic, geographic, historic, social, cultural, political, etc.) that converge to contribute to a total educational environment.

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[7] We use the term "outlying" since some of the participant districts are located in small towns that are designated as "cities" under Virginia's jurisdiction boundary laws. However, due to their location and size, they experience many of the same issues of traditional rural areas.
[8] Further details regarding the case district selection criteria and process are described in the methods section below.

Although many of the Commonwealth's urban pockets represent areas of significant need and warrant further research, the scope of this report is limited to rural and outlying districts. In addition to the unique and pressing challenges these areas face, rural districts represent a considerable portion of the geography and demography of Virginia. SCHEV will use the results of the study to build on existing successful community-school partnerships and programming, to develop best practice models, and to inform future funding when appropriate. Ultimately, however, the goal of this research is to provide a comparative perspective that positively impacts the way school administrators, teachers, and community members think about the relationship between school and community entities in a rural context. We hope all stakeholders will approach more intentionally these relationships as a means for promoting the academic success and postsecondary aspirations of their students, and ultimately to bolster and strengthen their rural communities for the future.

Overview of Major Subject Areas

Between 1950 and 2000, America's population shifted from a nation evenly divided between rural and urban areas to a primarily urban population (80%) (Wood, 2008). The story of rural areas of the United States and the national policies that are aimed at assisting them is strongly tied to the economic realities associated with the loss of local manufacturing and resource gathering. Communities are often devastated by the loss of large-scale manufacturing by industries that come to dominate a town or county (Licther & Graefe, 2011). Through a shared sense of belonging and the hard work of local leaders, these rural communities remain largely intact. However, providing education, public safety, and other basic social services with declining public coffers is a perpetual challenge for rural towns and counties.

Small Schools and Rural Schools

Small schools often struggle to meet federal and state mandates (Smith, 1999, Bryant Jr., 2010). These curriculum mandates (Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind) rarely take into account geography and scale, and especially the unique nature of small schools and districts. Instead, education reform has focused on building educational capacity on a national level to compete in the growing global economy (Budge, 2010; Howley, 1997). To the frustration of many rural places with lower tax bases and declining populations, these directives dictate how funding should be allocated and remove autonomy from local appointed and elected school administrators (Bryant Jr, 2010). Funding and program cuts are especially damaging to course offerings outside the regular academic curriculum, such as the arts, vocational courses, advanced courses for gifted and high-achieving students, and access to specialized programs for children with special needs (Ainsworth & Roseingo, 2005; E. Bouck, Albaugh, and M. Bouck, 2005; Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Schiller, 2003).

Despite the challenges and obstacles they face, small schools have several advantages that appeal to communities, educators, and parents. Locals view their school(s) as a place where their values are instilled in future generations, helping to maintain a unique sense of culture and place that is deeply rooted in individualism (Schafft, 2010). School board members, administrators, and teachers are well networked throughout these communities, which leads to a greater sense of accountability and input by both parents and other residents (Hicks, 2000). In a study of rural high school achievement in Oklahoma, Applegate (2008) found that the differences between quantitatively similar high- and low-achieving schools were based on "democratic schooling represented by place-based pedagogy" (p. 341). In this approach, vocational students offered services to the community that were not otherwise available, and social science students developed an oral history project of the local area. This curriculum that focused on having students actively engaged in the community was answered by greater community participation and investment in local schools. As Applegate (2008) notes:

> The importance of community to the success of rural high schools probably did not become apparent in the quantitative analysis because of the limited nature of the variables that were used as surrogates for this factor. The support of the community is more complex than simply passing or failing bond issues. The community, in the successful school I studied, not only supported their school financially, they promoted high achievement through their expectations. (p. 342)

Small school and classroom sizes attract both parents and teachers who desire a more intimate learning experience for children. Based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, rural schools have a lower teacher-to-student ratio than urban areas, 15.3 to 1 compared to 16.9 to 1 (Strange, 2011). Small schools and class size were found to be especially beneficial to at-risk student populations (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Howley, Hadden, and Harmon (2000) found that small rural high schools succeed in distinctly different ways. In visiting four communities the researchers observed that despite variance in economic class, race, remoteness, and external strains, the success of these small schools rested in the schools' ability to meet the expectations and needs of the local community.

Promoting college-going and the academic preparation necessary for a successful transition to higher education often conflicts with the values of rural communities, which are threatened by continuing outmigration (Theobald and Wood, 2010). McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) refer to a community and family culture that evokes strong feelings within students to remain in their rural home as a "golden cage" (p. 204). The cage promotes the comfort of remaining close to home over the hardships of leaving, but is disconnected from the realities of the modern economy in rural places. Ultimately, McDonough et al. conclude that the presence of higher education institutions, especially four-year universities, is required to overcome challenges to college access in rural areas.

<u>School-Community Partnerships</u>

Organized community involvement has taken place in public schools since the early 1900s, and has become increasingly popular during times of social and fiscal strain (Sanders, 2006). School-community partnerships can be challenging endeavors that range in complexity from relying on individual volunteers to having in place detailed written agreements and plans focused on long-term relationships and goals. These partnerships serve to fill a "gap" that develops between the day-to-day business of school administration and teachers, and the unique culture of the surrounding community (Epstein, 2010). Partnerships can include civic organizations, local businesses, senior groups, faith-based organizations, and higher education institutions (Sanders, 2006).

Mentorship programs are an example of a common type of community partnership program in rural areas. Isernhagen (2010) found that mentors of rural middle school students helped to contribute to their self-esteem, academic success, and career aspirations. The challenge for many school leaders is to make school relevant and an inviting place for community members who may not have enjoyed their time as students, or do not feel connected to new facilities or staff. As one teacher commented, promoting involvement is a balance of "making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar" (Hilty, 1999, p. 163).

Combs and Bailey (1992) studied the nature and impact of school partnerships in two Kansas communities. They found that the success of school/community partnerships was dependent on leaders who could build trust, communicate effectively, and develop support for change. In these rural areas, community interaction was encouraged due to the area's small geographic size and the location of the schools relative to everyone in the community. Events in local history and public perceptions of local schools were often obstacles to change. However, school leaders could overcome these challenges by developing relationships and effective communication. They stressed that local schools should be promoted as a "learning resource" for the entire community and concluded "that school and community partnerships are critical to the survival of both rural school and rural communities" (p. 12-13).

Defining the Study

For this study of school-community partnerships we employed a mixed-methods design appropriate for combining the in-depth personal perspective of individual participant interviews with the broad contextual and demographic data derived from a teacher survey instrument. The impetus for this study and the selection of school districts was a list of high- and low-performing districts identified in the 2010 study, *A Statewide Examination of College Access Services and Resources in Virginia*. For this follow-up study, SCHEV project advisors and the research team elected to focus on small rural school districts with high percentages of low-income students since these areas represent sectors of significant need and are found in nearly all regions of the Commonwealth.

District Selection Process

The research team developed a list of potential participant districts through a three-part process. First, all qualifying school districts had fewer than 2,000 total students in K-12 based on 2009 VDOE data. Second, all qualifying school districts had above the state average of 37% Free and Reduced School Lunch (FRSL) program qualifiers[9], a proxy for low-income status. (Among participating districts, actual rates varied from about 55% to about 75%.) We also used the VDOE's statistic of "economically disadvantaged" as a triangulating figure[10]. Third, school districts had to be located in rural or outlying areas in the state, determined by relative population density and proximity to urban and metropolitan areas. We included the concept of "outlying areas" since several candidate districts were actually classified as cities due to Virginia jurisdiction laws. However, because of their small populations and remote locations, we determined that they were an appropriate fit for this study.

From a pool of 25 qualifying school districts (approximately one-fifth of all consolidated Virginia school divisions), we selected participant districts based on graduation rates and dropout rates of all students and of low-income students, and used the VDOE metric "completer plans," which purported to reflect the post-high school plans of graduating students[11]. Later in the study we substituted advanced degree completion rates for all students and low-income students for completer plans. We also considered demographic data, including in- and out-migration between 2000 and 2010, racial and ethnic population composition and change, and the geographic distribution of cases, to gain as broad a representation of Virginia's rural populations as possible.

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[9] Also based on 2009-2010 school year data, which was the most recent year available at the point of comparison.
[10] The VDOE representative we contacted was unable to identify what data is used for this data point.
[11] Because we could not confirm the reliability of this data after questions were raised about it, we eventually decided to use other metrics, such as percentage of students with an advanced degree to signal college readiness, although this measure does not provide insights into the plans and aspirations of students that completer plans data might have.

In this process we did not codify a metric for selecting districts but rather looked for a compelling mix of factors that indicated success at preparing all students, and low-income students specifically, for academic success and postsecondary access. Three school districts, here called Riverside School District, Heritage School District, and Greenfield School District, were invited and agreed to participate with approval from district administrators.

Initially, we conceived of this project as a comparison between two cohorts: a succeeding group of districts and a struggling group of districts. Although we maintained the structure of a two-phase data collection process, as we prepared for the first phase of interviews and began the process of identifying phase II interview participants, we elected to reconceptualize our analysis in terms of *thriving* and *emerging* districts for two reasons. First, due to the small populations of students in each academic class (typically between 60 and 120), achievement data points were highly sensitive and could vary widely from year to year in ways that did not actually reflect the overall quality of the schools. Due to a recent change in the process of calculating the Virginia on-time graduation rate, accurate longitudinal data was limited as well. In short, the variance between success and failure was a very narrow margin, leading to the second reason for adopting this approach: that characterizing all districts as experiencing a non-linear process of development, adjustment, growth, and self-analysis would result in a far more nuanced and insightful study than a forced dichotomy between winners and losers. Thus, second phase participants were also selected with consideration of a wide range of factors, but focusing this time on districts with a compelling combination of successes and challenges both within the schools and within the local area. Five school districts were invited to participate in the second phase and two declined. With permission at the district level we included the three additional districts, here called Timberland School District, Twinsburg School District, and Western School District. Although we had initially hoped to identify participating districts by name, we needed agreement from all districts to proceed. Several districts agreed to participate but declined to be identified and as a result we have given each district a pseudonym and have obscured district descriptions through generalized details.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

The teacher survey and participant interview data collection processes occurred concurrently in the spring and summer of 2011 and winter of 2011 and 2012. The teacher survey (**Appendix A**) was created through an online survey tool and distributed through email lists with the assistance of school and district administrators to all six case study districts (n=300 survey completers). Survey questions established baseline demographic, educational, and employment contexts and provided information about teacher attitudes and experiences with school-community partnerships.

Participant interviews served as the primary data source in the study, with 79 interviews conducted across the six case districts. Participants included school personnel, non-profit and public agency employees, civic and special interest group representatives, business leaders, higher education employees, education activists, religious leaders, and key local cultural informants. Potential interview participants were identified through a snowball process that began with the recommendations of school administrators who suggested individuals connected to community partnerships and to leadership positions in the community. From this list and our own research we invited selected participants to be part of a semi-structured interview lasting between 45 and 120 minutes (see **Appendix B** and **Appendix C** for school and community interview protocols). Each interview yielded additional participant recommendations, broadening the scope and input of advisors to our participant pool. Participants were invited via email or letter. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person either in a public space or a location of the participant's choosing, though a small percentage of interviews were conducted by phone. All participants were advised about the nature of the study and the extent of their participation, including protections of anonymity and confidentiality.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into Nvivo 9 ethnographic software for analysis. We used an emergent coding process to organize and analyze interview transcripts, working from a set of five broad themes (school-community partnerships, school-community topics, higher education topics, school topics, and pressing local issues) and developing related sub-codes while also allowing new and unrelated concepts and sub-concepts to emerge, coalesce, and become part of our analysis. From these initial codes and our extensive field notes we develop a set of preliminary themes and findings that were member-checked for accuracy with phase I participants before identifying conclusions for this report.

Limitations

This project faced three major limitations or delimitations based on the nature of the research and the type of data we collected. First, qualitative research focuses on gaining contextual perspective and hearing the sense-making of participants that is necessary to capture a clear understanding of the perceived importance of community involvement from school personnel and community citizens. Because of this approach we are unable to say definitively how many or exactly what types of school-community partnerships are present in any given school district; this is not a comprehensive survey of programs. Second, because of the nature of our data collection process we are not in a position to evaluate the efficacy of any given partnership. Thus, although we do explore "effectiveness" in section six, these conclusions should be read as suggestions for improved practice that emerged from the patterns of behavior we observed and that were reported to us from study participants, and not the result of empirical testing of program elements.

Third, we are limited in our ability to report some specific descriptions and findings. Qualitative research typically involves in-depth interviews where participants are asked to reveal opinions, knowledge, and perspectives that they might not otherwise wish to disclose without cause. Although this study did not involve questions that were likely to create psychological risk or harm, all participants were assured that their responses will be confidential and anonymous to minimize any possible repercussions for their candor. Because schools and communities are legitimately concerned about the public perceptions that might be created by a study like this, we are unable to divulge some specific details which at points might make our findings richer. For example, we cannot name the specific school-community partnerships in each district, nor are we able to identify which organizations were represented in this study if they do not appear in multiple locations. Except for rare occasions where participants agree to be identified, all qualitative research faces these restrictions, based on federal ethics standards for research. Thus, although we are confident in the richness of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations, readers may desire more information about an area or a program than we are able to provide.

Findings

Findings are divided into six sections, followed by conclusions and recommendations:

<u>Section 1 (p. 14)</u>: Demographic, economic, and geographic environmental factors that form the context of the six case study school districts

<u>Section 2 (p. 24)</u>: Types of community partnerships in the case districts

<u>Section 3 (p. 37)</u>: Ways that college access provider organizations relate to and collaborate with schools and other community partners

<u>Section 4 (p. 44)</u>: Ways that school-community partnerships, individually and as a group, promote college readiness and ambition in the case study districts

<u>Section 5 (p. 56)</u>: Ways that school and community policies, practices, and strategies converge to promote student aspirations and academic success

<u>Section 6 (p. 69)</u>: Characteristics of effective and ineffective school-community partnerships

Section 1:
District Contexts and Descriptions

<u>Guiding Question</u>: What demographic, economic, and geographic environmental factors form the context of the six case study school districts?

Six school districts agreed to participate in this study under the stipulation that the identities of districts and participants would be kept anonymous. In this section we describe, in as much detail as possible, the social, economic, educational, geographic, and demographic context of each of the six participant districts. Specific details about individuals, groups, and data points are generalized or obscured to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of locations and participants. Since the deep interconnections between school factors and community factors is a premise of this study, we nevertheless provide contextual descriptions since the role and shape of community involvement with public education cannot be understood outside of the unique features that constitute each rural location.

The six districts are:
1. Riverside School District
2. Greenfield School District
3. Heritage School District
4. Timberland School District
5. Western School District
6. Twinsburg School District

Riverside School District

The educational environment of Riverside School District has been distinctly shaped by at least four contextual factors that are generally present in different configurations in all six school districts. First is the economic history and context. In the past several decades the manufacturing base of the area, once the backbone of the economy, has largely eroded, leaving both the working class and the business class scrambling to identify new sources of revenue and employment. Although many rural locations have faced a similar transition, the problem was exacerbated in Riverside by the dominance of one particular industry. A business leader and long-time resident described how that industry had actively worked to keep other industries out of the area in order to protect its access to the local workforce. This lack of economic diversity was doubly the cause of harm, since few alternatives were available when this primary source of employment folded. As the historical center of commerce in the region, Riverside has a hospital, a small movie theater, and a variety of banks, grocery stores, restaurants, and retail stores, including several well-known big box chains. These resources help to maintain its regional

attractiveness and provide low-wage, low-skill jobs, though they offer minimal job security or benefits. Nevertheless, the presence of these resources means that local residents have goods and services readily available and do not need to travel significant distances for basic necessities, as is the case with residents of many rural areas and small towns.

Second is the demographic context. The steady low-skill and high-wage industrial labor that had been available in the now-defunct industrial sector attracted a sizeable Latino population over the past three decades. The challenges of social, educational, and economic integration between the Latino and White populations is an important element of Riverside's context. Furthermore, citizens involved with the immigrant population described the unique educational challenges of a bifurcated Latino population: new immigrants who have a desire for education but face access issues, and second- and third-generation Latinos who often are unmotivated or do not value high school completion, preferring to earn money as soon as they are able.

Third is the geographic context. Riverside is located in an outlying part of the state marked by rolling hills and valleys. Local business leaders described how geographic distance from major cities and proximity from major throughways, in addition to a dearth of flat, buildable land, are factors that have impeded efforts to restore the once thriving industrial sector. As part of a regional effort, Riverside has been able to capitalize on aspects of its cultural and geographic history to develop a modest tourist trade. In addition, the natural beauty of the area adds to the appeal for residents and visitors. Although the business community has embraced this shift from manufacturing to tourism, several business leaders characterized the tourist industry as a bandage only, and not a reliable long-term solution. In response, several business enterprise and educational concerns have banded together to form an entrepreneurship incubator, believing that the best way to safeguard the community from a repeat of previous economic troubles is by growing a variety of local businesses. This initiative, still in its early years, has already yielded positive results, and its tie with a nearby community college further provides a point of educational opportunity for local residents, offering several workforce training courses. Still, one business leader, perhaps wistful for days gone by, expressed that the community also needs larger, more established businesses or industries to help anchor the local economy. Clearly, Riverside has a variety of resources available, but area residents also have a variety of visions for future growth and sustainability.

Fourth is the educational history and context. Over the past decade, Riverside School District has experienced mostly positive academic growth, accompanied by steady enrollment numbers and bolstered by the inclusion of a small cohort of students whose residence is outside the school district. In some locations, this practice is used to keep base demographics steady. However, similar to the practice of state universities that import out-of-state "full pay" and highly qualified matriculates, it can also be used to improve aggregate achievement data.

Whether this practice was in effect at Riverside was unclear, though the impact may be the same regardless of intentionality. Demographically, Riverside School District is primarily White, with a sizable minority of students of Latino heritage and a small and shrinking African-American population. In the past decade, more than half of students were identified as "low income" according toVirginia Department of Education metrics, placing Riverside School District above the Virginia state average of 37%. Graduation rates for all students and for low-income students outpace corresponding state averages of 82% and 77% respectively. Dropout rates were well below the state average of 9.3%. Together, these figures suggest academic success despite a challenging environment and demographics.

Greenfield School District

Although the town in which Greenfield School District is located has only a handful of eating establishments and gas stations and no banks or grocery stores, the borders of this farming region abut a medium-sized town with a regional state university and requisite commercial and health-care facilities. Though not adjoining the county, the sprawl from a nearby metropolitan area touches neighboring districts, providing employment opportunities for those in Greenfield District who are willing to endure the commute. Some Greenfield teachers and administrators also live in the neighboring areas due to improved housing options, employment opportunities for family members, and other social and economic factors. Local civic leaders noted the challenges of this bedroom community environment, where a lack of local infrastructure has frustrated attempts to attract industry. As well, many citizens in this conservative and traditional area have been suspicious and reluctant to fully embrace the cost and concept of economic development, preferring to preserve the slower pace of life that has historically been a hallmark of regional life.

Despite this hesitance, local civic and business leaders forged ahead, zoning an area for an industrial park and investing in utilities that would support future growth. Several promising though slowly coalescing economic development opportunities are on the horizon that required the county to trade on its land and natural resources to meet the growing needs of the nearby cities and towns.

Demographically, Greenfield School District has shifted from majority African-American to majority White over the past decade. Slightly larger than Riverside and Heritage school districts, the student population has grown by several hundred students over the past ten years. The percentage of Free and Reduced School Lunch (FRSL) qualifiers was well above 50% at the time of site selection. Graduation rates for low-income and general populations were just above state averages in 2008 and have improved since. Though dropout rates were slightly higher than state averages, they have since dropped below this mark as well. Greenfield's commitment to a

dual enrollment program and partnership with a local community college and regional university has led to a high percentage – over half – of graduates holding an advanced diploma.

Heritage School District

Because of its unique geographic features and its distance from major highways and interstates, Heritage County is isolated from major industries and commercial development that have benefitted other areas of the Commonwealth in the last several decades. Apart from one major industrial company located there, agriculture dominates both the economic base and landscape of the county.

Heritage County has experienced an influx of new residents over the last decade. Many are retirees or families that have moved to Heritage because of its distance from urban centers. Quite a few of these new residents are not employed in the County. Some long-term residents felt that these new residents were not as invested in the community, which occasionally resulted in political tension over taxes and funding for larger public projects and organizations, such as the local school system. The rural nature of Heritage that attracts newcomers also creates significant obstacles to long-term employment opportunities for local residents. Although there are low-skill and seasonal jobs available, a majority of residents who are not involved in agriculture work outside of Heritage, commuting one to two hours, each way, each work day. The commuting residents work in a range of low-skill, tradesman, and professional positions, with a majority of low-income residents working in the hospitality or food industry.

Like Greenfield County, Heritage lacks a full-service grocery store. This fact held both functional and symbolic importance. Although residents can buy milk and a limited selection of necessities from local convenience stores and gas stations, they must travel 45 minutes for access to a major grocery store chain in order to have a selection of nutritious food and specialized ingredients. Participants cited the lack of good roads through the county and their distance from major thoroughfares as reasons why grocery stores would not come to the area. The idea of a major grocery store chain opening in Heritage was described by many participants as an economic springboard that would encourage other businesses and companies to invest locally as well.

School personnel commented on the educational strides that have occurred in Heritage over the past decade, including increased graduation rates and advanced academic offerings. However, the school system's success has been the product of painful changes in both personnel and policies. Today, the school system utilizes a mix of partnerships and programs to encourage students to seek postsecondary education. The middle school has received grant funds to develop college-going activities. The high school partners with the local community college to

offer dual enrollment courses and partners with regional universities for on-site student interviews. Impressively, low-income students graduate at a rate higher than the state average for all students, and nearly half graduate with an advanced diploma. Although there is no completely accurate way to track postsecondary matriculation and performance, National Clearinghouse statistics support school administrators' observations that a majority of low-income studenst go on to some form of higher education. In many cases, students attend the local community college.

The population of Heritage County is predominantly African-American. Along with a significant minority of White residents, these two groups constitute most of the County residents. To the casual observer the racial make-up of Heritage County might suggest that racial tensions could be one of the primary challenges that the community faces. Yet the greatest point of friction identified by community members was the divide between established families who had lived in the community for generations and newcomers attracted to the natural beauty, inexpensive land, and relative geographic isolation of the area. Participants described the pace of life in Heritage as "slow" and said that to accomplish tasks within the community meant developing strong interpersonal relationships with community leaders, business owners, and public employees. For newcomers who are unaccustomed to this social structure and culture, their initial interactions with established residents can often be perceived as abrasive by both parties. This cultural divide extends beyond personal day-to-day interaction, becoming more complex at the governmental level. Here, established residents' concerns about funding public projects clash with the low taxes that incentivized newcomers to relocate to Heritage.

Timberland School District

Timberland School District serves a comparatively small geographic area which, like Riverside, is fortunate to contain many of the local area's service industries, retail businesses, and eating establishments, with a mix of local establishments and national chains. Timberland also benefits from a nearby four-lane highway and rail yard, making transportation of goods and persons directly to the region possible, though still indirect, given the local topography. Timberland owes its existence and prosperity to intensive and large-scale resource gathering, though local residents and business owners expressed concern about the future viability of this practice as the foundation of economic prosperity. Attempts have been made to diversify the economic base beyond service, retail, and resource gathering and processing, though these initiatives have met with limited success. A major issue voiced by several participants is establishing employment opportunities that attract and retain the area's better students. Currently this sort of retention is limited since most employment not involved in resource gathering is in low-wage, high-turnover positions. The push for local jobs for educated students is made more acute by two nearby higher education institutions (one a community college and

the other a public four-year university) whose student body is pulled primarily from the region and who often wish to remain local after graduation. Although these educational institutions are both themselves sources of employment and economic activity, many committed residents find that a commute to other regional towns and cities is necessary to find work.

Timberland Schools have done reasonably well despite small size and the large population of low-income students in the area. Graduation rates are very similar to the state on-time average rate, though dropout rates are several percentage points higher. Partnerships with nearby higher education institutions, and the community college in particular, has provided a *de facto* outsourcing option for many advanced and technical courses that otherwise may have been handled at the school level. As a result, the percentage of students with an advanced diploma (which strongly correlates with college-going) nears 50%. Timberland Schools struggle with graduating VDOE-designated "economically disadvantaged" students, though well over half of all graduates with a standard diploma or better go on to some sort of postsecondary education. The population of Timberland is predominantly White, with a small Hispanic membership and a handful of African-American students.

However, achievement data cannot describe the culture of education at Timberland, nor the tough road ahead faced by the Superintendent and the School Board. The historic availability of well-paying resource-gathering jobs that require minimal formal education works against the imperative for preparation for some type of postsecondary education. To some degree this career option also works at cross purposes with the two nearby educational institutions since it contributes to a culture where many young men believe they will be able to earn a good living without postsecondary education. Yet both educational institutions have attempted to identify and match curricular offerings to local established and emergent employment needs, though the process and product has been inconsistent.

The Superintendent described the strong sense of morale among teachers and administrators and the high level of school support among community members that he experienced from the first day of employment. Local residents are strong supporters of the district which has long had a reputation for its quality schools, though some constituents commented that this reputation may not have consistently held up across school levels. Yet because of the small size of the school district and the considerable expense of maintaining and operating the schools, the long-term viability of the district is in question. The economic challenge is further exacerbated by facilities expenses that, despite local support, still test the resolve of residents to carry the financial burden of needed renovations and general budget shortfalls.

Western School District

In contrast to Timberland, Western School District is marked by open farmland and the mixed fortune to be located near natural resources that attract a considerable number of seasonal tourists, some of whom choose to maintain vacation homes as well. As a result, although Western has a grocery store, several mid-level national chain hotels, and a small variety of eateries, the economic base is still relatively small and dependent upon a few industries and agricultural production. Like the other districts, local civic and business leaders in Western view the paucity (in size and number) of businesses and industries as a major source of concern. Worries about the local economy manifest on several fronts, including the need for a solid and consistent tax base and the desire to attract and retain college-educated locals.

As described by several residents, the population is made up of three informal groups: the "been-here's" (long-time residents), the "come here's" (new residents, often vacation home owners or retirees) and the "come back here's" (native sons and daughters who return, often to retire). Although some of these demarcations exist in the other locales (most clearly in Heritage and Greenfield), at Western they symbolize fundamental points of tension regarding the identity and future of the region. As a geographically isolated area, at least some portion of residents view this remoteness as a valuable resource worth preserving (primarily the "been here's"). Many of the "come here's" and the "come back here's" bring with them a more progressive approach to economic development, wanting to attract new industries and businesses through incentives, infrastructure, and programs. Without generalizing beyond the point of accuracy, "come back here's" are often those who left to pursue higher education and professional lives, and view those who did not, according to one participant, as those who either did not have options to leave, or those whose families had economic stakes such that they were compelled to stay.

The condition and position of education within this context is similarly contested ground. Western struggles with low graduation rates (though dropout rates were close to state averages), negatively impacted by a high number of single parents, a high level of local poverty, and a sizable enclave of seasonal farm laborers with few resources and often minimal family expectations for educational advancement. The school district has experienced frequent turnover in some administrative positions, and is in school improvement, which has provided some much needed and appreciated organizational and financial resources. About one-third of students are White, the largest demographic group is African-American students, and Latinos represent a small but considerable sub-population as well.

The combination of geographic isolation, transportation challenges, minimal employment options, and limited nearby college options (a community college is located in the next county)

contributes to a low percentage of students who go on to a two- or four-year education after high school. Participants discussed the challenges of developing aspirations without colleges or universities nearby where students can visit and begin to form an idea of what college would be like for them. Financial strains brought on by the economic downturn have resulted in some staff layoffs and programmatic cuts, with less funding available for students to take dual enrollment courses or advanced placement tests through the community college and at the high school. Several participants connected the educational struggles of the system, a "do nothing" culture that tended to dampen achievement aspirations, and a dearth of sources of local involvement: few activities for youth, few summer programs, and few employment or internship opportunities. In almost all cases, existing activities designed to inspire postsecondary aspirations were dependent upon coordinated or personal transportation to neighboring counties.

Despite these negative factors and elements, a vocal and activist group of locals and educators are pushing for improvement through support organizations, volunteering, and fundraising. The convergence of purpose among new administrators and teachers, support from a cohort of new and long-time residents, and the resources offered through school improvement seem to be creating positive momentum within Western School District.

Twinsburg School District

The social and economic resources of Twinsburg School District have long been divided between two nearby towns that now share a school system. These include a smattering of small retail shops, the obligatory dollar store, and two franchised grocery stores, among other local businesses that offer basic necessities to the county's residents. Twinsburg School District represents a kind of middle ground among the other case districts, both in terms of size, resources, and population. In the past, agriculture, resource gathering, and the processing and production of related products formed the economic pillars of the region. However, the combination of shifting markets and new machines and technology that reduce reliance on manual labor have greatly diminished both the scope of these projects and the number of residents they employ. Additionally, through the happenstance of historical events and geography, Twinsburg's current ability to foster an industrial base is hampered by its distance from major through-ways and rail lines, both of which are more than ten miles away. As a result, Twinsburg is at a competitive disadvantage in its bid to attract new industries and businesses. Nevertheless, the locale does have several small to mid-sized industries that have carved out market niches and contribute both jobs and dollars to the local economy.

Despite these apparent advantages, local business boosters still expressed distress at the loss of large-scale manufacturing from the area in the past half-decade. Concurrent with the exodus of industry was an outward migration of the citizenry, reducing the school-aged

population by two-thirds over this period. A local government official discussed at length the challenges of finding owners for all the houses in their town who would, at a minimum, maintain the structures and help to support the tax base. The lingering question seemed to be: what does "thriving" look like for a community when the times of greatest economic prosperity and human capital appear to be over?

Although a large portion of the remaining population is centered near the two hubs of the county, residents, often poor and minority individuals, are also dispersed to the far corners of the jurisdiction, increasing the challenge of transportation and communications technology. The school system's technology director laughed that people assume she has broadband internet access at her home in an outlying area by virtue of her professional position and technological knowledge. Fortunately, the school system has been able to leverage grants and other resources to provide high speed internet access to and between the schools, which the technology director noted was essential to meeting the requirements of state mandated testing.

Similarly, the location of the schools in and near the towns creates a dual and somewhat disparate experience for town residents versus those living in outlying areas. Lack of transportation to sporting events, after school tutoring, and summer youth programs makes participation and attendance at these gatherings difficult for poorer residents. Even residents of means are challenged by the logistics of time and distance when work requires an hour commute each way. Nevertheless, Twinsburg has found ways to leverage their school buildings (the newer structures in particular) to host community education and recreation events through external funding.

The population served by Twinsburg School District is about two-thirds White, one-third African-American, and less than ten percent Latino. These racial and ethnic dynamics impact district and regional life in terms of lingering African-American /White tensions seen in the dearth of African-Americans in positions of civic leadership. As well, the recent swell of Latino residents has pressed the schools and local agencies to develop services and resources to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking students and parents. Twinsburg's achievement statistics are something of an enigma, though they reflect the complex reality of many schools: Although the district is challenged by low graduation rates and a high drop-out rate, low-income students show success on three measures. First, economically disadvantaged students graduate at the same rate as their middle- and upper-income classmates. Second, low-income graduates attend two- and four-year colleges at a rate toward the top of the case study cohort. Third, more VDOE-classified economically disadvantaged students graduate with an advanced diploma than do their peers from other economic groups. All this, despite a Free and Reduced School Lunch qualification rate of nearly 70%, suggesting a complicated convergence of success and challenge.

Like other rural and outlying areas in this study, Twinsburg is, by and large, a conservative place pushed and pulled on various fronts by concerns about future economic viability, population stability, and the sorts of education needed to prepare area students for 21st century employment. One long-time teacher and administrator noted that the local ethos is to "work harder" at familiar forms of manual labor rather than to seek education that would provide entrée to more advanced or technical employment. Even within the schools and among administrators we heard differing accounts of the importance of technical and career education versus traditional college-level academic preparation and the sorts of resources and experiences needed to support those similar yet divergent goals. Twinsburg has a regionally accessible community college and a small private liberal arts college nearby, creating the opportunity for partnerships, advanced and developmental course offerings, and exposure to higher education settings that might increase students' imagination for college-going. Yet again, distances to these institutions require time, transportation resources, and logistics at a cost to the school district and the individuals involved.

Summary

These community descriptions illustrate some of the strengths, successes, challenges, and tensions that are a part of the fabric of daily life in the six rural and outlying communities in this study. All the case study districts were facing economic development issues that left unresolved questions about future financial viability. Paralleling the daily reality of many of these districts' low-income residents, the six case districts live close to the margins in a tenuous balance between internal resource management and dependency on external political and economic forces beyond local control. Just as a sick child or an unexpected car repair bill can set in motion a chain of unwanted and escalating events for a poor individual or family (late for work, loss of income or even a job, and so on), so small towns and rural areas can suffer significantly with the loss of just one industry or a new legislative act that results in cuts to much-needed state funding. On the other hand, just as low-income residents are often forced to be resourceful, to make more from less, to rely on informal networks, and to make do without services that upper-income individuals view as necessities, so rural areas find ways to cope by sharing, shifting, and maximizing human, material, and financial resources in tough times. Understanding how this process involves and impacts both local public/private resources and educational opportunities for residents is an important part of the findings and conclusions of this study that are discussed in the next section.

Section Two:
Understanding School-Community Partnerships: Definitions and Descriptions

<u>Guiding Question</u>: What types of community partnerships exist in the case districts?

After establishing a basic definition of school-community partnerships, this section will explain the following aspects of community partners and their roles:

1. <u>Part One</u>: The types of community partners present in the six case study school districts.

2. <u>Part Two</u>: The categories of partnering activities which are present in the case study school districts.

3. <u>Part Three</u>: The activities that are typically undertaken by particular community partners identified in the case study school districts.

4. <u>Part Four</u>: A brief summary of teacher survey results that relate directly to school-community partnerships.

This section focuses on demarcating types and developing descriptions; the following sections analyze how these types and functions serve the school districts in which they are present. The purpose of this discussion is to both clarify the nature of community partnerships and their functions, and to provide a broader frame of reference for school administrators, teachers, and community members who may wish to identify new sources for partnerships, or better utilize existing partnerships.

Defining School-Community Partnerships

For the purposes of this study, a school-community partnership can be either direct or indirect, defined as the following:

- A *direct partnership* occurs when an entity (individual or group) intentionally collaborates with a local school system, school, or local school representative (administrator, teacher, set of classes, etc.) to support, promote, enable, or facilitate student learning, development, or positive attitudes toward education, reflective of the goals of the local schools.

- An *indirect partnership* occurs anytime an entity (individual or group) engages in behaviors that support, promote, enable, or facilitate student learning, development, or positive attitudes toward education.

This study will focus on direct partnerships primarily since they tend to be most prominent, have the largest impact, be the most persistent, and are the most easily identifiable. However, throughout this section we are deliberate in noting the important role of indirect and non-organizational partners, which although difficult to identify and quantify, still serve an important function in supporting the success of students and schools. As well, this study is particularly focused on partnerships that promote college-going aspirations (that is, postsecondary education of some kind, be it two-year, four-year, or technical), and partnerships that meet the unique and pressing needs of Virginia's low-income students.

Part One: Partnership Types

Researchers have identified as many as twelve types of community partners (Sanders, 2006):
1. Business and industry
2. Higher education (two-year, four-year, technical)
3. Health care
4. Government/military
5. National service
6. Faith-based (congregations and para-church organizations)
7. Senior citizens
8. Cultural/recreational (parks, museums, theaters, etc.)
9. Other community
10. Sports teams (typically professional teams)
11. Media organizations (newspapers, radio, television, etc.)
12. Individuals

Given the college preparation, aspiration, and application emphasis of this study and the differences in the number and type of resources available in our case study areas, we condensed this list to six types of organizations, plus individual citizens:

1. College access providers (not including higher education institutions)
2. Business
3. Non-profit
4. Public agency
5. Faith-based
6. Higher education
7. Individuals

The category of "college access providers" refers to non-profit organizations and public agencies that offer or promote the skills, knowledge, information, and aspiration to prepare for, apply to, and enter some sort of postsecondary education. The unique role of college access provider organizations is explored more fully in Section Three. This organizational type includes federal TRIO programs, the Virginia Community College System's Career Coaches program, and other such programs. We included "individuals" as a partner category for two reasons. First, because individuals who give of their time, energy, and resources, but are not connected to a formal organization, play an important role in local educational success. Second, because informal networks and individual initiative are central aspects of how needs are met in small rural communities, and it is impossible to construct a clear sense of the systems of supports for students and schools without a sufficient appreciation for the burden many individuals shoulder without or outside of formal organizational responsibilities.

Figure 1 (below) provides a general overview of our six organizational categories and their frequency distribution in our case study districts. This list is not definitive and organizations likely exist that were not mentioned to us in our data collection process. Still, the figure provides a sense of the variety and variance between locations, while at the same time highlighting that with the exception of higher education institutions[12], at least one of every type are present in each location. An "x" indicates that this type of community partner is present, but the number of organizations fitting this description and participating in partnership activities is unknown or unverifiable[13].

Figure 1: Category and Distribution of Community Partner Types

Category and Distribution of Community Partner Types						
	Riverside	Greenfield	Heritage	Twinsburg	Timberland	Western
Access Providers	4	3	2	2	3	4
Business	x	x	x	x	x	x
Non-profit	6	9	7	6	4	7
Faith-Based	x	x	x	x	x	x
Public	5	4	5	6	2	2
Higher Education	3	2	0	2	3	1

Figure 2 (following page) identifies either by name or by general description the specific community partners found in our case study districts. This list represents a baseline compilation constructed from the accounts of participants and is extensive but may not be exhaustive.

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[12]Numbers of higher education institutions are based on those in reasonably close driving proximity, but not necessarily in the school districts or county jurisdiction boundaries. Our methodology on this point is based on approximate drive time and not a formal metric such as distance.
[13] The categories of "business" and "faith-based" are marked with Xs only since we had no way to quantify the number of these organizations that participate in partnership-type activities or endeavors.

**Figure 2: Identified Community Partners
in the Six Case Districts**

College Access Partnerships
GEAR UP
Career Coach
Talent Search
Provider A*
Provider B*
Super Saturday
Upward Bound
Provider C*
Community education foundations

Business Partnerships
Energy suppliers
Financial institutions
Industries
Retail and service businesses
Agriculture and resource gathering outfits
Business and industry associations
Doctors, lawyers, other professionals

Non-Profit Partnerships
Community education foundations
NAACP
Rotary Club
Lions Club
Men's organizations*
Arts organizations
Women's Club
Ruritan Club
Garden Club
Youth sports
Fraternities/Sororities
Historical Societies
Lunch Buddies
Father's organizations*
Farm Bureau

(Non-profit, continued)
Kiwanis Club
American Legion
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Chamber of Commerce
Community action agency
Mental health agency
Literacy agency*
Employment assistance agency*

Faith-Based Partnerships
Churches
Ministerial associations
Religious education clubs*
Religious youth organizations

Public Partnerships
Police/Fire departments
Mental health organizations
4-H/County Extension Office
State Parks/Fisheries/Game offices
Youth services office*
Community recreation
Social Services
Head Start
Americorps
Resource center for parents

Higher Education Partnerships
Technical institutes
Community College
Four-year institution

School Volunteers
Athletic booster club
Band booster club
Parent organizations: High school
Parent organizations: Elementary
In-school volunteer programs
Alumni associations
Informal support systems

*denotes a generalized name to avoid identification

Part Two: Partnership Activities

Understanding the potential resources in a given community is a necessary first step toward developing a greater imagination for ways in which the aims of schools and the resources of a community can be more effectively aligned. **Figure 3** (following page) illustrates the services and activities that we identified under each of the partner type activities introduced above. Since higher education institutions are partners of a different type, they have not been included on this list. Like Figures 1 & 2, this list is not exhaustive, but it is suggestive of the range of ways that community partners may engage in supporting students' health, well-being, family systems, educational performance, life skills, career plans, postsecondary aspirations, and other facets of physical, social, cognitive, moral, and intellectual development.

Figures 1-3, taken together, provide several important insights about the type and nature of resources available in rural areas. First, that although each of the six partner categories (**Figure 1**) have elements that reflect the character and foci of that organization or type of organization, each one also offers services and activities that overlap with other categories, rather like a Venn diagram. Thus, business community partners are often interested in promoting related interests and careers, and as part of their involvement may offer a scholarship for students entering a particular academic major. Faith-based partners, in addition to religious and moral concerns, may focus on meeting physical and emotional needs, but also offer a community service scholarship. As a result, two types of partners with disparate primary organizational purposes (making money in the first case and pursuing religious faithfulness in the second) may end up similarly supporting a student's college ambitions.

Second, although the list of possible community partners is quite long (**Figure 2**) and each school district has at least some partnership options in each of the six categories (**Figure 1**), we know that each school district's available and possible partner options are fewer because this is a compilation of all six districts. Furthermore, the particular combination of available partners greatly shapes the type of partnership resources available. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that each community, no matter how small, has multiple sources and types of partnerships spread across our six categories and are able, in various combinations, to offer many of the services and activities identified in **Figure 3**. Often rural school districts, by virtue of local conditions, may have a dearth of business partners. Yet a thorough understanding of what services these partners typically offer and what other entities might address some of those functions (such as churches, parks offices, game offices, or even businesses from outside the immediate area) may provide new avenues through which schools can access community resources.

Figure 3: Typical Partnership Services and Activities by Partner Category

College Access Providers
Application/FAFSA/Financial aid forms
College visits/tours
General cultural events
Academic tutoring
College advising
Career advising
College entry information
Academic accountability
Scholarship information
Loan information
Scholarship dispersal
Parental programs/information
Access support for underserved populations
SAT/ACT test preparation

Business and Industry
Presentations about career options
Mock interviews
Reality store/simulations
School supply donations
Grants/scholarships
Educational resources/instruction
Job Fairs
Loan/donate equipment
Educational initiatives

Non-profit (Excl. faith-based)
Scholarships
Recognition events
Community advocacy and activism
Service opportunities
Mentoring
Tutoring
Cultural opportunities
Educational programs, seminars, etc.
Mental health services and education
Physical/wellness education
Employment counseling, prep, etc.
Special interest or life skills development
Sports and athletics leagues/training/funding
Performance-based contests (writing, etc.)
Educational skill development (literacy, etc.)
Parental programs/support/socialization

Faith-based
Food for needy students
Support for teachers
Meals for sports teams
Student tutoring/mentoring
Religious education opportunities
Tutoring
Special events (graduation, etc.)
Summer events
Positive youth socialization
GED program recruitment/hosting
School supplies
Information conduit to population
Site for school outreach meetings
Socialization to value of education
Academic accountability and reinforcement
Scholarships

Public Agency
Public safety education (fire dept., etc.)
Mental health education and services
Educational programs (in school)
Educational programs (out of school)
Cultural education/socialization
Positive youth socialization
Life skills development
Mentoring
Tutoring
Transportation to/from events
Life Skills programs
Services coordination
Parental education/socialization
Job prep/training/location services
College and career advising
College socialization
Family support/counseling
College visits
School supplies collection
Sports/recreation opportunities
Academic socialization
Physical health services

Part Three: Comparing Activity Types to Community Partner Types

       Generally speaking, school-community partnership activities fall into one of four categories: student-centered, family-centered, school-centered, or community-centered (Sanders, 2006).

<u>Student-centered</u> activities include any intervention that improves a student's intellectual, emotional, or physical well-being and development, including mentoring, tutoring, awards, incentives, scholarships, internships, or field trips, among others.

<u>Family-centered</u> activities are those that provide entertainment, family management skills, adult education, counseling, or other services that improve parenting skills, parents' life prospects, or the condition of the family.

<u>School-centered</u> activities benefit schools in their operation, resources, and educational endeavors. This might include collecting box tops for school supplies, donations of equipment, awards for schools or teachers, and classroom assistance.

<u>Community-centered</u> activities involve outreach and support that benefits either local sub-populations (fuel drives for senior citizens) or the common good (such as park clean-up).

Sanders (2006) notes that student-centered activities tend to be most prevalent and community-centered activities occur least frequently. Furthermore, school-centered and family-centered partnership activities are identified as particularly important in schools with large numbers of high-need and resource-poor students.

    Although these four categories are helpful and descriptive, the category "student-centered" disguises a great deal of variation and nuance. Below we have divided the student-centered category into four sub-sets that provide additional detail that better reflects the foci of this project. Along with the remaining categories, this list now includes seven types of services and activities:

1. Student-Centered: College and Career Preparation, Socialization, and Information
2. Student-Centered: Other Educational Activities
3. Student-Centered: Health and Wellness
4. Student-Centered: Other
5. Family-Centered
6. School-Centered
7. Community-Centered

The figure in **Appendix D** (p. 118) develops these data sub-sets one step further by combining like services and activities from **Figure 2** above (for example, all the instances of "mentoring"), and placing them within one of the seven categories of foci listed above. Appendix D then compares the seven categories of partnership focus with the six types of partners (college access, business, non-profit, faith-based, public, and higher education), with the final categories of "individuals" and "schools" added to highlight that many of these functions are carried out in ways outside of formal community roles. The benefit of this matrix is that it demonstrates the points of intersection between activity types (rows) and partner types (columns), providing a quick overview of how particular organizations, agencies, and entities meet the needs of the students in these rural communities. The major limitation of this study is that we are not able, by agreement with our districts, to identify them or the partners in the area in a way that would reveal the location of the school divisions.

<u>Application to Career and College Readiness</u>

As previously introduced, the focus of this study is on factors that impact low-income students and their aspirations for postsecondary education. Low-income students, particularly in high school, often face the dual challenge of overcoming deficits at both ends of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a lack (at times severe) of basic resources such as adequate food, shelter, and clothing at the foundational end, and a lack of encouragement and knowledge about college admissions, financial aid, and entry requirement processes at the higher-order end. In considering low-income students' needs and the resources to address them provided by school-community partnerships, we have identified seven categories that represent particular aspects of the challenges and obstacles they face:

1. *College knowledge*: To successfully navigate the college preparation and entry process, students and their families must learn and understand information about application forms and processes, financial aid forms and processes, college affordability, and college opportunities, among other details. College knowledge is developed through straightforward information delivery and through socialization to college-going through familial and peer relationships where college attendance is valued and discussed.

2. *College aspirations*: To a great degree, the desire and commitment to go to college provides the impetus for a student to overcome many of the encumbering elements that are part of college knowledge. Aspirations also provide the motivation to take on and succeed in more difficult coursework in high school and to pursue co-curricular opportunities that will make him or her into a more attractive college candidate. Aspirations are built through firsthand experiences with higher education coursework and through exposure to realistic views of college life, through the encouragement of peers and trusted adults, and through academic success and recognition, among other sources.

3. *Career interest*: Like college aspirations, career interest is essentially the desire to learn about and pursue possible vocational opportunities, whether they require postsecondary education or not. Career interest arises from firsthand experiences that allow a student to envision him or herself in that role, and through understanding and creating a plan to accomplish the requisite academic or technical preparation necessary.

4. *Academic interest*: This category identifies a student's general interest in learning and academic success that is a prerequisite for college preparation and scholastic achievement. Academic interest is similar to college aspirations and career interest in that it is an intangible will or desire to persevere, though academic interest is more specifically a matter of the enjoyment and relish of taking in new information, making connections between aspects of learning, and applying learning to new situations. Academic interest is gained from diverse positive learning experiences occurring inside and outside the school setting.

5. *Academic skills*: Academic skills are fundamental abilities that allow a student to work within the structures of formal education and succeed in that environment. At the most basic, they include the ability to listen, to hear and follow instructions, and to focus on a task. More advanced skills include the ability to memorize facts, to understand the role of context, to use information to solve problems, to summarize information in one's own words, and to synthesize, compare, and contrast multiple pieces of information. Academic skills are learned through academic experience, but also through intentional activities and hands-on experiences.

6. *Life skills*: Of the deficits faced by low-income students, life skills are the most easily overlooked since they are not as pressing as basic needs, and not part of formal assessment like academic interest. Life skills include social skills, money management, conflict resolution, task persistence, self control, and other categories of behavior and self-perspective that are part of family socialization for many upper-income students. Life skills are important for success in all aspects of life, including relationships, education, and career. These abilities are gained through both observation and practice.

7. *Basic necessities*: Basic necessities are life essentials that make all other tasks more difficult when not sufficiently met. These include adequate sustenance, housing, clothing and other personal needs. This category might also include social and emotional care and support. These needs are met through direct giving and through healthy relationships.

For many students the needs in these seven categories are met through their families and through pre-existing social networks, supplemented by formal education, and to a lesser degree, sources of community support. However, for many low-income students who either lack

parental support or whose parents are unwilling or unable due to their own deficits in knowledge and ability to provide these intangibles for their children, school and community intervention becomes essential.

Community Partner's Services and Activities by Student Need Category

Appendix E (p. 120) combines this list of needs, skills, interests, and aspirations with the list of case study district partners (**Figure 2**) to identify which of these elements are addressed by which organizations and entities. As with the other figures, the points of convergence we identify are based on our best information and may be incomplete. Nevertheless, the patterns evident here suggest three important conclusions. First, this distribution illustrates the fairly obvious point that community partners fill a variety of roles, though some are more central, more specialized, and more involved than others. As noted by Sanders (2006), partnerships vary on several sliding scales:

1. Peripheral <------------------------------> Central
2. Simple relationship <--------------------> Complex relationship
3. Short-term <------------------------------> Long-term
4. Single event <----------------------------> Frequent events

What these scales show is how much variety is present not only in the basic type (**Figure 2**) and function (**Figure 2**; **Appendix D**) of community partners, but also in the nature of the relationship to the school district. Since it was not our aim in data collection to quantify all aspects of community partners we are unable to plot each partner on these scales. However, community activists, local officials, and school administrators and teachers might find the process of plotting their own partnerships to be a helpful exercise. These scales also suggest how an organization might currently be positioned across the four measures, and how it might increase (or be asked to increase) levels of involvement. For example, a civic organization who offers a yearly scholarship (plotted as "marginal", "simple", "long-term", and one-quarter off the "single events" end) might be asked to consider visiting home rooms to talk about local civic involvement, or to create a community service project that also meets the educational objectives of a civics, history, or art class, thus becoming increasingly central, increasingly complex, and increasingly frequent.

Second, and building on the sliding scales concept, **Appendix D** illustrates the relative complexity and breadth of the services and activities in which particular organizations and entities engage. A simple matrix like this cannot identify effect, size, or the depth of involvement of each of these partners, but it is instructive to recognize that some partners may be in a position to meet several of these student need areas simultaneously, while others might benefit from coordination or collaboration with others for increased potency.

Third, **Appendix E** illustrates that certain types of partners tend to be more involved in certain categories of activities:

College access providers obviously will focus primarily on academic skills and dispositions, though from our prior access study we know that the interpersonal relationships they form often draw them into situations where they attempt to meet or connect students with individuals and agencies that can help them meet basic physical needs.

Non-profit organizations[14], often local groups formed around a common point of interest, covered nearly every category as a whole, but individual organizations tended to meet only one or two of the student need types examined. There were, however, several exceptions: community education foundations and community employment assistance organizations frequently were involved with promoting education and student needs at a number of points.

Businesses tend to occupy two positions: 1) facilitating career and academic interests based on their own functions, or 2) desire to promote an educated workforce, life skills, or basic necessities, often through charitable giving, such as food, school supplies, clothing, and goods related to the output of the specific business. Non-profit partners from our analysis were primarily active in academic areas, often related to scholarships, contests, and occasionally educational workshops or special assemblies in school. For some of the organizations, mentoring and tutoring were important functions, though this was not consistent across the segment.

Faith-based organizations covered most of the spectrum, though the involvement of any one congregation or group was often isolated to one or two functions (tutoring and a scholarship, for example). However in each location in this study, and particularly those with the fewest resources, churches played an important if not central role in reinforcing educational values, encouraging college aspirations, and encouraging the development of life skills. Additionally, churches were conduits for information about school programs and initiatives, and sometimes served as the locations for community outreach meetings by superintendents. Although this level of activism was not the case for all congregations, each community did have at least several prominent and highly active congregations that viewed educational success as an important goal to be pursued on multiple fronts.

Public agencies and organizations tended to skew toward meeting basic student needs, often in the form of food, clothing, and housing assistance. Exceptions were groups such as 4-H which offered a wide range of activities and experiences that reflected both programs typical of the organization generally (plant science, camps, etc.), as well as locally developed initiatives.

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[14] Note: those non-profit organizations that are also access provider organizations were listed with the access provider group. The same is true with public agencies and organizations.

Finally, we included the menagerie of higher education institutions, booster organizations, and informal support systems to again acknowledge the many alternative sources of support that student's experience.

Part Four: School/Community Partnership Teacher Survey Results

A total of 371 teachers voluntarily began the school/community partnership survey, with 300 teachers completing the entire instrument. Demographically, the majority of respondents were female (77%) and over age of 40 (55%). Fifty-two percent of respondents (N=371) did not reside in the same school/district in which they taught. Seventy-six percent of teachers (N=346) felt that school/community partnerships were important to students, with 83% reporting that partnerships did not send the message that schools were weak. Forty-nine percent agreed that partnerships enabled them to focus on specific student needs, while others were met by outside organizations.

Only 25% of teachers (N=346) agreed that school/community partnerships required additional time that they were unable to provide due to other teacher-related obligations. The most common partnership detractors reported were the lack of funding (23%), insufficient communication (23%), and the need for additional personnel (18%). Eighty-nine percent of teachers (N=329) were aware of community partnerships, with 44% of those respondents indicating that school administration managed those relationships. When asked to identify the types of services partnerships provided, the most frequent responses (N=315) were afterschool programs (20%) and meeting holistic family needs (13%), such as counseling or parenting classes. College preparation and assistance only received a 6% response, the lowest of ten service-related choices.

Overall, the results indicate that the teachers who responded to the survey within the six case districts were very supportive of school/community partnerships. When prompted, survey participants identified similar partnership organizations and individuals that were discussed by the qualitative interview participants. However, the survey responses ranged dramatically by individual respondent and district. Although school and community leaders often communicated a running list of partnerships in their interviews, teacher survey responses typically ranged from 0-3 partnerships. This demonstrates the need for school administrators, community leaders, and other appropriate individuals to clearly articulate to staff what partnerships exist, what programs and services are available, and what staff can do to help maximize partnerships.

Summary

Community partnerships, even in small rural school districts, are as diverse in type as they are in function. In this section we have outlined and illustrated some of the ways in which

these organizations vary, overlap, and complement each other. A few community partners address future aspirations, academic and life skills, and basic necessities. Other organizations specialize in one or two particular areas, in keeping with their purpose, financial resources, and personnel. Knowing a district's current and potential partnering resources in all their variation is an important first step toward maximizing the contributions and collaborations of these resources as a community system.

Section Three:
The Role of College Access Provider Organizations

Guiding Question: In what ways do college access provider organizations relate to and collaborate with schools and other community partners?

One result of the current cultural and political focus on postsecondary educational opportunity is that concerned citizens and legislators have attempted to increase college access not only through the K-12 system by improving educational preparation and advising, but by working outside and alongside the formal education system to create stand-alone and networked organizations that attempt to reduce the barriers to higher education for underserved populations. Those organizations that focus primarily on promoting college-going are called "college access providers." In fact, any organization that promotes the well-being, development, or academic success of students (such as those listed in **Figure 2**) can be thought of as a college access provider since a student's progress toward college requires that a wide range of needs be met, some of which have very little to do with formal education. More succinctly, however, in *A Statewide Examination of College Access Services and Resources in Virginia* the authors defined a college access provider as:

> *Any organization through which an individual gains the knowledge, skills, or support necessary for college aspiration, qualification, application, and enrollment.* (Alleman, Stimpson, & Holly, 2010, p. 17)

This definition still encompasses many types of groups that, whether as a primary or secondary function, contribute to the preparation of students for college. To clarify the nature of the role of these groups, the authors further delineated them by their focus and function, categorizing five types of college access providers (Alleman, Stimpson, & Holly, 2010).

1. *Community-based providers* are typically locally based and focused on meeting the needs of a particular geographic area. Services and activities are typically developed from the perceived needs of the community and the skill set or sets of the founding members.

2. *State or higher education-directed providers* are similar in function to community-based providers, though funded and accountable to state agencies or public higher education entities. Federal TRIO programs and the Career Coaches are examples of this type.

3. *School-based providers* include teachers, school counselors, administrators, coaches, and other school employees who are on the front lines. Although school-based

providers are not independent organizations like the first two types, members of this group build the foundation of academic preparation, offer encouragement, and model mature, self-aware behavior for their students.

4. *Micro-providers* include churches, community centers, civic organizations, public agencies, and even business and industry entities that have a different and often unrelated primary group purpose, but for whom college access is a secondary function. Many of the community partners identified in this study would fall into this category. Lions Clubs or Rotary Clubs, for example, may give a yearly scholarship, sponsor a writing contest, or support a community service day with the schools.

5. *Relationship-based providers* are individuals who serve as mentors, role models, and sources of encouragement (not to mention material goods). They may be the single most important factor in an individual student's decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Although most involved persons or groups in this study fit into one of these five categories, in this conversation we will focus only on the first two categories (generally, but not exclusively, those groups listed under "college access partnerships" in **Figure 2**) due to the primary focus they place on promoting and facilitating college-going.

College Access Providers Collaborating with Schools

In contrast to the college access study which took a macro state-level view, this rural partnership study focused on micro-level contexts and behaviors in six locations. This approach allowed us to ask questions about the local role of college access organizations, and given their parallel interests with high schools, to ask how access providers related to and collaborated with schools and with other community partners. Among the college access organizations in this study, the two most common (and perhaps also most central) were community education foundations and the Career Coach program. This section will focus primarily on lessons gleaned from our interviews with participants who work for and with these very important and central organizations, though this emphasis does not discount the contribution of many other access provider groups that may be more important in any one district.

Collaborations with Community Education Foundations

Among access providers and community partners generally, community education foundations (CEFs) represent a unique segment: non-profit organizations that are closely tied to their local school system and yet still financially and administratively separate. Of the six districts in this study, four had community education foundations that provided scholarships for students and teachers, held fundraising events, funded educational opportunities, and generally

promoted academic achievement with their local schools. Participants described several ways that the ties between schools and foundations created challenges in terms of creating both appropriate distance and optimal coordination. For a particularly successful foundation that distributed over $50,000 in scholarships each year, the closeness and informality between school and foundation personnel led to some nepotism in their early years. The scholarship committee was originally comprised of persons with ties to the school – some of whom were employees – and on at least some occasions scholarships went to their children, children of school employees, and associates. The foundation soon took action to create an independent board and to set in place rules for the distribution of funds.

Education foundations (and access providers generally) are often in a symbiotic, and to some extent, co-dependent relationship where one member has access to financial and human resources and the other controls access to information about the specific needs of students, teachers, and schools. Three examples illustrate this complex dynamic. First, a community foundation member described how, on a drive for school supplies, he heard repeatedly that funds had already been given to individual teacher's aides who had canvassed the area on the same mission. To the foundation leader, this was an example of poor utilization of time and resources, since the time of educators was better spent on instructional tasks. He saw one function of the foundation as a clearinghouse where school and teacher requests could be collected and one large-scale coordinated "ask" could be made of local businesses. Part of his struggle and challenge was to convince teachers that it was in their best interest to rely on a third party to meet these needs and serve as an intermediary.

Second, community education foundation leaders often have access to extensive financial and human capital resources, yet they rely on school personnel and the school board to help them know how best to target those resources. In one example, a community education foundation sponsored a family reading night after hearing from the school board that encouraging parents to read to their children was an area of need and a priority for the district.

Third, even with coordination, community foundations and school leaders may have different visions for ways that the foundation can and should use available resources. In one instance, high school administrators wanted the foundation to pay for dual credit courses due to budget cuts that would otherwise shift the cost to students, many of whom were from low-income families. However, the foundation declined that request, wanting instead to invest in longer-term strategies such as supporting teachers to attain master's degrees that would allow the school to offer more in-house advanced placement and dual credit courses, rather than busing students to the community college at some distance and cost. These examples highlight how, despite shared general purposes of student success and college access, schools and access providers may interpret priorities in ways that at times will and other times will not lead to a shared concept of how those purposes should be accomplished.

Collaborations with the Career Coach Program

The Career Coach program is coordinated through the Virginia Community College System and focuses on helping public middle and high school students define and pursue their future goals, including community college enrollment, workforce training, and other higher education options[15]. Career Coaches are part-time employees who are residents of the community (often former school employees) and whose local knowledge and experiences in education give them an understanding of the importance of educational attainment and insight into the structures and processes that are part of formal education. The Career Coach program is officially coordinated from a nearby community college and usually serves one or more high schools in the region. As a result, a Career Coach's time is often divided between several locations throughout the week. In this study, all six case study districts had Career Coaches who had a regular presence in the schools. However, the nature of that relationship was quite different from site to site. Here we will focus on three lessons from the Career Coach experience that are instructive for school-community and access provider-school relationships in general.

First, the process of gaining entry and acceptance in a school (formally and informally) can be a major encumbrance or significant boon to the work of the outside organization and their impact on students. One participant Career Coach had been a teacher and school administrator in the area for years and was well known to school administrators when she transitioned out of retirement and into her new role. As a known quantity already, the Career Coach felt immediately comfortable and welcome in classrooms and embraced by school counselors who appreciated the ways she could defray some of the requests for college and career information.

A Career Coach at another location had a nearly opposite experience. Despite her years as a teacher, the high school guidance counselor was not open to the idea of a para-school organization that placed employees who lacked formal education in this field in guidance roles. Although the Career Coach had been given official clearance to work in the school, she understood that she would have to build credibility with the guidance counselor to gain full acceptance, so she focused on excelling at whatever tasks the counselor allowed her to do: "I wanted to do what she wanted me to do. And for the first two years that's exactly what I did. …And then as I earned my mettel, she allowed me to do more and more things." In the intervening years the counseling staff turned over, and though she now has unfettered access to students, she still takes her cue from the counselors, though her counselors use her very differently:

> One of my guidance counselors…when I arrived there he said, "You do whatever you want to do. You've got an open slate. You just go to it." And then my…guidance counselor over at [the high school] now, she was very helpful. She gave me a list of

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[15] More information at:
http://www.vccs.edu/WorkforceServices/CareerPathways/CareerCoaches/HighSchoolCareerCoaches.aspx

students that she wanted me to work with who were undecided as to what they wanted to do. So I just used the guidance counselors to kind of let them set what they want me to do. And now after [number of years], they just let me have full reign because they have confidence in my ability and what I do. So it was a work in progress over the years.

As these two examples illustrate, the process of gaining institutional acceptance cannot be overlooked, particularly in rural school districts where social connections and trust are so important, and where outsiders are sometimes viewed with suspicion. Even in organizations that are already well known, new individuals in those roles, like the second Career Coach example, might be wise to develop credibility slowly rather than rushing to establish their own agenda without regard for internal dynamics and initiatives already in place.

The first two Career Coach examples also hint at the wide and disparate functions access providers can serve. Thus, the second lesson about access provider to school district relationships is that access provider employees, by virtue of their independent status, are able to fulfill roles and functions that compliment and supplement the work of school employees. Particularly because they have no requirements to participate in the time-consuming administrative responsibilities required of teachers and administrators, access providers are free to use their time to meet with students, assist teachers and counselors, and plan events, such as FAFSA nights where students and parents can come and receive assistance with federal financial aid forms. One Career Coach described how she worked deliberately to make contact with new teachers and to help them understand the college and career advising she could offer. Occasionally when a teacher has to be absent she acts as a substitute, presenting postsecondary options and career information during that time. Another Career Coach discussed the working dynamic with the school counselor in this way:

Well, personally I think the Career Coach position itself is an excellent thing for students because they can go to their counselor, but certain things they will come to me and say, "…this dual enrollment class, how do I get my transcript, how do I get my grades?" They could get that from the counselor but often he's busy, so they can come to me and I can enable them to…see what they need to do as far as dual enrollment courses, and he and I work together in that respect. Career coaches work a lot alongside a counselor but also in place of, for other things.

To the degree that this role is seen as a resource and not a threat or an imposition, the targeted services and activities of college access providers can be a significant source of support to often under-staffed and over-burdened counselors, teachers, and administrators.

College Access Providers Collaboration with Other Community Partners

College access providers and other sorts of community partners are likely to share purposes and resources formally and informally due to the limited number of partners in a given area and the tight social networks that are a common feature of rural areas. Career Coaches, Upward Bound and GEAR UP coordinators, and other sorts of college access providers seek out scholarships, internship opportunities, and at times social services resources held and offered by civic and social organizations, public agencies, and faith-based organizations since, in many cases, access providers are in a position to establish direct interpersonal relationships through which they become aware of students' needs, both educational and otherwise. Access providers can act rather like school teachers and administrators by functioning as a point of connection between those in need of services and those with services in search of needs to fill.

However, two particular examples highlight the best of these interactions and relationships and can serve as a model for intentional future collaborations elsewhere. In one case district, a long-standing access provider program that had developed a positive relationship with a school system over the course of years was approached by a community action agency with several sites around the state. The community action agency, new to this region, had tried unsuccessfully to gain entry into the local schools to offer services and activities. Recognizing that there was already a college access provider organization delivering cultural activities, academic accountability, mentoring, tutoring, and postsecondary encouragement to low-income and underserved students, the community action agency tried a new tactic. Rather than persist in pushing for school access, they chose to initiate a partnership with the college access organization through which financial, programmatic, and administrative resources were made available that supplemented and strengthened the sorts of activities that the college access provider was able to undertake. More than that, the collaboration broadened the type of resources available to students. As the college access employee explained it:

> So what they've done for me in a way is they support programs so there is more money to spend on the students, but also they offer scholarships so though [the access program] is kind of a scholarship mentoring program gearing students to come to community college, they supply scholarships to places like [a public university], they have a summer program to [a private four-year college], they have all sorts of opportunities like that which is a whole other avenue opening up for my kids, which is really good.

Second, in many school districts around the Commonwealth and the country, the 4-H organization, a private, county, state, and federal collaborative venture, coordinates a program called the "Reality Store." In the Reality Store, 6-9th graders take the wages from a career and discover the actual cost of services, goods, transportation, taxes, education, and children. In this simulation, community businesses and agencies participate, setting up table store fronts where

students learn about the service they are buying and the costs and options available. Coming to terms with the real costs of independent living not only helps students recognize the importance of making wise financial decisions, but also of considering the sorts of education and preparation needed for a career that will provide a salary that matches their lifestyle expectations.

Several of the case study school districts participate in this popular simulation. In most cases students are randomly assigned a career and then worked within the parameters of its associated income. However, at one school district the Career Coach collaborated with the 4-H coordinator to complete an online career interest inventory. Students narrowed their selection based on the metric and their own expressed interest, ultimately selecting one career to explore at more depth that would be used in the Reality Store. Thus, students not only gained the opportunity to role play how they might handle the costs and opportunities of adult life, but their experience was framed by the educational costs, salary, and career experiences associated with a job that might, based on interest and ability, actually be their future career.

In both these examples the collaboration effect was multiplicative, rather than additive only, resulting in greater experiential and educational value for the students involved. In the first case the impetus came from the desire to connect organizational resources to students in need; in the second, it came from thoughtful community partners recognizing and taking proactive steps to combine resources in a way that created an enhanced learning experience for participating students. These findings suggest that in at least some cases the path to improved performance comes from the innovative integration of existing resources, rather than from simply adding more resources.

Section Four:
Community Partners' Role in Promoting College Readiness and Ambition

Guiding Question: In what ways do community partnerships, individually and as a group, promote college readiness and ambition in the case study districts?

Within the six case study districts, community partners contributed to the college readiness and ambition of students through services, activities, and social influence in five categories, from specific to general:

1. By supporting students' academic and future career success indirectly through targeted resources and directly through programs and activities.

2. By providing college information and advising on college choice.

3. Through experiences that contributed to college aspirations and socialization to college life.

4. Through a formal and informal economy of support that met tangible and intangible student needs.

5. Through a community commitment to the value of higher education that reinforced the goals of the school district.

Supporting Academic and Career Success

For a student to even consider postsecondary education, the barrier of qualification (taking the right courses and passing them) is the foremost hurdle that he or she must clear. Teachers and school administrators are the primary points of contact for a student's academic development, given the purposes of public education, the amount of direct instructional time allotted, and the extent of support resources and educational activities provided in and through the schools. Nevertheless, community individuals and groups in case study school districts reinforced and supplemented the efforts of school personnel in four ways. First, community partners provided academic tutoring in and outside of the school setting. In some cases tutoring was focused on a particular subject; in one district local bank employees provided regular math assistance to elementary students. Academic tutoring outside of the school context is a form of support that is often invisible to school personnel unless they are personally involved or affiliated with the group in question. In Twinsburg, a religious congregation held tutoring nights where retired and current educators helped students with math and reading skills and assignments over refreshments in the church basement. Tutoring was offered by businesses, non-profits, public

agencies, and faith-based groups across our six case districts. However, tutoring initiatives sometimes suffered from inconsistent delivery, both in quality and quantity.

Second, in-school academic efforts were often supported through donations of supplies and materials that improved the instructional process. In some cases donations were simply paper, pencils, and other basics otherwise available in minimal quantities (or not at all) due to budget cuts. In other cases teachers were able to write mini-grant requests to their community education foundation or another local partner for specific resources that would improve the delivery of course materials. For example, in Heritage School District a teacher received a mini-grant to make sturdy math flashcards that could be reused by subsequent classes. In districts where mini-grants were available, education foundation leaders in some locations noted that teachers seldom requested funds, while in other locations teachers made regular use of this resource. This variance might have been due to inadequate publicity and information about mini-grant resources, but it may also have reflected the level of trust and cooperation between schools, teachers, and education foundations.

Third, community partners in many case districts offered supplementary learning experiences that built personal efficacy and skills applicable to future academic and career contexts. In Riverside School District, an extension campus of the community college offered leadership training opportunities to local high school students. In several locations, civic organizations such as the Rotary Club held regional leadership seminars tied to small scholarships that covered travel and associated costs. In another case, a public agency developed a freshman seminar course for 9th grade students, exposing them to career planning and basic life skills such as financial management. This program was adopted by the district and was run as part of the regular curriculum, demonstrating a deep level of trust and integration between the school and the community organization. Although these experiences may seem peripheral to college preparation, particularly for low-income students they can provide exposure to new places, new ideas, and new social networks, expanding student's imagination for future academic and professional opportunities, and developing self-confidence that the student is capable of functioning within new and different environments.

Fourth, students, and particularly students from underrepresented groups, are often part of social networks connected to particular language groups or religious communities. Several school administrators and education activists discussed ways that these informal networks and affiliations can be used to reinforce the importance of academic focus generally, or to draw attention to particular school and district areas of emphasis, such as family reading time. When I asked a school counselor (who was African-American) why churches were a good avenue for disseminating messages from schools, she described how difficult it is to reach some of the students most in need of help:

> Because a lot of your, I'm going to be honest with you, a lot of your students who are not very aware are your minorities. And for me, if we can get other adults involved, to know what's going on, they can help us spread the word. And if they don't come here for an after-school, some of them will go to church. Or even if they don't go to church, there will be people who are close enough to them who do go who can help spread the word.

Thus, harnessing the natural proclivity of social networks to spread information may be one important way that schools can distribute information and encourage academic focus.

College Information and Advising

> These are…the higher risk kids. Not all of them in the program, but a lot of them…when I call them in one on one you could tell they didn't have a real perspective on the world after high school. "What are you going to do next fall?" …And several told me, "I want to go to college" because they figured that's what I wanted to hear. And…I ask, "Ok where have you applied?" And several of them had applied but they said they hadn't heard back. Then I said, "Have you done your FASFA?" A few had; the others, "What's that?" So it's, they have to learn, they don't know a lot of the background for after high school.

As this quote from an access provider director illustrates, many students from low-income families come to the end of high school either with unrealistic expectations or no expectations for what they will do after graduation. Although teachers and school counselors are most often the first line of information, the volume of their responsibilities and number of students they serve can reduce the depth of individual student attention, despite their best efforts. Community partners augment the work of school personnel in two general ways: by providing college information and by providing college advising.

At most higher education institutions, students are required to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, whether they are seeking financial help or not. Low-income students whose parents are not familiar with the college-going process may not understand the importance of this document in the application and financial aid process. As a result, a wide variety of organizations in our case districts helped students complete the FAFSA, including religious groups, 4-H coordinators, public social services agencies, local college access providers, Career Coaches, and local civic and special interest organizations. Some districts held a "college night" (either independently or in cooperation with a local or state organization) where students and families could receive help with this and other forms. Two of the districts participated in "Super Saturday" events, partnering with SCHEV, college access organizations, and other school districts to complete requisite forms.

In addition to assistance with the ubiquitous FAFSA form, low-income and first-generation students often do not understand the many scholarships, grants, and loan options available, nor do they understand other requirements and processes, such as standardized test preparation and application timelines. In these functions, previously identified college access provider organizations were especially adept, though by no means were they the only channels through which students received assistance. Many of the case study school districts participated in the federal GEAR UP grant program, which provided academic and college entry assistance to an entire academic cohort as they progressed from seventh through twelfth grades.[16] Other districts had local or regional access organizations, some of which focused on a small group of qualifying (usually by income level) students who received intervention services throughout their high school careers, and others, such as the Career Coaches, offered help to any student, regardless of socio-economic background.

Second, community partners advise students about their college and career options, both expanding awareness and delivering sober assessments of possible choices. Advising came about most often either as part of the organization's mission (such as Career Coaches and other access organizations) or through frequent contact that led to trusting relationships (such as faith-based organizations, certain social services organizations, or special interest groups). Often, these roles and relationships gave community partners a voice that is more extensive or more intensive than school personnel can provide. Wanda, who works for a state-based social services agency, described a situation where her level of intervention exceeded what the school was willing to give:

> We had a student that had received a full ride last year to a college and the parent had no idea that it was a full ride. So on the last hour that that scholarship was due the child came to me and said, "[Wanda] I'm not going to be able to do the scholarship." And I said, "Why?" and he said, "Well, my mom truly doesn't understand and she's looking at the numbers and she's thinking that she has to come up with all of this money." So, I took the child home and I sat and talked to the mom and I let her know that…we know that you can't afford to send your child to college. Your child has a full ride. You don't have to pay a DIME for your child to go to school. …All we need is for you to sign this paper so we can fax it back to the college so that your child can go to school. And she was very, very happy that someone came out to explain it to her.

Was there no outreach from the school in any way?

> To be honest, no one. The guidance counselors were like, "If mom doesn't want to sign it, mom doesn't have to sign it." Not realizing that mom is illiterate herself. You know

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[16] Note: GEAR UP Virginia program funding ended in 2012.

this child has made it through school because this child has truly put himself in the position to study, study, study. So, guidance only does enough to get by to be honest with you. You know? That's the battle that I continue to fight. We just can't sit back and say, "Ok the parents are not signing the papers." We have to go outside of the box and find out what's going on. Why didn't this parent do this? But the school is not going to go outside of the box. There are very few teachers that choose to go outside of the box. Other teachers are like "Ok, mom didn't come in so she doesn't care." I often preach to the teachers that it's not that the parents do not care, it's that they don't know how or know what to do.

From our interviews we know that in many instances school personnel do "go outside of the box," to use Wanda's expression. For example, Grace, a school counselor in Riverside District high school, described one such effort precipitated by a teen pregnancy:

We have had the last two years a large number of young women pregnant. So we've really encouraged them to come back. We have a young woman who had had her little boy was born in December right before Christmas and we had to work hard to get her to come back, because she didn't want to be separated from him. But she's going to graduate. And it's those kinds of individual situations we try to work with if we know the circumstances.

Yet in other contexts and situations, school counselors may feel limited by their formal roles or may simply be unaware of the full circumstances a student faces. In such instances, for a student or family to have more than one point of contact and advisement creates a back-up system that can ensure that a crucial opportunity is not missed.

If students or their families do not understand particular elements of college attendance, the combination of resource limitations and a lack of information can set a student on a path to struggle or failure before they begin. Elizabeth, who works with a youth program in Western School District, discussed a situation in which a family's lack of understanding nearly had a major impact their daughter's college entry experience:

I had a student that was a very good athlete…[and had] gone with us on the trips to the colleges, [but] had not a clue what kind of money was really going to be involved in getting her to school, and neither did the parents. She was supposed to go to orientation [but] it wasn't convenient to her mother to take her to orientation, so she told her she had to cancel. So I said, "Oh no, we are going to orientation. If you don't go to orientation, then you're behind everybody else right from the beginning." The thing with the orientation was that her mother sent her there with a twenty dollar bill. She had no money to pay for her, for anything. She couldn't even get her room assignment if she didn't have the down payment, the deposit for the room assignment. There are just so

many things that these kids do not have a complete understanding of, because it's, I don't know whether it's so foreign to them that they don't understand what they're being told by the guidance counselors, or the guidance counselors are so swamped they don't get to those details.

Although Elizabeth wonders aloud whether guidance failed this student or whether the student failed to comprehend the guidance she received, the story makes clear the important role community partners can have as an external observer who recognizes the gravity of a situation, understands the deficits that challenge the student and family, and takes action on behalf of the student in a crucial moment of entry, socialization, and familiarization to her new academic environment.

Socialization and Aspiration Experiences

Although some students do reach the end of their high school career without forming a post-graduation plan, many others develop interests and aspirations for further education through exposure to new places, new ideas, and education and career opportunities offered through community partnerships of three general types: events, positive influences, and academic experiences.

<u>Finding One: Events</u>

Particularly for students in isolated areas, exposure to high culture such as museums, plays, and art galleries, and natural and built environments, such as botanical gardens, historical sites, state parks, and urban areas, can be at first bewildering, but also can inspire student to take an interest in new ideas, cultures, foods, places, and forms of expression. Although the connection between an expanded cultural palette and college-going may seem distant, research by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) connected an appreciation of high culture to the values of the liberal arts and a liberal education. An expanded view and appreciation of the forms of high culture—Bourdieu was particularly interested in the likes of art, theater, and music—allows a student to understand and participate in the means of expression favored by the educated class. In short, questions about the nature of human existence, human purpose, and human ingenuity happen most persistently within the arts, and engaging in those conversations can draw a student into new ways of thinking about and relating to the world. Of course, this is no magic bullet: some students are very eager to remain in the safe confines of their community, and for others simply experiencing a world quite different from their own and living to tell about it is enough.

Typically, organizations with a consistent presence with students and within the schools (access organizations, 4-H, community education foundations, and many others) were most likely to offer trips to nearby cities, state and national parks, historical sites, and other sorts of

guided cultural experiences. However, civic organizations, higher education institutions, and public agencies may also sponsor trips to leadership seminars, regional or national writing or speech contests, or on-campus introduction weekends for individuals or small groups. As well, traveling exhibitions, performance groups (music, theater, and others), or speakers may be sponsored by local businesses or organizations to come to an area, providing a similar experience.

More directly, trips to colleges and college tours were an important staple in programs designed to inspire student achievement and college aspirations. Although some school districts, such as Riverside, had in place structured programs that included tours of nearby colleges and universities as early as seventh grade, in other districts these opportunities happened either from in-school sub-groups (clubs, advising groups, organizations), were arranged per-student, or were delivered by or through a variety of community organizations. Particularly for students in geographically isolated areas, a visit to a college campus helped them begin to imagine themselves in the role of a college student. Activities such as eating in dining halls, touring dormitories and classrooms, or walking among students on the quad help to make college life seem normal and accessible for students who may never have set foot on a college campus before. Even for low-income students in relative geographic proximity to a college or university, lack of transportation or general unfamiliarity with a college campus may have kept them from attending sporting events, concerts, or educational experiences hosted for high school students that might otherwise have delivered this initial exposure. Discussing the value of the college tour, one 4-H director reflected on a student who particularly benefitted from this experience:

> And in fact, there's one child that didn't think he was going to college, and I just heard he's getting A's and B's at [college]. And until we started going to colleges, he wasn't planning to go to college at all. It was a shame because he was, he had a lot going for him, he was very personable, but he needed to get to college, he needed to see that there were other things out there and that he had what it takes to get there.

Finding Two: Positive Influences

Tours and cultural events provide direct exposure but make an indirect case to students that their future plans should include some sort of postsecondary education. Directly, community partners of all types served as mentors and models, in many cases offering specific encouragement to students who may not have considered higher education before. Researchers note that even with the presence of college-going resources and opportunities, students often need this sort of direct injunction to personally believe that higher education is for them. In a study of Mexican-American young people, Attanasi (1986) noted that peer modeling by siblings, friends, and acquaintances who go to college and speak positively about their experiences significantly impacted high school students' thinking about their own future plans. Similarly, within our study, faith-based organizations were often places where this social influence was

passed on through annual recognition and celebration of high school and college graduates, through religious mentors who regularly checked grades and provided accountability for academic performance, and through individuals who directly encouraged students to consider postsecondary education. A pastor in Heritage School District described this function in his congregation:

> I think [education] is celebrated, and in fact this past Sunday we had graduation Sunday where we had four people graduate that are connected to the congregation, four of them graduated high school, one college. We got them up in front of the congregation, we gave them Bibles as sort of a gift of remembrance. [We] interviewed each one of them, asked them what their further plans were, [then we] encouraged the congregation to come up after church to embrace them and wish them well and so forth. So I mean publicly we lift them up and we celebrate their success and we wish them well in their further endeavors and encourage [others in thinking that] college or furthering their education will be a part of it. I think it's definitely encouraged, embraced. I haven't seen anybody that says "well, just stay on the farm - this is your life here." I think there is a general sense that we want you to go off and do better and to get an education. Like one of the girls: she's graduated from [college] a couple of weeks ago and she's going to be a second grade school teacher here in the county. So that's a real success story and we lift it up on Sunday. She's gone up and she's done well. We celebrate the fact that she's graduated and she's coming back to educate our kids so that's something that we can all celebrate.

Other groups, such as community education foundations, used the peer influence of recent graduates returning home from college during school breaks to talk about their experiences and encourage the rising classes to consider their college options. Influence from religious groups and other organizations can come in the form of encouragement to use school resources and seek out the information needed to advance toward college. A woman who works with the youth in her church discussed how she sends her students to the guidance counselors for help in addition to the assistance she provides as a former teacher.

Widening the circle, a common form of partnering that can lead to academic and postsecondary aspirations is to invite local professionals, business owners, and other local leaders to discuss not only the details of their careers, but to explain the steps they took to reach their current positions. In one school, the guidance counselor polled students on careers of interest and then invited community professionals in, to great effect:

> So they come in and say "It's really great to be a doctor but this is how many years of college it took, and this is how dedicated I had to be even in high school." She was really good, the teacher that kind of helped us develop the class, in laying out some good questions for these people so they could say "These are some class that you might want to

take in high school," you know don't take the easy road. Or "These are some clubs that might be of interest to you" or "It's really important for you to be involved in things outside of the school," volunteerism and that kind of thing, because we all know those are things colleges and universities look at. It's not just your GPA anymore. So those kinds of things I think too are helpful to kids because they're seeing it's not too early to start volunteering when you're at the middle school.

Not only were career pathways described for students, but also the sorts of courses and extra-curricular activities necessary to set up future access to higher education. School personnel also discussed inviting in speakers from outside organizations and colleges and universities to talk about career and educational opportunities that students might not otherwise experience or understand. In one district, the community college sponsored a program that targeted high-risk African-American males by bringing in speakers who came from similar backgrounds and were able to relate to students in ways that teachers could not.

Finding Three: Academic Experiences
In all of the six school districts, dual enrollment was a topic of extensive discussion. Teachers and administrators identified many ways this educational opportunity impacted their small schools, citing cost and the loss of connection to peers and activities experienced by students who were absent from the school building to attend dual enrollment courses, among the few negative factors. One administrator described the effect the college campus dual enrollment experiences also had on students' imagination for their own ability to attend college:

So for [first-generation high school graduates] to go on to college was a whole other kind of experience that had not been a part of their family history. What we felt like is that if we can convince the students by permitting and offering them the opportunity to take dual enrolment classes, then that would kind of be a little hook: "Well maybe I can do this work." So it had not only an economic benefit for the families, it had an educational benefit for the student that it might was the thing [sic] that enabled them to believe in themselves enough to go on.

Through the course of our research we heard widely varying views on the merits of dual enrollment, but for potential first-generation college students that first step into a college classroom, if successful, could provide a positive segue to embracing college, both for the student and the student's family.

The Formal and Informal Economy of Support

The final two ways in which community partners support the college aspirations of local students, and in particular low-income students, are less concrete and more difficult to identify

from any single action or event. However, in several of the school districts, the accumulated and combined efforts and expectations of school and community stakeholders did create a palpable sense of that education was a high priority that would be supported across the community. This positive momentum came from the language used to talk about education and from the efforts taken to actively support schools and students materially, financially, interpersonally, and programmatically.

In the hierarchy of student support systems, parents are most centrally and broadly responsible. Schools take a secondary place based on educational mandates, and the community, at its best, acts as a cohesive force and a resource to parents and schools. However, in areas with a low total population and a high percentage of low-income residents, some parents are unable to provide for the basic physical, psychological, and developmental needs of their children. Students bring deficits of preparation, development, and support to school, pressing the education system and the local community into roles typically and best occupied by parents. Throughout the study we heard how local school teachers and administrators gave of their own time and resources to quietly meet student needs for clothing, school supplies, uniforms, trips, and a myriad of other minor expenses, in addition to offering support, encouragement, and a listening ear to distressed or struggling students. When asked on the teacher survey (N=315) about ways they interact with community partnerships, volunteering personal time (16%) and donating resources (money and educational supplies) (15%) were the most frequent responses.

School personnel are not alone in these acts of self-sacrifice: the close and informal social circles that typify rural life in our case districts carried word of needs quickly, often to persons in community organizations described throughout this report. In some cases these organizations are specifically outfitted to meet such needs, but in many cases they also supplement the efforts of parents and schools. The story of a youth worker who took the student to college orientation and the social services employee who helped a parent understand a full-ride scholarship form are prime examples of this system in action. At the heart of this behavior, and a theme echoed through all six of our case districts in different ways, was a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for students whose circumstances have dramatically disadvantaged them through no fault of their own. When asked to identify the key elements to students' success in this environment, one college access provider identified the community as an essential part, reflective of comments offered by many study participants:

> It's the community support I think by far. It's the encouragement of the community and many of us might see just like this one child, I'd give him money out of my kid's account if I thought that would help him, and there are a lot of people that think that way. They sacrifice their own, whether it be some perk that they're going to have personally, to see this kid who needs the money to take the SAT or needs money for a college application. There's a boat load of us that see the community support and the community need and

we're going to give to whoever. And it's not just the agency people: it's people within the church, it's people within the community…. *I think that's what makes the difference. It's the small community spirit* (emphasis added).

Significantly, this participant linked community intervention not only to student success, but specifically to combined community efforts that remove barriers to college-going in addition to meeting basic student needs.

Community Commitment to the Value of Higher Education

The quote above describes community altruism and concern for the welfare of young people. However, it also suggests a critical mass of community members – both individuals and organizations – committed to ensuring that students have the resources necessary to succeed academically and to pursue postsecondary education, as a reflection of shared school-community goals. A school administrator in Greenfield described the partnership of schools and community groups in terms of sharing a common purpose, rather than seeing the work of the school as an isolated enterprise:

> I think they [community partnerships] are a very important part of it because…I think they're really supporting the common vision and mission of the school division. So with the writing and the art through the [local organization], through the beautification and the green initiative that we have that we're working on, or whether it's the scholarships so that our kids can go to college, they're really supporting…the mission and the vision of the school system. And without [them] I don't think it'd be as authentic and quality experience. …And without the scholarships, of course they're small scholarships but still without the scholarships the students might not even try to go to college. So I think they all support our mission and *I think it's important that the student sees that the whole community supports the mission of the school, and it's not just the school's mission, it's the community's mission*. (emphasis added)

This quote identifies two of the most important reasons for school-community partnerships in small rural areas: functionally, partnerships provide resources that reinforce the educational foci of the district through experiences outside the classroom. Partnerships also enable students to pursue postsecondary goals through financial and logistical support. Symbolically, partnerships tell students that educational achievement is a value across the entire community, and not only within the walls of the school. Partnerships convey expectations that educational degree attainment of some type is possible for all young people. And, partnerships can convey a community vision for the type of place citizens are working to create.

Timothy, the director of a community college extension center, described the necessity of the whole community moving in a similar direction and focusing whatever limited resources are available toward a common goal. On this point he paraphrased entrepreneurship guru Ernesto Sirolli, saying: "The future of every community lies in capturing the energy, imagination, the passion of its people." Reflecting on this shared focus as a kind of community virtue-in-process in his area, Timothy demurred: "I don't represent us as being all of the way there, but I do represent us as a community that has those kinds of conversations, and I would say that that's different than many." Rather than looking outward for assistance from the state or from a major corporation, Timothy argued that the focus must be on maximizing local resources and believing that the solution is primarily internal: "We can't always depend on somebody to come here. We've got to build the capacity of people from within."

Summary

The most successful of our case study districts demonstrated a broad-based commitment to the value of school success and higher education access, both for the betterment of the individual student and for the prosperity of the area. Although all six case districts were making positive strides toward educational improvement, districts were at different points with regard to a widespread commitment to the value of education as an important local goal reflected in the cooperation of school personnel, the school board, the board of supervisors and other local government entities, the business community, and the non-profit community. In high achieving school districts, stakeholders in a variety of political, educational, and community activist roles described high quality schools as a key to the success of the area. Outcomes of education as a total community project would be a generation of young people able to contribute to society (whether in their community or another) and a school system that is a selling point to business owners, developers, and professionals who might consider moving their businesses to the area.

Section Five:
School and Community Policies and Strategies that Promote Academic Success and Postsecondary Aspirations

Guiding Question: In what ways do school and community policies, practices, and strategies converge to promote student success?

> We have a high unemployment rate, we have a lot of retirees, and our student population is dropping. So where does that money come from? We just try to make the best we can with what we have and we don't buy a lot of new stuff. We fix up our old and make it work [laughter], and buy the new to supplement. – Greenfield school administrator

Each of the six case study districts addressed academic success and postsecondary aspirations in very different ways. The financial, human, and physical capital in each community played major roles in establishing what resources, both educational and governmental, were available to local leaders. As the title of this study suggests, administrators, staff, and community members assumed multiple roles and stretched resources to meet basic educational and community needs. The current economic downturn, combined with declines in longstanding local industries, variable population levels, and reduced state support have hit these small rural communities particularly hard. At a time when leading national and state educational and political leaders call for increased postsecondary degree completion and advanced training for 21st century careers, case districts were laying off staff and cutting curriculum options. Despite these challenges, economically struggling communities and their schools succeeded at promoting academic success and postsecondary aspirations in a variety of ways. Thus, we will discuss school and community policies, practices, and strategies, identified in this study, in two sections:

1. Elements that contributed to school and community academic and access successes
2. Elements that contributed to school and community academic and access challenges

Elements that Contributed to School and Community Academic and Access Successes

Unlike many of the findings presented thus far, identified policies, practices, and strategies that positively impacted academic performance and postsecondary ambitions were often meaningful as the result of accumulated behaviors by many groups and individuals throughout the district and not a product of any one actor or any one situation. In other words, these findings were part of a culture and climate of behavior that, over time, resulted in positive educational outcomes for low-income students. We identified eight themes in this category:

1. Building relationships
2. Vision and language
3. Circle of influence
4. Creative autonomy
5. Grants
6. Community colleges
7. Facilities
8. Technology

Theme One: Building Relationships

Despite district differences, school administrators argued that state mandates and locally established goals could only be accomplished through developing relationships and trust with local citizens. These intertwined goals required school administrators to quickly learn local history, customs, and social networks in order to develop the relationships necessary to not only ask for additional community support, but also to make internal changes in the schools, such as alterations to the curriculum and the reassignment of longtime teachers.

Central office staff and principals often worked long hours at their schools and then attended other community events, such as board meetings for other governmental and private agencies, civic group meetings, church services, and organizational fundraisers in order to establish connections within the community. A school administrator stated: "I do everything from pretty much attending every funeral in [Heritage]. So it's not unlike me to leave here on a Friday, turn around, come back Saturday to do a funeral. And it's those types of things that endear you to the community." Although this may read as disingenuous, many of these school leaders were from the district or originated from similar rural areas where this behavior was, and still is, expected of local leaders. Later, and carefully, school leaders would utilize the community networks they had created or had been adopted into to ask for assistance. Requests ranged from support for multi-million dollar bond referendums to buying sneakers for student athletes who could not afford them.

Theme Two: Vision and Language

Developing a shared vision for both community partnerships and college access was an ongoing process in several of the case districts. Furthermore, building consensus over educational goals was a challenge both within and outside of the schools. A consistent college preparedness ethos shared throughout all levels of staff from the superintendent to teachers, from kindergarten to high school, was uncommon in our case districts. Those districts where most staff shared a common set of concepts for discussing their role in promoting postsecondary aspirations were also the most deliberate in how they worked at this problem. Strategies included structured time within the school day for college-going activities and promoting in-

school opportunities, such as SAT testing dates, at school assemblies and athletic functions in the evening.

For some of the most academically successful districts, alerting the community to the district's educational achievements and college access goals was another challenge entirely. Two of the districts had recently developed plans to increase community awareness of school objectives and academic successes. One district had already formed a community outreach committee at the time of our site visits. The goal of these efforts was to improve communication about district accomplishments (including college-going resources and successes), discuss areas of need, and foster additional community involvement in the schools, especially among underrepresented and low-income groups. It was clear that articulating a shared vision that captured the spirit and intent of district goals concerning postsecondary success was still a work in progress in all of the case study districts. Although school personnel and community members in several districts understood the achievement and college preparation priorities of their schools, none of the districts had developed or had successfully disseminated a clear set of objectives that were so easy to identify and recall that important educational stakeholders were able to easily call them to mind. Creating a ubiquitous educational vision is a challenge in any context. However, we speculate that the lack of or informality of community communication reduces the likelihood that school objectives are reinforced by parents, extended family, neighbors, pastors, and local business owners, apart from what is required at the state level.

Theme Three: Circle of Influence

In each of the six case study districts a small but determined group of school and community leaders worked together to improve the education of students and lives of their fellow citizens. This leadership core varied in membership, size, and organization in each community. As noted above, the most successful groups shared a common vision for schools and the community, and were able to convey that vision to the other stakeholders and community members. These "circles of influence" were able to rally resources for districts, which in turn allowed schools to redesign or create new courses and programs, set higher standards, and focus on college preparation efforts.

In the Heritage district, as in several other locations, leaders often were members of one another's boards and service committees. This type of cross-organizational membership was a positive force where school and community leaders understood individual organization needs that led to cooperation, rather than competition for local resources. However, the concentration of leadership was also indicative of the lack of local population and participation. As a result, multiple roles in the community were filled by a small number of people.

Recruiting volunteers and fostering new leadership was a challenge in each community, and these tasks were made more difficult due to districts' small and widely dispersed

populations. Both elected community officials and organizational leaders held multiple positions, in some instances maintaining those roles for decades. These leaders were invaluable to their community, but their passion and institutional memory would be difficult to replace. Most importantly, these leaders often held the respect of many long-time residents whose favor was needed during budget struggles and capital campaigns.

Theme Four: Creative Autonomy

Consistency in the message from those in leadership positions and "buy-in" from staff members at all levels allowed for greater flexibility in developing new programs within and outside the curriculum. One superintendent commented on the opportunity and risk involved in taking chances:

> …the board gives me that latitude and I give that latitude to my administers, and that in a nut shell really is the ability to fail, to create new programs that don't work and knowing that that's okay and having comfort in that. I think though, the comfort of knowing that you can try things even if they don't succeed allows our administrators to be innovative and creative and dynamic in what they're doing.

In this particular district, educators had both the financial and political support to try new academic approaches to address postsecondary aspirations, such as reconfiguring the daily course schedule to allow for an enrichment period and using instructional time to take a whole cohort of students on college visits. Other districts had less flexibility to introduce new programs.

Theme Five: Grants

Many of the school-based curricular and co-curricular programs that focused on developing student career aspirations and providing college-going assistance were heavily dependent on grant funding. Popular funding programs included the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) grants, and GEAR UP. Some programs like the 21st Century grant, require schools and communities to submit partnership plans as part of the grant writing process, which helps to foster communication between schools, government agencies, and other community organizations. Both school and community leaders discussed the impact that these programs had on students and their families. Grants allowed districts to offer after-school remedial workshops, vocational and art classes for students and parents, and field trips, including college visits. Without the capital and resource infusion that accompany grants, many districts would not be able to offer these programs.

Eventually grants are not renewed or are relocated to other communities in need. School leaders then face the challenge of maintaining these grant services with local funds. Administrators and staff responded to the loss of grants in various ways including eliminating

the program(s) entirely, reducing the scale of the program(s), and asking for school staff volunteers or community partners to continue the services. It was rare that a program was entirely eliminated since school staff retained the training and print/media resources that accompanied the grants. Obtaining grants was a priority in every district and required a great deal of staff time and district resources. Nevertheless, grant requests were frequently refused. One superintendent discussed how financial pressures pushed him toward hiring a grant writer even at the cost of an instructional position:

> Grants are there, but you have to write the grants. So it might be a pretty wise investment to bring on a full-time grant writer. Yes, it would maybe supplant a teaching position, which nobody likes to think about. But you write your grants with the idea that this is really the only way we're going to be able to make it as far as a STEM education for our kids. We've got to have outside funding.

School improvement services from the state often functioned similarly to external grants, bringing in consultants, resources, and programs that the districts would not be able to develop or fund otherwise. Although school improvement carried negative connotations, school administrators and staff in these districts often focused on the positive elements associated with these resources. Yet, like grants, these improvement funds and services were also temporary.

Theme Six: Community Colleges

A frequent partnership that school administrators mentioned was their relationship with the local community college responsible for their region. When all cost-cutting measures had been exhausted and districts were forced to cut staff and course offerings at the secondary level, it was the local community college that intervened by allowing students to dual enroll in existing courses or creating new courses to meet the needs. In some instances, the local community college hired recently laid-off teachers to lead the same courses that they had taught at the local high school. Dual enrollment also exposed students to college campus life and the array of academic and vocational possibilities there.

As discussed in Section Three, local community colleges also served as the base of the Career Coach program. Career Coaches coordinated with school guidance counselors to deliver college-going assistance to students, with services and activities ranging from choosing a career path to assisting with the completion of SAT and FASFA forms. Career Coaches also helped to support the Virginia Wizard, an online tool that offers career and college-going assistance. Local community college leadership was also a critical component in the development of regional educational partnerships and recruitment of potential employers to the area.

However, the relationship between rural secondary schools and community colleges also had drawbacks. Depending on the location, students had to be bused from their high school to

the community college for classes, in addition to busing to and from home. These convoluted transportation patterns led to long commuting days for students. In Twinsburg, school staff described how qualified students chose not attend advanced level dual enrollment classes at the community college since it meant missing out on co-curricular and social opportunities at the high school. Although the partnerships between rural schools and community colleges demonstrated elements of P-16 alignment goals, we observed that the relationship was more of a product of strained rural district resources and incremental shifts in curriculum, rather than articulated agreements that received local resident input.

Theme Seven: Facilities

School facilities were frequently the center of community activities for the case districts. School facilities, particularly high schools, were open until late in the evening, not only to host school-related activities, but community events as well. In four of the six districts, high school auditoriums, gyms, and cafeterias were the largest meeting and public spaces available in the area. Physical plants are costly and many rural school districts across the nation are being faced with replacing aging and outdated facilities. In many cases, renovations alone are not an option, since a multiplicity of expensive items such as HVAC, roofing, plumbing, and ADA access need to be addressed simultaneously (Chadwick, 2004).

Challenged with several outdated buildings, Greenfield School District elected to build entirely new facilities simultaneously. Building public and political consent was a painful process for both school and government leaders. Finally after securing a major new employer and tax source, the new construction projects were approved. Participant community members were very proud of the new buildings, but some remained skeptical of the investment due to their costs and the continuing decline of state support. School leaders in our study had responded to community concerns by reaching out to citizens in a variety of ways and venues, including inviting residents to tour the new buildings, to have lunch in the new cafeteria alongside students and staff, and by opening the computer lab and gymnasium to the community during the evenings. These community outreach activities had spawned other positive effects beyond community buy-in for the facilities. Community lunch guests were also becoming volunteers, often these same volunteers would act as facilitators between the schools and the community organizations to which they belonged, developing and reinforcing existing partnerships with the school.

In addition to creating community access to existing school facilities, school administrators discussed future construction plans and ways districts shared resources by partnering with county and municipal agencies. Heritage schools were in the process of a phased building and renovation effort. In an effort to gain support for the ongoing capital projects and develop stronger community support for the schools, plans were in place to be deliberate about the integration of community facilities, such as shared community/high school library in future

phases of construction. In addition, Riverside schools partnered with the parks and recreation department in order to operate and maintain recreational field space. The shared use of gyms by schools and recreations departments was a frequent and longstanding partnership within some of the case districts. Many of these public facility partnerships came about through economic necessity. In an effort to reduce costs, two of the case districts were in negotiations to combine school and county maintenance facilities and staff as well.

Theme Eight: Technology

Rural schools were also growing centers for both student and community member technology access. The majority of rural residents in four of the case districts still had no home-based access to high-speed internet. Local officials explained that telecommunication firms were hesitant to contract for cable and internet services because the majority of the capital outlay for a new network would be required on behalf of the firms. Some community leaders recognized that communications infrastructure would have to be externally funded due to stagnated population growth and an increasing percentage of low-income residents.

School administrators and staff discussed community-wide access to technology as a limiting factor in communicating with parents, offering asymmetrical curricular options to students, and allowing students to explore postsecondary opportunities. The majority of local public libraries in the case districts were small, operated on reduced schedule (often due to cutbacks), and limited patron's computer access to 30 minutes because of demand. For this reason, the schools had become by default an important internet provider in some communities.

Unexpectedly, state-mandated testing was the source for the funds and resources to develop and expand computer labs and high-speed internet access in schools. However, this was also a significant point of friction for both school and community members. In order to meet Governor McDonnell's goal of having all school districts conduct Standards of Learning (SOL) testing online by 2013, districts were appropriated additional technology funds. In concert with grants and local matching funds, state funding helped case study districts to develop the capability to conduct large-scale computer-based testing. Outside of testing, creating multiple computer labs allowed larger numbers of students, sometimes whole classes, to be guided through the use of the Virginia Wizard program and other college-going activities. Improved equipment and high-speed internet access allowed schools to mitigate some of the impact of staff reductions and curriculum offerings through distance education.

Similar to constructing new facilities, developing a foundation for next-generation technologies in their community was a point of pride and accomplishment for school leaders. A superintendent from one of the more isolated case districts described the importance of this feat:

…There are other school systems in Virginia who are much, have more resources and richer than we are, and have not gone 100% online. So we have been very meticulous in looking at what we needed to buy to make that happen so that we could, to me that's a step forward [for our] county. If you have every child online taking an online test and met the criteria by the governor and by the superintendent of the Department of Education that you wanted everybody to be technologically astute at that point in time, for [a] little [county], I think that's a real big deal.

Technology implementation was also an area where the knowledge and skills of school staff were utilized to their fullest in order to make the most out of the short-term infusion of cash. In Twinsburg, a central office administrator did most of the networking labor himself, rather than contracting an outside firm, saving the school district thousands of dollars to allocate to other needs.

Elements that Contributed to School and Community Academic and Access Challenges

Just as community policies and practices contributed to students' academic success and postsecondary aspirations, so other procedures and behaviors created additional obstacles and issues for groups and individuals who wanted to create positive change. We identified five types of challenges:

1. Curriculum and Instruction
2. Parents
3. "Learning to Leave"
4. The Age Gap
5. Misaligned Educational Values

Challenge One: Curriculum & Instruction

When asked about promoting student academic success, many school staff and community members discussed the role of curriculum within the schools. On their own accord, participants frequently addressed their concerns and frustrations regarding state-mandated testing. School administrator and staff issues often focused on the importance of meeting individual, school, and district annual yearly progress (AYP) goals. Community leaders and residents frequently voiced distress about the growing ideology of "teaching to the test" and districts making funding decisions based on meeting state goals, not local needs. A Timberland community member discussed his concerns over the ways that testing focus might be hurting the academic experiences of some groups:

SOL testing, the standardized testing that we have in this state, it helps lazy teachers and lazy students. It holds them accountable to a certain degree, because it's a minimum

benchmark of achievement, but that's what we're graded by, and that's what we're viewed upon, by how we do on those tests. Well, the students who get left behind is the good students, a lot of times…to try to find things for them. And I hope that when they go to college they can compete. But we're so focused on getting this D-F student through and pass his SOL test that the A student who kind of just…we're just glad they're going to be a good percentage for us…they're going to…we take that for granted.

Both school staff and community members discussed that arts and vocational courses linked to developing career and college aspirations had or were in the process of being eliminated, since they were not linked to testing outcomes. In case districts where school leaders and staff primarily focused on reaching AYP goals, often less attention was paid to both partnerships and longitudinal programs focusing on college preparation.

In order to prepare students for the rigor of work required at both the two- and four-year institutions, district and school level staff frequently emphasized high academic achievement to students, parents, and community members. This approach cast reaching AYP as a minimum academic standard that should and must be surpassed. Michael, a principal in Greenfield, discussed moving past standards:

I think our focus now is improving upon our curriculum and making it a stronger curriculum as far as challenging them at a higher level and pushing more kids towards the higher levels of learning. I think we're at the proficient level. Our SOL scores and our accreditation says that. I think we need to push our kids to be at a higher level, more past advance or the higher level of understanding and being able to not only to understand what they learn, but being able to explain it back to you… …I think that's our goal.

School leaders discussed that SOLs and AYP changes had led to schools and individual teachers focusing on traditionally underserved student populations, particularly providing a range of intervention strategies from preschool through second grade.

Providing preschool to low- and moderate-income children was a topic that several school and community leaders discussed. Dependable and structured childcare has been a growing need in rural areas across the country due to shifts in parental work patterns (Forry & Walker, 2011). Not only are rural parents working farther away from home, but they also have less control of their weekly work schedules which have become increasingly erratic (McCrate, 2011). The need for structured childcare was especially great in four of the case districts where there were no, or not enough capacity in, private preschools or afterschool care for younger children. School staff emphasized that earlier intervention at the pre-K level would help to increase student academic achievement and reduce the costs of later interventions.

There were also challenges in meeting the needs of secondary students who desired access to Advanced Placement (AP) or dual enrollment courses[17]. Administrators discussed how these courses required teachers with a master's degree in a specific subject area (Chemistry, Economics, History, etc…) in order to offer them. Teachers with graduate degrees in math and science were difficult to find and case districts did not have the resources to compete with larger and wealthier districts. As mentioned earlier, offering advanced level courses was becoming a larger role of the local community college.

In general, many of the case districts struggled with recruiting new teachers to their schools. Lower pay and the limits of rural social life were not in the district's favor. Of the 371 teachers that responded to the demographic section of the survey instrument, only 17% were between the ages of 20-29. Fifty-five percent of respondents were between the ages of 40-59. Districts located near four-year universities had an advantage over their peers, giving them the ability to host and recruit student teachers. Other districts stayed in communication with students who were attending college to study education in the hopes that they would return home to teach.

Challenge Two: Parents

Both leaders and community members discussed the various ways parents were invested in the schools. Parents' interests often varied based on socio-economic status, with middle- and upper-income parents volunteering for groups like the PTA and booster activities. Administrators and teachers relied on core groups of parents and concerned residents to assist with activities that reflected their interests or the interests of their student, such as band. One of the challenges that stood in the way of increased parental participation was the growing number of commuting parents driving outside of their home community to work, sometimes over an hour each way. Frank, a religious leader in Twinsburg discussed the impact that commuting parents had on the community:

> They work eight hours and then they have a three-hour commute, an hour and a half each way, so by that time you just got, you know, a couple, maybe an hour in the morning and an hour after you get home and you're ready to go to bed again. I mean, you know, there are, if they're gonna do some grocery shopping they're gonna stop on the way home, somewhere in [the city] and pick up groceries at the store, at the grocery store, you know *Kroger* on the way out of town or something like that, instead of coming to the local grocery store or using the local stores here. They're gonna tend to keep up with people at

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[17] It should be noted that Advanced Placement and other academic courses are available to students across the Commonwealth through the Virtual Virginia program. Courses contain video segments, audio clips, whiteboard interaction, multimedia activities, and online discussions, as well as text. Instructors are available for telephone and online communication with students. More information about Virtual Virginia is available at www.virtualvirginia.org.

their workplace a lot more. So, that kind of self-reliant self-contained mindset comes with them… A lot of these folks are making that long commute, just can't invest their money in a house here and not themselves so much. Not yet anyway. They might have that intention in doing so, but later though. Right now it's just not practical.

Commuting parents and community members in general was a major issue raised by school staff, town and county leaders, and support agencies. Out-commuting positively impacted the community by retaining citizens in the county. Commuting residents helped to stabilize the local population from decreasing further, children remained enrolled in local schools, and the districts retained much needed tax revenue. Although commuting helped to fill local coffers through property taxes, commuting residents were less likely to attend school events, volunteer in the community, and be knowledgeable about local governance issues.

As Frank's quote indicated, out-commuting residents often bought goods in "the city" rather from local merchants. Two of the case study districts had recently lost their only full-service grocer. This meant longer commutes to a grocery store for non-commuter residents, but also low-income residents without transportation were increasingly dependent on gas stations and other small food vendors for day-to-day needs. Nationally, the closing of the local rural grocery store is often an indicator of further local business closures, as more rural residents conduct the majority of their shopping elsewhere (Gross, 2011).

Challenge Three: "Learning to Leave"

The absence of a young professional class was also a concern in the case study districts. County governments and the school systems were often the largest local employers, followed by resource gathering, small-scale manufacturing, and the service industry (which depended on population and the location of major roadways). As larger manufacturers closed and resource gathering techniques became more dependent on technology, government and school employees often remained as the core of a district's middle class.

If area young people aspired for careers beyond local public service, it meant considering commuting to a larger urban area or moving entirely. In order to pursue professional avenues outside the scope of their home community, students required additional training and advanced academic skills at the high school level that would enable them to go on to further training or college. Therefore, as an outcome of school and community members' encouragement of academic success and college preparation, students were also "learning to leave," as Corbett (2007) coined it. Successful student matriculation is often an irony in rural communities. High tests scores and college-going rates demonstrate the quality and value of local schools, but the loss of highly educated and motivated young people complicated academic success and college-going for future generations of graduates. A primary manifestation of this occurrence was the

absence of a young professional class to mentor students and to actively engage in the other aspects of community life.

Challenge Four: The Age Gap

The lack of young professionals and families also led to the development of an age gap that separated a young low-income population, often dependent on local government services, and an aging "baby boomer" population. Retirees played important roles as school volunteers, providing much-needed childcare to family members, and were politically active in the community. Long-term residents of several of the case districts were concerned over preserving their communities as they once were, including schools, rather than embracing changes that school and community leaders were attempting to implement in order to adapt to current challenges. Mary, a member of the education foundation in Western district said:

…the longtime locals are the ones that don't want to see the change. They want to keep everything safe and sound. "It's been going smoothly like it is. Why upset the pile?" They just settle… …They really don't want to see new people. And if there's enough of them, they can say, "Well, we have to worry about that change, and there's enough of us that we're going to talk against, or we'll go against whatever this is." They just settle. They just want things the way they are. But it's not working!

New members of some of these communities and some of those who had retired or intentionally relocated back to these rural areas, raised concerns about education spending. Many newcomers picked these specific areas because of low taxes and have no interest in becoming involved in the community. This constituency group posed a growing challenge for school and community leaders, since recruiting this population was seen in some of the case districts as one of the major economic development strategies.

Challenge Five: Misaligned Educational Values

School and community participants agreed that high school athletics drew large numbers of parents, non-parents, and both new and long-term residents. Football games were especially popular and were seen as a unifying experience for these communities. Enterprising superintendents and principals used athletic events to call attention to other school activities, state testing information, and college deadlines. Yet, residents disagreed on the overall impact of the popularity of the games, since they help to reinforce values aligned with "better days" in the past, when jobs were plentiful and education was less important. Below, a Timberland resident discussed the juxtaposition between sports and how the community perceived school success:

I think that it's more of a sense of pride than it is a sense of function. As sad as it sounds, as long as you're going to the football game on Friday night, the citizens are happy. They just assume that we're preparing kids for the 21st century, yeah, we're in the 21st

century, aren't we? Preparing kids for tomorrow. Preparing kids for the next step in education. I'm not saying we're not, but if we have a losing football team, everything's wrong with the school. Isn't that awful?

Emphasizing the value and importance of educational attainment to parents and community members, specifically high school completion, was a priority for educational leadership in every case district. Surprisingly, leaders in those school districts, such as Heritage, with fewer businesses, civic and nonprofit organizations, and job opportunities were able to build a wider range of community consensus over the value and investment in local schools. In districts where job opportunities were relatively abundant, there was less community-wide interest and investment in promoting educational attainment. A school board member in Timberland commented about the relationship between employment and promoting education:

I'm not sure that the majority of folks are convinced and believe that education is the key to making changes for the better in this area. I don't know what the percentage is, but I know it's very low, the percentage of adults who have college educations in this area. And in the past, because the [resource gathering] has had ebbs and flows, but most of the time, the economy, [work] is pretty good. Adults can make a good living in the [resource gathering]. But fewer and fewer businesses now, more [modernization], so, as time goes on, the area's going to be faced with a real dilemma as to what's going to be a viable economy here.

Summary

An *espirit de corps* for academic success and postsecondary promotion was the product of communities that were committed to promoting the success and value of public schools despite local and external obstacles. Even if school leaders and education stakeholders could not develop a sense of shared urgency and concern about local schools within a majority of district residents, they were able to do so with a core group of community leaders and residents. School and community resources were maximized parallel to a shared vision for student academic success. This shared vision looked past local economic difficulties and state mandates, and emphasized the ability of school staff and community members to make positive changes in students' lives despite obstacles. In places where school and community partnerships were less coordinated, schools, private and public support organizations, and local residents addressed academic and civic issues independently. However, school and community leaders clearly identified similar problems and the ways to address them, and knew that additional communication and structure was warranted to address these issues. These communities were at the cusp of reaching a similar level of success as their peers, needing a combination of different educational and community elements to fall into place.

Section Six:
Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective School-Community Partnerships

Guiding Question: What are the characteristics of effective and ineffective school-community partnerships?

This study of school-community partnerships sought to understand the complex intersection of rural context, school setting, and community resources, and to analyze the ways that these situations and systems might contribute to student achievement and postsecondary aspirations. This study was not designed to evaluate which partnerships "work" and which do not, or whether one type of program is superior to others. However, this study did shed light on ways in which observed partnerships maximized resources, optimized operations, and thoughtfully utilized networks to offer services and activities with greater potency and efficiency. We also noted that some of the most important "partnering" functions of local agencies and organizations may not involve the schools or school personnel in an official or direct capacity. However, since they provide opportunities for students to gain life and academic skills, cultural experiences, career aspirations, and other benefits, they are certainly indirect partners in the educational process.

Generally speaking, the best partnerships synchronize the knowledge and resources of all parties in ways that improve the content and delivery of their work. Specifically, our analysis identified six features of effective partnerships, identified here and described in detail below.

Effective partnerships in rural Virginia communities occur when:
1. All involved parties contribute from their unique resources and benefit from the resources shared by others.
2. Partners capitalize on local resources to engage students in new learning opportunities.
3. Services and activities provide students with new venues where they can build self-efficacy and demonstrate ability.
4. Coordinating persons bring vision, motivation, and unique skill sets to their work, rather than relying only on stock or pre-existing programs.
5. Partnerships are sensitive and responsive to teacher and school needs.
6. Partners' services and activities meet short-term and long-term objectives.

Finding One: Sharing Resources
Effective partnerships occur when all involved parties contribute from their unique resources and benefit from the resources shared by others. Many of the community partnerships in the case study school districts served single or stand-alone functions: a civic organization would give a scholarship each year or would recognize a student for their scholastic achievements, for example. Although these gifts and honorariums can be very meaningful for

students and for community contributors, the breadth and depth of their impact may be limited. More effective community partnerships occurred in the confluence of resources from various partners, specifically in three ways.

First, thoughtful integration of resources resulted in a more potent program or programs for students. As introduced previously, when a Career Coach used the Virginia Wizard program to augment a Reality Store program that was already a successful partnership program between the school and local businesses, students could more fully imagine the process toward and outcomes associated with a particular career choice.

Second, when community partners recognized common needs and share resources, not only were the organizations able to expand their activities, but students could access a wider array of opportunities as well. In Greenfield, the local 4-H, Boy Scouts, and other organizations shared the cost of a van, creating the means for each organization to offer rides to and from events that otherwise would not have been accessible to some students whose parent or parents were unable or unwilling to provide transportation.

Third, in some situations, partners coordinated in ways that increased the visibility of and attendance at the events of the organizations involved. In Heritage School District, a non-profit organization gathered donations of goods and services from local businesses to use as door prizes to entice participation in a parenting skills program. The business benefitted by supporting a worthwhile cause and through the publicity that the non-profit gave its sponsors. The non-profit organization benefitting from increased attendance, and of course, the parents benefitted from the educational program, and in some cases, from the door prizes as well.

Finding Two: Capitalizing on Local Resources

Effective partnerships occur when partners capitalize on local resources to engage students in new learning opportunities. Schools located in metropolitan and suburban areas often have the advantage of nearby large public works and philanthropic projects, such as museums, public performance spaces, seasonal cultural events, and historical centers. However, rural areas have unique resources as well that can create new types of learning experiences for students. In response to the loss of large-scale manufacturing and agricultural production, some rural areas have invested in natural resource, cultural, and historical site development and promotion, such as parks, waterways, interpretive centers, and festivals. In several of the case study districts, both schools and other community partners had developed programs in conjunction with nearby state parks to provide hands-on lessons in field biology, conservation, wildlife management, and a range of other interest areas. One public agency leader who runs a program where students are able to visit a park at night and use a high-powered telescope, described how these experiences benefit students who are sometimes the most difficult to reach:

> And these are the kids that, I mean they're great kids, but they are the ones that have such a hard time academically kind of sitting there and listening. So…we were in the gym and I looked and there was about four or five of them sliding on their backs on the gym floor. But those same kids when you get them outside in the woods…something happens to them there that doesn't happen in a structured kind of environment, which is kind of cool.

In Riverside School District, the local area has capitalized on traditional regional musical forms to promote tourism and the arts. A local arts organization connected to this style of performance began offering lessons to school children, and wanted to expand services to underrepresented students as well. With some gentle arm twisting, the school district was convinced to bus students to and from these rehearsals, opening participation to low-income students from outlying areas.

Finding Three: New Contexts for Student Confidence

Effective partnerships occur when services and activities provide students with new venues where they can demonstrate ability and gain self-efficacy. The arts center director from Riverside described how students from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status categories, and academic achievement levels found a voice and a point of pride through participation in this program. In another example, a student who "struggled to give her best effort" was involved in a summer academic program at the nearby community college where she discovered that she had an affinity for poetry. The guidance counselor linked this experience to improved support in the school setting, showing coordination and cooperation between partners and an increased sense of academic identity for the student: "…so it has helped us to have a handle to try to kind of help her too, for her to work on meeting her potential."

Finding Four: Individual Initiative

Effective partnerships occur when coordinating persons bring vision, motivation, and unique skill sets to their work, rather than relying only on stock or pre-existing programs. The oversight of a school-community partnership relationship often fell to the community partner to initiate, pursue, and develop. In some cases, partners plugged their resources into existing structures, such as adding a scholarship to the list of available funding opportunities held by the guidance office. In other cases, community partners found that more initiative was necessary to mobilize resources or to persuade potential partners to increase their level or type of involvement. The director of the arts program described the process of establishing the transportation agreement with the school district:

> I know majority of the people up there [school and district administrators], I told somebody, "They may not tell me yes, but they couldn't tell me no," just because they've known me forever and they thought it was a very good idea and they would eventually like to see it in the school system, but that kind of thing is just not going to happen right

now. So I just sort of backed off of that a little bit, of course the superintendent and the assistance superintendent were good friends of mine, and I just kept on sort of talking to people and so they agreed that they would bus the kids to [the arts center] for us.

Her recollection illustrates the importance of persistence, planning, and relationships in creating opportunities for disadvantaged students. Similarly, in Western School District, a woman who coordinates a college access organization told us, with a twinkle in her eye, how she stretches the number of students she accepts into her program each year, pushing her board to provide the necessary funds because she believes so strongly in the benefits the program will bring to them. A variety of community partners discussed how they developed their own materials, looked at other state and national programs, and borrowed ideas from colleagues they met at conferences to bring together what they believed to be the set of programs that best fit the needs of their students and area.

In many cases an individual who coordinates an access program, directs an agency, or heads a scholarship initiative is the primary and at times only point of contact for that group in the community. As a result, although their parent organization may have established programs and expectations, the particular shape and delivery of content depends on that individual and their ability to build networks, identify resources, and create innovative programs that are both ambitious and contextually appropriate. Often, these point people have local ties that give them social entrée, but in many cases they are simply individuals who believe strongly in their purpose and commit the time and energy to improve the fortunes of local students. Particularly in areas with high turnover in school administration positions, partnership continuity and consistency depends on long-standing community agencies and organizations who must re-introduce their potential contributions to subsequent generations of administrators and teachers. In such cases, community partners also represent a form of institutional memory for both schools and the community at large.

Finding Five: Sensitivity and Responsiveness

Effective partnerships occur when they are sensitive and responsive to teacher and school needs. Following from Finding Four that emphasized individual initiative and contextual sensitivity, some of the most meaningful partnerships happened when teachers and organization representatives were able to communicate directly about their needs and resources, and to utilize them as needs arose. On a basic level, this happened in many districts through simple community volunteer programs where local residents served as classroom support on a regular basis. These roles become even more important as a result of recent budget-driven staff layoffs. In other cases, organizations brought specific expertise that could supplement or fill in gaps where needs arose. Several access provider and service agencies maintained a regular presence in the schools, resulting in a high level of teacher awareness and comfort with their skill set and areas of knowledge. One 4-H coordinator described how teachers occasionally contact her to do

life skills and character development sessions with classes when student issues, such as theft and disrespect, arise. Similarly, several Career Coach participants detailed handling advising and career assessment referrals from teachers and counselors, stepping in to talk about college and career options when a teacher had to be absent, and assisting college recruiters (in one example transporting students to another county because the recruiters did not consider one small rural school to be worth their time). In other situations potential partnerships had not yet solidified. A community education foundation leader in Western School District noted how their attempts to provide volunteers, teacher funding for innovative pedagogy, and other partnering offers had garnered few takers. As an organization founded in the past few years, building relationships and establishing trust may be necessary before school employees feel comfortable accepting these resources.

Finding Six: Short-Term and Long-Term Objectives

Effective partnerships occur when partners' services and activities meet short-term and long-term objectives simultaneously. As previously discussed, the community education foundation in Western School District was struggling between supporting the immediate college-going needs of students through scholarships and investing in long-term initiatives, such as a program that would enable teachers to pursue master's degrees that would enable them to teach advanced placement courses. Both goals are worthwhile, and the perception of choice may be a forced dichotomy. In Heritage School District, school personnel and community organizers actively maintained relationships with graduates who had gone on to successful careers, whether these individuals remained in the community or moved away to pursue education and employment. Within the school, recent college-going grads are invited back for a "College Day" to mix with current students and talk about their experiences in college. Each year the community education foundation invites several of these successful graduates back to a fundraiser dinner that supports the ongoing scholarship and educational initiatives of the foundation. Along with this initiative, one successful alumnus is invited to speak at high school commencement exercises as well, creating additional opportunities for students to learn:

> This year…two lawyers came back, one doctor, one command sergeant major who retired this year…and we had two administrators retire and they came back, and we recognized them. And at our graduation we always have an alumnus to come back to speak because we want our children to see this person who sat where you were X number of years ago and they have gone off and done great things, you can do the same thing, and that has really been great for those kids to see. [Heritage] is a small community but you can do great things if you settle down and achieve academically and do well in school, and that has really gone over well.

Through the school and foundation's efforts, students see the career and life achievements of men and women who succeeded from and because of their community, and not

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in spite of it. Simultaneously, the foundation is able to raise money to financially support the college and career aspirations it is helping to inspire, accomplishing short-term (financial) and long-term (inspirational) goals.

In Greenfield School District, a new combined high school and middle school were constructed in the past decade and have become the central location for many community events and activities. However, funding for the new structures was a highly contentious issue that divided the community. Since then, school administrators have been very intentional about inviting local interest groups and organizations to eat lunch in the cafeteria and then tour the building. Short-term, the tours help local residents, some of whom opposed the school construction, to develop an appreciation for the positive impact and dramatic changes brought about by the new buildings. Long-term, the tours create comfort and familiarity with the school building and lay the groundwork for group and individual volunteering and involvement, and generally, positive regard for their local schools.

Characteristics of Ineffective School-Community Partnerships

As we have discussed in several contexts throughout this paper, school-community partnerships take many forms and may have different goals, duration, frequency, and effect size based on the purpose and resources that motivate and sustain them. For example, a yearly writing contest sponsored by a historical society that bestows a savings bond upon the winner may fit the time, resources, and needs of the school and community partner. Rather singling out small and infrequent programs for criticism, we observed three particular characteristics of ineffective partnerships in the course of this study.

Ineffective partnerships in rural Virginia communities occur when:
1. Partnerships are never initiated or are not supported.
2. Facilitators do not build committed relationships with communities and schools.
3. Services are not coordinated.

Finding One: Unsupported Partnerships
First, and perhaps most obviously, ineffective partnerships are those that are never initiated or are not supported. A member of a women's organization who volunteered in school and coordinated several partnership activities throughout the year noted the limitations of further engagement in a small rural area: low total population, long commute times, large distances between locations, and limited financial resources. External constraints are joined by internal constraints: apathy, disinterest in education, a sense of helplessness, and exhaustion from involvement in other worthy though time-consuming commitments. Partnerships also may not come to pass because teachers and school employees already feel over-burdened by mandated testing and by the necessity that all employees take on multiple roles, some of which may not be

of particular interest to or expertise for them. Also, partnerships may not coalesce because, ironically enough, small rural communities come to rely on informal networks to meet student needs. Creating formal systems may seem like an impediment to quick response rather than an opportunity to galvanize support for particular issues.

Perhaps most distressing, partnerships may not happen because, at the community level, a sufficient number of residents do not see education as worth the investment. Among our six case districts, those with the most the most vibrant and diverse array of partnerships were the areas where a critical mass of residents were convinced that the success of their schools and the success of the community were deeply intertwined. The concepts or phrases they used to describe this symbiotic relationship varied, but the result was similar: citizens who believed that high quality schools would contribute to an attractive place for employers and employees to settle. Other districts in this study were, to varying degrees, contested ground, with some factions viewing education as a bellwether for community prosperity, and others resisting this characterization. In one case study district, school-related 4-H activities were cut due to a lack of support.

Finding Two: Lack of Committed Relationships
Second, ineffective programs happen when facilitators do not or have not taken the time to build relationships and demonstrate commitment to the community, school, and students. Some of the larger and more extensive partnership arrangements began smaller and developed as trust and rapport allowed. In some school districts (none in this study) these programs have not been able to work in the schools due to resistance from district administrators. One community education foundation in this study created a volunteer network but has found few receptive teachers willing to utilize their human and financial resources. In rural areas, relationships are the water that turns the wheel, and building those connections is a fundamental step.

Finding Three: Uncoordinated Services
Third, when partnerships develop a myopic perspective or fail to take the steps necessary to connect with other partners and develop collaborative relationships, they are less effective. In Western School District a social services director explained that the challenge was not a lack of services, it was a lack of coordination of services:

One of the things we find is that there are a tremendous number of activities, social organizations that are doing something, but no one knows about it. They are all doing something and what we want to try to do is consolidate that so that it becomes more efficient in terms of what they're delivering. If you standardize items that you're donating that might help, but also to publicize what they're doing…

Even in small rural school districts sources of services and partnerships may be sufficiently diffuse that redundancy or poor matching of needs and populations can occur. Although schools may be a common point of contact for all of these agencies and organizations, small schools often lack a point person or community partnership committee to track, coordinate, and assess these ongoing relationships, as has been identified as a best practice in the existing literature (Sanders, 2006). Indeed, only one of our case districts, Riverside, had a community relations committee of any kind. Even this committee had just been initiated and was designed primarily to promote programs and not to create and monitor them.

Summary

Although the purpose of this study was not to assess individual programs, our research has uncovered some important characteristics of more and less effective partnerships. Better partnerships are like hubs: points of intersection and convergence that combine resources and better support the overall educational process. And, they are like levers: creating movement and change by capitalizing on existing opportunities, including local cultural, historical, and environmental resources, social connections, and the strengths of other organizations to deliver innovative programming that meets the need of a range of students and a range of student needs. To an extent, less effective partnerships are those that do not develop those connections, or whose personnel do not have this sort of willingness or imagination for collaboration, resource sharing, and responsiveness to the needs of the local school district.

Conclusions

This study focused on school-community partnerships, both direct and indirect, in six small rural and outlying school districts in Virginia. We approached this topic from a community ecology perspective, analyzing the converging factors of the social, economic, and educational context in each area, the policies and practices of the schools and school leaders, and the type, function, and role of community organizations. Ultimately, our purpose was to understand how the confluence of these factors impacted and contributed to the academic success and postsecondary aspirations of the many low-income students who live in these areas and attend these schools. In this section we conclude with an overview of what we learned in three categories:

1. Lessons about school-community partnerships
2. Lessons about small schools in these rural communities
3. Lessons about rural communities

We will then discuss the particular factors we observed that contributed to the more successful, or "thriving" school districts, and what we learned about those districts facing more stringent challenges, or the "emerging" school districts, though we again emphasize that the differences are a matter of degree and not fundamental type.

Lessons about School-Community Partnerships

A. <u>Schools are stronger because of the variety of community partners</u>. Study findings show that school-community partnerships vary extensively by type, purpose, size, scope, frequency of activity, duration, resources, and other factors. Based on the study's focus on educational success and postsecondary aspirations, we grouped providers into seven categories: college access providers, business, non-profit, faith-based, public, higher education, and individual. As described in Section One, each school district had a unique combination of these community resource partner types and a resulting unique set of services and activities, many with overlapping and complementary purposes, such as promoting civic interest or expanding students' cultural awareness. School personnel should appreciate that various community groups will vary in their degree and type of involvement. However, seemingly less significant (in scope and duration) partners are important because they widen the circle of community involvement and offer new avenues for student learning and engagement.

B. <u>Coordination and maximization of resources were hallmarks of effective partnerships</u>. Small rural school districts have, by definition, a limited set of businesses, non-profit organizations, and higher education institutions from which to build partnerships.

Although identifying new potential partners should be a first step for schools and communities, imagining ways that existing partnerships might be expanded, focused, or combined was often a more fruitful approach to meeting student needs. Strategic thinking (often on the part of the partners) has the potential to create multiplicative value for students when several partners combine resources and ideas.

C. <u>Rural partnerships are a mix of formal and informal structures and relationships</u>. In a theme echoed throughout this report, the way that school-community partnerships work in suburban and metropolitan areas where policy and best practices are typically established is not necessarily the way that these arrangements work best in small rural school districts. Within the school-community partnership literature (Sanders, 2006), the focus is primarily on formal agreements between larger urban or suburban schools (often through the intermediary of a partnership committee) and local organizations that provided a particular service or stage a regular event with a pre-determined timeline and set of objectives. We agree that many of the partnerships we observed could certainly benefit from deliberate conversations about goals for the collaboration and how those goals align with school objectives. Partnerships could gain additional clarity and purpose from a structured annual partner meeting that clarifies areas of need and examines coordination and evaluation of programs. In these small rural school districts informal relationships are the coin of the realm, and organizational affiliations often just delineate the types of resources a given person is able to offer. As a result, although each school district had a few formal and structured relationships, the most intensive and broad-based relationships, such as social services agencies, 4-H, college access providers, and other non-profit organizations, often were a mix of formal roles and informal sharing of resources. To a great extent the performance and utility of these partnering organizations depended on the skill, dedication, and imagination of one paid point person in each organization who was dedicated to improving the lives and fortunes of local residents. To the degree that these networks are sufficiently inclusive rather than territorial, their unstructured, organic, and locally responsive nature is a strength more than it is a liability.

D. <u>Community partners matter to the success of low-income students</u>. As stories gleaned from participant interviews illustrated, the extensive needs of the many low-income students, who often made up a majority of the school population in these districts, stretch the resources of school personnel, even though most teachers and administrators give extensively of their own time and resources. Nevertheless, the structures and roles of school personnel at points confined, constrained, or limited the extent to which they could be involved with any one student. In a variety of ways, community partners met tangible and intangible needs, often at moments of crisis or important decisions, providing material and financial support, advice, information, and knowledge of systems

or processes that were in some cases necessary for college access decision-making. Combined, the contributions of these partners demonstrated to students and sometimes to school staff that community members care about the success of individual students and the success of schools. Of course, not all students received needed services or took advantage of the services provided for a range of reasons, including disinterest, the presence or absence of support at home, transportation issues, and other problems or impediments

Lessons about Small Schools in Rural Communities

A. <u>Successful schools use their physical resources to draw in the community, generating familiarity, engagement, and support</u>. Many rural areas lack community resources such as community centers, sports facilities, conference facilities, and other large social spaces that are common in suburban and metropolitan areas. Particularly for those school districts that have made capital investments in facilities, new or remodeled school structures represent a set of scarce resources: gyms, dining facilities, assembly space, computer labs, a library, and classrooms that can be used for a variety of special interest groups. In this study all but one of the districts had either built or remodeled one or more of its schools in the past ten years. Several contextual factors made strategic use of school structures additionally important, including contention over the decision to build or remodel schools by some citizen groups, availability of grant funding (such as the 21st Century Grant that is designed to encourage healthy communities and life-long learning), and a growing retirement-age segment of the population, some of whom moved to the area to enjoy a slower pace of life and who had little interest in supporting or funding education initiatives. Savvy administrators recognized that positioning the school buildings as a community resource reinforced the importance of school in community life and created a centripetal effect, pulling individuals and resources into the life of the school. For example, an invitation to the county Red Hat Society to eat lunch in the cafeteria and enjoy a tour of the new building in one district created a segue to volunteering opportunities. School building resources, when properly used, are a platform for community involvement, interest, and ultimately for support in difficult financial circumstances.

B. <u>Schools committed to improving postsecondary access to all students structure career and college opportunities throughout the K-12 education process</u>. Although distance and geography were obstacles in some of the case districts, school districts that were most successful at ushering students on to postsecondary education used several strategies to encourage students to begin considering their own future options. First, several of the schools structured the school day to provide enrichment time for students. In Riverside School District, every junior high student spent a portion of this time exploring college

and career options, including a trip to a research university, a four-year private liberal arts university, and a community college. In other cases, schools used enrichment, or even valued instructional time to bring in speakers, host discussions, and consult with guidance counselors and college access provider staff about the type and level of education required for particular career options. Occasionally enrichment time was split between remediation (for those in need) and enrichment for other students. Although this strategy did provide additional time for academic assistance, it also meant that those students were excluded from experiences that might help them develop an imagination for greater achievement.

C. <u>Schools administrators understood the value and liabilities of external funding</u>. State, federal, and private grants in relatively poor school districts were a vanishing life line. Without a dedicated grant writer, school personnel (administrators and teachers) invested precious hours writing grant proposals that frequently went unfulfilled. Even those that were accepted were both curse and blessing: grants often came with stipulations of programs, positions, or structures that required shuffling to accommodate. Most grants, and even those that were renewable, delivered resources for a set number of years before expiring. School personnel discussed the frustrations of sudden and short-term access to resources that improved the lot of struggling students, only to lose that funding and face the decision whether to squeeze resources elsewhere to continue the full program without external support, continue the services in a watered-down form, or simply drop the initiative and try to retain some of the best practices that had been gained. Despite these uncertainties, one superintendent discussed his plan to abandon a currently vacant administrative position in favor of a full-time grant writer. At a time of difficult state funding cuts, these districts that were already close to the margins became even more reliant on external funding and the "deal with the devil" that accompanies them.

D. <u>Administrative turnover is a difficult fact of life</u>. Nearly all individuals in top administrative posts within our case districts were participants in this study (18 in all), and none had been in their current position for more than five years. Of the district-level top administrators, none had a tenure longer than three years. Nevertheless, we were impressed by their sense of mission, their clear understanding that building bridges between constituents and joining the social economy of the area was essential for success, and, on the whole, their vision for what their school district could become. Many administrators had risen through the ranks from teachers to lower-level administrators before assuming their current roles. Although some had grown up in that particular school district, most were natives of the region, with a few exceptions. However, educators and community leaders had to adjust to regular school leadership turnover brought on by opportunities to move on to larger and more prosperous school districts, by internal promotions, or by local clamor over unpopular decisions. As a result, we suggest

that the impetus for a culture of educational emphasis and postsecondary expectation may shift to long-time teachers (the best of whom are sometimes called up the administrative ranks, then eventually lost to other locations) and to the community itself, in the form of the school board, county administrators, and community organizations, such as community education foundations. Although school leadership is very important, the onus of educational continuity may ultimately rest on community organizations, institutions, and individuals.

E. Successful small rural schools viewed externally mandated testing as a minimum standard. For the most part, administrators acknowledged the need for standards but also expressed deep reservations about the byproducts of this approach to evaluation. Their worries were typical and have been explored at length in other venues. Among the issues they cited was the effect mandated testing had on the objectives and goals of teachers, schools, and districts. For schools that were struggling, passing mandated testing marks was a nearly all-consuming pursuit. But even for those that did pass, the temptation was to hang a banner and relax, that is, to celebrate the achievement and not carry that momentum to other areas of need. Several school administrators argued that minimum standards testing not only lowered the bar of achievement, but it tempted school personnel to surrender ownership of district, school, and individual student goals. Within the highest achieving districts in the study, administrators were quick to explain that preparing college-ready students (regardless of their future plans) required stringent academic focus driven by a *local* commitment to the success of their students. A local public administrator described this approach in terms of seeking out the best school districts and competing with them, rather than competing with neighboring schools. In short, a commitment to embrace school goals that exceeded externally imposed standards was a mechanism for expressing pride and confidence in teachers and students, and for claiming local agency and control even in the face of increased reliance on external resources.

F. Nearby higher education institutions represent an invaluable resource. All six case study districts profited from relationships with nearby higher education institutions, though not to the same degree. Two- and four-year, public and private college and universities may provide student teachers, continuing education courses and workshops, advanced degree programs for teachers and administrators, specialized academic camps for students, and most centrally, postsecondary degree options that are affordable, regionally accessible, and within the scope of imagination for many students. Nearby higher education options provide opportunities for exposure to a college campus and related activities throughout childhood, reducing the perception of college as foreign and intimidating, particularly for first-generation students who have little frame of reference for college-going processes. Community colleges were an especially important resource since they facilitate dual

enrollment courses, technical education courses, workforce education, and the Career Coach program which is an important component to college access for many rural students in Virginia. Furthermore, several districts had partnerships with community colleges that provided scholarships, in-school developmental education courses, and other initiatives intended to smooth the transition from high school and increase the likelihood of postsecondary success. Nearby higher education opportunities had a few drawbacks as well: the apparent ease of access may reduce commitment to preparation and success; statistically, students who begin at a community college have a far lesser percentage of eventual bachelors degree completion than those who begin matriculation in a four-year program; and community colleges may not have the full complement of student support services found at larger colleges and universities.

Lessons about Rural Communities (and their Schools)

A. <u>Intensive social networks are both a strength and a liability in small rural communities</u>. For most long-time residents of small rural areas, familiarity with the majority of local inhabitants is a reassuring part of life that provides consistency to events and mutual support in times of crisis. Young people, as many locals pointed out, often do not understand the virtues of this social network until they move away to anonymous suburban neighborhoods, then decide to return to raise their own children. Interconnected networks have the advantage of quickly spreading information about individuals in need, providing context for eccentric behavior, and linking individuals to sources of information and resources when particular needs arise. On the other hand, these networks can bind individuals to family social positions, can prematurely cement expectations of student performance both low and high, can ensconce unqualified and poor performing individuals in positions of authority or responsibility, and can facilitate breeches of confidentiality, procedure, and standards. Top administrators in this study, and particularly those from outside their service area, discussed the hours spent attending sporting events, funerals, civic organization meetings, local seasonal events, and nearly any other gathering of local citizens to build trust and become embedded in local informal social networks. Understanding this context of organic social networking is a necessary first step prior to developing and proposing new structures or policies.

B. <u>Most public and non-profit work is accomplished by a small "circle of influence" of highly involved citizens</u>. Although positions of leadership do change hands, we were surprised at the relatively small number of people who hold most of the formal positions of responsibility in these small rural school districts. Many of our participants, who were recommended or identified because they held a particular role or position, listed a paragraph of other boards, positions, and roles they fill or have filled. These heavily involved citizens reach this state of prominence through a combination of cause and

motivation. "Cause" arises from expertise, skill, or a pre-existing prominent role in the area, such as a superintendent, a business owner, or a financial management consultant. "Motivation" is the impetus for extending involvement beyond the occupation or position that gives prominence or visibility. In many cases individuals joined boards or volunteered for leadership roles due to a sense of civic responsibility, an interest in the issues at hand, or a personal belief that they could improve local fortunes through their involvement. The circle of influence model can benefit a locality if relationships are positive and cooperative, since the same small group of people, in different combinations, will work together on multiple projects and friction between members can be detrimental on multiple fronts. Clearly, this model also can facilitate the informal exchange of information, including sharing needs and resources in ways that can reduce the burden on any one group. The community where several organizations shared a van illustrates this point well. However this model can also encourage group-think, a lack of diversity of perspectives, and a narrow view of problems and solutions. A final and likely indirect effect of this model is that the circle of influence of most districts was constituted from mid- to high-income individuals. Low-income and commuting workers with fixed schedules and limited transportation options may be disqualified from participation. Those accustomed to serving in positions of leadership may not consider how the exclusion of these perspectives (which in some cases were paired with racial and ethnic minority status) might negatively impact local perceptions and group sensitivity to some local issues.

C. <u>Most community decisions reflect the tension between change and continuity</u>. Cities are places of perpetual transition: businesses start and fail, buildings rise and are leveled, residents occupy and depart from large rental units. Rural areas experience far less of this transition, almost by definition: natural areas are maintained, relatively few structures are constructed, and families occupy the same homesteads for generations. Yet the stability visible to the eye can disguise tremendous economic and social change: railways, roads, and ports change the ability of farming or a resource gathering community to connect with markets. Market fluctuations infuse and remove capital for growth. New tourism interests or resource gathering techniques and related industries can bring floods of new visitors and residents. Some citizen groups are concerned that developing too quickly will jeopardize the values and resources that make the area attractive to them. Other groups are concerned that failure to act quickly enough will cause the area to miss opportunities needed to ensure financial viability for the region and to raise the quality of life for all citizens. Education is often tied up in these perspectival clashes, directly through disputes over facilities, funding, and personnel, and indirectly through economic development and other political decisions that impact the tax base and population change over time. In some cases, improving the education system is seen as part of the solution, creating a more attractive community for businesses through an

educated workforce and quality schools for potential employees. In other situations, it is cast as part of the problem, creating tax increases and funding demands that only directly benefit a small segment of the population. Although these controversies are not restricted to rural areas, the role of rural schools as a social institution, as a hub for activities, and as a major local employer uniquely amplifies the conflict.

D. <u>Small rural communities struggle with the reality that a good education system prepares young people to leave</u>. Although nearby higher education and employment options mediate this effect to a degree, when schools and communities succeed in preparing students for college-level work and encourage the drive to excel, in most cases this means an increasing number of students will leave the area. Reflective of the tension between change and continuity, participants interpreted the imperative to prepare students to leave on a sliding scale, with those who saw the push for college-going as part of the problem at one end, and those who viewed the departure of more students to college (still with the hope of eventual return) as a sign of success. Most participants held perspectives somewhere between these poles. On the whole, the districts that sent more students to college had also constructed a shared narrative to make sense of this seeming contradiction, involving one or more of the following elements: First, that all students, regardless of future career type, will benefit from a more rigorous education that prepares them for some sort of postsecondary education. Second, that schools that succeed at preparing students for postsecondary education create an attractive environment for families (which is a particular concern in some areas due to population out-migration and accompanying lost tax and state per-pupil revenue), new employers, and graduates who remain or return because they want to and not because they have no other options. Third, that successful high school graduates who become college graduates and successful members of the workforce -- whether they return or not -- would then become a resource for the community and the schools. Heritage School District in particular had been proactive at tying successful graduates back into the community as models for achievement. Similarly, some of the educational activists pushing for change in Western School District were natives who had left for education and employment, returning in their sunset years to once again enjoy the community they loved and contribute to it in personally meaningful ways. Regardless of the quality of the schools, every district has at least some students who leave for educational or employment opportunities, or simply to see new parts of the world and escape their parents. For small rural school districts, the sense made of this eventuality and the response it generates within schools, county boards, and the business community is more important than the basic fact of student departures.

Comparative Lessons: Thriving Versus Emerging Districts

Throughout this study we have resisted characterizing some districts as successes and others as failures, preferring to conceptualize each district as occupying a different point in an uneven process of growth toward increased academic excellence and postsecondary preparation of students. Through visiting and touring each community we saw firsthand the significant resource variation of each area that formed the backdrop to the challenges and opportunities facing each school district. Furthermore, the volatile nature of student populations and resulting statistical sensitivity of achievement measures required more nuanced ways of conceptualizing the condition of case study school districts. All districts had teachers and administrators who showed a high degree of concern for underrepresented students, though in several districts issues of race and access to services for sub-populations continue to be a work in progress. All districts had local partnerships that resulted in meaningful work in and with the schools. In short, there are no perfect districts, but some districts had a greater convergence of positive factors that help to explain their relative success. Many of the points described below echo themes presented in the prior section, but bear repeating.

Distinctive Characteristics of Thriving School Districts:
A. The presence of a strong, active, and unified community education foundation (CEF) helps to galvanize support for local schools and local students' academic achievement and postsecondary aspirations. Community education foundations are non-profit independent organizations that provide financial support for educational events, scholarships, pedagogical innovations, and other related initiatives. These organizations can also help publicize district objectives, and through creative use of resources, encourage school-community partnerships and collaborations between other community organizations. The importance of CEFs will be revisited in the recommendations section to follow.

B. Cooperative relationships exist between local governmental and educational entities. Within the most successful districts we repeatedly heard about and observed the effects of a positive cooperative relationship between the superintendent, school board, county board of supervisors, and other top administrative and political positions. The hallmarks of this relationship were a shared commitment to the value of education, trust that school personnel were making good choices with resources and asked only for what was needed, and clear and open lines of communication between the various entities. The relationship between school leaders and community leaders was perhaps the most important partnership of any observed.

C. Externally mandated performance standards are viewed as a minimum standard, with higher expectations held at the local level. This point was discussed at length under

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Lessons about Rural Communities letter E, and was a consistent point of difference among the most successful school districts. Many leaders in thriving districts viewed community partners as an integral part of achieving a higher standard of education.

D. Thriving school districts had community partners that communicated with one another, shared resources, and cooperated on projects of common interest. Much of this information exchange occurred informally. In nearly every case district, community organization leaders discussed the importance of reducing redundancy and increasing collaboration. However, in one of the districts several community organizations leaders (and one who regularly worked in the schools) noted that they have very little communication with school personnel. In fact, in the course of interviews the researchers served as an unwitting intermediary between school personnel and a college access provider, passing along information about a funding initiative that had been cut that greatly impacted low-income students' ability to take dual enrollment courses.

E. Thriving schools demonstrated a persistent effort to form clear goals and to communicate them to parents and to the wider community. Specifically, superintendents hosted town hall-style meetings throughout their service area in locations such as churches and libraries that were likely to draw citizens. They formed advisory groups made up of particular segments of the population, such as pastors. They also made specific and targeted efforts to connect with racial and ethnic minority sub-populations who may not feel welcome in some typical venues. Savvy administrators understood that school improvement by the numbers was only part of the battle; another aspect was convincing local residents that schools had in fact improved and were worthy of positive regard and support. Toward this end, one of the six districts had formed a community relations committee made up of various school personnel to promote the schools and school initiatives at local events and through a variety of local media outlets.

F. Repeating another theme presented above, thriving school districts benefitted from a shared vision for the benefit of high quality schools across business, public, and non-profit sectors. The importance of shared goals communicated between local educational, public policy, and economic development interests cannot be overstated. Of course, this enthusiasm is never unanimous, but broad-based support resulted in forward movement in support of education on a wide variety of fronts, and a much wider cohort of local leaders who were willing to invest time and resources to improve educational opportunities for local students.

G. Thriving school districts made creative use of alumni to inspire subsequent generations to believe in their own ability to succeed and to encourage young people to reinvest in their community. Through college days with recent graduates, fundraising dinners with

prominent alumni, alumni graduation speakers, social networking sites designed for ongoing communication between graduates, school personnel, and students, and the wall of fame where graduating students could post college acceptance letters and notes about their forthcoming plans, school districts dedicated to postsecondary achievement saw departing students as a resource rather than a loss.

H. Thriving school districts were willing to pay the price for facilities upgrades. As mentioned above, all but one participant district had constructed or renovated facilities in the last 10 years. Thriving school districts had and were in the process of significant construction or renovations (beyond capital deferred maintenance projects) that result in facilities that were foremost traditional schools, but were planned in ways that incorporated community space needs as well. One district, in the early stages of planning its next renovation phase, looked to incorporate the small, satellite, community library with the high school's library, creating a separate community entrance to the facility. This strategy would increase the size of the libraries holdings, allow the library to be open longer hours, and encourage community members to visit and become active in school activities. Although the process of planning and funding some of these facilities brought about painful community debates that often occasionally ended in the ouster of elected and appointed officials who were focused on change, the financial and personal costs of the process were often outweighed by the benefits of the community that emerged.

Distinctive Characteristics of Emerging School Districts

Although school districts typically serving as examples on the "emerging" list also had some characteristics of thriving districts, the following issues were common themes that detracted from student success and ambition at school, district, and community levels:

A. Emerging school districts either did not have or had only recently established a community education foundation that was just beginning the work of building a coalition of supporters and establishing credibility as a hub for local educational needs and resources.

B. Emerging school districts had not achieved a critical mass of buy-in to the importance of postsecondary education and achievement from teachers and administrators. Many school personnel were primarily motivated by avoiding the penalties and stigma of a failing pass rate on state testing.

C. In emerging school districts communication and resource sharing between community partners was inconsistent or infrequent. Although leaders of community organizations

articulated the importance of coordination and resource sharing, formal and informal lines of communication were not sufficient to establish this level of awareness and cooperation consistently.

D. In emerging districts, processes for distributing information between the school, parents, and community organizations were still in formation or needed additional refinement. School and community leaders in these districts rarely discussed leveraging popular school and community activities, such as athletic events, plays, concerts, or other large gatherings to discuss school news and objectives. Here the tendency to rely on informal networks may be part of the problem, or it may be that with transitions in personnel and leadership at the school and community level, these lines of exchange simply have not solidified yet.

E. Emerging school districts typically had school buildings in need of renovation or replacement. Physical plant projects can be enormously expensive and difficult to undertake in a small rural district. At the risk of oversimplification, within areas of comparable size and resources, new buildings were a priority worthy of sacrifice in some areas, and in others they were not. Just as school buildings were described as serving positive functional and symbolic roles in an earlier discussion, so aging and dilapidated buildings serve negative functional and symbolic roles. Functionally, old structures detract from the educational experience when they have inadequate facilities and contain deferred maintenance projects that reduce the aesthetic appeal of a school. Community members have less enthusiasm for the space and are less apt to use it. Aging buildings are a symbolic reflection of district priorities. In one case district, a high school that was in clear need of renovation sat just down the road from a brand new municipal complex. Both students and community member receive this message that can perpetuate a low view of education generally and signal to potential supporters that the district does not take school improvement seriously.

In summary, it would be very easy to discount the importance of individual school-community partnerships, such historical society scholarship or a yearly program run by the garden club, in the face of the immense needs of low-income students. Yet when these many and diverse sources of community support, encouragement, knowledge, and resources converge, they take up the slack left by unwilling or unable parents and supplement the work of overburdened teachers and administrators. And when these individual acts of compassion and support are part of a community-wide vision for the role of education in student and local success, the result is a shared sense of purpose, pride, and as one participant put it, "small town spirit" that provides new life changes to the area's low-income students.

Recommendations

Given these findings and conclusions, we recommend the following action steps for **schools** and **communities/community organizations.** We have also included recommendations that schools and community liaisons can pursue with **state policy actors**. Although these recommendations have been designed with small schools in rural and outlying areas in Virginia in mind, they may be appropriate for other systems and situations, as well, to the extent that they fit the community's needs and goals based on a thorough stakeholder analysis.

Recommendations for Small Rural Schools:

1. Develop a Community Relations Committee (CRC). Negative school perceptions can outlive the realities that gave rise to them, reducing local support for schools and robbing the community of the positive regard they might otherwise have for their local education system. As importantly, a community relations committee made up of school personnel and representatives from the business and non-profit sector can be a point of entry for new school-community partnerships. The CRC could partner with a community education foundation or an alumni association to use prominent alumni to mobilize support and publicize the work of local schools.

2. Cooperatively develop and support a Community Partnership Coordinator (CPC). Even areas where cooperation and resource sharing happen organically may benefit from the consistency and advocacy of a community partnership coordinator. The CPC would serve part-time as a local education advocate between schools, businesses, and state and local agencies and organizations. The CPC would be a person who has been a long-time supporter involved either directly in K-12 education as a teacher or administrator, or an agency employee who has worked closely with the schools. Ideally, this would be a retired person to reduce any chance he or she be might be viewed as an agent of a particular group in this function. The CPC would act as a hub for information and ideas about resource sharing between schools and current and potential community partners of all types. The CPC would be tasked with using his or her knowledge of local educational resources and goals to encourage partnerships that support these objectives, and to brainstorm creative use of human, financial, and material resources to meet these needs better. For funding purposes this person could be a joint appointment supported by the community education foundation and the local school board, or the position could be completely voluntary. The CPC would also work closely with groups such as the chamber of commerce, the Community Relations Committee (created under recommendation number one), the superintendent of schools, the local director of social services, and other essential persons and groups. Although the CPC would sit on and attend a wide variety of board and committee meetings, their formal authority should be

significantly limited since the purpose of the CPC is to identify ways to create and improve partnerships, but not to mandate these changes. Based on what we have observed of the success of the Career Coach program, the CPC position would be most potent if physically located within the local schools so that the CPC is able to maintain firsthand knowledge of student, teacher, and school needs.

3. <u>Perform a school-community partnership inventory.</u> An important first step for the community partnership coordinator, for the community relations committee, or for any school district wanting to better understand and improve school-community partnerships with an eye toward improved academic success and postsecondary aspirations, is to perform a school-community partnership inventory. As we have highlighted throughout this report, in small rural areas cooperative relationships are often informal and based on pre-existing social networks. The purpose of this inventory is not to replace existing or typical modes of operation, but to enhance them through increased clarity of types and functions of school-community relationships in ways that will maximize existing resources. The forms in Appendix F and G are resources to aid this process of identifying and naming the functions (**Appendix F**) and roles (**Appendix G**) of school-community partnerships.

4. <u>Involve successful alumni to increase academic and postsecondary aspirations</u>. High school alumni who have completed postsecondary education and gone on to successful careers (both low- and high-profile) can provide a model for career and educational options for students who feel trapped or disempowered by their rural upbringing. Not in the sense that growing up in a rural area is a liability, but rather to show them that their native environment has in fact equipped them with essential skills and dispositions that will allow them to succeed in contexts very different from their point of origin, even if those areas initially seem foreign. Alumni events may also offer an avenue through which communities can encourage young professionals to return to their home area. Furthermore, bringing alumni back for fundraisers, graduation events, college days, and other coordinated events models community re-investment to students who might otherwise think that to succeed a person must leave their home community and not return. Finally, the proliferation of social networking options makes ongoing engagement with alumni easier than ever. A private social networking page dedicated to alumni from a particular year, or a website designed to capture major events in the lives of all alumni can foster a network of graduates through which job opportunities can be channeled to graduating students and material resources can be channeled back into the school district. Alumni engagement can be coordinated by school personnel, by a community education foundation, by a public relations committee, or by an alumni association.

5. <u>Orient new employees to the unique experiences and challenges faced by students from low-income families</u>. Low-income students are not just financially poor, they are often disadvantaged by a lack of parental support, structure, positive modeling, and academic encouragement. Although most low-income parents want their children to succeed in school and in life, they may not have the skills or knowledge to promote achievement and may feel intimidated by education systems. Low-income families, often widely dispersed to the margins of the community, are sometimes geographically distant from schools and other central services. One aspect of new employee orientation programs could be a session on working with low-income students, including a district "Reality Tour" - a bus or van trip throughout the county to visit otherwise invisible locations where poverty is most acute and where many low-income students and their families reside. The purpose is not to gawk at the less fortunate, but to educate all employees about the unique challenges that face low-income students and negatively impact their life changes. This tour would benefit from the participation of the superintendent, a top official from the local social services or family services office, and several veteran teachers who can help new employees understand how poverty negatively impacts the educational experience of students. This opportunity might be especially helpful for teachers and administrators who commute to the district, as well as for those who grew up locally but may not be familiar with sections of the county where residents from other socio-economic groups live. Two districts in this study either have or had a county tour of some kind.

6. <u>Develop an explanation for the value of academic achievement and postsecondary education for all students, and promote it broadly</u>. Especially in areas with high populations of low-income students who would be first-generation college attendees, postsecondary education can carry a variety of negative stigmas and myths. Rural populations generally may see preparing students to leave for college as a net loss for the community. Although some of these concerns are legitimate, school leaders, in concert with community leaders, must do more than prepare students for postsecondary education; they must also help the community understand why an education system capable of sending most students to college is a good thing for the students and for the community. Once again, this sort of promotion requires broad support, including school board and county leaders, community education foundation members, and of course school administrators and teachers.

7. <u>Use school buildings strategically</u>. Nearly all the school districts in this study were making extensive though varied use of their buildings and grounds to increase community involvement, interaction, awareness, and indirectly, to build support. These initiatives were more successful in structures that were in good condition. Our sense is that many small rural districts already are using their school structures extensively by necessity. However, school leaders in this study highlighted the important strategic ways

this resource can be used to make parents and community members aware of school objectives and successes. For instance, in one district where high-speed internet is not widely accessible, the principal of the high school opened the computer lab for evening hours where both students and community members could take advantage of access.

8. <u>Understand and develop appropriate relationships with faith-based organizations</u>. Although faith-based organizations are a part of communities throughout the Commonwealth, they are of particular importance in rural areas. Throughout the six case study districts, these groups played a vital role in assisting low-income families. Faith-based organizations provided meeting facilities, mentor programs, recreational activities, and financial aid for local students heading to college. These organizations became more important in the more remote districts where public facilities and activities for all ages, peripheral of the schools, were few. One of the districts with the smallest total population had over 60 churches. Rural school and community leaders should consider ways that they can work with local faith-based organizations to promote local educational goals and needs. School administrators discussed in detail how they were currently developing or planned to develop relationships with local churches, especially those with large populations of minorities and/or low-income families. For them, churches were places of neutral ground where school administrators and staff could interact with parents and community members who were uncomfortable visiting the schools. These engagements allowed administrators to discuss school system successes, upcoming testing dates, college application deadlines, and most importantly, invite these individuals and groups to the schools. Where these activities were occurring, school leaders, community members, and church leaders recognized the importance of maintaining religious non-partisan relationships between schools and faith communities.

Recommendations for Small Rural Communities:

1. <u>Develop and support a Community Education Foundation (CEF)</u>. Throughout this report we have discussed the virtues of a community education foundation as a catalyst for local educational advocacy, financial support for postsecondary education, pedagogical innovation, and other related activities. In four of our six case study districts, the local CEF brought together local stakeholders with experience, expertise, and interest in education to focus efforts to improve academic outcomes and students' access to postsecondary education. The presence of a CEF is an important symbol of community support, though its real importance depends on purposeful leadership and coordination with local school leaders and the business community, since fundraising and financial distribution are generally an important functions of CEFs. Virginia has numerous examples of successful CEFs that could serve as models for seeding new organizations.

2. <u>Promote community involvement in schools by supporting the development of a Community Partnership Coordinator</u>. Described at length under school recommendations number two (above), a community partnership coordinator would, through formal and informal channels, develop new networks between various community stakeholders, field ideas for new partnerships, and given his or her awareness of community resources and actors, identify new avenues for resource sharing. The coordinator would not be in charge of partnerships in a formal sense, but would act as a center of knowledge and organization for them, and serve as a resource for school personnel looking for community support and community persons looking for ways to support the schools. The success of this position would rest on the coordinator's knowledge of local issues, schools, organizations, and businesses; their commitment to improving educational success; and their willingness and ability to listen to local stakeholders to understand their needs and resources. Existing community organizations (private, non-profit, business, and higher education) would be key actors in developing and financially and logistically supporting this position, in coordination with school district leaders.

3. <u>Prioritize and support school construction and renovation projects</u>. One of the clearest lessons from this study is the importance of well maintained and up-to-date facilities that reflected community commitment to education, inspired pride and ownership in students and school personnel, and tacitly set an expectation of performance and success within the district. A new building is not a magic bullet and it may only come at a high cost to other local priorities. Yet, as part of a systematic effort to improve both education and community attitudes toward education, a bright, clean, well-designed structure that also provides meeting rooms, technology and fitness access, and assembly space can be a boon to educational success and to community health.

4. <u>Consider ways to increase involvement of and investment by low-income and minority voices in public life and decision-making (both students and adults)</u>. Each school district had its own unique history of racial tension and social stratification that lingered on in a variety of overt and covert ways. Although not the case in every case district, in several locations nearly all civic and educational leadership positions were filled by white males. Without any commentary about the leadership skills of these individuals, to fully understand and represent the range of experiences and needs of the district's African-American, female, Latino, and other populations, meaningful inclusion of these groups in community decision-making must be a priority. Often, leaders from majority racial and gender groups are not aware how simple cultural practices or informal group habits might send messages that those who are not part of the dominant group are not welcome to participate. Other districts, although more racially diverse in population and leadership, were led primarily by higher-income earning individuals who tended to circulate between various community leadership roles. Although in most cases these individuals provided

excellent leadership, in districts with high percentages of low-income students and families, we would urge leaders to find ways to include the emic knowledge and experiences of those most impacted by poverty and decisions designed to improve the fortunes of the poor. We recommend locally based leadership programs, leadership shadowing initiatives, or leadership mentoring opportunities for cross-sections of students and adults who are not part of the dominant racial, gender, and socio-economic status groups. Local leaders must take care not to tokenize one or two individuals or develop a quota system of some type, but rather to make decisions based on an earnest commitment to strengthening the community through broad-based involvement, input, and investment by all residents. In areas where current leadership was concerned about prospects for the next generation of local leadership, low- and moderate-income residents represent untapped potential.

5. <u>Form a cooperative community preschool</u>. In several of the communities, leaders discussed the dire need for early educational intervention programs with low-income students and families and the challenges brought about by a lack of a local public or private preschool that met both custodial and education improvement needs. Federally funded school-based programs such as Head Start only served a small segment of the pre-K student population. Rural community attempts at large-scale early preschool programs have been especially difficult due to the elimination of the state pre-K program and the growing lack of interest by private firms based on low or dispersed populations. As with other school-based programs focused on promoting aspirations and success during middle and high school, school and community leaders will likely need to look to third-party grant funding to establish and maintain critical early intervention programs for pre-K students. The program would also be heavily dependent on volunteers, part-time staff, and a significant level of coordination between government offices and private organizations. In rural communities the establishment of a cooperative pre-K program would be a significant challenge, but also could be a tremendous asset, establishing the fundamentals of students' academic success at an early age.

Recommendations to Pursue with State Policy Actors:

As discussed in this report, education in small rural and outlying areas is highly relational and organic, and communities and school personnel often become adept at doing more with less. Therefore, it is paramount that school and community leaders help state legislators and policy actors understand that mandates, program cuts, and structural innovations may impact rural communities differently than larger, more urban locales. We suggest that school personnel and community partners work with state policy actors to encourage them to invest in and support the following recommendations that may help to coalesce and focus existing community resources:

1. <u>Support the development and growth of Community Education Foundations in Virginia school districts</u>. Although CEFs can only come about with local initiative and commitment, state-level actors can facilitate and encourage their development in three ways: First, collect state-level data to learn about the prevalence and function of community education foundations in Virginia, and identify best practices of formation and behavior of these organizations; Second, identify or develop and distribute information showing the value of these organizations and their role in promoting educational success and postsecondary aspirations, and describing in detail the steps to forming a community education foundation through print and online media; Third, identify exemplar CEFs and bring together leaders in a workshop, seminar, or conference format (perhaps online) with school and community leaders in prospective districts to talk through logistics, best practices, and limitations of these organizations. In these regards, state organizations, perhaps with the support of external funding, are in an excellent position to help rural communities establish structures that will result in self-perpetuating systems of postsecondary education support. State agencies could also use grant funding as seed money to encourage interest and participation.

2. <u>Support a pilot of the Community Partnership Coordinator (CPC) role, and promote the position statewide, as appropriate</u>. The Community Partnership Coordinator is a new position created to further capitalize on the existing resources of rural communities, and in particular, the social networks and local knowledge of long-time residents with education or community organizing experience. First however, we recommend a two-year trial run in several selected school districts to clarify how this position might best fit and operate in lieu of existing structures and relationships. Based on information gleaned from the pilot, Virginia state agencies could use existing education structures to develop resources, advertise, promote, and perhaps seed-fund the positions for an initial year. The strength of this initiative, as with the community education foundation proposal, is that it becomes embedded in the local system, perpetuated through local knowledge and support.

3. <u>Develop rural-specific teacher scholarships</u>. Due to low salaries and limited cultural and social opportunities, rural school districts often find it challenging to recruit new teachers, especially those who are the most qualified. Rural schools are also in need of licensed teachers who possess master's degrees in specific areas such as math and science, which would enable these schools to offer AP and dual enrollment courses on-site. Although rural schools and districts fit some of the criteria as outlined for the Virginia Teaching Scholarship Loan Program (VTSLP), greater incentives attached to specified periods of rural service are worth considering, though we acknowledge that it might be difficult to find full support for financial incentives in the current economic climate. The North Carolina Teaching Fellows program could serve as a model for how high-achieving

Virginia high school seniors could be selected to attend regional universities. In return for a full scholarship, these new teachers would be assigned to work and live in a rural school district for a term commiserate with the academic years needed for bachelor's degree completion. A graduate-level program would allow undergraduate students as well as practicing teachers to be selected to pursue, full-time, master's degrees under a similar model. Increasing the number of teachers with master's degrees in strategic disciplines could allow more high schools to offer additional AP and dual enrollment courses on-site. Although individual communities have tried to structure such agreements, program authority and centralization at the state level would ensure continuity and standardization of processes at a larger scale.

Epilogue: School District Contexts

In this report we have noted a set of indicators and central issues that have appeared in various forms throughout our findings and conclusions. These include the following:

1. Number/type of community partners
2. Communication and collaboration between schools and between partners
3. Understanding and leveraging of local social networks
4. Condition of buildings
5. Nature of school and community support for postsecondary education
6. Clear school district objectives
7. Regional economic stability
8. Nearby higher education options

Returning to the narrative case descriptions that began the study, below are brief discussions of each case district and the combinations of features above that we observed or that were reported to us. Our purpose in presenting findings in this format is to provide a holistic view of the combination of strengths and struggles facing each location. Although confidentiality and anonymity agreements restrict the specificity of details, this presentation highlights the role of community context and resources, such as community partnerships and support, in developing educational systems that are equipped for and interested in promoting postsecondary education aspirations and success.

Riverside School District:

Strengths:

 Riverside School District benefits from a strong and active community education foundation that has been highly successful at raising funds to support scholarships and educational programs, though support has tapered off recently due in part to economic conditions. All participants described the relationship between school and civic leadership groups as very positive, and open communication was a hallmark. Riverside has a combination middle and high school renovated in the past decade that increases collaboration and communication between these levels. The elementary school, located at another site, is older but in good condition. Although far from unanimous, Riverside schools are strongly supported by the community generally and local public officials connected the success of the schools to maximizing the possibilities for future economic growth. A satellite branch of the community college allows for strategic relationships between both the school system and local employers. Riverside benefits as well from the number of businesses and professional offices in its borders, creating options for educated graduates to return and find employment. School leadership shows

a strong commitment to the value of postsecondary education and has found a number of structural ways to provide opportunities for students to explore future college and career options.

Struggles:
Despite widespread support, one school administrator commented that the schools have not been particularly successful in the past in communicating goals to the community and in building specific partnerships through all K-12 grades. However, we also observed new efforts to address the need for improved communication through a community relations committee. Despite this new committee, like the rest of the case study sites, Riverside had no formal coordination of community partnerships. Not all school personnel participants were able to explain clearly the challenges faced by low-income students, which could be a sign of disconnection from the unique problems they face. As a locality, Riverside has worked to build relationships with local minority groups, though they have not yet found significant representation in leadership or decision-making positions.

Greenfield School District:

Strengths:
Greenfield School District benefits from a recent history of strong support at the county level, and a largely cooperative spirit between school administrators and the local school board. Greenfield has a variety of community partnerships, large and small, extensive and annual, that in their own ways reinforce community support for educational success. School-community partners showed the capacity to work together on shared projects and to meet the needs of schools and individual teachers as appropriate. A new combined high school/middle school was a point of local tension but has become an important fulcrum for increasing community presence, involvement, and support of local schools. Several long-time community members commented that local residents once had a negative view of local public education, but the combination of improved physical plant and improved educational focus has helped to change those perceptions. Greenfield benefits from strong though relatively new leadership on several levels. Leaders have shown willingness to take risks, to clarify purpose and discuss future plans in the community, and to engage external resources to improve local educational opportunities. Although not located in the county, Greenfield has a regionally accessible community college and four-year institution that provide supplementary educational opportunities, student teachers, and exposure to a college campus. The district commitment to postsecondary attainment is reflected in the high percentages of students who graduate with an advanced diploma or with an associate degree through dual enrollment.

Struggles:
Greenfield is challenged by the small number of businesses and the lack of a central commercial or municipal hub. Community development efforts have brought about several possible sources

of revenue that trade on the county's natural resources and available land, though a sizable percentage of the population prefers to maintain the county's current largely undeveloped condition. Due to the lack of local jobs many long-time residents have had to seek employment outside the county in a nearby metropolitan area. As a result, children in these families may have minimal parental influence and may not have access to transportation to attend after school and summer events, or become involved in extracurricular activities. Community tensions still remain over the school construction and administrators have additional work to do in order to reinforce the value of this and ongoing educational investments with local residents.

Heritage School District:

Strengths:
Heritage School District benefits from broad-based community support and has increased performance on student achievement and completion indicators over the past decade. Heritage draws strong support from several local and nationally affiliated service and education associations and agencies. Faith-based organizations, and particularly the African-American churches, are sources of vocal and active support for education generally and the public schools specifically. Heritage has a strong and active community education foundation that supports local schools through scholarships and funding for educational initiatives. Many locals are at peace with the fact that students frequently must leave the area for education and employment, with a few describing this as a sign of community success. The combined middle school/high school is undergoing protracted renovations designed to meet local community needs. Despite relatively few businesses, typical of districts with high percentages of low-income students, Heritage has a strong *esprit de corps* that is evident in the human, financial, and material resources residents commit to support student success. Another expression of this community spirit is the thoughtful and strategic use of alumni to promote aspirations for college and career among area students.

Struggles:
The paucity of businesses and employment opportunities is a source of concern for many local leaders and residents. As a result, the number and variety of possible community partners is limited, and community activists expressed concerns about over-burdening those that are present with too many requests. The lack of local employment options also means that many parents endure a long commute to live and raise their children in the county. Due to long travel times students may not have transportation to educational events and parents may not be in a position to provide educational support. Life in Heritage is subtly divided along two lines: historical stratification between African-American and White residents and ongoing tension between long-time residents and new residents, some of whom have joined the community to retire or construct vacation homes and have little interest in participating in civic life. Although racial differences

generally did not result in overt tensions, points of division were clear in areas such business ownership (primarily White), civic leadership (primarily African-American), and educational leadership and opportunity (public schools were primarily led by African-Americans, and at least some upper-income Whites chose to send their children to private schools). Educational involvement of upper-income Whites was beginning to change to some degree as schools improved. However, several White participants in community leadership roles were unaware of the recent success of local schools, creating questions about the dissemination of positive information throughout the entire community. Another challenge for Heritage is the lack of nearby higher education opportunities which stymies the ability of residents to commute to school and for the schools to benefit from partnerships with higher education institutions.

Timberland School District

Strengths:
Timberland School District is part of a highly cohesive community that strongly supports the local schools as a point of civic pride and identification. Local businesses are active supporters through material donations and scholarship opportunities, and the school reciprocates by supporting local charities and relief efforts. Morale among teachers and administrators is generally high and communication appears to be open and frank across the schools. Timberland benefits from two nearby higher education institutions that provide extensive opportunities for dual enrollment, technical education, continuing education, access to student teachers, and programs that enhance the educational opportunities and life chances of area residents. One of the local schools received a major renovation in the past decade, though another one is in need of updating. Like the other districts, most of Timberland's administrative leadership team is young and was hired within the past five years, but they are energetic and committed to improving opportunities for students to succeed after high school. The commitment to improvement and change is embraced by most local school board and political officials who have a history of prioritizing funding for educational initiatives.

Struggles:
A few local residents explained that Timberland has a history of supporting the local schools to a greater degree than it supports education. As a result, Timberland was one of only two of the six case districts that did not have a community education foundation that could serve as a gathering point for scholarship funds and postsecondary education support. The history of resource gathering in the local area has had a dampening effect on the imperative for higher education among students and some local constituents. Although several local postsecondary options are available, they are far from panacea: participants noted how accessibility can contribute to a lack of ambition and can result in students who have not been adequately academically prepared for higher education entering and struggling in the system. Although Timberland schools have had recent success at state mandated testing, some administrators worry that this achievement is

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causing complacency. As such, building a commitment to achievement in which testing success is viewed as a minimum standard is still a work in progress.

Western School District

Strengths:
Western School District benefits from a wide variety of local partners, many of whom operate indirectly in relation to the schools, but who provide a range of services and activities from basic necessities to college knowledge. Western also has several strongly supportive education promotion organizations, including a fairly new community education foundation, an alumni association, and recently organized volunteer and support organization. Some of the county's school buildings are in good shape though the high school is in need of renovation. New district administrators are working on building and rebuilding relationships with local constituents and establishing a proactive plan for increasing the ambition of both school personnel and students. Western School District also benefits from an active and vocal cohort of retirees and returning residents (in addition to some long-time residents) who are participating in local civic and educational organizations and developing new support mechanisms for the schools and students.

Struggles:
As much as any district in this study, Western has a very challenging population of students due to socio-economic and racial/ethnic factors. Vestiges of racial tension remain in some quarters, though socio-economic factors and the high number of children raised by single parents and grandparents may be the most pressing social and educational issue. These challenges are compounded by the dearth of postsecondary and employment options in the local area. Although the district does have a cadre of vocal supporters, this spirit is far from ubiquitous. Western is a place divided between those who wish to see proactive economic development and educational improvement, and others who prefer to proceed slowly and for whom postsecondary preparation for all students is not a funding priority. Despite the wide variety of organizations and agencies working to improve the fortunes of disadvantaged populations, coordination of resources and interests was noted as an area for improvement, which we observed as well. The remote location and lack of local higher education options also reduces postsecondary options for commuters and negatively impacts college-going aspirations.

Twinsburg School District:

Strengths:
Despite its size, Twinsburg School District's two population centers offer a variety of businesses and partnering opportunities, many of which happen informally as teachers and administrators make requests. The district benefits from the strong leadership of administrative staff with a vision for improvement and the value of postsecondary education. Despite the lack of a

community education foundation, Twinsburg does have an alumni scholarship fund that supports graduates continuing on to higher education. Communication between administrators seems to be open, though the distance between schools and between the schools and the central office likely reduces face-to-face contact. Twinsburg has several community resources not observed elsewhere, such as a support center for parents. One of the local schools was constructed in the recent past and has been used to engage community members in life-long learning opportunities. The Twinsburg's town centers host a variety of annual festivals and events, and school personnel, students, and related organizations are often active participants, adding to the sense of community. As we observed in other districts, student success happens in part due to the willingness of individuals to self-sacrifice and use personal resources to meet low-income student needs.

<u>Struggles</u>:

Twinsburg has many of the pieces in place for success but has yet to fit them together in a way that results in community-wide vision for the value of postsecondary education. Resource gathering continues to be a source of employment and at least some young people do not connect the need for advanced education to the types of jobs they envision pursuing. As well, the school district does not have a widely shared vision for student achievement and postsecondary aspirations, though certainly many teachers and administrators are committed to these goals. However, this support has not resulted in residents founding a community education foundation. Similar to other districts, transportation and distances between some outlying parts of the county and the central schools makes extracurricular participation and remediation programs difficult for some students to attend. Dramatic population out-migration over the past half-century has required school and community leaders to make difficult cuts over the years. Twinsburg also continues to struggle with racial stratification, and although many of the school leaders were African-American, most other community leaders were White. Although this may not seem like a school and education issue, from the perspective of encouraging aspirations and establishing role models for young people, several participants noted that these factors contribute to a general lack of achievement ambition among low-income African-American residents.

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Appendices

Appendices

Appendix A: Teacher Survey

Please note that this survey will be administrated electronically. The formatting below is intend to represent the online version of the survey.

Demographic Information

Please note: all data will be used in aggregate only, and will not be used in any way that would identify individual survey participants.

Are you male or female?
>A. Male
>B. Female

Please circle your age range.

>20-29
>30-39
>40-49
>50-59
>60-60
>70-79

What type of school do you teach at?

>A. Pre-Kindergarten
>B. Special Population
>C. Elementary
>D. Middle
>E. High

How many years have you been full-time teacher at this school?

>A. 1-5
>B. 6-10
>C. 11-15
>D. 16 or more

How many years have you been a full-time teacher throughout your career?

>A. 1-5
>B. 6-10
>C. 11-15

D. 16 or more

What is your highest level of education

A. Bachelors Degree
B. Masters Degree
C. Education Specialist Degree
D. Educational Doctorate or Doctorate of Philosophy

Do you live in the same district you teach in?

Yes/No

School Focus
What is your personal definition of a school-community partnership?
(Enter Script Box)

Which of the following would you identify as qualifying as a school-community partnership organization? (Select any that apply)
__ Other city/county departments (parks and recreation, arts council)
__ Local businesses
__ National educational charities (grant funding, program resources)
__ Social clubs and organizations (Civitan, Moose Lodge, Shriners)
__ Veterans groups
__ Churches and other secular organizations
__ Community nonprofit organizations
__ Community athletic teams
__ Other: (Enter Script Box)

Please respond to the following statements regarding the purpose of school-community partnerships? (Please choose agree, disagree or don't know/no opinion for each statement)

Partnerships with external organizations show the commitment of the community towards education in my district.

Partnerships are important to my students, in that they offer additional curricular and co-curricular resources.

Partnerships enable me to focus my attention on specific student needs, while the student receives additional support from an outside organization.

Partnerships require additional time that I do not have due to my other obligations as a teacher.

Partnerships only help to portray our school as "weak" and that we are not meeting community expectations.

Which of the following statements best reflects your attitude toward school-community partnerships?

A. I strongly support engaged relationships between my school and community partners.
B. I support the relationship with organizations outside of the school, but find that their work only applies to a small number of my students.
C. I support community partnerships as long as they do not disrupt my practice as a teacher.
D. I feel that partnerships are not necessary and the school has any resources the students need.
E. Other: (Enter Script Box)

What is your current understanding of school-community partnerships in the context of your school?

A. I am unaware that any partnerships exist.
B. I know that there are some relationships with community groups and programs, but the administration handles those contacts.
C. I know of the community partnerships that my school is engaged in.
D. I know of the community partnerships that my school is engaged in and I am aware of how to refer students to those programs.
E. I actively participate with community partners, through and outside of my role as a teacher.
F. Other: (Enter Script Box)

How would you best describe the support of your school's administration to working with   or partnering with public and private organizations outside of the your school?

My school…
A. Strongly supports the use of all community resources available.
B. Supports the use of community resources, but through direct partnerships with the school.
C. Does not support, nor restricts working with groups within the community.
D. Supports only limited interaction with community groups, under approved circumstances.
E. Does not support working with resources outside of the school.
F. Other: (Enter Script Box)

Do you feel that school-community partnerships are needed in the community you teach in?

Yes/No

What, if any, kinds of activities have you participated in, in regards to school-community partnership? (Select any that apply)?

__ I have not participated with a community partner in any way
__ I have referred a student to a community partner
__ I have volunteered my time, beyond the school day, to a community partner
__ I have donated resources (money, personal educational supplies) to a community partner
__ I have shared information on curriculum units and goals with community partners
__ I have been an advocate to the school, and/or division, administration on behalf of a
        community groups
__ I have developed, or helped to develop, a school related program that works directly with a
        community organization
__ I have discussed the work of community partners with other teachers, counselors, and
        administrates
__ Other: (Enter Script Box)

What, if any, resources do current community partners offer students at your school that you are aware of? (Select any that apply)

__ After school programs
__ Study skills
__ Access to technology
__ Reading assistance
__ Math assistance
__ Arts programming
__ Holistic family needs (family counseling, financial counseling, parenting classes, etc)
__ Weekend programs (academic support, field trips, socialization)
__ Trade/career preparation programs
__ College-going preparation (application assistance, financial aid assistance)
__ Other: (Enter Script Box)

In your opinion what kind of obstacles, if any, hamper school-community partnerships in your district? (Select any that apply)
__ There are no obstacles to partnerships that I am aware of
__ The programs are not age compatible with our school
__ There are rules that make this difficult in my area
__ Funding is not available
__ Additional personnel is needed to support such partnerships
__ Program(s) can only meet the need of only a small number of students
__ Partnerships are controlled by select staff
__ There is not sufficient information sharing about partnerships and the resources that are available
__ Other: (Enter Script Box)

For the following question, please indicate the level of support you perceive on a scale of 1-5.

From your perspective, how supportive are your school's administrators toward school-community partnerships?

Not Supportive   Moderately Supportive   Very Supportive

1   2   3   4   5

How supportive are your district's administrators of school-community partnerships?

Not Supportive   Moderately Supportive   Very Supportive

1   2   3   4   5

Community Focus

How would you best describe the business environment in the community, that have resulted or could result in school-community partnerships?

Little to No Resources   Moderate Resources   Significant Resources

1   2   3   4   5

How would you best assess community resources (government organizations, private organizations) that have resulted or could result in school-community partnerships?

Little to No Resources   Moderate Resources   Significant Resources

1   2   3   4   5

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How engaged do you feel that the business community is with your school?

Not engaged   Moderately Engaged   Significantly Engaged

1   2   3   4   5

How engaged do you feel that community organizations are with your school?

Not engaged   Moderately Engaged   Significantly Engaged

1   2   3   4   5

When a significant student or school need arises at your school, how does the community react to that need?

Slow to React   Reacts with some speed   Meets need almost immediately

1   2   3   4   5

Do you feel that the community is aware of the specific needs of your school and students?

Not aware at all   Somewhat aware   Very Aware

1   2   3   4   5

Do you think there is sufficient communication between your school and the community?

Yes/No

Open Answer
Please list any organizations, private or public, that partner with your school directly.

Please list any organizations that your school many not be in a direct partnership with, but you have referred students or their parents to.

Please list any other organization in your district that may be helpful to reaching your schools educational goals.

Have you ever held a position (volunteer, full-time, part-time,) or acquired educational skills that you feel would help you engage or facilitate school-community partnerships? Please tell us about your experience(s).

The following will be separated from survey responses
Would you be willing to participate in a focus group with other teachers in regards to school-community partnerships. Please enter your name and e-mail below

Thank you for particpating and completing the survey. In appreciation for your particpation we are randmoly selcting a teacher from each district partipating in the study to recieve a $50 Wal-Mart gift card. If you would like to particpate, please list your name and e-mail address below. Names will not be associated with survey data in any way.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for School Employees

Educational goals and priorities
- What are the educational priorities and goals of your school district? Local goals too?

- How are those goals and priorities determined?

- How are those goals and priorities communicated?

- How would you describe the climate of your school district related to college-going?

- What are some of the most pressing educational issues faced by the district?

Populations
- As you see it, what student are the educational challenges that face students from low-income families in your area?

- From your perspective, what factors most influence low-income students in your school to develop an interest in attending college?

- What do you feel like your school and district does well, related to academic preparation for postsecondary education?

- What is an area where your school or district can improve in the future, related to academic success and college preparation?

Partnership programs
- What is the relationship like between the community and the schools? Support?

- What value do community people place on college going?

- What do you see as the role of the community in the local schools? Talk about what you see as the ideal, and what the reality is here.

- We are interested in points of interaction, resource sharing, and cooperation between schools and communities which we refer to as "community partnerships". Can you talk about what programs or initiatives do you know of in your school that fit this description? (MAKE A LIST)

- When you think about these community partnerships and resources on the whole, what roles and functions do they play in your school and district?

- Related to academic preparation of low-income students, what does this district do well? What are some areas for future growth?

Parents
- What is your view of the role of parents in academic success and students' desire to attend college?

- In what ways do you or does your school attempt to involve parents, and particularly low-income parents, in their child's education?

Location
- How does the small town/rural location of your district impact educational opportunity, both positively and negatively?

- Considering your district and community as a whole, what resources are here that schools make good use of currently?

- Are there opportunities that are not being used, or need to be used better?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Community Members

<u>Local community needs</u>
- What, from your perspective, are the most pressing issues facing this region?

- What are the most significant educational issues in the local area?

- How would you characterize the resources available to meet these needs?

- In what ways have the local schools addressed those issues? To what effect?

- What do you see is the role of the local community in addressing those issues, if any?

- When you think about the overall life of the local community, what are the major events or occasions that seem to draw people from together?

<u>Educational goals and priorities</u>
- From your perspective, what are the goals and priorities of the local school district?

- Where do your perceptions about educational goals and priorities come from?

- How does your involvement with the school district relate to these goals and priorities?

<u>Personal Involvement</u>
- In what ways are you involved with local public schools and students? How would you characterize your involvement?

- What motivates your involvement with the local public schools? *(look for short term/long term impact of involvement)*

- How did your involvement come about?

- What goals do you have for your involvement? What impact do you want your involvement to have?

<u>Partnerships</u>
- We are interested in what we're referring to as "school-community partnerships". What we mean is individuals, groups, or organizations of any kind that work together with local schools to provide resources or expertise that promote the educational goals of the schools. Based on this definition (clarify as needed), what school-community partnerships are you aware of locally?

- Which of these, if any, have you been involved with personally?

- From your perspective, what role do these partnerships and programs play in the schools?

- From your experience and observation, how would you characterize the relationship between various partnerships you named?
    - Do the individuals involved in these various partnerships that you named know each other? How?
    - Do these individuals or groups coordinate or collaborate together?
    - Can you think of instances of cooperative work between community groups who are involved with the schools?

END STANDARD PROTOCOL

Questions for community informants:
- From your perspective, what do people in the local [**racial/ethnic**] community feel about public K-12 education in this area? Examples/stories?

- How would you describe the relationship between the local [racial/ethnic] community and the local public schools? Examples?

- Can you think of a situation or example that is reflective of this relationship?

- What are the community's feelings about going to college?

- What concerns to community members have about their children going to college?

- What would most people say are the biggest obstacles to going to college?

Questions for religious leaders:
- How would you characterize your congregation's attitudes toward local public K-12 education?

- What are some ways, perhaps in addition to what we discussed already, that the church supports education, whether K-12 or higher ed? This could be in general in the community, or in specific ways for youth in the church.

- From your perspective, do members of your congregation value education, whether K-12 or higher ed? Why/Why not?

- How would you describe the importance or value placed on going to college by those in your congregation?

- What is the basis for this valuing of education?

- What are some ways that your church could be involved in promoting educational success or college access in the future?

Appendix D: Activity Categories and Partner Type Comparison

Category and Partnership Activity Description	College Access	For-profit	Non-profit	Faith-based	Public	Higher Ed	Individuals	Schools
Student Centered: College and Career Preparation, Socialization, Information								
Applications/FAFSA/financial aid forms	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
College visits/tours	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Academic tutoring	x		x	x	x		x	x
College advising	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Career Advising	x		x	x	x		x	x
College entry information	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Academic accountability	x		x		x		x	x
Scholarship information	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Loan information	x					x	x	x
Scholarship dispersal	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Parental programs/information for college	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Focus on underserved populations	x		x		x	x	x	x
SAT/ACT test preparation	x						x	x
career talks by working professionals	x	x	x		x		x	x
mock interviews	x	x	x		x		x	x
Reality store		x	x		x		x	x
Job Fair		x	x		x		x	x
Academic achievement recognition events	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
GED program recruitment			x	x	x		x	
Employment counseling, prep, etc.			x				x	x
Skill and performance-based contests (writing,etc.)			x					
Job training/preparation			x		x	x	x	x
Advanced placement courses						x		x
Developmental courses						x		x
Student Centered: Health and Wellness								
health fair (hospital)		x					x	
Physical/wellness education		x	x		x		x	x
Mental health services and education			x				x	
Food for needy students		x	x	x	x		x	x
Positive youth socialization	x		x	x	x		x	x

Student Centered: Other Educational Activities								
In-school educational programs/activities	x		x		x			x
Educational resources (books, curricula, etc.)		x						
Out of school educational programs/activities		x	x	x	x			x
Academic tutoring	x		x	x	x			x
Educational skill development (literacy, etc.)	x		x	x	x		x	x
Public safety education (fire dept., etc.)					x			
Academic accountability	x		x	x	x		x	x
Summer events	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Religious ed opportunities				x				
Student Centered: Other								
General cultural events	x		x		x	x	x	x
Mentoring	x		x	x	x		x	x
Sports and athletics leagues/training/funding		x	x	x	x		x	x
Transportation to/from events					x			
Special interest or life skills development	x		x	x	x		x	x
School Centered								
Donating supplies		x	x	x	x		x	
Loan/donate equipment		x	x		x	x	x	
School supplies collection					x		x	x
Meals for sports teams				x			x	x
Planning/Participation in special events (graduation, etc.)		x	x	x				x
Athletic/Band/etc. booster clubs			x				x	
Parent organizations			x				x	
In-School Volunteer programs			x				x	
Community Centered								
Community input/perspective/advocacy	x		x	x			x	
Site for school outreach meetings		x	x	x	x	x		x
Serving as an information conduit to students/families	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Use of school building for community rec/ed/etc. programs								x
Charity fundraising and donations			x	x	x		x	x
Service opportunities			x	x	x	x	x	x
Family Centered								
Parental programs/support/socialization	x		x	x	x		x	x
Discipline and behavior correction			x	x	x		x	x
Family support/counseling					x			

Appendix E: Community Partner's Services and Activities by Student Need Category

Community Partners' Services and Activities by Category							
	College Knowledge	College Aspirations	Career Interest	Academic Interest	Academic Skills	Life Skills	Basic Necessities
College Access Providers	x	x	x	x	x	x	
GEAR UP	x	x	x	x	x		
Career Coach	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Talent Search	x	x	x	x	x		
Provider A*			x	x	x	x	
Provider B*	x	x	x	x	x		
Super Saturday	x	x					
Upward Bound	x	x	x	x	x		
Provider C*					x	x	
Non-Profit Partnerships	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Community Education Foundations	x	x	x	x			
NAACP		x		x			
Rotary Club		x	x	x			
Lions Club		x	x				
Men's Organization*		x					x
Arts Organizations		x		x			
Women's Club		x	x				
Ruritan Club		x	x				
Garden Club			x	x		x	
Youth Sports (county league)						x	
Fraternities/Sororities	x	x		x	x		
Historical Society		x		x			
Lunch Buddies				x		x	
Father's Organization*				x		x	
Farm Bureau		x	x	x			
Kiwanis Club		x	x				
American Legion		x	x	x			
Veterans of Foreign Wars		x	x	x			
Chamber of Commerce		x	x	x			
Community Action Agency				x		x	x
Mental Health Agency					x	x	x
Literacy Agency*					x		
Employment Assistance Agency*	x	x	x	x	x		
Business Partnerships		x	x	x	x	x	x
Financial Institutions		x	x		x	x	
Industries		x	x			x	
Retail and Service Businesses						x	x
Agriculture and Resource Gathering		x					x
Business Owners Associations		x	x	x		x	x
Doctors, Lawyers, Other Professionals		x	x	x	x	x	x

Appendix E, continued:

Community Partners' Services and Activities by Category							
	College Knowledge	**College Aspirations**	**Career Interest**	**Academic Interest**	**Academic Skills**	**Life Skills**	**Basic Necessities**
Faith-Based Partnerships		x	x	x	x	x	x
Churches		x	x	x	x	x	x
Ministerial Associations		x					
Religious Education Club*						x	
Religious Youth Organizations		x	x	x		x	
Public partnerships	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Police/Fire Departments			x			x	
Mental Health Organizations						x	x
4-H/County Extension Office	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
State Parks/Fisheries/Game Offices			x	x		x	
Youth services Office*						x	x
Community Recreation						x	x
Social Services						x	x
Head Start				x	x	x	
Americorps					x		
Resource Center for Parents						x	
Higher Education	x	x	x	x	x		
Technical Institute		x	x	x	x		
Community College	x	x	x	x	x		
Four-year Institution	x	x	x	x	x		
School Volunteers				x	x	x	x
Athletic Booster Club						x	x
Band Booster Club				x		x	x
Parent Organizations: High School				x			x
Parent Organizations: Elementary Sch.				x			x
In-School Volunteer Programs				x	x		
Informal support systems						x	x
Clothes							x
School Supplies							x
Anything for students						x	x
Schools Supporting the Community							
Use of School Building			x	x	x	x	x
College Night	x	x					
Charity Events						x	

Appendix F: School-Community Partnership Inventory Names and Functions Form

Use this form to identify current school-community partnerships (on the left column) and to chart their function or functions across the seven categories in the top row. Make notations of specific services and activities in the box provided or on another sheet as needed.

	College Knowledge	College Aspirations	Career Interest	Academic Interest	Academic Skills	Life Skills	Basic Necessities
Community Partners:							

Appendix G: School-Community Partnership Inventory Scales

Below, plot groups, agencies, businesses, organizations, or individuals who work locally in ways that support the education and development of students directly or indirectly.

Simple relationship <--> Complex relationship

Short-term partnership <--> Long-term partnership

Single event <--> Frequent events

Informal agreement <--> Formal agreement

Peripheral <--> Central

Indirect partnership with schools <-----------------------------------> Direct partnership with schools

Questions to consider:

1. For a given organization, what functions does it serve (Appendix F) that correspond to the functions of other partnerships? Could these organizations collaborate, or better collaborate to improve the education experience of students?

2. For groups, organizations, or individuals whose involvement plots mostly on the left side of the scale above, on which measures might their involvement be increased? (note: do not assume that the left side of the scale is "bad" and the right is "good": partnerships serve many different functions which are appropriate to the mission and resources of the group).

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