

Rural School Superintendent Perceptions of Rural Development in Three U.S. States: A Collective Case Study

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Abstract : The public school system is the largest employer and most impactful factor in the local economy for many rural communities in the United States. The relationship between the school system and the community is symbiotic—they thrive together or decline together. Understanding the perceptions of rural school superintendents (the titular head of the local school district) with regard to rural development is foundational to understanding how the school and community interact and collaborate in key areas like economic development, community development, and workforce development. To investigate those perceptions as they manifest among superintendents in thriving rural communities, a collective case study was designed and conducted to disclose and characterize superintendent perceptions about rural development in three diverse rural settings in the U.S.: Florida, Kansas, and Ohio. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) served as the conceptual framework and supported a focus on identifying and describing assets and strategies/activities that helped explain the positive results in the communities of interest. Implementation of a criterion-based purposive sampling process (using extant data and a nomination process to identify rural superintendents in communities with vibrant economies and recognized the contribution by the schools in rural development) resulted in two superintendents from each of these state settings who participated in semi-structured interviews. Interview transcripts and relevant extant documents were coded and analyzed to produce individual cases with representative themes, after which a cross-case analysis was conducted to generate overarching themes. The overarching themes were then scrutinized and tested through the application of appropriate credibility techniques to promote the trustworthiness of the results. Findings include the importance of building and maintaining relationships that extend beyond the immediate collaboration activity, the importance of collaboration skills, intentionality of practice, and organizational systems/structures as facilitators/affordances. The results offer potential guidance for leveraging the potential for public schools to contribute to their rural development in the communities they serve.

Keywords : collaboration, leadership, rural development, rural schools

Conference Title : ICRD 2021 : International Conference on Rural Development

Conference Location : Barcelona, Spain

Conference Dates : December 16-17, 2021