Leading for Educational Equity and Community Vitality: A Comprehensive School–Community Framework

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Abstract

Educational and community leaders can use a community aware policy perspective in the quest for educational opportunity, equity, and community vitality. This school–community conceptual framework presents four elements of the school–community relationship that highlight the intersection between the educational and community levels of analysis, as well as the economic and social role that schools play. Rural schools and communities are the focus of this framework; however, it can be applicable in the practice and study of school–community relationships in other settings. It can be used by educational leaders and researchers to surface long-standing tensions, agreements or disagreements about the role of the school, and voices that may often be silenced in local educational decision-making.

Key Words: school–community connections, educational leadership, school role, human capital, social capital, community, development

Introduction

School and community leaders are professionally siloed, working in different fields with distinct training, regulations, and experiences. However, the reality of schools functioning within communities is much more

fluid and interdependent. Rural schools and communities are facing unprecedented challenges (Azano et al., 2022; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021), including learning loss and economic disruption from the pandemic, a need to attend to the call for a national reckoning of racial inequities, and the pressing opioid endemic, among other issues. Addressing these issues in a way that leads to equitable educational opportunity and community vitality are dependent on school and community leaders who focus on the interdependence of the school–community relationship. Local school boards and local municipal authorities are in positions to make decisions that tackle these issues in their schools and communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009), calling to question what evidence they consult and whose voices they include when making these decisions.

We do not presuppose to know the intricate and proper balance in any given community of educational priorities, budgetary needs, and local workforce, but we posit that a comprehensive assessment of a wide range of dependencies and priorities between the school and the community it serves is useful. We present a school–community framework rooted in previously developed conceptions of educational leadership (Budge, 2006, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) and the concept of community-aware educational policy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016), which foregrounds cross-sector policy formulation, adoption, and implementation for the mutual benefit of families, schools, and communities. To ensure local leadership is responsive to the full community, the use of the framework includes previously unheard or marginalized voices in the assessment of local assets and future decision-making. The framework presents four elements of the school–community relationship that highlight the intersection between the educational and community levels of analysis, as well as the economic and social role that schools play. Rural schools and communities are the focus of the framework in this article; however, the framework is applicable in the practice and study of school–community relationships of other types and in other settings. We define community as the region demarcated by the local school district boundaries, which is most applicable in the multiple states in which we are working with school and community leaders, and we recognize the importance of local context in the development of cross-sector attachments and relationships (Ma, 2021). However, studies conducted in states with countywide school districts or in densely populated urban settings may define the community as an area demarcated by an individual school's catchment area (i.e., attendance zone) rather than a whole district that may contain dozens of schools.

Foundational Concepts

Educational Leadership

As superintendents and administrators attempt to navigate their jobs as both community and school leaders, they are confronted with many difficult decisions to satisfy multiple stakeholders. Individuals and groups of people have strong beliefs about their public schools and the education of their children. Although there can be common ground found around the idea that the learning and achievement of students is the bottom line, there are often conflicting approaches to this common goal. McHenry-Sorber (2014) highlights this conflict through a case study of a rural school district divided over the values of education, budget allocation, and curriculum content. Middle class educators and parents supported the school's goals of social mobility and competition, while working class community members and parents fought for a basic curriculum and focus on extracurriculars (McHenry-Sorber, 2014). This exemplifies the political tensions that underlie school-based decisions and how within-community, class-based differences can lead to differing views of schooling (Brown, 2005; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007).

Accordingly, superintendents must act as both instructional leaders and public stewards (Lochmiller, 2015). However, these are not easy roles to merge, as school–community involvement is sometimes viewed as something that takes time away from school leaders' role as instructional leaders (Hauseman et al., 2017). In addition to the perceived increase in workload, Gieselmann and Ruff (2015) highlight the tension between achieving efficiency while also including all voices. While engaging the public and involving the community in decision-making processes may mutually benefit both the school and the community, it often comes at the cost of a quick and efficient decision made by school leaders (Reece et al., 2023). However, despite this acknowledgement of the effort it takes to include the community in decisions, the importance of having a leader committed to including all voices cannot be discounted (Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2015). Krumm and Curry (2017) underline this point in their study which found that administrators who "initiated and sustained successful partnerships" (p. 113) understood that collaboration amongst stakeholders and a shared sense of responsibility for student outcomes was vital to their leadership efforts. Therefore, partnerships were not viewed as something "added on" (p. 113), but rather as something integral to the operation of the school. Having a public that is supportive of public schools is crucial to effective schools and vital communities, and a superintendent's willingness to create an environment that welcomes that sort of collaboration is essential.

Superintendents foster this collaboration, in part, through knowledge and awareness of the place in which they work. Place-conscious leadership (Budge, 2006; Harmon & Schafft, 2009) calls for the enactment of extralocal professional knowledge attuned to the place in which the school district is located. Increased attention to the variety of rural places, including the heterogeneity of rural populations, differing and changing economic contexts, as well as the political, cultural and economic conflicts between and within communities has led to the expansion of this conception of leadership. Budge (2010) identifies that "critical-place consciousness might [better prepare leaders] to engage in the balancing act between local interests and extralocal policy" (p. 17). McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) call for critical place-conscious leadership to be increasingly attentive to the inequities within rural communities, as well as to the role of superintendents' professional socialization in the context of their practice in rural places. The framework presented in this article provides for contextually relevant and community responsive assessment of the appropriate school–community relationship in a given place. School and community leaders can examine existing community power structures and work across sectors for a more genuinely critical and place-conscious enactment of leadership (McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020).

A critical place-conscious leader is responsive to the place, the people in the place, and the existing inequities. Horsford et al. (2019) stress that "leaders should not get out ahead of their communities or make policy for their communities. Rather, they should be networked with authentic community leaders and move toward change *with* their communities" (p. 9). However, this is often not the case. Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic discrimination runs deep in many rural communities and has led to inequities of who within a community can have a political voice (Lasater, 2019; Wilcox, 2021). Therefore, we note that it is of utmost importance to point out where disparities of opportunity to participate exist in an already established system of local decision making. For example, existing models of local decision making include an elected school board (Wirt & Kirst, 2001), which communities can work to ensure are inclusive of all voices.

Similarly, O'Connor and Daniello (2019) argue that social justice is not often explicitly discussed in the school–community literature, and they stress that a social justice lens must be embraced in order to serve students and communities equitably and effectively. Through this framework, we aim to give power to local decision makers while also recognizing that this power has been abused and unequally distributed in the past. In arguing for local awareness and power, we stress that local decision making needs to

take a new approach and be conducted in a more equitable way. Accordingly, we aim to address the ways that voices are silenced in school–community relationships—particularly in rural communities—and focus on the ways that the framework can be used as a starting point for research and conversations in practice that lead to collaborations across multiple stakeholders.

Community Aware Education Policy

To approach decisions for a school more holistically, school leaders can benefit from having a "community aware" mindset. Community aware education policy operates under the premise that communities and schools are interdependent, and rather than just focusing on the needs of the individual, both immediate needs of individuals and systemic needs of communities need to be addressed simultaneously (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Casto & Sipple, 2022). This can be achieved by school and community leaders who can work across siloed and professional realms of expertise where funding and policy are often distinct, disconnected, and even deleterious to each other due to a lack of cross-sector planning. Community aware education policy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016) cannot be created without attention to community context and assets, and effective community development policy cannot overlook the role of schools. Therefore, rather than just focusing on instrumental (thin) needs of students and institutions, community aware education policy aims to understand and address the underlying and more systemic (thick) needs of children and families in a community (Dean, 2010). This school–community framework urges local leaders and policymakers to ask themselves how public and private sectors can work in interconnected ways to support all community members in addressing both immediate and more fundamental needs (e.g., Reese, 2023; Talmage et al., 2018).

Underlying Assumptions

The framework is premised on public schools as a public good that must attend to the tensions between the individual and collective (e.g., Labaree, 2010; Mathews, 1996)—an institution that benefits the greater community by preparing individuals to be participants in the economy and society in addition to the fiscal and social roles that it plays as an employer, educational institution, and cultural institution (e.g., Kaestle, 1983; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In an era of school choice, the emphasis on the private gain afforded individuals often gets highlighted in education policy—embracing a market-based approach to education and hence giving

the individual the power to make a decision about where they want to receive their schooling (Ravitch, 2020). Nonetheless, this framework, built on a public goods model of public education in local communities, allows communities to examine the potential collaboration with schools for the betterment of students, the broader community, and society.

In developing this framework, our focus has been on rural communities and the schools which serve these communities. We do this based on experience and expertise, as well as because in rural communities the school is often one of few institutions that can have such an outsized influence on the vitality of the community (e.g., Sipple et al., 2016; Tennyson et al., 2023; Tieken, 2014; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). School–community interactions and dependencies can also be easier to identify, measure, and examine in less populated rural communities than in more urban communities. We suggest this framework is also relevant in nonrural communities, but given the more complex array of agencies and the economic and social impacts in urban and suburban settings, we choose to remain focused on rural communities. We do, however, suggest that in more populated urban areas researchers and community leaders may want to define their local community or place as the catchment area of an individual school (primary or secondary) rather than try to capture all the complexity that may be contained by large suburban or urban school district boundaries. In addition, a framework with attention to rural leaders can help build capacity in rural communities, where school superintendents face specific challenges (Lamkin, 2006). Brown and Argent (2016) argue that the outcomes of these rural-specific challenges depend on the capacity of local institutions and the decisions made by local community leaders.

While previous frameworks for understanding school–community–family engagement conceptualize these three overlapping spheres (e.g., Epstein, 1997), this framework is focused on the role of the school as an institution within a geographic community. The families and caregivers are conceptualized as part of this community. Given the varied social relations in communities that may enhance or hinder a family's connection to the school, including but not limited to social identity, prior experience with the school, length of time in the community, and proximity to the school, it remains an empirical question as to what degree these silenced voices can be surfaced through a data collection process that could then include them in educational decision-making. In future publications, we will share our experiences with mixed method case studies that seek to make heard previously disenfranchised members of local political processes. This framework captures the complexity of the relationships between schools

and communities through four quadrants and multiple measures within each quadrant. In an urban-focused typology of the school–community relationship, Warren (2005) examined the approaches used in these relationships with an eye toward the community development possibilities. Later, Casto, Sipple et al. (2016) combined this attention to community development (or vitality) with a focus on school–community partnerships. In this framework, school–community partnerships are just one aspect of these relationships, and this framework conceptualizes the role of the school in much broader terms. Building on ideas based in place-conscious leadership (Budge, 2006, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018), community aware education policy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Casto & Sipple, 2022), and the need for attention to social justice in leadership training and practice (Horsford et al., 2019; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019), we offer this framework to assist school and district leaders to more broadly assess and understand the nuance and complexity of a school sitting within its community using an equity-oriented approach.

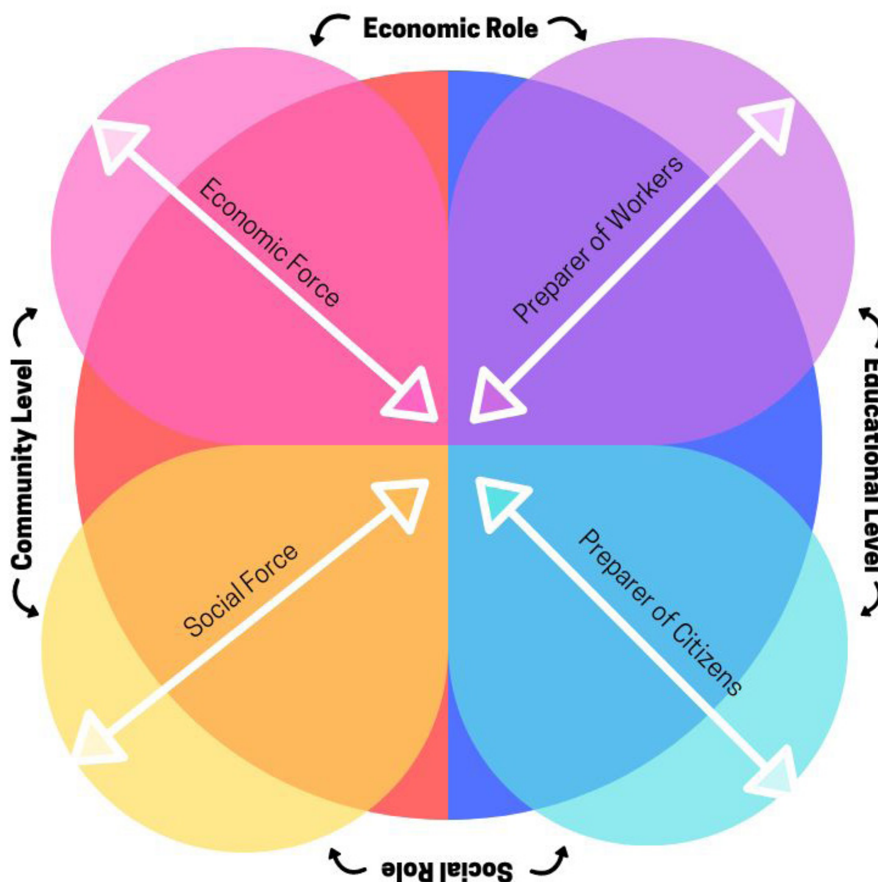
Lastly, this framework is the guiding force for a broader research project including school–community focus groups and a survey distributed throughout each community collecting input and feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including an emphasis on voices not traditionally heard in typical school leader discussions. Following the survey, the data is shared with each community for self-analysis and reflection via a data dashboard that can be shared with the public. The hope is that the discussions surrounding the data available through the dashboard will result in new administrative, budget, partnership, and programmatic decisions to enhance the school programming and community well-being.

School–Community Conceptual Framework

The School–Community Conceptual Framework (Figure 1) consists of two dimensions: level of analysis (school/community) and the role of the school (economic/social). The overlapping spheres are divided into four parts: economic force (community level and economic role), social force (community level and social role), school as preparer of workers (school level and economic role), and school as preparer of citizens (school level and social role). This overlapping nature of the framework represents the spillover effect that these parts can have on each other. Each part of the framework exists on a continuum. Neither end of the continuum denotes a good or bad, right or wrong position for the school in the community, but rather it helps school and community leaders to identify and better

understand how a particular school functions and interacts within a particular community.

Figure 1. School–Community Conceptual Framework



The following sections outline the four quadrants of the framework. Each section lays out an explanation of the continua in a similar order starting with a short description, followed by an explanation of the continuum, a figure of the continuum, a review of the literature, illustrative examples from community-wide conversations we have conducted involving educators and a wide range of community leaders and participants, and finally questions to consider in order to locate a school along each of the four high-level continua. We include examples from our current case study work for illustrative purposes. Future publications will include the complete analyses of these data, including detailed methods sections.

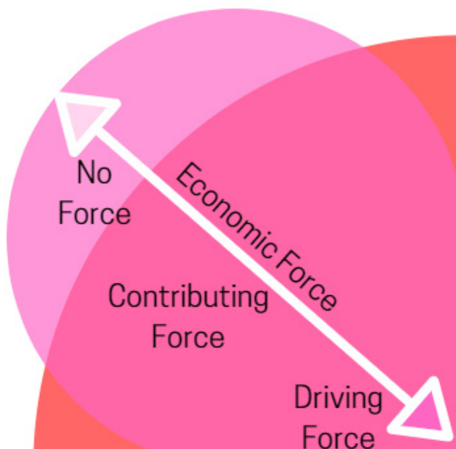
School as Economic Force

Schools have the potential to impact the economy of a community in a number of ways. For instance, a school is not just a place where students learn but is a labor-intensive workplace that employs many people. In addition, a quality school can attract businesses and places of employment, as well as families with children, to an area. We present the school as an economic force as a continuum in this framework to capture the role a school plays in the local economy. This section of the article is the longest of those describing the four quadrants because we argue that most existing literature involving school and community interactions is related to areas more similar to our other three quadrants. The economic force is often omitted or overlooked, and so we feel the need to expand on the relevance.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 2 displays the range of how a school can act as an economic force. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates that the school is a primary driving economic force within the community. At this end, the school can be viewed as the largest employer and/or the greatest source of attraction for other businesses and employment in the community. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a decrease in the importance of the school as a sole economic force within the community, designating the school as a contributing force amongst others. Further movement along the continuum towards the outer end continues to decrease the impact of the school as a force within the community to a point of recognizing the school as having little to no impact on the community's economy in comparison to other institutions.

Figure 2. Economic Force Continuum



The School as an Economic Force: Literature and Examples

As the public school system has developed and expanded over the last 150 years, the combination of local and state taxes has paid for a growing number of community members to be employed in schools in a variety of positions including teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, bus drivers, and food service workers. A relatively small school district today may have a $10 million budget, of which roughly $8 million in salaries (NCES, 2021) which, if educational personnel reside in the community in which they work, stays right in that community to be recirculated through the local economy in the form of housing costs, food, recreation, and other spending.

The school is a supplier of salaried and hourly jobs, which can be measured at the most basic level by capturing the percentage of jobs that a school district provides in relation to the other employment options within a community. For example, in one recent case study, community members could report that the school was the third largest employer in the community, while in another case study community, they reported being fourth or fifth largest. To consider the impact of this economic force, it is helpful to consider where school staff live. Do teachers, administrators, and support staff live in the community in which they are employed? Or is there an economic divide in the community based on salary such that only the highest paid can live in the community? Or in contrast, as we have seen, only the lowest paid live in the community, and the better paid employees choose to live in a different school district, thus draining the local community of the investment it has made in its salaried employees. In one of our case study districts, where the school is the third largest employer, we found the leaders estimated that a third of the staff lived within the community. However, it was mostly the support staff who lived locally, while teachers and administrators lived outside the community. This was explained as the school being a primary employer for those closest to it who could not afford to live in more expensive areas of the county. Through an equity lens, this economic reality of the community affects the degree to which employees in different professional positions at the school feel or are seen as part of the school's community.

Following this example, it is worth considering the inequity that is potentially present in the employment of school workers. After *Brown v. Board of Education* and the large-scale closure of Black schools and integration of White schools across the country, it has been estimated that more than 30,000 Black teaching jobs and more than 2,000 Black principal positions were lost (Goldstein, 2014; Tillman, 2004). More recent analyses additionally indicate this loss may have been as high as the transfer to White persons

of over 100,000 teaching and school leadership positions that had been held by Black educators (Fenwick, 2022). No longer did the makeup of the teachers match the makeup of the students in the schools. The role of the school as a local employer demands a school leader to reflect on the degree to which the workforce within the school represents the broader community that it serves. Similarly, within the school itself, does the staff consist of mostly White, middle to upper class teachers and administrators, while the custodial and transportation staff consists of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) populations as low wage workers? Accordingly, these dimensions are important to consider when examining not only the economic role of the school, but also whether or not the school functions as an equitable economic force.

Another robust examination of the school as an employer would explore the school's role in generating expenditures and jobs in the local economy. This type of analysis can be measured in various ways and is often referred to as the multiplier effect. As such, studies in the field of regional development (e.g., American Independent Business Alliance, n.d.; Civic Economics, 2015; Drucker & Goldstein, 2007; Harris, 1997) have attempted to tease out the direct, indirect, and induced effects of an employer on the local economy. Direct impact refers to the spending necessary by an employer to operate and includes expenditures such as paying employees and paying for utilities. Indirect impact refers to the money spent by the local institution at other businesses and institutions locally. This would include the electrical and plumbing services that the school hires, the hardware store from which the custodians purchase their supplies, any local food suppliers, in addition to others. Lastly, induced impacts refer to the extent to which the money earned by school workers and employees are recirculated into the local economy. Thinking about the extent to which an individual school district impacts the local economy in this way is key to determining the role of the school as an economic force within a community.

Tangentially related to this, and made abundantly clear in the 2020 global pandemic, schools can impact the local economy through the services it provides allowing parents to participate in the workforce (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2020, 2021). For instance, we have heard about childcare deserts (Jessen-Howard et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2016) or at least diminished early care capacity (Sipple et al., 2020) that have made it challenging for parents of young children to return to the paid workforce. Moreover, schools can offer before or after school activities and PreK to serve 4- and possibly 3-year-olds, allowing the parents of these children to join and remain in the labor force (Durham et al., 2019). The beginning and

end of a parent's workday can vary greatly, and those hours do not always align with the hours of the school day, especially if it is a virtual school day. For this reason, it can be difficult to get students to and from school on time, or support a child's remote schooling, while also maintaining a job with demanding hours. In 2021, across Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas, approximately 6–11% of parents voluntarily left the workforce due to childcare issues (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2021).

In one of our case study communities, there is a local casino employing many community members, often during nonstandard hours, and creating a demand for childcare outside of the school day. During a focus group in the community a discussion ensued as to whether creating more care options in out-of-school hours is the responsibility of the casino, the school district, or local care providers. As such, offering before or after school activities can help alleviate the stress surrounding incompatible workday and school day hours. Families and caregivers in rural places have specific needs related to care during nonstandard hours (Choi et al., 2009; Henning-Smith & Kozhimannil, 2016). Further, providing child care for young kids who are not yet school age or connecting with community partners who provide such care can also assist parents by providing daytime care for all of their children while they are at work (Warner, 2009). Ensuring an adequate balance of childcare and school-based PreK opportunities, however, requires careful communication between school leaders and local childcare providers. A lack of communication may result in a net reduction in childcare capacity (Sipple et al., 2020).

In addition to the aforementioned economic impacts of a school, the presence of a quality school is associated with attracting other businesses and places of employment to the area (see, e.g., European literature including Kroismayr, 2019; Slee & Miller, 2015), though the causal direction of this relationship is unclear and understudied in the U.S. context. Schools can, metaphorically, serve as a magnet. Businesses looking to locate in a community might consider the quality of the schools in order to be attractive to potential employees with children. But so too can robust employment be a magnet for the presence of schools. While there is evidence that schools cannot be the only employer (for a vital community), where there are many employment opportunities, school closure is unlikely (Slee & Miller, 2015). European research tracking demographic flows in and out of communities reveals that the presence of a school is more strongly tied to reduced out-migration, but not related to community in-migration (Barakat, 2015; Elshof et al., 2015). While broader in scope, it has also been documented that the presence of a school (Lyson, 2002) and increased school proximity to villages (Sipple et al., 2016) is related to enhanced economic indicators.

Further, the presence of a quality school is also associated with attracting families to an area. In a study looking at home buyer trends, 40% of home buyers aged 36 and younger and 35% age 37 to 51 consider the quality of schools when looking for a new home (Lautz et al., 2017). Further, in a survey of realtors, it was reported that quality of schools ranked in the top three most influential factors affecting home purchases (Carnoske et al., 2010). The role a school can play in attracting families is dependent on the presence of available housing, which was reported as lacking in all of the case study communities. The quality of a school district can serve as a source of attraction or as a source of deterrence to a community, depending on the reputation of a school. For example, community members in a focus group in one case study community said that parents send their kids to their district due to its reputation, but due to a lack of housing, the families were not able to relocate with the students. In this case, the school benefits from gaining students who were within another school district's boundaries, but the community does not benefit from gaining families who could not afford to move into the district. It is important for school and community leaders to consider the various ways that their school serves as an attraction or deterrent to migration patterns in the community.

In addition to acknowledging the ways that a school serves as an attraction or deterrent, it is also important to recognize how this can be a way for inequalities to persist. Because school quality is often used as an important factor in home buying, it has been argued that school quality is used as a proxy for racial and ethnic composition of a community (National Fair Housing Alliance, 2006). Discussing the racial composition of a neighborhood is illegal for realtors. However, school quality (determined by test scores and graduation rates) is often tied to racial composition due to gaps in achievement that are reflective of a variety of inequities in opportunities across races (i.e., income gaps; Kamenetz & Yoshinaga, 2016), resulting in it functioning as a proxy and having the effect of maintaining racial divides in the housing market and residential patterns.

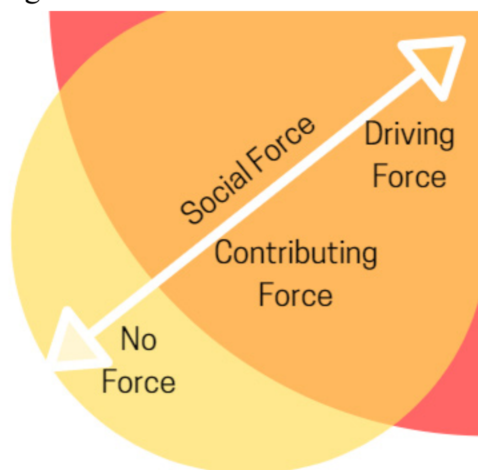
School as Social Force

Schools have the potential to serve as a place where social connections are made and facilities are shared. As a community center, the school building, including its libraries, computer labs, or school-based health centers, could be used after hours for adult education or family purposes. As a social hub, the school has the potential to provide a network of social ties for local people of all generations (Talmage, 2018; Tennyson et al., 2023). Accordingly, we present the school as a social force as a continuum in this framework to capture the role a school plays in the building of social capital.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 3 displays the range of how the school can be viewed as a social force. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates that the school is a driving social force within the community. This means that the school is seen as a gathering place for the community where social capital is shared. Using the concept of social capital as coined by Hanifan (1916; Putnam, 2000), the school as a gathering place can range from using the building as a community center where multiple events are housed to the school as a place for activity where extracurricular activities bring community members together. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a decrease in the importance of the school as the sole gathering place for the community while still recognizing it as a contributor to the social scene within a community. Further movement along the continuum towards the outer end continues to decrease the community's utilization of a school as a community center, whether that is due to other social hubs within the community or the school's choice or perceived need to distance itself from the community.

Figure 3. Social Force Continuum



The School as a Social Force: Literature and Examples

Schools have long served to connect people, particularly in communities where few other institutions draw membership from as large a segment of the population as public schools do (Ma, 2021). Schools serve as a source of community identity: one need only imagine a Friday night high school football game between close rival towns to have a sense of the ways schools can serve as a source of local identity—but it is more nuanced than that

(Tieken, 2014). Schools, as physical locations, also act as meeting places, particularly in areas lacking the resources to provide community centers and in rural places where "rural schools are the heart of villages" (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014, p. 8; see also Talmage et al., 2018). As can be imagined, parents, educators, and those connected to the school have an attachment to the school that draws them to attend school events, but to what extent do people outside of the school's immediate network connect with others at school activities and events? Further, although parents and educators have an attachment to the school through their children or their job, they too enter into a network of adults (other parents, other school staff) with which they might not otherwise interact (Cochran & Niego, 2002; Cox et al., 2021).

School leaders in one of our case study communities reported that family struggles, including especially in this specific community those caused by the opioid epidemic, often create barriers to communication between the school and students' caregivers. Depending on the context, a school can create a social network amongst community members that allows for the exchange of social capital across a range of people (Ma, 2021; Reece et al., 2023). However, in order for the school to fulfill this function to the fullest, it must also consider the range of people who actually feel welcomed in this network. Is the school a welcoming environment to people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses? The school as a place to link parents is largely a middle-class phenomenon (Horvat et al., 2003). Even the number of years you have lived in the community or having the "wrong" last name can impact how you are perceived and welcomed by others (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Stelmach, 2021). In the same case study community just described, school employees also noted that undocumented immigrant families were less likely to enter into the school's social network. In addition, the school leaders knew that the community had low levels of trust in the education system, and they reasoned that policing and school discipline were central to the mistrust. Identifying and reforming an area that diminishes community trust could help a school to provide a social network to all, thereby creating more equitable access to the social capital within the community.

In communities with limited resources to build separate facilities to provide various services, innovative solutions include using a single structure to house multiple entities and out of which to provide multiple services (e.g., Tennyson et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). For example, one of our case study communities described in a focus group conversation how their efforts to make their sports fields and other facilities available to the com-

munity had been thwarted by the pandemic. Similarly, MacKinnon (2001) uses a case study in Vermont to describe the way a school building can be used toward community development ends: "Public schools meet many community development criteria if the school is open to afterschool use for adults and children. The multiple uses possible include recreation, non-formal schooling, adult education, and social gatherings" (p. 8). This shared use of space makes the school building, which is a community-wide investment, more accessible to the entire community (Reece et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Some community members in one of our case study communities reported a tension between the educational and community development roles of the school with questions about to what degree the school should focus on being a daycare or a healthcare facility as opposed to focusing on the educational role of the school. These school and community leaders identified partnerships with community organizations as a way to provide opportunities to families without distracting from the school's educational role, echoing a previous case study focused on identifying a particular school's local and non-local partners and the purposes of those partnerships (Casto, 2016). School personnel commonly feel that all of society's ills are now placed on their shoulders and are wary of additional responsibilities. We argue that careful community discussions using the school–community framework and an equity-oriented mindset can determine school- or community- or private-based assets that can be used to create solutions to the community challenges.

Lastly, in addition to acknowledging the unique ways that a school's role as a social force plays out across different communities, it is also important to acknowledge how this role is impacted due to the current school environment amid fears of school shootings. Schools are increasingly implementing security measures such as controlled access to the school building and requiring staff to wear photo ID badges (Warnick & Kapa, 2019) in an attempt to protect students from gun violence. Amid these changes, it is important to ask the question: how is the current sealing off of the community in order to protect the school impacting the welcoming of the community? Warnick and Kapa (2019) address this concern in their analysis of whether or not target hardening (the increased security of and surveillance of the school building) does more harm than good to the school environment. They find that "the unfavorable outcomes associated with target hardening are further correlated with lower levels of community involvement and a weaker sense of trust within schools" (Warnick & Kapa, 2019, p. 27). The school staff in one of our case study communities described how caregivers are "grilled with questions" upon arriving at the school's front office,

which detracts from a feeling of being welcomed into the school community. Moreover, the pandemic has further enhanced the separation of insiders and outsiders at the schoolhouse gate. For this reason, school leaders must take all these aspects of the school environment into account when making decisions surrounding school safety and the accessibility of a school to its community, as well as allowing students and staff into the community for additional place-based learning within the broader community.

As opposed to the first two continua ranging based on force, the next two continua (school as preparer of workers/preparer of citizens) range based on the school's attention to local and extralocal engagement and opportunities for students.

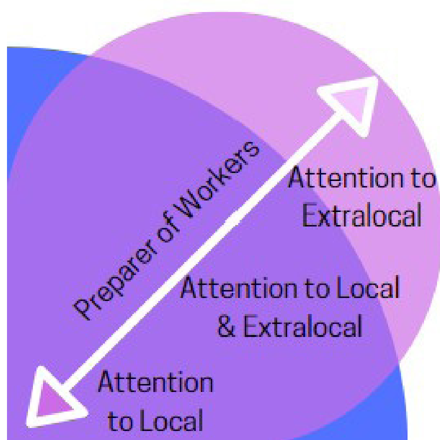
School as Preparer of Workers

The development of human capital is a central function of schools. Most directly, schools provide curricular and extracurricular opportunities that prepare students for gainful employment, locally or globally. This schooling may be driven by local teacher knowledge, state curriculum standards, state testing, local economic needs, or state and national interests. While preparing the workforce may be the most obvious function of schools, we must closely examine what is taught and why it is taught as the content and experience have profound impacts on the trajectory of children becoming adults and the generational impact on each community.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 4 displays the range of how a school prepares workers. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates a focus on preparing students for the local workforce. At this end, the school can be seen as educating students about future employment opportunities available in the local community and providing students with opportunities to receive training or have internships with local employers. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a combination of attention to both the local and extralocal workforce needs—providing students with the tools that give them the opportunity to make the choice between college or a job as a worker in the local economy or in the global economy. Further out along the continuum indicates the implementation of curriculum and programs that focus solely on preparing students for the job market that typically lies beyond the local community.

Figure 4. School as Preparer of Workers Continuum



The School as a Preparer of Workers: Literature and Examples

Throughout the 20th century, schools have been the main focus of human capital development and as a preparer of workers (Becker, 1993). The key tension now is between preparing students to leave their local community for college and work elsewhere, versus preparing them to work locally (Corbett, 2007; Rury, 2020). This tension plays out in tracking systems, teacher assignments, budget priorities, engaged learning opportunities, and the types of relationships and dependencies seen between schools and local businesses, trades, and the postsecondary schools (Rury, 2020; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These tensions between local or global, community-connected or insulated from community need and opportunity, are at the heart of the tension between schools as agents of local community vitality versus agents for the "adjustment to general society" (Sims, cited in Schafft & Youngblood, 2010, p. 275).

Nowhere are these tensions more dramatic than in rural communities. More populated urban and suburban communities have greater and perpetual in-migration due to institutions that attract people, families, and businesses. More sparsely populated rural towns and villages (many of whom have experienced loss of industrial production and people through globalization, out-migration, and lack of in-migration), however, can be teetering on the brink of extinction (Brown & Schafft, 2018). Maintaining population and workplace productivity is linked to attracting outsiders or appropriately preparing local students with an affinity toward their local community and an appropriate workplace opportunity. The school is a central player in this. While neither end of the continuum connotes success or failure on the school's part (e.g., Jennings, 2000), perhaps the most

realized version of this is a high-quality education meeting college and career-ready standards that prepares students for the global economy using tools of place-based pedagogy, which are attentive to the needs and realities of the children's home community (Avery & Kassam, 2011; Avery & Sipple, 2016). One of the case study communities stated that this was one of their goals—to provide students with all the skills necessary to have the *choice* to do what they want after graduation, whether that be to enter college or the workforce.

At the core of "school as preparer of workers" is the set of related concepts of human, social, and cultural capital. Through some combination of community and school resources (i.e., money, people, priorities), schools actively develop skills and knowledge in their students (Becker, 1993; Mincer, 1974). Human capital, the skills and knowledge of an individual, is directly influenced by schools and the experiences children have while growing up. This influence, however, is shaped in scope and level by opportunity, identity, school resource, and community interaction and influence. In one example from our case study research, nearly all participants in one community agreed that better preparing students for work locally is critical to helping local businesses thrive and maintaining local populations; however, it was less clear to them how to do it. The regional educational shared service centers were mentioned by several focus group participants as the main path toward quality and relevant vocational training; however, others spoke about how the students view these vocational programs with disregard and almost embarrassment if they were to participate. In comparison, in another case study community the focus group members discussed the strategies they employ to get local business owners and employees into their classrooms as early as elementary school to exemplify to students at an early age how they can turn the things they are passionate about into a career in their local community. Ideally, students are prepared by their local school and community for workforce participation and leadership to "live in community" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 286) no matter where that may be (Corbett, 2007).

An important caveat to this pressure to develop human capital for the state and nation's workplace needs is the important process by which schools historically began to differentiate which opportunities were given to which students. Today, we see this differentiation of inputs (resources invested in one's education) and outputs (postsecondary role for which one is prepared) captured by Carr and Kefalas (2009) in their book, *Hollowing out the Middle*. Schools group students, these authors argue, to be Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, or Returners. Suggesting that rural America's greatest

export is not milk or wheat, but rather young people, the authors shine a light on differential preparation for the future across the student body. Educators identify Achievers as those students deemed worthy of an investment of time, expertise, lab equipment, and college preparation, imbuing them with human and social capital to enable them to succeed in a world away from their local region. They are then pushed off to college and life success. Educators, by default more than design according to Carr and Kefalas (2009), also "prepare" Stayers by not providing them with resources and expertise, leaving them to make a living in their own home community or region. Participants in many of the case study communities where we have conducted focus groups acknowledged these different groups of students. In one of our cases, a school administrator directly acknowledged the fear of brain drain and stressed that they aim to present some of their best and brightest students with options for how they can make a good living within their home community with the key idea that they provide those students with the skills to make the choice for themselves. In another community conversation that we facilitated, the participants discussed how they identify students who are not interested in college and work to build their skills so that they will become "workforce ready" by the time they graduate.

School professionals making decisions for students and their families can be fraught with embedded bias towards different races, genders, and social classes (Delpit, 1988; Oakes et al., 2006). Letting the students decide their own academic track can also be laden with immature interests and comfort levels with certain teachers, subjects, and social groups (Grant, 1984; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). School professionals, in conversation with community and family, can develop more inclusive and equitable practices leading to genuine choice in school opportunities and outcomes. In preparing students and graduates to "live in community" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 286), whether it be in the local community or around the world, school leaders hold tremendous responsibility for curriculum, tracking, and programming that balances individual success and community vitality.

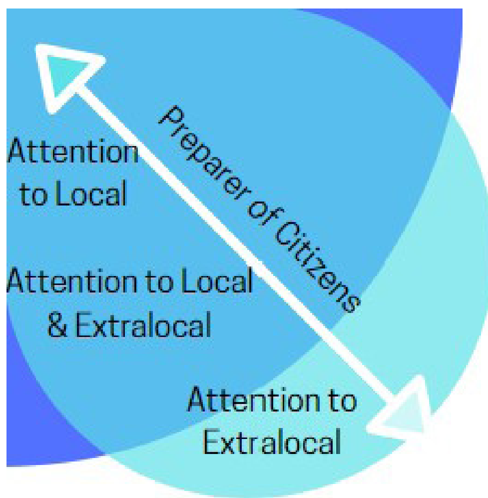
School as Preparer of Citizens

Schools also serve as a location for students to learn to work with peers and teachers, as well as to exist in the community of the classroom and the school. Students learn what it means to be a member of the school, the local community, as well as the nation and world. These lessons can also include the broader concept of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy and a global, multicultural society.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 5 displays the range of how the school is a preparer of citizens. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates that a school encourages their students to be engaged in civic activities locally. At this end, the school can be viewed as having programs and policies in place that immerse their students in the local civic environment through volunteer work, community engagement, and involvement with local government, among others. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a combination of a focus on preparing students for both their duties as citizens of their local community and the world. Further movement along the continuum towards the outer end indicates a heavy focus on the students as global citizens, preparing them largely for their duties as a citizen outside of their individual community.

Figure 5. School as Preparer of Citizens Continuum



The School as a Preparer of Citizens: Literature and Examples

Citizenship education may feel like a loaded term in some communities more than others, depending on the local impact of the current political discourse surrounding immigration. While the importance of this type of education does not vary, it may be that school leaders in some places find it more appropriate to use varied terminology like community membership rather than citizenship. The essence of community membership can also be expanded by acknowledging the local history of the land and of indigenous peoples in the region. School leaders will also want to attend to the varied daily lived experiences that students bring to school as being deeply

influential on their perception of democratic citizenship education (Rubin, 2007). Banks (2001, 2008) has called for a reconceptualization of citizenship education to ensure the assimilationist ideology is fully replaced with a model that does not isolate students from their home cultures and languages. Schools need a form of citizenship education that "recognizes the right and need for students to maintain commitments to their cultural communities, to a transnational community, and to the nation-state in which they are legal citizens" (Banks, 2008, p. 134). In these ways, citizenship education can work to acknowledge students' concurrent membership in local, cultural, and global communities.

Research in rural communities suggests that, not only in regard to workforce preparation but also in preparation for community life, there can be an orientation toward the global or extralocal (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Tieken, 2014). For example, Carr and Kefalas (2009) describe the (often false) choice teachers create, and students feel, of being (successful) leavers or (unsuccessful) stayers. This dichotomy presents students not only with a sense of being less successful if they stay in their own community, but also does not position them as experts of their own place or potential community leaders. Similarly, Corbett's (2007) earlier study reports a similar false positioning of the academically successful students as being those who seek futures beyond their home communities, thereby prioritizing preparing them for community life and citizenship at the national/global level. To prepare active and engaged citizens of their community, many community members in the focus groups we have facilitated articulated a big-picture strategy of the importance of a supportive and stimulating environment created by supported families, housing organizations, work opportunities and role models, PreK, and the schools. Additionally, in one particular district where we held a focus group, the participants described a specific strategy in which they brought courthouse officials into the district once a year to teach students about voting and help students who are 18 or older register to vote.

There is a view of civic education that focuses on discrete skills; however, a reconceptualized form of democratic citizenship education also involves the development of a civic identity, which is commonly done through involvement in the local community (Rubin, 2007). Local community involvement can take the form of community service or be more embedded in the academic core of the school through service learning or place-based pedagogies. Place-based education provides examples of how skills and knowledge developed in a local place can allow students to see themselves as successful community members in their own places; however, it does

not preclude their success in other places, since the skills are transferable from place to place and from the local to the global. As Gruenwald (2003) notes: "Place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit" (p. 3). This enhancement of local communities is the goal of place-based pedagogies (Smith, 2002) and echoes Dewey's notion of the school as a "miniature community, an embryonic society" (Boydston, 1976, p. 12). Anderson and Gurnee (2016) report that creation of the relationships and partnerships required for place-based practices is evidence of the democratic process in and of itself; in addition, these connections derived among the school and local entities position students as participating and integrated citizens in their local community. For some, these local connections have been more common in rural places out of necessity; nonetheless, these practices can be viewed as a "virtue that needs preserving rather than just a practice to be tolerated" (Jennings et al., 2005, p. 44).

Although place-based education can allow students to develop skills of active citizenship, make connections to their locality, and develop their civic identity, in many communities this may occur in a relatively racially and ethnically homogenous context. Development as a global citizen also involves working with diverse teams, which some rural schools have accomplished through international exchange programs (Casto et al., 2012). With paired goals of opportunities for students' global citizenship development and enhanced community vitality, Casto et al. (2012) describe a school that created a program for international students to enroll in the school and live in the community for a year. The school increased its dwindling enrollment, thereby achieving economies of scale for the sustainability of the school, and also diversified the student body in an otherwise racially and ethnically homogenous school.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Examining the school as an economic force, social force, preparer of workers, and preparer of citizens allows us to map out the complex roles a school plays in a community. With this framework, school and community leaders can examine and measure their own local relationships in conversation with a broad range of stakeholders, locate their school on each continuum, and make equitable, locally relevant policy decisions. Similarly, researchers can use this framework to build on our understanding of the school–community relationship, especially in grounded work with

communities. The use of this framework will, we argue, lead toward a substantially greater understanding of the range of ways in which schools and communities depend on and influence each other, including the centrality (or not) of schools in the vitality of a community. Moreover, researchers using this framework will be less likely to adopt a polarized or binary lens for understanding local communities and their schools.

Our future work using this framework involves empirical investigation through community case studies starting with focus groups of school and community leaders followed by communitywide surveys. Conversations and surveys provide school leaders the opportunity to collect a variety of perspectives, especially those perspectives that are not usually heard. For example, there are growing numbers of rural English learners, and "linguistic diversity is fact and fabric of the United States," (Coady, 2022, p. 248), but many districts face challenges in supporting communication with non-English-speaking families (Coady, 2020). Families in nondominant community groups can often feel marginalized by schools, but in order to welcome these families into the decision-making process, creating an environment in which bilingual families' opinions are collected and valued is necessary (McCauley et al., 2023). Utilizing multiple tools to support engagement (e.g., surveys, conferences, phone calls, family events) are cited as useful ways to increase communication, along with an intentional strategy to drive efforts for engaging multilingual families (McCauley et al., 2023). Once a community has engaged in the focus group conversations and the survey, they are provided with a data dashboard allowing them to examine their local data. In this way, school and community leaders have a new way to view and understand their community, which in turn can enhance community aware decision-making.

Given the variety of community contexts, there are myriad ways for schools and communities to interact; however, this framework allows leaders across these sectors to arrive at mutually beneficial community aware policies and practices (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Casto & Sipple, 2022). Accordingly, once a community can better understand the fiscal, social, and educational roles of the school, leaders can find areas in need of improvement in addition to strengths on which to capitalize. School administrators who work collaboratively with their community (Harmon & Schafft, 2009) can tap into the unique range of resources within their community to ensure the best policy decisions are made (Wang et al., 2023). This collaborative and community-based work is particularly relevant as communities work to reassess and rebuild in light of the pandemic and the reckoning with racial injustice.

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