

# “Just One More Thing I Have to Do”: School–Community Partnerships

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## **Abstract**

School–community partnering activities promote the education of children, the well-being of families, and the vitality of communities. This study explores the connections that exist and are desired between a small, rural elementary school and its local community. Interviews ( $n = 21$ ) with district and school administration, teachers, parents, and community members revealed that partnerships exist to create afterschool and summer activities for children as well as to promote literacy and ease the transition to middle school. The primary obstacle is organization, including the time and resources to create and maintain partnerships. Geographic isolation affects volunteer activity in the school. Community connections are considered as horizontal (local) and vertical (school district) ties for the school. Place-based education is described as a form of partnering that could enhance the educational experience of students while simultaneously creating horizontal ties for the school and its community.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, small schools, place-based education, rural education, vertical ties, horizontal ties, local collaboration, elementary schools

## **Introduction**

Educating children brings together the work of families, communities, and schools. The confluence of these areas of a child’s life is complex, and so delimiting the responsibility and work of families, schools, and communities can be

a complicated endeavor. When each can enhance the work of the others, all can thrive. School–community partnering activities can enhance the education of children, as well as the health of families and the vitality of communities (see, e.g., Bauch, 2001; Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Sanders, 2001, 2003; Sanders & Harvey 2002). School–community partnerships can benefit rural communities in important ways, especially through enhancing the well-being of children and families (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Witte & Sheridan, 2011). This study explores the connections that exist between a small, rural elementary school and its local community by examining the following research questions:

1. How do school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members conceptualize school–community relationships?
2. What school–community partnerships exist, and what types are desired from the school and community?

### **Defining Terms: Community and Partnering**

This study relies on a definition of community derived from *The Community in America* (Warren, 1978). Warren conceptualized communities as social systems and emphasized the connections within and between these systems: “A particularly important point is the nature of the systemic linkage between various community-based units and their respective extracommunity social systems” (Warren, 1978, p. 51). Warren referred to the links to the extracommunity social systems as vertical ties, while the links within the local community are called horizontal ties. This study examines the ties of one elementary school in a small village.

Partnering activities are defined broadly in this study, using the following concepts. In *Learning Together: A Look at 20 School–Community Initiatives*, which was prepared by the Institute for Educational Leadership and the National Center for Community Education, Melville (1998) offered the following definition of initiatives: “intentional efforts to create and sustain relationships among a K–12 school or school district and a variety of both formal and informal organizations and institutions in the community” (p. 6). This definition emphasizes the relationships between organizations rather than the goals or activities of partnering. Bauch (2001) also used a broad definition focusing on the relationship at hand: “Partnerships are built on social interaction, mutual trust, and relationships that promote agency within a community” (p. 205).

## Literature Review on School–Community Partnerships: Goals and Motivations

The literature on school–community partnerships illustrates the social problems that inhibit the work of the school and suggests these can be ameliorated through partnering with social services agencies and community organizations (e.g., Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Sanders, 2001). In other words, there are so many pressures on schools, students, and families that schools cannot single-handedly do the job of educating children, but can maximize their efforts by reaching beyond their walls and partnering with other organizations to best serve the needs of children. Epstein (2011) described the potential perspectives on the responsibilities among families, communities, and schools as separate, shared, or sequential. Her theory of overlapping spheres of influence places the shared responsibilities perspective on the relationships. While the activities of families, schools, and communities are distinct and different, when they are shared and supportive in their goals, the boundaries among these arenas of children’s lives become more fluid and permeable.

While academic achievement can be understood as the focus of schools, it is not the dominant reason for partnering according to the literature. Partnering is more often viewed as a way to improve the conditions in the lives of students, families, or the school so that the work of educators can occur with fewer obstacles (Nettles, 1991); therefore, improved student achievement becomes a byproduct rather than a focus of many partnerships. The motivations for partnering most prevalent in the literature are for (1) school reform and improvement (Sanders, 2001), (2) support for families (Heath & McLaughlin), (3) community development (Crowson & Boyd, 1993), and (4) the creation of a sense of place for students (Bauch, 2001).

### Partnering to Support Families

Partnerships may be created to offer support to students or families. This can take the shape of family involvement in the schools, continuing education for parents through GED or other classes, parenting support, full-service schools, and even the development of social capital. These wide-ranging supports are evident in the community schools movement, full-service schools, and in traditional schools seeking to integrate services for children and families (e.g., Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2012; Dryfoos, 2008). These are often formed as school-based, school-linked, or community-based networks (Crowson & Boyd, 1993). As noted in Voyles (2012), even the process of conducting a needs assessment to develop integrated services in a school can create the conversations and shared knowledge needed to bring families and schools together.

Another support for students that can be created through partnering is related to Coleman's (1988) understanding of the importance of social capital for children and families, especially in relation to academic achievement. Arguments for the development of social capital at an individual and community level are plentiful in the partnership literature. Driscoll (2001) argued that schools can alleviate problems associated with the unequal distribution of social capital among children through partnerships connecting the school and the students to community networks. In particular, Ferrara (2015) described an intervention that creates information channels between schools and families using Parent Involvement Facilitators to "unlock social capital that can help students succeed in school" (p. 48).

### **Partnering for Community Development**

Partnerships can also be used as a community development tool, given the potential reciprocity of school–community linkages (Gross et al., 2015). Community development can occur through community service by students, development of civic responsibility, creating economies of scale for purchasing services across a small town, enhancing the vitality of a community through social and human capital development, and even through the provision of technology. Moreover, schools can act as community centers by opening the school building to the community for use during nonschool hours. The range of work to be done varies in the literature, including having students survey the local business community in order to advise a chamber of commerce's activities (Seidl, Mulkey & Blanton, 1999) and to study the effectiveness of a local chamber of commerce's advertising campaigns (Versteeg, 1993). Finally, in another example, a school forged a partnership with the community to not only upgrade the school's information technology infrastructure but to make online access available to the community for a much lower subscription rate than any private provider (Schafft, Alter, & Bridger, 2006).

### **Partnering to Develop a Sense of Place**

Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012) proposed that "engaging students in activities that are consistent with environmental and sociocultural structures existing outside school walls will ensure a greater degree of parallel between school environments and real-life tasks that will facilitate students' meaningful learning of academic subject matter" (p. 10). They suggested three instructional approaches that are well suited to the context of school–community partnerships: authentic instruction, problem-based learning, and service learning (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012). These goals and practices are related to those found in the literature on place-based education. While place-based

education is not synonymous with school–community partnering, the two ideas can be connected, as many place-based educational projects are enhanced through partnerships. The goals of place-based education root the educational experience in a local geography, including the history, politics, culture, and practices of a physical space (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Theobald, 2006).

Place-based education connects children to their place, including their social, cultural, and geographic community, through educational practice. Sobel (2004) defined place-based education as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum” (p. 7). He suggested, “Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school” (Sobel, 2004, p. 7). As a link between schools and communities, place-based education can serve the goal of developing a sense of place for students, as well as the goal of community development. “Place-based education can be understood as a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xvi). In addition, place-based education can serve as an excellent way for schools and communities to work together, because while it strengthens the bond between the school and its surroundings, it does so without drawing attention away from the core mission of the school: academics. Place-based education draws upon the resources of the community to meet the educational needs of teachers and students.

### **Partnering in Rural Communities**

The rural school plays a particular role in its community, and therefore, the partnering activities between a rural school and its community may have a particular focus. The presence of a school in a small, rural area has been found to have social and economic benefits related to population growth, housing, income, and employment (Lyson, 2002). Examining census data over time, Lyson (2002) found a decline in community indicators after towns and villages experienced school closure. For this reason, there are particular calls for rural schools to be involved in community development efforts, and these efforts can be the motivation for partnering between a school and its community. Miller (1995) emphasized the need to develop social capital in rural communities. This is related to community-level social capital, as opposed to the previously discussed individual-level social capital (Coleman, 1988). Community-level social capital relates to Putnam’s (2000) notion of a decline in social capital

paired with a decline in communities. Through his work with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Miller (1995) was able to describe the efforts of several small schools in development projects which he categorized as using the school as a community center, creating projects to sociologically study a community (e.g., Foxfire), and school-based enterprise projects (e.g., Rural Entrepreneurship Through Action Learning). Crowson and Boyd (2001), based on Schorr (1997), argued for a new lens through which to view the community relationship for schools. They combined the ideas of importance of place, an ecological view of development, social capital, and individual agency to arrive at a combination of awareness of sense of place and politics of place that can play an important role in educational reform.

In a review of the literature on family–school connections in rural communities, Semke and Sheridan (2012) established the relevant aspects of the rural context to partnering. They wrote that while much of the research describes an urban context, “rural settings present unique conditions that influence the availability and delivery of coordinated family–school services” (Semke & Sheridan, 2012, p. 23). The geographic isolation of rural communities, as well as shifting demographics (i.e., declining population, increasing poverty rates, increasing migrant and ELL populations in some regions) that increase the need for services, place rural schools in the difficult position of needing to play a broader role in the community while also having fewer local resources to draw upon (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Witte & Sheridan, 2011). In addition, Barley and Beesley (2007) found that successful rural schools have strong and positive relationships with their communities. “The community–school connection also provides support for the high academic expectations found in each case study school.... This bond between the town and the school is characteristic of small rural schools that may not be found in nonrural small schools” (Barley & Beesley, 2007, p. 10).

Rural school administrators have a particular role to play in the school–community relationship:

Close relationships, both among individuals and between school and community, are characteristic of smaller schools. The principal’s ability to thrive in these conditions and adapt to unique characteristics of the school and community is critical. Successful rural schools result from the leadership these principals provide within the context of the local environment. (Barley & Beesley, 2007, p. 10)

Not limited to the rural community, principals have a particular balancing act to manage the instructional focus of the school while also looking beyond the school for ways to support the academic needs of teachers and students:

I would add that the principals, situated at the boundary of the school and its environment, are the best-suited individuals to undertake this type of sense-making work. But a principal's primary responsibility is for what happens *inside* the school. That is, these probes into the external environment are primarily a means towards the goal of improving teaching and learning within classrooms. (Beabout, 2010, p. 26)

School–community partnering can enhance the personal, social, and academic development of students, the lives of parents and families, and, consequently, the vitality of communities. These effects can be particularly powerful in small, rural places. This study illuminates the ways in which the partnering activities of Maplewood Elementary, or the lack of these activities, can serve the needs of students, families, and the community.

## Research Design and Methodology

The data analyzed in this article are from a case study of a single school, Maplewood, which was purposively chosen (Patton, 2002) because it offers an interesting though not unique context for research. All school and place names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

### Study Location

The Maplewood school was once a K–12 school in its own district; however, over the course of mid-twentieth century, the process of school and district consolidation left it as only an elementary school (preK–5) within a broader school district. It is now part of Oakwood City School District (OCSD) which is centered around the small city of Oakwood. All but two of the elementary schools in the modern district are within the city limits of Oakwood, as well as the middle schools and the high school. Maplewood and one other outlying school, Beechwood, are the two rural schools in an officially nonrural school district. Maplewood has a population of approximately 3,500 residents, Beechwood's is around 3,200, and the city of Oakwood has about 30,000 residents. The population density of Maplewood is fewer than 100 people per square mile.

In the 2009–10 school year, Maplewood Elementary School had just under 30 classroom teachers and aides in the pre-K to fifth grade classrooms. In addition, there were fewer than 10 general staff members, including clerical, custodial, cafeteria, and transportation staff. The principal was in his second year at the school during the study. The enrollment was approximately 240 students. Free and reduced-price lunch rates at Maplewood had increased from approximately 45% in 2007–08 to 70% in 2009–10. In terms of academic



achievement, Maplewood reported only one subgroup of students, economically disadvantaged, with the other subgroups, including non-White racial and ethnic groups, having too few students in them to be reported. In 2009–10, the school made Adequate Yearly Progress in mathematics but did not for English Language Arts (ELA) due to low scores for disadvantaged students.

### Participants

The participants in this study included school district and school professionals as well as parents and community members. Within the school, I spoke with teachers ( $n = 5$ ). In addition, I interviewed the superintendent, the principal, a past principal, a front office staff member, the head janitor, and the school's family liaison. I spoke with parents ( $n = 7$ ) including the Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) president, a parent who is also the president of the community council, and five other parents with differing levels of participation in the school and community. Most of the parents (5 of 7) had multiple children in various grades in the school and had been affiliated with the school for varying numbers of years (ranging from less than 1 to more than 12). I also interviewed community members ( $n = 3$ ) without current connections to the school as a parent or staff member.

### Research Design

The research questions for this study were generated following a review of the literature highlighting the definitions, goals, and motivations for partnering. In addition, the purposeful selection of Maplewood allowed for an examination of the complexity of the school–community relationship for a rural school in a nonrural district, which is a position not unique to this school. Maplewood Elementary School is situated within its small village center, and it is connected to the families it serves in the slightly larger concentric circle of its catchment area; however, its professional circle is geographically larger at the school district level, which also includes the small city of Oakwood. How does Maplewood, both the school and the village (or the school district), understand its school–community relationship? Further, as a way to concretely consider this theoretical idea about defining the layers of community for a school, what partnering activities exist between the school and the community, both at the village and district level?

At the time of the study, I was a resident of Oakwood and affiliated with a local university. Nonetheless, I was an outsider to the school and the village of Maplewood. I entered this study through a contact with the principal; my presence in the school and community was endorsed by this school leader.



Consequently, my relationship with the members of the school and community may have been affected by this endorsement. Responses among members of the community, school, and district are used to complete a portrait of the school and its community from multiple viewpoints.

The participants were selected in various ways. I randomly selected the teachers who participated ( $n = 5$ ) from the universe of full-time classroom teachers ( $n = 14$ ). I recruited the parents using three methods: a targeted approach by the family liaison, a request made by one teacher to her class, and by a full-school mailing. I spoke with all the parents who responded to each of these three recruitment strategies. These parents, due to the recruitment methods, are a random but not representative sample of the parents at Maplewood Elementary School. I purposefully interviewed the PTA president to understand any partnerships facilitated by the PTA. I used snowball sampling to gather the names of community members. The community members with whom I spoke were recommended as people to contact by parents and/or members of the school staff.

Over the course of two months during the early spring of the 2009–10 school year, I conducted semistructured interviews ( $n = 21$ ). The questions for these interviews (see Appendix A) were developed in order to understand the participants' conceptions and definitions of the community, the school, and the relationship between the two. In addition, participants were asked to list the partners of the school, describe the activities of these partnering relationships, and to recount the benefits and obstacles of these relationships. If no or few partners were listed, I followed up by asking the participant about the relationships with the organizations listed on the school's website as partners. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes each. I digitally recorded these interviews and transcribed them. These transcriptions were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis program ([www.atlasti.com](http://www.atlasti.com)). This program has a wide range of functionalities. For these analyses, I used the software to code the transcripts and to generate the output (i.e., compiled quotations) for each code in order to thematically review the data across participants' responses. In addition, the program completes basic counts of codes or phrases, which I report in the findings to explain the frequency with which particular partners were mentioned by the respondents. These findings are part of the larger study on Maplewood. The overall findings of the study were shared with the participants prior to being included in publications.

### Data Analysis

I developed a coding scheme in light of the research questions about the partnerships that exist or could exist between the school and its environs (see

Table 1). For those relationships that existed, I analyzed the benefits to the school and community, and for those that did not exist, I coded the responses in order to analyze the barriers to establishing these partnerships. Finally, I connected the respondents' conceptions of community to the descriptions of partnering activities. I coded the partners as local or nonlocal to better explore the following question: Is the immediate community (i.e., within the local town borders) considered viable for partnering, or is it the larger community (i.e., larger bordering city) that is viewed as the location of potential partners?

Table 1. Coding Scheme

Code Name	Code Definition	Code Usage
P_Exist_Who (P: partnerships)	With whom the school has existing partnerships	This code is used to identify who the school has current partnerships with in the community.
P_Exist_Begun	Who began partnerships	This code is used to identify who initiated partnerships, particularly if it was someone within the school or the partnering entity.
P_Exist_Maintain	Who and how are partnerships maintained	This code is used to identify who (e.g., specific teachers, administrators, parents, etc.) maintains school partnerships and what strategies (e.g., regularly scheduled events) are used to maintain them.
P_Exist_Benefit_Sch	What benefits the school sees from existing partnerships	This code is used for any benefits the school sees stemming from the existing school–community partnerships.
P_Exist_Benefit_Com	What benefits the community sees from existing partnerships	This code is used for any benefits the community experiences from the school–community partnerships.
P_Desired_Who	With whom are partnerships desired	This code is used to identify with whom school staff, parents, and community members believe the school could or should be partnering.
P_Desired_Why	Why is this partnership desired	This code is used to identify why these respondents want this partnership to exist and, in particular, what benefits they expect.
P_Desired_WhyNot	What obstacles exist or why does this partnership not exist	This code is used for obstacles preventing the partnership that is desired or other reasons why it has not yet been created.

## Findings: Partnering and School–Community Connections

In this case study of the Maplewood community and Maplewood Elementary School, I use partnering as the avenue for exploring the school–community connection. Based on the analyses connecting the existing partnerships and the participants’ conception of their community, I report the existing partnerships in two sections: those within the village and those beyond the village but within the broader school district. In addition, given the focus of this study on a rural school and its partnering activities, I report the findings of an analysis focused on rurality under a separate heading. Finally, those partnering relationships that do not exist for the school and its community but are desired are reported based on an analysis of the barriers to partnering.

### Partnering Within the Village: One Horizontal Tie

When asked to describe the partnering activities of the school, most respondents—including all of the school administration and staff, half of the teachers and parents, and two of the three community members—mentioned the Maplewood Community Council (MCC) as a partner of the school. This is a nonprofit organization with the mission of providing services for the children of the community. The council is made up of community members, including parents of students at Maplewood Elementary. The activities provided by MCC include a summer camp for children, a basketball team during the school year, and support for a Harvest Festival, among other programs for children ages elementary through high school. The president of the council described the activities provided by the MCC for middle and high school students from Maplewood now attending schools in Oakwood:

We have a middle school–high school program, mostly middle school, that does activities after school: [local camp], crafting groups, girls’ groups. There has been a group that does computer game design. We have a program manager that we contract with through [University] develop the programs. She is very connected to the kids and usually spends lunchtime at the middle school interacting with the kids and pulling from that information the things that they’re interested in participating in and then trying to find those things, and it’s one of the very special things about her. But as a consequence, we do have some programs that the kids are very interested in participating in.

In this way, the MCC helps to smooth the transition for the Maplewood students by placing a familiar and trusted adult in the middle school in Oakwood. The MCC president also described the role the community plays in connection to greater community:

In addition, we try and do some community events. We have a Harvest Festival at the end of September each year, which is our primary fundraiser, but it's also a community event, and we couple free events with money events so that they, anybody can attend. We would like people to attend whether they can really afford to pay for it or not. Most of our youth programming is either very low cost or free.

The MCC is the partner most often listed by the respondents, and it is the partner in closest proximity to Maplewood Elementary. The principal explained why it is such a strong partnership for the school:

One of the most solid partnerships that we have is with the Maplewood Community Council because it's very, very small, and it just serves this community.

By serving only the children in Maplewood and of the Maplewood Elementary School, the MCC is the primary partner to the school and seems to play an essential role in the village. It is the only local partner and, therefore, the only horizontal tie (Warren, 1978). The other partners mentioned by respondents are located in the greater Oakwood area and school district.

### **Partnering Outside the Village: Maplewood's Vertical Ties**

The other most often mentioned partnership is a program through which retired community members volunteer in the Maplewood Elementary classrooms; however, these are Oakwood community members rather than Maplewood residents. The reported benefit of this program is the intergenerational aspect, meaning that children are exposed to grandparent-type figures. Administrators, teachers, and parents alike mentioned the benefits of having these retired volunteers in the classrooms. This program is a partner to other schools in the district but in particular was described as being "very good about getting into Maplewood." This is as opposed to student volunteers from the local college and university who seem less likely to come to Maplewood than to the other schools in the district. This was most often attributed to the distance they would have to travel, which is less than 10 miles from either campus. Nonetheless, the elementary schools in Oakwood are less than five miles from each campus, and many are within walking distance or accessible by public transportation. For example, a teacher described how offers may be made to all the teachers of a certain grade or program in the district, except the volunteers do not want to travel to the outlying schools:

We try really hard to make those [university] connections, and again, it's the distance, at least in my classroom. We'll get all these things in [x grade]; we have these [offers for] volunteers from such and such, but

they won't come to Beechwood or Maplewood, but does anybody else [at the city schools] want them? You get that. Because they can't drive the distance.

The superintendent reiterated this problem of transportation to the outlying schools from her district-level perspective:

Transportation hurts us there, too, because...if you're a [university] or [college] student and you don't have a car, it's pretty hard to get to Maplewood. Beechwood, too, but Beechwood is on the same hill, that side, whereas Maplewood, a lot of the college students view it as going to Podunk, [even though it] isn't that far away—Podunk, USA—and it's really hard to have them, one, think of going there, and two, have the wherewithal to get there.

Whether the distance to Maplewood is actual or perceived, it may cause the school to be isolated from opportunities of which other schools in the district are able to take advantage, in this case the volunteer time of college students.

### **Partnering for a Rural School**

Other partnering activities mentioned by the participants are made available to Maplewood particularly due to its position as a rural school in OCSD. The district has had incidents of bullying and violence in the middle and high schools that have been attributed to racial or socioeconomic class tensions. These tensions are sometimes attributed to the populations of students who are separated in the elementary schools and who then come together for the first time in the middle schools. In particular, the separation of the rural and urban children is thought to add to these tensions because of the differing demographics (i.e., racial/ethnic background, economic class) of the student populations. To alleviate these problems, the district has focused on programs that partner the rural elementary schools with the urban elementary schools for fieldtrips and pen pal activities. The former Maplewood principal who now has another position in OCSD described one of these programs:

It combines classrooms within the district with other classrooms, particularly building the bonds that those children will have when they go to middle school, just so they know some of those other children.

One parent spoke about this program from her perspective with one child in middle school and one still in elementary school: "I don't think it's been effective." She went on to question if a fieldtrip in fifth grade would really make a child seek a friendship in middle school; however, this mother wondered if her younger child (we'll call her Susie), who she described as being on the autism spectrum, might benefit from this program:

It's not going to work with a typical child that knows how to make friends and makes friends easily. It's not going to affect her at all. Susie, on the other hand, something like that could be highly beneficial.

It was my understanding that this program would pair the same two classrooms for multiple events or activities across several grades, thereby enhancing the possibility that bonds could form among the students in different elementary schools. However, the teachers described how the classrooms with which they are paired change: "[We are paired] with another class, who is supposed to be a feeder that goes to the same middle school. It's not always the same class." Regardless of how the program is structured and whether there are unintended benefits for children with special needs, this districtwide program is attentive to the rurality of the two outlying schools in the district.

The other partnering activity described from which Maplewood in particular appears to benefit is due both to the rurality and the poverty of the students in the school. The superintendent described the college access program:

There's another Oakwood Youth Bureau program. It's called the College Discovery Program...it's specific to [the poorest city school] and Maplewood. There are students that have been together, now I think they're entering the high school, and they've been together since fifth grade. It is a support program to help the families and the students realize that they can go to college. But we [the district] paired an urban school and a rural school with regard to that, and that's forged friendships that have been really very, very beneficial.

I also spoke with a community member who works with the program and lives in Maplewood. He described in more detail the activities of the program:

Basically it is a program that identifies kids at the end of fifth grade who have good academic potential but probably aren't thinking about going to college. Either because, this is an and/or, either because the economic means to think about it don't exist or because they're in families where it isn't, it's not just that it isn't an expectation, it isn't even part of the thought process. And so this program identifies these kids. Half come from the rural areas, primarily Maplewood, and the other half come from downtown. And they're included in a mentorship program with homework clubs and scholastic tutors and weekend activities and summer activities and help and college visits and help applying to college, etcetera, until they graduate. It's been very successful. The first, actually, the first cohort of kids is about to graduate, and they're all heading on to further education.

This program is targeted at children from socioeconomically poor families with both few financial resources and little experience with higher education. In OCSD, the two poorest schools, as measured by the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch, are one urban and one rural school. In this way, the college access program is for the poorest families and also serves to pair urban and rural children and their families from fifth grade through the end of high school in an attempt to open the doors of college to these students who may not otherwise consider it as a possibility.

### **Barriers to Partnering**

The barriers to partnering and reasons listed as to why particular partnerships do not exist or no longer exist can be summed up in one word: time. The most often reported reason for a lack of partnering is that the time and effort required to organize partnerships prevent them from being formed and maintained. Partnerships formed by the MCC or by the PTA are created and supported by members of those organizations, predominately by parents who may have more time to spend on those activities. Administrators and teachers seem to have much less time available to forge and maintain partnerships. But when asked about how to form partnerships, with the large university in Oakwood in particular, the principal responded that he has found help from others who have existing partnerships:

I hadn't been the first person from here to initiate [a partnership]; I had a lot of help from my extended day coordinator who is constantly on the search for extensive partnerships for the extended day program. So she has found the contact for me...there are multiple contacts [at the university]...even though [the university] has tried really hard to streamline things, it's been pretty haphazard. You just need to know someone who knows someone.

One teacher described her impression of how hard it is to know what kinds of partnerships are even possible:

I think that [university] and [college] both offer things that I don't have a clue about. Because they're just out there, and there's no real formal way to get the information to the teachers or to the administrators. I just kind of happen on it and go, "Whoa, this is really good," and...so I guess that's what I would like to see, something more organized.

Another teacher echoed this need for organization:

Organization. I think it's just not, everybody has really good ideas, but it's in little bits and pieces. This is a good idea, so let's do this, and then you start to do it and then, but it doesn't get spread, it doesn't spread out.



Another teacher also seemed to discredit her own initiatives to involve partners in her teaching, either because as the previous quotation suggests it is just in “little bits and pieces” or because it is not formalized:

Some of the girls I went to high school with are scientists up at [university], and so they come down [to my classroom]. But that’s little pockets here and there.

I asked this teacher if there was a centralized point to go to find out about the partnering activities she could engage in with the university. She said, “There might be. I am sure there probably are.” She continued with an explanation of why she might not know about them:

You know how it is. When you are teaching, you think “Oh my gosh. I could teach them that ‘o-a’ says ‘o’ like coat so they can read.” You focus on what you focus on. I am driven by pressure, by expectations, by your own expectations, your own perceptions of what is stressful and what is not. I could do more, and I probably don’t.

For this teacher, finding out about possible partners may detract from her teaching by taking time away from her planning and instruction time. There are multiple pressures on teachers, and partnering seems not to be a priority in comparison to the importance of teaching literacy, for example.

The principal described his role in regard to partnering and explained that the time require to forge and maintain the partnerships is something he does not want to force upon his staff:

The difficulty in creating partnerships is that you have to coordinate that. So I’m finding there are lots of partnerships that are available, but the problem I’m finding is coordination with it. So my dream world would have a coordinator or someone that’s dedicated at least part time to making sure that things run smoothly, that the correct people are contacted and having systems for that. There are many, many willing organizations, groups, and individuals that are just there for the asking. But it’s about the phone time and the contact, and I just don’t have the time to and the other resources to do that, and I can’t ask any of the staff to do that. Again, we’ve relied on people and their projects and who they’ve known for this many years, but when that person is gone, the partnership is gone, unless they’ve made some kind of system for it to continue. The dream world would be a coordination of that.

In addition, he found himself having to buffer his staff from some of the opportunities available, and he only shared some of the possibilities with the staff so as to not overwhelm them:

There's a push and pull—always a push and pull between the district saying that we have to have these partnerships and we will foster these partnerships and teachers who are saying this is just another thing that I have to do—and some going through the motions and some very interested and involved in it. Sometimes I am at meetings saying we really can't do this, being that active buffer. And things that are sent by email or something saying that this person really would like to work with people, I use my discretion of whether my teachers are going to be interested in certain things. Like I just sent out something about some fire dog that is from the Red Cross to the K–2 teachers, and it's up to them to contact this organization. But other things, everyone wants a piece of you, so I really try to be judicious in how I send things out so as not to overwhelm people because that's what will sink us.

The principal described not only that there is a “push and pull” between what is expected and even required from the district and what teachers can do, but he also articulated his own strategy for developing the partnering activities of the school. He planned to move slowly and carefully so as not to overwhelm his teachers because “that's what will sink us.” This raises the question of what types of partnering may be easiest to begin and maintain and, in particular, may feel the least like “just another thing I have to do” for teachers. As described in the following sections, place-based pedagogy can offer a balance for teachers who are interested in partnering and yet find that it takes away from the time they spend on traditional academics, like teaching that the letters “o-a” sound like “o.”

## Discussion

The partnering activities defined by the Maplewood school employees, parents, and community members reflect the definitions of partnerships in the literature (Bauch, 2001; Melaville, 1998). The notable aspects of the findings are discussed in further detail in this section with particular attention to the local/nonlocal partners, the support for families through partnering, and the potential development of a sense of place for children in Maplewood. Although few partnerships may exist, each respondent was able to speak about at least one connection the school has with the community; there are, however, differences to note between those partnerships within the most local community, Maplewood, and those within the larger community of Oakwood. These local/nonlocal tensions can be viewed using Warren's (1978) vertical and horizontal ties. These horizontal and vertical ties may represent different types of support for the families in Maplewood. Finally, some of the partnering work of the

school was noted as being related to the rurality of the school. These responses reflect the aspects of the existing literature on partnering that describe the role of partnerships as compensating for deficits in the community, families, or lives of the students (e.g., Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Sanders, 2001). If reenvisioned from an asset-based perspective, this rurality could be the basis for place-based education.

### **Partnering Within and Outside Maplewood Village: Horizontal and Vertical Ties**

The case of Maplewood Elementary School sheds light on a plethora of contemporary issues, especially the potential of, yet challenges with, school–community partnering. While the story of consolidations, closures, and mergers is what lays the historical foundation for Maplewood Elementary School’s current position within OCSD, a detailed analysis of the arguments and policies related to these particular issues is beyond the scope of this article. The fact that Maplewood is isolated within its own school district as a rural school in a nonrural district reflects the residual effects of district and school consolidation and mergers. As the respondents—community and school members alike—recounted, Maplewood is different than the other schools in the district. The families are rural, many poor, and the children miss out on many of the opportunities the children in the city have. There are resources within the community of Maplewood; nonetheless, if the teachers cannot connect these strengths to the classroom, then they will remain untapped for the children in relation to their formal education. The differences between Maplewood and Oakwood and between Maplewood Elementary School and the city schools leaves the outlying school in the situation of having a local community that is separate, distinct, and different from the school district.

Maplewood’s local and nonlocal (meaning Oakwood) partnering activities also can be understood using Warren’s (1978) horizontal and vertical ties. The partnership within the community with the MCC is the horizontal tie of the school. Warren’s vertical ties most often are associated with connections to state or national-level entities. Nonetheless, using a different level of analysis, the connections for Maplewood Elementary School to Oakwood and OCSD can be considered vertical ties. In this way, these ties are essential but could serve to diminish the local community as they are simply played out on the stage of the Maplewood community but offer little benefit to the immediate local community. An awareness that these ties are necessary for the school but could be harmful to the community sheds light on the need for the school to have both horizontal and vertical ties.

### **Maplewood’s Partnering Relationships: Support for Families**

The partnering relationships described by the respondents in Maplewood serve the multiple goals outlined in the relevant literature, including support for families, community development, and the development of a sense of place for children. The one partnering relationship within the village with MCC supports families through the provision of afterschool and summer programming for local children. In addition, by having an adult from MCC present in the Oakwood middle school, children’s transition to the city school is eased through the network created by their connection to this person. In this way, MCC develops a form of social capital for students at Maplewood on which they can rely in middle school (Driscoll, 2001; Ferrara, 2015). The vertical tie represented by the retirees who volunteer in Maplewood could establish this same form of social capital for children; however, it is unlikely to do so as these intergenerational relationships are formed with people outside the village who the children are unlikely to encounter in their middle and high school lives. A horizontal tie of this type, for example, if the volunteers were recruited from among retirees living in Maplewood, could form a stronger network for the children because they might then be able to maintain the relationships outside of school and beyond elementary school. Finally, the college discovery program supports families by exposing children to the possibility of college and to needed advising along the way. This intervention provides knowledge (and thus social capital) to families who may have little experience with college.

### **Partnering Through Pedagogy: Place-Based Education**

Directly related to the conceptions of community that this study has highlighted are the implications for partnering. It appears that there are no potential partners in Maplewood other than MCC. There are no local businesses other than a corner store/gas station. The organizations, businesses, and potential partnerships all seem to be located in Oakwood. Yet Maplewood Elementary School’s strongest partner is MCC because it is the one partner that is able to focus only on that community rather than spreading its attention across all the schools in OCSD. This is not unique to Maplewood: “As proximity narrows the field of potential partners for schools, schools that are not close to their community’s organizations may have difficulty establishing partnerships that involve students, in particular” (Hands, 2005, p. 78). How can the school find other ways to make use of the resources in its most local community, Maplewood? I see opportunities even in a small community with increasingly fewer apparent partners. The history, geography, politics, and people can all provide resources to be tapped by the school for the benefit of the students (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Theobald, 2006).

I asked teachers, administrators, parents, and community members if they had experienced the use of the local community in the education at Maplewood Elementary. One teacher described a project she had done with one of her classes in the past, which is an excellent example of place-based education but which was extremely time consuming for her:

There are some really good things that I've done with [local college media literacy initiative]. But they're huge, and they're really difficult to maintain year to year because they're so huge. It was certainly worth it when I did it, but I could not maintain it every year because it requires so much time, but it was definitely worth it. We did a study of Maplewood and took pictures, snapshots, and made an iMovie and did all kinds of things all over the community, but it required a great deal. I know why producers get the big bucks, because I spent on a 15-minute DVD, it probably took me 100 hours to get stuff together.

The principal and some of the teachers describe how the grounds of the school were used in the past or are currently used by the students. There are orchards, vineyards, and gardens that were once tended to by the community and students together. There is currently a garden maintained by the pre-K class as a butterfly garden. In the winter the students are able to take advantage of the rural surroundings by cross-country skiing in gym class. Each of these activities takes energy, time, and effort by administrators and teachers who may not have any of those resources to spare. The question remains as to how to make such activities more deeply entrenched in the school, particularly in the academic practices.

Over the course of my case study, I heard about the history and stories of the Maplewood community. I heard parents, staff, teachers, and community members describe the community and the resources within it, particularly the resources found in the people of Maplewood. The town historian and other community members with whom I spoke know the community intimately, as do the veteran staff members, and one or more of these people could help teachers introduce the history of Maplewood to their students. The grounds of the school have been used before by teachers and community members and could once again be used and included in social studies, science, and mathematics lessons. In addition, while there were once many more, there are a few remaining farms in the area. In particular, there is an active sugarbush where maple trees are tapped and maple syrup is produced. These resources could be included in the coursework of the school, thereby forging new partnerships with the most local community. In addition, partnerships centered on notions of reciprocity (Hands, 2005) could serve to support students and families, as well as potentially spurring community development efforts. Ultimately,

partnerships between a school and its community that enhance the well-being of schools, children, families, and the community will feel more essential and less like “just one more thing I have to do.” To this end, Sanderson (2016) describes the benefits of partnerships that are designed for mutual benefit, for example, with attention to reducing teachers’ overall workload.

As the Maplewood principal mentioned, to make this type of work possible, it may take an employee being designated as a partnering coordinator or the development of a community of practice focused on the use of the local space for instructional purposes, as described by Ferreira, Grueber, and Yarema (2012) in a study of an urban gardening initiative in Detroit. Once embedded in the curriculum, the practice of the educators maintaining these ties could become part of the school day routine, as important as teaching that “o-a” sounds like “o.”

## **Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

The overlapping spheres of schools, families, and communities (Epstein, 2011) are the context for the education of children. Understanding and appreciating these overlaps can create a mutually beneficial environment supportive to children within their schools, families, and communities. This article offers a review focused on school–community partnerships, especially their goals of family support, community development, and sense of place development. Using a small, rural school as a case, the existing partnerships are examined for the benefits to children, families, the school, and the local community. This study finds that horizontal ties may be especially important for small, rural places and offer the support to children and families described in previous studies (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). The challenges the school faces in partnering activities are connected to the lack of time educators have to organize and maintain partnerships. In addition, the school’s geographic isolation offers challenges as well. Finally, this study suggests that place-based education may combine the benefits of horizontal ties with a practice that ameliorates the challenges of time and isolation.

Given the types of school–community partnerships that exist and the rural context of this school, the findings of this study suggest that additional horizontal ties would benefit the school in order to strengthen the school–community connection, as well as to enhance the education of students. Respondents described how effective the most local partnership with MCC is for them, at least in part because the resources are not spread across any other school. In addition, the findings describe the challenges to partnering, most specifically the organization, time, resources, and transportation required to sustain partnering activities. For these reasons, place-based education and the partnering it

can establish with local resources can be a form of partnering well-suited to isolated rural communities. This approach can make use of otherwise untapped local resources and keep educators tightly focused on the core activity of the school: instruction.

Place-based education may offer a way for Maplewood to focus on the academic work of the school, while partnering with and perhaps enhancing the vibrancy of its most immediate surroundings. Additional research is needed addressing the connection between school–community relationships and place-based education, especially the degree to which it can become entrenched in a school because of its position in the core activity of education. Can place-based education be a viable method for creating additional horizontal (local) ties for a school? Additionally, future work can address the role of administrators and teachers in the implementation of place-based education. More detailed analysis of my own data as well as future studies may also shed light on the connections of a teacher’s own sense of place, whether it is in the school’s local community or not, to their interest or ability to deliver a place-based education to their students. It will be necessary to consider the role of community studies and theories of place in teacher education programs. A teacher’s own ability to recognize the importance of place in their own life and the lives of their students may enhance the school–community relationship, partnering, and the development of place-based education.

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### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

#### Community Definition:

- How do you define community? How do you define *your* community?
  - (Probe) The community of \_? City of \_? \_ City School District? \_ county? Beyond?
  - (Personal community? Professional community?)

#### School–Community Connections:

- What community does the school serve? Should it serve?
- How does the school serve the community? How could it?

#### Partnerships:

- What school–community partnerships exist? (If many given, pick one to focus on.)
  - How was this partnership started? How is it maintained? What role does the district play in this? How does it benefit the school and/or community? (If none, ask about list from website.)
  - \_ Cooperative Extension; \_ Retirees Volunteering in Schools; \_ University Public Service Center; \_ Community Council; \_ Family Reading Partnership; \_ College; \_ Public Education Initiative; \_ Youth Bureau; \_ University; \_ County Health Department; \_ County Sheriff; D.A.R.E.; \_ BOCES; Town of \_
- What partnerships would you like to see between the school and community? (Specify community in connection to definition given above.)
  - How could this be started? What opportunities exist? Obstacles?