FACTORS INFLUENCING DISTRICT LEADERS' DECISIONS ABOUT ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES: A STUDY OF RURAL ADIRONDACK SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Scarce resources challenge school district leaders throughout New York State and the nation as they struggle to provide adequate and rigorous academic opportunities for students at the high school level. This challenge is exacerbated for leaders of small rural school districts, particularly those located in the Adirondack Park.

This phenomenological qualitative study examined the relationship between four particular factors and district leaders' decisions regarding academic opportunities. The factors studied were: culture, geographic location and isolation, finances and capacity. For the purposes of this study, culture was considered to be the held values of the communities under study, and capacity included: physical plant, technology, and staffing.

Data were collected primarily through interviews with district leaders of small, rural districts located in New York State's Adirondack Park, and by reviewing relevant documents. Findings suggested a relationship does exist between the factors under study and district leaders' decisions regarding academic opportunities at the high school level. The degree of influence of these factors varies. Rarely do the influences of these factors act in isolation; instead, they act concurrently and in concert with one another to shape district leaders' decisions about academic offerings. Location and isolation alone were not cited as influencing academic opportunities, more so were the residual effects of isolation, particularly small enrollments. Existing research suggests a diseconomy of scale for small rural schools relative to providing equitable opportunities. Per pupil cost and inequity were not raised during the research study, and as such not reported among the findings.

The existing relationship between the factors under study and decisions regarding academic opportunities is heightened by and results from the uniqueness and intricacies of the

communities served by these leaders; their sense of place and subsequent leadership of place clearly influence the decisions made by these district leaders as they consider academic opportunities for students.

Key Words: small rural schools, Adirondack Park, culture, geographic isolation, district leaders' decisions, academic opportunities, sense of place

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In northeastern New York State, there lies a substantial parcel of land identified as the Adirondack Park. Initially known as the Adirondack Forest Preserve, the area was originally designated by the New York State Legislature in 1885. Ultimately, the Adirondack Park was established in 1892. Designated by an imaginary blue line, the park now encompasses nearly six million acres and "is comprised of twelve counties and 103 municipalities with approximately 132,000 residents. The region abounds with mountains, lakes and rivers scattered throughout a unique natural landscape" (Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project [APRAP], 2009, p. iv). Since much of the park is considered rural, the initial population from which potential research participants for this study were identified was from school districts that were located wholly or in part within the blue line.

"The Adirondack Park represents one-fifth of the land area of New York, but it has one half of one percent of the student population" (APRAP, 2009, p.105). The 2009 Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project (APRAP), a study commissioned by the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages in collaboration with the Adirondack North Country Association, determined there were 18,245 students who lived in the park. Of those, 17,559 were enrolled in public schools, and the remaining 686 students were split fairly evenly between being home schooled and attending private catholic schools. APRAP reported the average enrollment in Adirondack school districts was 521, while the statewide average was 3,927.

Rural schools throughout New York State and the nation struggle to provide adequate, extensive and rigorous opportunities for students. From the perspective of this researcher, these struggles are exacerbated for small schools in the Adirondack Park that continue to grow smaller. "Since 1990, enrollment in Adirondack school districts has declined at a far greater pace than the

rest of the state" (APRAP, 2009, p. 105). APRAP (2009) reported that in the current decade, the decline of 329 students annually, "is equivalent to the loss of one average sized Adirondack school district every 19 months" (p. vii). This dramatic decline in student enrollment has been accompanied by a steady increase in the median age of residents. According to APRAP, "Park residents average just under 43 years of age, older than any state for median age. By 2020, only the west coast of Florida will exceed the Adirondacks as the oldest region in America" (APRAP, 2009, p.vii).

Also unique to rural Adirondack school districts and their communities is the financial impact resulting from the large number of vacation properties in the region. Both the recreational opportunities and the natural beauty of the park make it a desirable destination for vacation homeowners. Of the residential parcels in the park, 40% are owned by individuals with mailing addresses outside of the park (APRAP, 2009). The high property values of many of these homes are in contrast to the moderate or lower property values of the homes of many year-round residents. The financial impact on the residents in these small rural communities is staggering. The higher value of vacation properties make these communities appear wealthier than they are. In New York State, the amounts of state school aid, and subsequently the tax rates, are based in part on the average wealth of the particular community or school district. As a result, some of these districts find themselves receiving lower levels of state aid than other rural areas in the state with residents having to offset this reduction in the form of higher taxes. Within the park, "The average tax levy is two and one-half times the statewide value" (APRAP, 2009, p.106).

Schools throughout the country face challenges in providing substantive academic opportunities for their student populations. This challenge is heightened for small rural schools,

and even more so for those located in the Adirondack Park, given the uniqueness of their circumstances. There is limited current research that exists that specifically considers characteristics that might be exclusive to those districts in the park, and the impact they may have on the academic opportunities provided to their student populations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of various factors on the decisions of system leaders in small Adirondack districts regarding academic opportunities at the high school level. The factors studied included culture, geography and isolation, finances and capacity (physical plant, technology, and staffing). For the purpose of this study, academic opportunities were defined as high school course offerings that were beyond those mandated by state regulations to meet graduation criteria. The population being studied was small rural school districts located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park.

Research Questions

The intent of this research was to study four factors and their influence on a school district leader's decisions regarding the academic opportunities available to high school students in small rural Adirondack school districts. The four factors researched were: culture, geographic location and isolation, finances, and capacity. For the purposes of this study, capacity included physical plant, technology, and staffing. The research questions were as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between a school district's culture and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
2. Is there a relationship between a school district's geographic location and isolation and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

3. Is there a relationship between a school district's available finances and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
4. Is there a relationship between a school district's capacity (physical plant, technology, and staffing) and a school system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

Sample

Of the 61 school districts located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park, 53 were further identified as offering academic programming at the high school level through grade 12. This further identification was accomplished through a review of websites, and through phone calls to the districts. The superintendents of those 53 districts were invited to participate in the study (Appendix A), and 11 of them agreed to participate. Despite being located within the park, not all of the identified districts would be considered small and rural using the criteria utilized by the United States Department of Education (USDOE). According to the USDOE, *small rural schools* are those eligible to participate in the Small Rural Schools Achievement (SRSA) Program (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2010). In order to be eligible to participate in this grant program, schools must meet both the criteria of having a total average daily attendance at all schools served by the Lead Educational Agency (LEA) of less than 600 and being designated by school local codes 7 or 8 by the U.S. Census Department. These school codes result from the manner in which the district is identified by the U.S. Census Department, with a local code of *7* indicating a district that is outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) with a population of fewer than 2,500, and a local code of *8* indicating a district that is inside a MSA with a population less than 2,500 (NYSED, 2010).

Of the 53 districts earlier identified, 22 also meet these criteria. Of the 11 superintendents who agreed to participate, seven were employed by small rural schools. Thus, seven of the 22

small rural schools located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park served as the sample for the study.

Definitions

Adirondack Park. As described by the Adirondack Council (2008), a not for profit New York State environmental group, "The Adirondack Park is the largest park in the contiguous United States. It contains six million acres, covers one-fifth of New York State and is equal in size to neighboring Vermont. The Adirondack Park is nearly three times the size of Yellowstone National Park. More than half of the Adirondack Park is private land, devoted principally to hamlets, forestry, and agriculture and open-space recreation. The Park is home for 130,000 permanent and 110,000 seasonal residents, and hosts ten million visitors yearly. The remaining 45 percent of the Park is publicly owned Forest Preserve, protected as 'Forever Wild' by the [New York State] NYS Constitution since 1894" (para. 1-2). Further description of the park provided by Adirondack.net (2010) states, "Many first time visitors to the Adirondacks are surprised to learn that 'the Park' isn't a traditional park at all. You won't find an entrance gate guarded by conservation officers – but you will find a vibrant blend of public and private lands where thousands of people live, work and play amid the breathtaking Adirondack Mountains, forests and streams" (para. 4). The geographic features of the park provide year round recreational opportunities including swimming, boating, hiking and skiing.

Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). "BOCES is a public organization that provides shared educational programs and services to school districts. BOCES owes its origin to a state legislative enactment authorizing the formation of intermediate school districts. Passed in 1948, the act was aimed at enabling small rural school districts to

combine their resources to provide services that otherwise would have been uneconomical, inefficient, or unavailable" (NYSED, 2009, para. 1).

Capacity. For the purpose of this study, *capacity* is defined as the physical plant, technology, and staffing present in the districts under study.

College For Every Student (CFES). As described on their its web site: "A nonprofit organization committed to raising the academic aspirations and performance of underserved youth so that they can prepare for, gain access to, and succeed in college" (College For Every Student [CFES], 2007a, para. 1). "CFES currently works with 120 rural and urban schools and districts in 16 states and the District of Columbia. Each school works with more than 50 CFES Scholars — low-income youth, most of whom would be first in their family to pursue higher education — to help them get to college and succeed there" (CFES, 2007b, para. 1).

Culture. For the purpose of this study, *culture* is defined as the held values of the communities that constitute the districts under study.

High Peaks Region. A region of the Adirondack Park designated as such because of the 46 mountains with an altitude greater than 4000 feet. This region is renowned for the various recreational opportunities available.

Northeast Regional Information Center (NERIC). As described on its own web site: "In a geographic service are that covers 12 counties, the NERIC partners with seven BOCES to provide advanced technology services to more than 140 school districts. [Providing] districts a broad array of services that apply to multiple facets of district operation, such as instruction, student information, finances, human resources, security and test reporting" (Northeast Regional Information Center [NERIC], 2008, para. 1)

Sense of Place. Budge (2006) equates sense of place with a critical leadership of place, which he describes as follows: "A critical leadership of place is leadership that specifically aims to improve the quality of life in particular communities. Leaders with a critical leadership of place support community as a context for learning, understanding that schools and their local communities are inextricably linked, and that the ability of each to thrive is dependent upon the other. They work to conserve what is beneficial to the well being of students, families, and communities, while actively leading efforts that address the challenges and/or contradictions found in the local context" (Budge, 2006, p. 8).

Small Rural Schools. For the purpose of this study, *small rural schools* are those deemed as eligible to participate in the Small Rural Schools Achievement Program (SRSA). To be eligible to participate in this grant program, schools must meet both the criteria of having a total average daily attendance at all schools served by the Lead Educational Agency (LEA) of less than 600 and being designated by school local codes 7 or 8 by the U.S. Census Department. These school codes result from the manner in which the district is identified by the U.S. Census Department, with a local code of *7* indicating a district that is outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) with a population of fewer than 2,500, and a local code of *8* indicating a district that is inside a MSA with a population less than 2,500 (NYSED, 2010).

Limitations and Delimitations

The sample of the study consisted of those who voluntarily participated. Of the 22 potential respondents, seven chose to participate. Though these voluntary participants shared qualifying characteristics with those who chose not to participate, readers will need to generalize their finding with more care than they might have had the sample been random.

The researcher was a novice at conducting interviews for the purpose of qualitative study, and this could be a limitation. Care was taken when preparing for the interviews. The researcher conducted a pilot interview and practiced interview techniques in order to become more proficient. A common set of interview questions and a script were used to insure consistency from one interview to the next.

Potential bias on the part of the researcher should be noted. Having been a lifelong resident of upstate New York, she is quite familiar with the region under study. Due to her background in education and appreciation for and proximity to the region, she kept abreast of the educational challenges faced by the districts in the region through media reports and her personal and professional affiliations with individuals living in the region and working in the field.

To limit the impact of this potential bias, careful attention was given to collecting and interpreting data. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Participants were provided the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. The data collected were self reported by participants, and truthfulness is assumed.

The sample was intentionally delimited. The intent was to look at particular factors influencing small rural school districts in New York State's Adirondack Park, so subsequently only leaders from these districts were considered. Findings should be generalized with care to similar rural districts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The ability of public schools to provide adequate, extensive, and rigorous opportunities for students has diminished given the current economic uncertainties faced by New York State and the nation. This challenge is not a new one for small rural schools and districts. Difficulties for these schools and districts are compounded by issues beyond available finances and also include: culture, geographic location and isolation, and capacity. For the purposes of this study, capacity included physical plant, technology, and staffing. These factors have and will continue to present challenges for small rural districts as they strive to respond to the needs of their students and communities. Compounding these challenges are certain requirements and accountability measures levied under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

The most resounding consistency found in the review of current information available relative to rural education is that the amount of research in this area conducted to date is far from adequate. This is particularly true in New York State. Much of the research available specific to New York State can be attributed to David Monk and his colleagues. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) completed a comprehensive database search of K-12 rural education research conducted in the United States from 1993 – 2003. Their findings suggested that little research regarding rural schools had been conducted, and that much of what had been conducted was inadequate. They also suggested that much of the research that existed was qualitative.

The intent of this study was to determine the impact of various factors that influence a district leader's decisions regarding academic opportunities. The factors being considered were: culture, geographic location and isolation, finances and capacity. The following research questions that were addressed:

1. Is there a relationship between a school district's culture and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
2. Is there a relationship between a school district's geographic location and isolation and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
3. Is there a relationship between a school district's available finances and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
4. Is there a relationship between a school district's capacity (physical plant, technology and staffing) and a school system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

The initial intent in reviewing the existing literature was to consider each of these factors and the subsequent research questions independently. This proved problematic; there were particular influencing factors that could not be easily compartmentalized into one of the four independent factors being studied, but instead encompassed one or more of the areas being studied. Yet, to provide some structure and organization to the review of the relevant literature, the information is organized in the following manner: To the extent possible, existing research that is exclusive to a single factor and its subsequent research question is discussed. The particular factors are addressed in the initial order in which they were presented. This is followed by information which summarizes the fact that certain influences do not necessarily align uniquely to a specific factor, but instead have overarching implications to more than one, and in some cases several of the factors being studied.

Culture

Culture, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the held values of the communities that constitute the districts under study. Though no one existing piece of research has been able to succinctly identify exactly what *it* is, there is a great deal of implication that there is something

unique about small rural schools and districts. "Researchers disagree about the precise definition of the term *rural*, yet they do agree that rural schools possess certain indefinable attributes which set them apart" (Gardner, 2003, p. 12). Though it was not the intent of this study to compare rural districts to those of other designations, Arnold et al. (2005) suggested:

> ... there is a need to recognize that the values found in rural America differ in important ways from those in urban and suburban areas. In particular, the relationship between the school and the local community is different. Schools are much more important to the day-to-day functioning of the community in rural areas. (p. 20)

Research provides distinct implications that result from the link between schools and their communities. Some of the existing body of information suggests that rural existence is a limitation, while other research suggests the opposite is the case. What seems to be conveyed consistently was the need for district leaders to understand the community and the impact of his or her decisions have in relation to it.

Budge (2006) spoke to a limited understanding by parents and the community of their children's needs. "Many parents and members of the community were thought to have limited aspirations for their children and/or to have limited understanding of what their children would need to be successful in the future" (p. 4). Arnold et al. (2005) suggested that aspirations and expectations of the community might negatively impact school improvement efforts.

Gardner (2003) and Bethel (2001), each of whom conducted case studies of a small rural school district, in Pennsylvania and Illinois respectively, found that academics were of significant importance and grounded in community desires. Bethel (2001) stated, "For rural people it is about learning to live and work in a rural environment" (p. 15). Gardner alluded to the power local parent groups have over academic offerings.

Research also points to the fact that parent involvement might not be directed toward the academic aspect of schools. Arnold et al. (2005) found research that indicated parents were active and involved as spectators at school activities. Bethel (2001) suggested that communities do have significant influence regarding spending, but that they provide autonomy to district leadership regarding academic decisions. "Schools transmit the values of the family and community from generation to generation. [This might create a means to] open a world of opportunity by freeing students from the limitations of their parents" (Bethel, 2001, p. 25).

Given the differing perspectives present in the research, academic leaders in small rural districts grounded in community must perform a delicate balancing act that is contingent upon a deep understanding of the communities they serve. Budge (2006) described the importance of a *sense of place*:

> A critical leadership of place is leadership that specifically aims to improve the quality of life in particular communities. Leaders with a critical leadership of place support community as a context for learning, understanding that schools and their local communities are inextricably linked, and that the ability of each to thrive is dependent upon the other. They work to conserve what is beneficial to the well being of students, families, and communities, while actively leading efforts that address the challenges and/or contradictions found in the local context. (Budge, 2006, p. 8)

It is imperative then, that school leaders, particularly superintendents, be well attuned to the community, its history, and its values. Bethel (2001) identified the school superintendent as the key figure in small, rural districts, and indicates that in many cases (s)he may be the only full time central office administrator and, as such, is functioning in many capacities. "In rural America, finding a happy medium between the past, with its rich tradition of rural life, and the

future, with its promise of opportunity and prosperity, requires school leaders to have a keen sense of where the school and its community have been and where they hope to go" (Harmon & Branham, 1999, p. 15). "Administrators … can significantly influence teaching and learning in small rural districts" (Budge, 2006, p. 3).

Geography and Isolation

"Obviously, even within the rural category, there are differences among school districts with respect to student population, community environment, economy level, geographic features, etc." (Gong, 2005, p. 15). Often assumptions are made about districts simply because they are rural: "There are many misconceptions about rural schools. Not all of them are underperforming, poor, hayseed places. An Iowa Corn Belt community does not face the same issues as a ski resort in Colorado or an island in Maine or a mostly minority hamlet in the Mississippi Delta" (Lewis, 2003, p. 1). "Rural schools face a unique set of challenges largely due to their geographic isolation" (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 1). Budge (2006) suggested that geographic location and isolation might be among the factors that are seen as a benefit to living in these areas, and conversely that these locations offer, "limited quality and quantity of experiences students need to prepare for the future" (p. 4).

Geographically isolated districts tend to be small – in number of students served – as a result of their isolation. Research indicates that small districts are less able to provide opportunities for their students. "Students who attend small districts do not receive the same opportunities as those who attend larger school districts" (Sasala, 1996, p. 1). In referring specifically to New York State, Monk & Haller (1986) suggested that the state has a constitutional obligation to assure that a student's education is not inferior simply because they, "happen to live in a small rural community" (p. 4). Bethel (2001) echoed this sentiment when he

stated, “The quality of a student’s education should not be determined by where he/she lives” (p. 5).

There is ample research relative to consolidation and reorganization as a possible means to enhance educational opportunities in geographically isolated districts. Sasala (1996) surmised that the fact numerous small districts continue to exist in particular regions,”…can be attributed to provincial attitudes and the fear of losing local autonomy” (p. 1). Thus, opportunities afforded by centralization of services may provide a more viable option for geographically isolated districts. “Centralized administration [also] provides many of the benefits of district consolidation without undermining local identity – traditionally a key barrier to public acceptance. A dozen districts can share the same fiscal officer while keeping their schools and their football teams…” (State University of New York [SUNY], 2009, p. 5).

Another option that has begun to emerge is regional facilities. “The creation of regional distance learning networks is one of the more widespread practices aimed at expanding educational opportunities by bridging the geographical and cultural distances between schools…”(SUNY, 2009, p. 8).

Minimal research exists exclusive to the effects of geographic isolation, supporting the assertion made by Monk & Bliss (1992) that the effects of isolation deserve more attention.

Finances

Small, rural districts often face financial challenges which result from diminishing industry and population accompanied by declining enrollment and further compounded by decreases in available financial resources. These combined circumstances have and will impact funding to support operations and opportunities. “In addition to struggling with shallow tax bases and small secondary enrollments, many small districts suffer diseconomies of scale that

result in higher costs per pupil in certain areas, including administration" (SUNY, 2009, p. 4). The Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project (APRAP) (2009) reported that the average tax levy in the park was two and one-half times the statewide value. APRAP further reported an average per pupil tax levy in the park of $19,262, compared to a statewide average of $7,749. "Because of financial constraints and decreasing enrollments, smaller districts cannot offer comprehensive courses in higher level mathematics, sciences, and foreign languages" (Sasala, 1996, p. 1).

Monk & Bliss (1992) stated, "It costs more in small districts to achieve the same result it does in otherwise equivalent larger districts" (p. 4). Consequences may include reduction in the scope and/or quality of services offered or in increased costs to tax payers (Monk & Bliss, 1992).

Research supports the fact that it costs small rural districts more to function, and that ". . . small districts tend to spend the same, if not a higher percentage of their income on education than larger districts" (Monk & Bliss, 1992, p. 7). Yet, "the research shows that rural districts spend less on instruction than do otherwise similar districts" (Monk & Bliss, 1992, p. 12)

A question then arises as to what might account for a higher level of spending, yet apparent diminished academic opportunities. Small, rural school districts in New York State, as a result of legislation in effect since 1948, have the opportunity to benefit from pooled resources and services available through Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) (SUNY, 2009). There is much variation in the degree to which small districts utilize this opportunity, yet they tend to spend more per pupil to do so than larger districts (Monk & Bliss, 1992).

Multiple factors contribute to the financial challenges and difficulties faced by small rural districts. As Gardner (2003) indicated, "… rural schools are often consigned to 'making do with less'. That 'less' becoming increasingly more difficult to manage…" (p. 12). Other possible

factors impacting spending and resulting in financial constraints in small rural district are not tied directly to academic opportunities. They include: increased transportation costs related to sparse geography (Monk & Bliss, 1992), maintenance of aging, overcrowded, and over utilized facilities (Bethel, 2001), and staffing costs unique to rural districts (Arnold, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Monk & Bliss, 1992). These particular factors will be discussed in further detail in the subsequent section titled: Capacity.

Capacity

As defined earlier, capacity consists of physical plant, technology, and staffing. Inadequacies in any of these areas could influence academic offerings and opportunities available to students.

Physical plant. Bethel (2001) provided significant information regarding the impact on and implications of physical plant and facilities. He suggested that in rural areas, schools are more than educational centers. He referenced them in his study as being much like the town hall – the center of community activity. He then suggested, "Many schools lack adequate, safe, and modern buildings" (Bethel, 2001, p. 15). Overuse by the community leads to increased wear, compounded by the fact that many small rural districts do not have staff with necessary facilities expertise. He alluded to additional implications in his statement, "Their aging electorate, small bond debt, and diminished probability that referendums or bond issues will be successful to maintain, upgrade or replace aging facilities contribute to the dilemma" (Bethel, 2001, p. 15). Finally, he suggested that the mindset of community members is that cost savings can be realized or monies allocated to classrooms and students if facility needs are neglected.

Of note, is the suggestion that consideration for renovation and/or rebuilding might be influenced by the emotional attachment that exists between community members and existing

facilities. "For some this nostalgia exists to an extent that they seem unaware that the carefully planned educational process for young people is being negatively impacted due to the deteriorated and overused buildings" (Bethel, 2001, p. 141).

Technology. Sasala (1996) discussed potential options that might be made available through innovation and technology, but alluded to the fact that though emerging technology and innovation may provide opportunities for small rural isolated districts to compensate for their curricular limitations, the cost associated could be prohibitive. Arnold et al. (2005) also suggested that technology might be a means of overcoming curricular shortcomings. Such options could be limited by inadequate facilities and infrastructure. Bethel (2001) supported this notion in his contention that the potential for buildings, as they currently exist, has been maximized.

Staffing. What constitutes quality among staff members, particularly teachers, has been a topic of controversy, particularly in rural schools. This controversy has been heightened by the requirements of NCLB. In his research regarding the *highly qualified* provision of the act, Eppley (2009) suggested that content area expertise may not be what qualifies teachers in particular settings. "What it means to be a highly qualified rural teacher is a variable of the communities in which the teacher works…" (Eppley, 2009, p. 8). "Quality teaching should not be determined in a 'one best' way that ignores both place and students" (Eppley, 2009, p. 7).

Eppley (2009) contended that highly qualified provisions set forth under NCLB did not take into consideration the unique circumstances and needs of rural, and in some cases remote, school districts. This is consistent with the findings of Lewis (2003) who stated, "The inflexibility and underfunding of NCLB create even greater problems for rural schools" (p. 2).

Gardner (2003) further supported these assertions by suggesting that this was, in part, due to salary and the multiple responsibilities placed upon staff members.

Eppley (2009) provided an extreme example in a study of the K-12 Chignik Bay School located in a remote Alaska village: "This remote fishing village balances dangerously on the edge of losing their school as enrollment declines, and adding a highly qualified teacher requirement seems like a cruel joke on staff members that travel by bush plane to serve multiple schools in the district … compliance would result in replacing these teachers with 'an outsider'" (p. 7).

"The rural education setting faces unique challenges, many of which are enhanced by the nature of the rural environment in which it exists" (Bethel, 2001, p. 141). These challenges include physical plant, technology and staffing.

Summary

In many cases, the influencing factors found in the existing literature did not align themselves strictly to one of the four areas being studied. As was likely apparent, there were often overarching influences and implications with finances being the most prevalent. The lines between the factors under consideration were often blurred: "…rural schools face significant resource limitations, particularly in terms of economic and human resources. In addition, there are social, cultural and political forces that can influence the capacity of rural schools…" (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 18). Separating out such forces or factors is not always possible.

The link between rural schools and their communities, the expectations communities have for their children, and the openness of community members to innovation all impact local decisions regarding allocation of finances. These allocations, whether for facilities, technology, staff or program, will impact the academic opportunities afforded to students. All of these are

factors of which rural school leaders must be well aware. "Successful leaders, it was believed, needed to understand the "mentality" of a small, rural community . . . "(Budge, 2006, p. 7). Education as it currently exists in all types of communities is undergoing change; how leaders respond must be aligned to the particular communities they serve. Gardner (2003) supported this when he suggested that educational leaders cannot ignore local circumstances.

Chapter 3: Methods

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to determine if a relationship existed between various factors and the decisions of district leaders in small rural Adirondack school districts regarding academic offerings at the high school level. The research questions, each relevant to one of the factors being studied, were as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between a school district's culture and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
2. Is there a relationship between a school district's geographic location and isolation and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
3. Is there a relationship between a school district's available finances and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
4. Is there a relationship between a school district's capacity (physical plant, technology, and staffing) and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

This chapter describes the design of the study, the sample studied, how the sample was selected, the manner in which data were collected and analyzed, and the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the study.

Design

Qualitative research has increasingly become appreciated and respected as a means of studying applied social sciences, particularly education. Merriam (2009) in discussing qualitative research states: "Research focused on discovery, insight and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p. 1). Creswell (2009) presents a cross-section of the defining characteristics of

qualitative research derived from various individuals in the field. Chief among them is that such research is well suited to the natural setting with the researcher being the key instrument. Additionally, that indicative of such research is the fact that it "focuses on learning the meaning that participants hold" (Cresswell, 2009, p. 14), and that it is emergent. This is consistent with several of the characteristics of qualitative research provided by Merriman (2009), who contends:

> The overall purpose of qualitative research is to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense of their lives … the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participant's perspectives … a second characteristic of all forms of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Since understanding is the goal of this research, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data. (p. 14-15)

Given the purpose of this study, and based on these characteristics of qualitative research, it was the optimal manner of research to utilize in order to determine, from the perspectives of those system leaders in the prescribed situation, the impact of the designated factors on their decision-making relative to academic offerings.

Of the qualitative approaches to research studies, the phenomenological approach was best suited to this particular study, as the purpose of such a study was to "describe and interpret the experiences of participants in order to understand the 'essence' of the experience as perceived by the participants" (McMillan, 2008, p. 291). McMillan further suggests, "… a phenomenological study focuses much more on the consciousness of human experiences … the participants of a phenomenological study are selected because they have lived the experiences

being investigated, are willing to share their thoughts about the experiences, and can articulate their conscious experiences" (p. 292). These statements are in complete alignment with the participants and phenomenon of the study at hand.

Qualitative phenomenological research was most appropriate to explore the relationships that exist between various factors and their influence on decisions regarding academic offerings among district leaders in small rural Adirondack schools.

Population and Sample Selection

In qualitative research, "the most appropriate sampling strategy is non-probabilistic ... or purposeful … Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2009, p. 76-77). Such was the basis for the purposeful sample selection for this study. From this purposeful sample, a volunteer subset ultimately constituted the participant group.

As designated in the purpose statement, certain attributes were essential of participants: they were to be school district leaders of small rural school districts located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park. The initial criteria for selecting participants was to identify superintendents of school districts located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park. The sample was further refined using theoretical sampling, a practice by which, "the researcher begins with an initial sample chosen for its obvious relevance to the research problem" (Merriam, p. 80). The resulting data lead the researcher to subsequent decisions regarding the research. The quality of being a system leader in an Adirondack school district has obvious relevance to the purpose of the study. Refinement of the sample was accomplished by further

identifying Adirondack districts that had high school programs, as well as those that would be considered small and rural. A more detailed explanation follows.

Sixty-one school districts were identified as being located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park of New York State. Of these districts, it was found that 53 offered programming through grade 12, or at the high school level. Superintendents of each of these 53 districts were invited to participate in the study; 11 of the 53 responded favorably. Seven of the 11 ultimately participated. While interviews were scheduled and conducted, the researcher reviewed the most current data available to confirm whether or not participating districts were considered small and rural using the criteria utilized by the United States Department of Education (USDOE).

According to the USDOE, *small rural schools* are those eligible to participate in the Small Rural Schools Achievement (SRSA) Program (NYSED, 2010). In order to be eligible to participate in this grant program, schools must meet both the criteria of having a total average daily attendance at all schools served by the Lead Educational Agency (LEA) of less than 600 and being designated by school local codes 7 or 8 by the U.S. Census Department. These school codes result from the manner in which the district is identified by the U.S. Census Department, with a local code of *7* indicating a district that is outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) with a population of fewer than 2,500, and a local code of *8* indicating a district that is inside a MSA with a population less than 2,500 (NYSED, 2010).

Of the 53 districts initially considered for participation in the study, 22 met this definition of small and rural. Of the 11 positive respondents to the initial invitation to participate, seven met the criteria of this definition. Thus seven of the 22 small rural districts located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park make up the sample of this research study. The district leaders

in three of the four districts that agreed to participate but did not meet the criteria had already been interviewed; their interviews were transcribed but not considered further. A scheduled interview in the fourth district that agreed to participate but that did not meet the criteria was cancelled.

Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation

An invitation to participate in the study was extended to the 53 superintendents of school districts located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park. Invitations were sent via U.S. mail (see Appendix A). Of the 53 invited, 11 individuals responded favorably by the date designated in the original correspondence. The superintendents of these districts constituted the volunteer sample of the study. Upon receipt of these positive responses, the researcher developed an interview schedule that facilitated in-person interviews in the home district of the participants, taking into consideration the geographic area and required travel time between each of the sites, while at the same time being attentive to the availability and time constraints of the participants. Ultimately, the interviews were conducted over a two-week period in April 2010. The interviews ranged in duration from 28 minutes to over an hour.

In advance of the scheduled interviews, the researcher completed a demographic data sheet for each district, to the fullest extent possible by using publicly available information (see Appendix B). The intent of this document was to gather cursory data, including demographic information, structure of district facilities, and funding available to each rural school. Also, prior to the scheduled interviews, subjects were provided with a written copy of the questions, or the script that would guide the interviews. A written copy of the interview questions was distributed to participants via email (see Appendix C). The body of the email to which the script was attached contained a request for participants to furnish certain documents including:

- Publications indicating course descriptions or course offerings at the high school.
- Publications citing the historical success of budget passage.
- Documentation of funding sources, including available grant funding.

It was suggested that these documents either be sent to the researcher via U.S. mail or be furnished when the interview was conducted.

In advance of distributing the interview scripts and conducting the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted. The subject of the pilot interview was a retired superintendent who had substantial experiences as a superintendent in various small rural Adirondack districts. One of the purposes of the pilot was to provide the rather novice researcher with the opportunity to gain familiarity with the questions and the interview process, thus making her more qualified to conduct future interviews. Additionally, the pilot served as a means of determining the clarity of the questions from the perspective of the individual being interviewed. Finally, the pilot served as a venue in which to determine the adequacy of the recording device that would be utilized throughout the study. On each of these counts, the pilot proved beneficial. The researcher developed a comfort level with the process and procedure, as well as with the interview script itself. It was determined that there were, in some cases, terminology in the script that was either confusing or unclear for both the interviewee and researcher. These particular questions were revised to improve clarity. The researcher was able to become more familiar with the recording device utilized, and, as a result of the pilot, adjustments were made regarding the location of the device at subsequent interviews. Finally, the pilot interview gave the researcher a better sense of the duration of the interviews, which aided in the development of the interview schedule.

Each interview occurred in person at the respective office of the participating superintendent. First, the researcher provided the following brief scripted introduction:

> Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. The following questions are meant to help me to investigate the impact of various factors that might influence academic opportunities and course offerings in small rural school districts, particularly at the secondary level. Given that the nature of my research is qualitative, I would ask that you provide as much supporting detail as you are able in response to the questions. The first three questions are intended to provide some cursory information, while the remaining questions will be specific to the factors being researched.

The interview then commenced utilizing the aforementioned interview script (see Appendix C) as the guide for the questioning. The manner in which the interview progressed and the direction of subsequent questioning was determined in large part by the responses of the subjects; thus, though the initial script was relatively structured, the interviews themselves were semi-structured. Toward the conclusion of each of the interview sessions, the earlier referenced, and partially completed, demographic data sheets (see Appendix B) were shared with the subject, at which time they were asked to confirm the accuracy of the data completed by researcher, correct any inaccuracies, and provide any missing information. Again, though the document was structured, the verification and collection of information was semi-structured based on the prior completion and accuracy of the information.

Each of the interviews was conducted utilizing a digital recording device, with one exception. Upon arrival at the second interview site, the recording device was not operating properly. In this particular situation, the researcher recorded responses in writing to each of the questions asked. Handwritten notes were transcribed verbatim. To decrease the likelihood of such occurrences during the remaining interviews, a secondary back-up recording device was utilized, and subsequent interviews were recorded utilizing two devices.

The digitally recorded interviews and, in the one case, the hand written responses were transcribed verbatim by the researcher into a word processed document. Merriam (2009) states, "Ideally, verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best data base for analysis" (p. 110). She goes on to further extol the intimate familiarity with the data afforded the researcher that results from self-transcription. To ensure accuracy of transcription, copies of the transcribed interviews were then sent to their respective participants for review prior to analysis. Each participant was asked to confirm the accuracy of the information – their responses – in the transcribed document and/or to suggest revisions based on their recollection of the interview. This practice of insuring credibility, in essence the validity and reliability of the data collected, is known as member checking. Participants reported only minimal and trivial inaccuracies in the transcriptions and minor adjustments were made, thus signifying a high level of reliability.

Data Analysis

The data set in this particular study included completed demographic data sheets for each of the districts represented, digital recordings and written transcriptions of the interviews with superintendents, and any requested documents that were provided by each of the participants. The primary analysis focused on the transcribed interviews, and the other pieces of the data set served to confirm information shared during the interview process.

A rigorous method for analyzing the data was utilized. Using the semi-structured interview script as the basis, the responses of each participant, question by question, were compiled into a master document. As the responses were compiled, they were read and re-read to glean consistencies and disparities regarding each question. Emergent themes and findings relative to each question were compiled.

Since the interview script and questions were categorized by research question, responses addressing each research question were also compiled under separate headings. These compiled responses relative to each research question were also read and re-read, resulting in a comprehensive summary of emergent themes pertaining to each research question, which was compiled and added to the master document.

The summaries of emergent themes and findings relative to each research question were then reviewed and compared to one another in order to determine responses that might be pertinent across the various factors being studied. Lastly, overarching themes and emergent findings relative to the purpose of the study were added as the final piece of the master document. The researcher developed these various summaries by utilizing participants' responses to individual interview questions, combined responses relative to particular research questions, and the themes and findings that emerged across research questions.

Reliability and Validity

Merriam (2009) suggests that using reliability and validity, as commonly known, is not feasible given the nature of qualitative research. Instead she suggests using trustworthiness and rigor to determine that data were collected in an ethical manner. The rigor in methodology in this study supports a high level of trustworthiness. A piloted and relatively structured interview script was utilized, and responses were recorded verbatim digitally (with one exception where equipment failure required hand recording). Self-transcription was completed by the researcher. Merriam (2009) states, " Ideally, verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis" (p. 110). She goes on to contend that self-transcription provides the researcher intimate familiarity with the data. The researcher shared transcribed interviews with participants, thus giving them the opportunity to review and verify the transcripts and to confirm

that what was reported was an accurate reflection of what they had shared; in essence providing for member checking. Data provided during the interviews was verified or crosschecked against documentation requested of and provided by the subjects, essentially serving as a means to triangulate the data.

Rich, thick descriptions were used conceptually to describe the manner in which both the data were collected and the findings were reported. In many cases, the exact words of respondents were used, and, when possible, descriptions of their demeanor or obviously intended meaning conveyed through body language were provided.

Chapter 4: Findings

This research study was conducted utilizing a structured to semi-structured interview format, with interview questions developed to and aligned with each of the research questions. A document review was used as a means to support and confirm the information provided. These findings are structured in much the same way, as they are compartmentalized, to a great extent, into sections representing each of the four factors being studied: culture, geography and isolation, finances, and capacity, and aligned directly with their respective research questions. As not all the information reported fit neatly into one of these four, there were occasions when responses were repeated, as they pertained to more than one of the factors being studied. The reporting of these findings is all encompassing; including the data provided by all respondents to insure horizontalization (Merriam, 2009, p. 26) or that equal weight is given to all the data.

Following the findings relative to each of the original four research questions, findings are reported in response to the closing question of the study. This final question encompassed the overall purpose of the study and asked district leaders: "What are the primary factors that influence you as you consider academic opportunities at the high school level, particularly the addition or elimination of courses?"

Prior to addressing the research questions themselves, a summary of some of the basic information about each of the participating school districts is provided. Each participating district, by design, was a small rural school district located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park. The summaries that follow provide a more detailed look at the demographics of each of these participating districts, as well as the longevity and previous experience of each of the participating system leaders. Finally, the existence of policies and/or procedures in place within the district in regard to academic offerings is reported.

Findings relative to each particular research question are presented as follows: a table or tables indicating the cursory findings relative to each of the scripted interview questions along with a detailed narrative explanation utilizing participants' responses.

When reporting results, particularly when providing direct quotes of respondents, measures were taken to ensure confidentiality. All data were reported in a gender neutral manner and, in cases where quoted responses might reveal a participant's geographic location or district, bracketed text was used to ensure confidentiality, while also maintaining the integrity of participant's responses.

Demographic Data

Table 1 provides demographic data relative to each of the participating districts. Student enrollment ranged from less than 200 to 600. In each of the participating districts, there were fewer than 50 teachers. The number of administrators in each participating districts ranged from one to four. The most recent approved budget figure was rounded to the nearest million to protect the identity of the district and respondent and ranged from $5 million to $11 million.

Table 2 provides information relative to the longevity and experience of the district leaders interviewed. Participants had served in their current leadership role for seven years or less. Three of the seven were previously employed by their current district in another capacity, and five of the seven had previous administrative experience in another district within the Adirondack Park.

Table 1

Demographic Data: District Enrollment, Staffing and Budget Information

District ID#	Enrollment	Teachers	Administrators	Budget[a]
1	< 200	< 25	4	$6 million
2	200 – 400	25 – 50	4	$9 million
3	< 200	25 – 50	1	$5 million
4	200 – 400	25 – 50	2	$6 million
5	200 – 400	25 – 50	2	$8 million
6	200 – 400	25 – 50	1	$8 million
7	400 – 600	> 50	3	$11 million

[a]Rounded to the nearest million.

Table 2

Demographic Data: Participant Longevity and Experience

District ID#	Years as a superintendent	Previously employed by current district	Previous administrative experience in another Adirondack district
1	5 – 7	No	Yes
2	< 7	Yes	Yes
3	< 7	No	Yes
4	5 – 7	Yes	No
5	5 – 7	No	Yes
6	5 – 7	No	Yes
7	< 5	Yes	No

Policies and Procedures

Participants were asked to share any policies or procedures for considering academic opportunities at the high school level, particularly the addition or deletion of courses that were currently in place in each of their districts. Table 3 reports a summary of the existence and utilization of policies and/or procedures in place for adding or deleting academic opportunities. Only two of the seven respondents reported existing policies, and only one reported utilization of said policies. All seven reported utilization of procedures or past practice. Actual responses or iterations of such responses follow the table.

Table 3

Policies and/or Procedures for Course Implementation/Reduction

	Yes	No	N/A
Existence of policies	2	5	0
Utilization of policies	1	0	6
Utilization of procedures and/or past practices	7	0	0

District #1 (D1). The participant from District #1 responded:

There is no set policy, but we do an annual review … we look at the courses we offered last year ... we do it on interest, and with our population declining, it becomes more critical to let students pick courses that they are interested in. (D1)

District #2 (D2). *"There are some policies in place, I was reviewing them this morning, but we really do not follow them" (D2).* The respondent went on to discuss various scheduling options that have been tried or considered, and the impact scheduling can have on offerings. Offerings resulting from conscious decisions on the part of the board of education (BoE) were also alluded to, including AP courses and a mandated elective in personal finance. *"Principals*

meet with faculty in spring to discuss electives, interested teachers develop proposals, administration then checks student interest ... the courses offered from one year to the next are a moving target" (D2). When discussing deletion of courses, it was conveyed that it is primarily numbers driven.

District #3 (D3). No real board of education policies were reported. It was suggested that past practice for determining offerings beyond what is mandated was shaped by district initiatives and a comprehensive district plan that has been in place for six years. *"The plan calls for us to look at advanced sciences, and for us to have acceleration in math and science, and to offer college level and AP courses to the fullest extent possible" (D3).*

District #4 (D4). The respondent spoke of the district's desire for all students to go to college and the district's work with an organization called College for Every Student (CFES) in this regard. The respondent also mentioned the recent availability of college courses resulting from affiliations with local colleges.

> *What we have tried to do as part of our procedures, is that we make sure that all of our students in 9-12 take a full load ... putting them in a good position for college. We also require 22.5 credits … most of our students graduate with 25-30." (D4)*

In response to a different question, the respondent spoke of an annual curriculum fair designed to gauge student interest in particular electives, which helps to shape offerings.

When referencing credits, the respondent was alluding to graduation requirements dictated by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). According to Part 100.5 of the regulations of the Commissioner of Education of New York State, students are required to have earned 22 units of credit in designated areas to receive a high school diploma. This recently increased from 18.5 units.

District #5 (D5). The respondent stated, *" Very simple policy that the administration will recommend adding or deleting courses that will then be considered by the board of education for approval" (D5).* The respondent went on to describe a varied number of ways that such courses come to fruition, including staff and student interest, and, in some cases, evolving as the result of teacher lead clubs.

District #6 (D6). The participant from District 6 responded:

We don't have any board of education policies per say, what we traditionally have done, or will do is discuss any of those options with the board of education and have the dialogue with the board and make whatever changes or adjustments which need to occur, most of which revolve around enrollment. (D6)

District #7 (D7). The participant from District #7 responded:

I'd say there has been a policy review going on over the past few years. There is no real policy in place; it is left to the discretion of the working relationship between the high school principal and staff in consultation with me. At times, board presentations might be made to the board of the direction the high school is heading. No real policy, but procedure has included conversations between high school principal and staff about needs of the students, and planning around that, and getting some ideas written down on paper... Often times if a teacher wants to propose a course, we have it written up and get it to students to see if there is an interest, and if so we will try to incorporate it into the schedule. That said, the opportunities for adding a lot of things are pretty limited because we are a small school, and existing staff is primarily committed to core courses needed for graduation requirements, so there is not a lot of wiggle room. (D7)

Summary. The following summarizes the responses in regard to the existence of policies and procedures in place relative to course offerings at the high school level.

Not one of the participants could clearly identify a board of education approved policy being utilized for the purpose of adding or deleting courses at the high school level. One superintendent did report that, though there was an existing policy, it was not consistent with current practice in this regard.

Respondents eluded more to procedures, as opposed to policies, that shape course offerings available at the high school. Policies would typically be board of education approved and mandated; the procedures described were really past practices of how course offerings had been determined, offering more discretion in decision making than would policies.

In all but District #3, some manner of annual review was conducted, with course offerings most impacted by student interest and enrollment. In District #3, decisions are driven by district goals and an existing district plan.

Research Question #1

Is there a relationship between a school district's culture, and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

Table 4 reports the impact of culture, or community held values, on a district leader's decisions regarding academic offerings. All seven of the respondents reported expectations on the part of the board of education and community relative to academic opportunities. None of the respondents reported that courses had been added or deleted as the result of community insistence. All seven reported that community influence did impact their decisions regarding academic offerings.

Table 4

Culture and System Leader's Decisions About Academic Offerings

	Yes	No
Expectations of Board of Education/community	7	0
Addition of courses due to insistence	0	7
Deletion of courses due to insistence	0	7
Community influence on district leaders	7	0

Academic expectations of board of education and community members. Participants were asked about expectations on the part of the board of education and community members relative to the academic offerings at the high school. Overwhelmingly the responses suggested that there were indeed expectations from these two groups. Actual responses or iterations of such responses follow:

District #1 (D1). *"Beyond what is mandated there is always an interest in providing above and beyond that if we can" (D1).* The respondent went on to describe the disparity in socio-economic status among district residents, ranging from *"poor to wealthy" (D1).* Also discussed was the recently heightened desire among community members to provide college level, credit-bearing courses as part of the high school program. This is something they have been able to accomplish through their affiliation with local colleges as well as through Distance Learning opportunities. It was suggested this desire had increased more so in the last few years due to the economy.

District #2 (D2). *"Yes, they [the board of education] would like to see courses offered for higher achieving students, that is why they support AP [Advanced Placement] courses" (D2).* Further discussed were opportunities to provide higher-level courses through the local BOCES as

well. In response to a different question, the respondent spoke of the positive influence on the district resulting from the number of colleges in the immediate area.

District #3 (D3). This respondent provided the most emphatic response to this question, and responded in a very animated manner: *"Oh Yeah!" (D3)* The extended response indicated that this expectation resulted from the number of families who have had, and continue to have, the means to provide their children with a private education should they chose to do so, including opportunities that would require students living away from home. One of the first charges received by this superintendent upon joining the district was in the form of a directive from the board: *"Improve the program to the point that those parents who could choose to send their children elsewhere would not" (D3).* The leader developed a district plan that addressed this challenge in a systematic manner, being sure to address facility and staffing issues that might impact this possibility. The same respondent reported an expectation on the part of community members that district programs support long term positive outcomes: *"The community really wants to know where are our kids going – big name schools, and are they completing?" (D3)*

District #4 (D4). *"The board is very much in favor of a rigorous program, and support 100% offering college level courses" (D4).* It was suggested that the community, and parents in particular, were equally supportive: *"Many parents did not have the opportunity to go to college, and they want better for their children" (D4).* Further suggested was the possibility of enhanced support as a result of the financial relief for families, since students could accumulate college credits for a nominal fee. Also noted was a district wide expectation that, upon graduation, all students will go on to some type of post-secondary education. The respondent spoke about a young man that was slated to graduate in the current year who aspired to a job in welding. School personnel worked with the student and his family to find an educational training program

in the field and facilitated a visit for the student and his family. It is anticipated that he will participate in the program after graduation.

District #5 (D5). This district leader stated a board goal, *"to improve the opportunities for students and try to expand course offerings" (D5).* It was suggested that prior offerings may have been impacted by board policy and that those policies had been reviewed and revised to support this goal.

District #6 (D6). This respondent said the following of the board of education:

> *Their entire mission is to provide a quality education for our students – for our students and the school district to have excellence ... they want to make sure everything we do is of quality, they are very committed to it – they have high expectations of our students and staff. (D6)*

District #7 (D7). This leader also spoke of the ability of students to be dually enrolled in high school courses that could earn them college credit through an affiliation with local colleges and stated that this opportunity has become an expectation. Conversely, this participant also discussed the expectation that more traditional agriculture and technology courses be available due to the high degree of agricultural industry still prevalent in the district, *"We still have what old timers think of as shop, including welding and wood working and other agricultural courses" (D7).*

Summary. What was evident in the responses of participants is that expectations do exist among board of education members and community members relative to course offerings at the high school level. There is an expectation of rigorous programming above and beyond what is state mandated. Included in these expectations are opportunities for students to have advanced offerings and, in most cases, opportunities to access and obtain college credit for college level

courses. Cited on more than one occasion was the sense that this not only affords students opportunities unavailable to their parents, but it does so in a manner which is financially beneficial to the families, many of whom are not economically advantaged.

Additionally, there existed an expectation that districts recognize unique needs within the community and that they must continue to provide opportunities that address those needs. Particularly cited among respondents was the continued need for traditional agricultural and technology courses.

Though one respondent suggested that expectations were only for "*higher achieving students," (D2)* the overall reality was contrary to this. In all other cases, it was clear that if expectations and subsequent opportunities were made available, they should be heightened and afforded to all students.

It is pertinent to the findings in this regard to discuss the unique nature of District #3. The expectations cited by this district leader paralleled those given by respondents from other districts, including rigor, increased opportunities, and success beyond high school. It is imperative to discuss the influence described of the property owners/tax payers in this district, as not all of these property owners are able to vote on school budgets since many of the homes located in the district are not the primary residence. These are affluent individuals who own, in some cases, multiple dwellings. It was suggested that these individuals have even higher expectations, given the property tax money they contribute, yet have a limited voice. *"Yet if we can show the impact of our program, glorify it, they are very accepting of what they have to pay in the long run" (D3).*

Cultural influences and decisions relative to adding or deleting courses. Discussion then occurred with participants relative to courses that had been considered, adopted, or deleted

as a result of board or community insistence. In regard to courses being added or considered, respondents reported that, though such decision may have been influenced by input from board of education and community members, in no case did such a change result from insistence or pressure from these groups. Several of these courses were the same as those that were cited as expectations in the earlier section, including Advanced Placement (AP) courses, credit bearing college courses, and agricultural and technical courses.

Two district leaders did cite particular courses that were dictated by existing board of education policies; one was a course in personal finance, and the other was a parenting course. The respondents did not perceive this as insistence. A third district leader reported numerous course additions that resulted from a review of and subsequent revision to board of education policy relative to course requirements. In several districts, it was suggested that course consideration, in terms of adding or deleting, were part of an ongoing dialogue with board of education members and administrators, with community members provided opportunity for input.

Not one of the participants could identify a situation where a course was eliminated or considered for elimination due to community or board of education insistence. Multiple other reasons were cited; among them were funding, staffing, enrollment and student interest. The superintendent in District #2 did speak to particular components of curriculum being opposed by community members and of the district's procedure that was in place to hear such concerns and respond to them.

The respondent from District #3 spoke to a particular situation in the district worth mentioning, though not necessarily in regard to high school offerings. During a routine budget meeting about reduction of non-mandated courses, components of the districts long-standing K-

12 Spanish program were discussed. At the following board of education meeting, a significant number of parents were in attendance. They were delivering a strong message: *"you will not cut Spanish K-6..." (D3).* According to this district leader - *"really leaving us no choice" (D3).*

These findings then suggest that, though addition or deletion of courses may be influenced by or in concert with members of the community and boards of education, in none of these cases have additions or deletions at the high school level resulted from board of education or community insistence. One might observe that this was not the case in the two districts that have courses mandated by board of education policy; however, without being fully aware of the genesis of said policies, such an assertion cannot be made.

Culture of the community and decisions regarding academic opportunities. The culminating question relative to culture, which was the basis of the first research question, asked participants if indeed the culture of a community influenced their decision relative to academic offerings at the high school level. Participants agreed that decisions made about the opportunities offered to students at the high school level were and should be influenced by the culture of the community. Evident in the views expressed by a number of the respondents was the obligation on their part to provide offerings that responded to what students and the community wanted and needed, while simultaneously providing them offerings which provide them experiences beyond their current reality. There was a keen awareness on the part of these leaders about the need to be responsive to the communities they serve and their unique needs. Responses supporting this assertion follow:

District #1 (D1). *"I want to make sure we have course offerings that are interesting to all of our kids, and not just basic courses either. We get interest in high end and college courses, and that does influence what we do" (D1).*

District #6 (D6).

I think you have to keep the culture in mind, try to rise above where it is and take it to the next level ... some our students and community members say that this is a pretty good life here, and that's alright as long as they realize there is more out there and this is what you choose. (D6)

Among this leader's goals was to provide students opportunities that will provide them the knowledge and information they need to make informed choices, *"to decide if they want to live in rural upstate New York, or anywhere else in the world" (D6).*

Concurrent to providing students opportunities to expand their horizons, leaders expressed the need to be cognizant of the perceived needs of the local communities:

District #5 (D5). *"The reason for the agricultural offerings is that we have a lot of people in the community involved in farming ... the southern half of our district is agricultural" (D5).*

Respondents reported a willingness to be open to suggestions from community members:

District #2 (D2). *"We will try to accommodate people, if a request is made, we investigate it" (D2).*

District #4 (D4). *"We always listen to things people have an interest in and look at the feasibility ... staff, parents or students saying 'what if'?" (D4).* The respondent went on to cite several courses that evolved from such situations.

Not necessarily in agreement with some aspects of community influence the following was reported:

District #3 (D3). The respondent reported, shortly after arriving in the district, questioning the financial feasibility of offering a course for one or two students. Despite the

financial implications, the community expectation was made clear; if it were a course a student wanted or needed, it would be provided regardless of enrollment. “The community did not care.”

This sentiment emerges as a consistent one, among the districts in the study. Across each of these districts it became evident that opportunities desired by students, even a single student, influence decisions regarding academic opportunities, despite the financial repercussions.

Research question #1 summary. The data collected relative to research question #1 suggest the following:

1. There were expectations on the part of board of education and community members relative to course offerings at the high school level, and such offerings need to be rigorous and exceed what is state mandated.
2. Offerings should provide students with the opportunity to access higher-level opportunities, including Advanced Placement and college credit bearing courses.
3. Course offerings should align with unique aspects of the communities that the districts serve, with attention being given to the local economy and the skills necessary to perpetuate it.
4. Communities and Boards of education can influence decisions relative to course offerings, but in no case did courses result from insistence on the part of either of these groups, though two districts did have boards of education mandated electives required for graduation.
5. Respondents agreed that decisions made about course offerings were influenced by the culture of the community, and further agreed that this should be the case.
6. At times, decisions were influenced by the leader’s recognition that members of the community, students in particular, needed to be granted opportunities that would

provide them experiences beyond their current reality, and that, when such opportunities have been provided, they have been embraced by and beneficial to the school community.

These findings suggest that there is a strong positive relationship between a school district's culture and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings.

Research Question #2

Is there a relationship between a school district's geographic location and isolation and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

There were four prescribed interview questions that corresponded to this research question, the first of these offered participants the opportunity to describe their geographic location and whether they considered their districts to be geographically isolated.

Table 5 reports district leaders' perceptions of their geographic location and isolation and subsequent impact on academic opportunities. Six of the seven perceived their districts as isolated. Six of seven also indicated courses had been added as a result of isolation. Only two of seven reported deleting courses due to isolation. All seven reported that location does influence decisions relative to academic offerings.

Table 5

Geographic Location & Isolation and System Leader's Decisions About Academic Offerings

	Yes	No
Considered isolated	6	1
Addition of courses due to geography/isolation	6	1
Deletion of courses due to geography/isolation	2	5
Geography/Isolation influence on district leaders	7	0

Geographic location and perception of isolation. Evident in the responses of many of the participants was the pride they had in their communities, in part due to the geographic location, not only in how they responded verbally, but their demeanor, animation and body language when they discussed their communities. A challenge in reporting the responses with accuracy in the detail provided by the respondents was doing so while maintaining confidentiality, given the landmarks included in descriptions. Omission of certain details replaced by bracketed text was used in certain circumstances in response to this challenge.

As necessitated by the purpose of the study and the method used for selection of the sample, each of the seven participating districts exists wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park in New York State and is considered small and rural as defined by the United States Department of Education. Though located in various parts of the Adirondack Park, there were similarities in the responses, given the uniqueness of the landscape of this region of the country. The descriptions provided by respondents follow:

District #1 (D1). The participant described the district as being located in the northern portion of the park, and in the least populated county east of the Mississippi River. The community has no traffic light, no drug store, and since two years ago no suitable grocery store. Until three years ago there was no funeral home in the county. *"We are definitely geographically isolated up here" (D1).*

District #3 (D3). The participant described the district as being located in the High Peaks Region of the park, but in a valley, *"You go up hill in all directions to get down to the valley" (D3).* Provided was a description of the limited number of businesses in town, *"small what you need to survive here kind of businesses" (D3).* Further indicated was that the school district and

the town government were the two largest employer in the community, and that a number of the district's teachers are married to employees of the town highway department.

The respondent contended that they are indeed geographically isolated, and, though that might be a detriment relative to certain things like cell phone coverage, that it has its advantages as well. *"We really are in a little cocoon from a lot of things. A lot of bad stuff doesn't come here – that's OK, keep it out" (D3).*

District #4 (D4). The respondent alluded to the fact that the district borders one of the many lakes of the region as well as other geographic attributes of the area. *"Our terrain is very hilly, we have a tremendous amount of what people around here call upback, back roads, gravel roads where a number of our students live" (D4).* Described were the cold winters and significant lake effect snow. The respondent described the area as beautiful, but also spoke about the disparity in housing, alluding to some *"beautiful homes" (D4)* and homes of students *"without running water" (D4).*

"We are absolutely geographically isolated" (D4). The justification of this statement being that, to experience any real shopping opportunities, community members must travel an hour in one of three directions to have access to purchase items necessary to meet daily needs.

District #5 (D5). The participant described the location as being in the western part of one of the counties located partially in the park; describing it as "*the foothills of the park," (D5)* further describing the district as very rural, having no large population or community center.

"We are most definitely isolated . . . we exist because [a major route] goes through our district, and small populations have built up on roads that connect to it" (D5). It was explained that a number of residents work outside the community, having to travel significant distances to

do so. It was reported that 99% of the students are transported by bus, because, *"there are no sidewalks – no safe way to walk to school" (D5).*

District #6 (D6). *"We are in rural upstate New York, almost as rural as you can get, and I believe we are isolated" (D6).* This contention was supported by talk about being located 25 miles from the county seat and the same distance from what was called *"the nearest hub" (D6),* of which there were two. It was apparent through further discussion that the term *hub* referred to a larger population center where commerce was more prevalent. Subsequently, many of the residents travel to these hubs to work and shop. The latter of which was referred to as, *"a designated weekend task" (D6).* Further discussed was the separation from the major thoroughfares that cut through the park by mountains, making travel difficult.

As a result of their isolation many of the teachers, more at the secondary level, live outside of the district. The advantage cited to this was that, *"carpools do provide an opportunity for professional development" (D6).*

District #7 (D7). This participant described the district as follows: *"In the northernmost part of New York State on the eastern side . . . [near] the Canadian border" (D7).* Also provided was a detailed description of their proximity to some of what might be considered the more recognized and larger cities situated in the park and their location between the Champlain and St. Lawrence Valleys.

The respondent claimed it was more difficult to address the portion of the question in regard to geographic isolation, eventually stating, *"In many ways we are, there is really no good way to get here," (D7)* and chuckled when stating, *"You can't get there from here" (D7).* Also indicated were the difficulties in traveling the terrain. *"The northern part of New York State has been crying for a long time for some better highways" (D7).* Thus, causing difficulty in traveling

between the hubs (to use the term of another respondent) in the region, stating, *"This limits commerce and the economy in general" (D7).*

This participant also alluded to the infrastructure implications that result from the geographic isolation. *"Internet and cable television is still a luxury for many of our homes. Cell service has improved, but is still spotty; construction of cell towers is impacted by the regulations in the park" (D7).*

"Yeah we are pretty rural, and at first glance, pretty isolated" (D7). Reflecting again on the difficulty of the question, the respondent suggested there are things relatively close by that perhaps they do not take full advantage of – for example their proximity to what were called *"top notch colleges" (D7),* the Olympic Training Center in Lake Placid, and Canada. *"So in some respects there are some opportunities we have that other rural high needs districts do not have" (D7).*

Summary. The last part of District #7's response echoed some of the sentiment of the respondent from District #2, which could be viewed as the dissenting opinion. Though similar in terrain and proximity to amenities as the other districts, in response to the question: *Do you consider yourself geographically isolated*, the simple response was, *"no" (D2).* When prompted for an explanation, cited were the four colleges that were in *"close proximity" (D2).* The respondent actually reported the distance and direction to each of these campuses, some of them being the same as those *"top notch colleges" (D7)* cited by another respondent.

The responses of participants when they were asked to describe the geographic location of their districts painted a picture with words of the landscape that epitomizes the Adirondack Park. With one exception, these leaders viewed themselves as isolated as a result of their geographic location.

Themes emerged among the responses. Reported was that proximity to large cities or *hubs* required residents to travel long distances to work and shop. The unique landscape was viewed in some ways as problematic; indicated was difficulty in traveling throughout the region as a result of terrain, geographic barriers, limited roadways and weather.

According to respondents, limited commerce and economic opportunities resulted from their location and isolation. Also cited was limited infrastructure, particularly access to cell coverage and Internet for community members.

The single dissenting participant suggested that their proximity to certain colleges kept the district from being geographically isolated.

Geographic influences and decisions relative to adding or deleting courses. Participants were asked to share their perspectives of the impact of geographic location and isolation on the addition or deletion of courses. The findings suggest that geographic location and/or isolation had impacted course offerings.

Certain courses could be made available to students as a result of the opportunities created by the environment of the region. Cited were Adirondack Biology and other environmental courses that utilized the geographic features unique to the area as part of instruction; one of the respondents spoke to the availability of *living labs.* Respondents spoke to the impact of the geography on components of the physical education programs and the inclusion of instruction in areas such as: hiking, fishing, cross country skiing and bike safety.

Leaders in the two districts that reportedly offered more traditional agricultural and technical courses suggested that, though not directly related to geographic location, these courses were in place as a result of the economic opportunities available to and prevalent among community members as a result of the geography. Similarly, the respondent in District #3

reported a unique offering that resulted from their isolation. The district's planning documents indicated a determination to attract people and businesses and to encourage graduates to remain or return. This has proved to be challenging due to the economic and job opportunities in the region. In response they have developed and implemented a sequence in entrepreneurial studies, *"to empower students – to give them the means to create their own livelihood" (D3).*

In several cases, geography and location were cited as the reason that college course offerings, AP offerings, and Distance Learning course offerings have come to fruition. All but one of the districts offered one or more of these options. The respondent from the lone district stated, *"I see online or distance learning possibilities in the future, or offering credit bearing college courses here; because our isolation, the feasibility of sending kids to these opportunities is limited" (D6).* This echoed the sentiments of another respondent who commented: *"If we do not bring these opportunities to kids, they may not otherwise be able to access them" (D4).* One respondent cited course offerings provided through BOCES to high school students are shaped by location. In particular the New Visions programs in medicine and government, which exist as a result of proximity to a medical center and the county seat.

When asked if geographic location or isolation had resulted in courses being deleted or considered for deletion, none of the respondents could cite examples of courses that had been deleted or considered for deletion due solely to geographic location or isolation. There were course deletions attributed to size, enrollment, and staffing limitations. It was suggested that this might be due in part to location and isolation, which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Some reported that BOCES opportunities have been reduced because of the travel time to the facilities, which result from location and terrain.

The culminating question to the portion of the interview dedicated to the impact of location and isolation asked subjects: *"Does the geographic location impact your decisions relative to course offerings?"* All but one of the respondents answered in the affirmative, though not necessarily for the same reasons. Several spoke about student interest and making course decisions that would enable students to be successful should they choose to stay in their communities beyond high school and college. Others alluded to the need to provide students with college opportunities to spark their interest in that pursuit.

Prevalent in the responses was the inability to transport students to opportunities, be they BOCES or college opportunities, as a result of proximity and travel time; thus, the decisions were made to offer opportunities on campus. Consistent with this was the perception among respondents of the diminished feasibility of sharing staff.

The one superintendent who suggested that location did not impact decisions on course offerings reported it was more influenced by interest and student numbers: *"Numbers certainly make a difference, with a small [average graduating class size]; it is hard to maneuver course offerings" (D2).*

Research question #2 summary. The data collected relative to research question #2 suggest the following:

1. Geographic location and isolation of districts does not directly influence course offerings, yet repercussions such as size and proximity to other opportunities do affect offerings.
2. Opportunities for advanced and college level course work provided on these campuses have resulted from geographic location for dual reasons. Given their location it would not be feasible to transport students to other locations, and it is

viewed as a need (expectation) for students to have access to such opportunities to heighten their awareness of opportunities beyond their current reality as well as to facilitate future success.

3. Where opportunities have been available to utilize the landscape and attributes the geography affords, this has occurred.

A relationship was discovered between a district's geographic location and isolation and the system leader's decisions relative to academic opportunities. The ability to measure this relationship is hampered by the compounded influence of other factors that may be impacted by geographic location and isolation including size of population, staffing limitations, and infrastructure. These factors will be discussed in more detail relative to research question #4.

Research Question #3

Is there a relationship between a school district's available finances and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

Table 6

Finances and System Leader's Decisions About Academic Offerings

	Yes	No
Community suggested deletions	2	5
Addition of courses due to finances	2	5
Deletion of courses due to finances	3	4
Finances influence on district leaders	5	2

Table 6 reports the impact of finances on district leaders' decisions regarding academic opportunities. Three of seven reported courses had been eliminated for financial reasons. Two of seven indicated proposed courses had not been added due to finances. Two of seven also

reported that community members had offered suggestions for elimination of courses. Of the seven participants, five reported that finances influence their decisions regarding academic opportunities.

New York State specific background information. Often mentioned in responses to the interview questions related to this research question were the manner in which education in New York State is funded and recent cuts in state aid. Thus, the following is offered in the way of explanation. In the State of New York, schools are funded in part by state and federal aid and in part by monies generated by taxes levied on local community members. The formula used to calculate the amount of state aid generated considers a number of factors including the wealth of the district. Of particular consequence to several of the districts that participated in the study was their designated level of wealth according to the calculation method employed by NYSED. The calculation is based in part on an average of the values of the homes in the district, so it can be significantly impacted by higher valued waterfront and/or vacation homes that exist in these districts. Subsequently, the tax rate of the year round homeowners, though they may live in modest or substandard housing, is influenced by the perceived wealth of the community as a whole.

Additionally, during the time this research was being conducted, the State of New York imposed reductions on previously allocated school aid, in essence taking away money that had already been promised.

In response to the various interview questions relative to finances, respondents discussed the impact of the manner in which funding is made available to schools in New York State along with recent reductions to funding opportunities provided through state support. Comments included:

District #1 (D1).

Resources for the school district come primarily from the local community, since according to the manner the state education department calculates aid, we are wealthy. We are 85% community funded, with 15% from federal and state aid. This works in our favor now given the reductions in state aid. It does not affect us that much; we can make it up or absorb it. (D1)

District #3 (D3). *"We are not state aid dependent, we are considered wealthy. In the past I thought this was a curse, now I think it's a blessing, because 10% of 10% is not a big deal – the cuts" (D3).*

District #6 (D6). *"We are currently 36% state aided, we do not live and die on it" (D6).* The respondent went on to specify the dollar amount of the recent cuts and the minimal impact.

Financial impact on course offerings: Addition of courses. Participants were asked six prescribed interview questions in this regard. First among them was *"Have high school courses been eliminated for financial reasons alone?"* Though not explicitly stated in each case, it was conveyed that, although it has not necessarily occurred yet, it is inevitable given the current economy and resources available to these districts. As one of the respondents stated, *"They have not at this point, but they will be in the future, no question" (D6).* In further explanation of this response, two themes emerged: the financial implications of staffing and the manner in which districts are funded.

Examples were provided of staff reductions or expected reductions in the near future. Reductions were a direct result of financial situations in which districts currently found themselves. There was a fear conveyed, too, of replacing qualified staff members that leave. One respondent suggested, *"We are reducing staff by three this year, and [are] able to maintain*

program, and will be looking at it again in the future if budgets continue and we do not get additional state aid" (D6).

Driver's Education. One particular course offering issue was raised by four of the seven district leaders and mentioned by a fifth in response to a different question was Driver Education. Along with the financial difficulty in providing this class, respondents conveyed the perceived importance of it and the detriment to the community if it is unable to be offered to students. Particular responses in this regard follow:

District #1 (D1). The respondent reported that the instructor who currently teaches Driver Education is dually certified to also teach technology courses; the combination of the two making it a full time position. Since this individual is nearing retirement, *"Unless we can find someone with similar certification, we will be unable to continue Driver Education, particularly given the other additional expenses associated with the course" (D1).*

District #2 (D2). "Driver Education is always dangling out there. To date the BoE has decided to keep it, but it has been considered for elimination" (D2).

District #6 (D6). "We continue to have Driver Education, which is wonderful for our students and community, but it is something we may not be able to continue in the future" (D6).

District #7 (D7). "In next year's budget we eliminated Driver Education which has been a summer offering, but it was primarily for financial reasons . . . when push came to shove, we really had to eliminate it" (D7).

Distance Learning. One other respondent cited cuts or consideration given to cuts in Distance Learning opportunities:

District #3 (D3). "It got to where it was $100,000 a year to do it, and just six kids were taking a class. We just couldn't do it" (D3).

AP Courses. District leaders suggested that reductions were considered annually during the budget preparation process. The following response reiterates an earlier emergent finding that primary consideration was given to student interest.

District #2 (D2). "AP courses are considered every year for financial reasons, but are really body driven" (D2).

Courses not added for financial reasons. In the same vein, respondents were asked about courses not added for financial reasons. Only two of the seven reported this had occurred.

District #2 (D2). The respondent suggested that the implementation of a program called Project Lead The Way, a comprehensive project-based science, technology, engineering and math offering, could not be continued beyond the first two years. Phases 3 and 4 could not be financially justified particularly with an equipment cost of $50,000.

District #3 (D3). The respondent described a proposed innovative business sequence that did not come to fruition because of the costs associated with it including hiring a job coach, transporting students to job sites, and staff training. It was suggested that the opportunity could be reconsidered in the future.

Financial considerations for course additions. Participants were asked to discuss the financial consideration given to newly proposed courses. The responses were as follows:

District #1 (D1). *"It's all to do with resources: what staff do you need, what technology do you need to offer these courses, text books, supplies, materials … Is there someone on staff who can teach it? Do we have the faculty?" (D1)*

District #2 (D2). *"We look at if we have the faculty to teach it and students who would access it, then if it would be the best use of the faculty based on the number of students" (D2).* This individual also stated:

We are pretty accommodating, if we have a couple of kids that have an interest and we have the appropriate staff, we find some way to give the opportunity to kids . . . more important than finances is the lack of kids to justify. (D2)

District #3 (D3). *"We look at staffing for sure, and equipment costs. What does it do to the master schedule if we add one more piece to it, and what is the value?" (D3)*

District #5 (D5). *"What would it cost and how many students would participate?" (D5)*

District #6 (D6). *"How can we offer something new within our existing program – and without taking away?" (D6)* This district leader went on to speak of the need to be flexible and creative in scheduling, particularly citing the addition of a drama course outside of the school day and offering electives on a rotation.

District #7 (D7). *"Anything we want to add has to be paid for. We haven't added anything in several years because we would not be able to add staff financially" (D7).*

Considerations in addition to finances. In cases when participants had suggested courses had been added or deleted for financial reasons in conjunction with other reasons, they were asked to describe these cumulative influences. Responses were as follows:

District #2 (D2). The respondent suggested that decisions were really student enrollment driven, as opposed to financially driven, stating, *"More important for us than finances is lack of students to justify" (D2).* Also cited by this respondent were the equipment purchases that would be required to operate programs and having or being able to find appropriately certified staff.

District #3 (D3). The respondent cited only, *"lack of certified staff" (D3).*

District #4 (D4). Both declining student enrollment and appropriate staffing were indicated. The respondent suggested that having such staff has been feasible due to the districts fortune in having several multiply certified teachers.

District #5 (D5). A history of student participation was cited along with the fact that courses may not be deleted, but might not be offered in a given year if enrollment is not adequate.

District #6 (D6). The response was a single word, *"enrollment" (D6).*

Summary. The three themes of staffing and enrollment coupled with finances clearly emerged as impacting course offerings.

Financially driven suggestions regarding course offerings. Participants were asked if, as a result of the current economic climate, community members and/or individuals associated with the district had suggested courses be eliminated at the high school, and, if so, what people and what courses.

District #1 (D1). The respondent spoke of ongoing conversations with the board of education relative to what would need to occur if budget votes were unsuccessful and particular areas that would need to be considered for reduction. Further reported was that community members were not making such suggestions.

District #2 (D2). *"People have suggested cutting administrators, not programs" (D2).* Also suggested was that community members had suggested sports programs could be reduced.

District #3 (D3). *"Not parents, not at all, and not really my elderly folks in town. They might allude to when they were kids, but they don't stand in the way" (D3).* The respondent did speak of the influence of what were termed *"second homeowners" (D3)* in the district over their properties caretakers – community members who work for them, causing these individuals to raise questions relative to spending on offerings. *"Caretakers raise issues, but when explained to them, they understand" (D3).*

District #4 (D4).

I haven't heard in the past few years anyone say, don't offer this or that. There might be a small handful of people who say high school kids don't need college courses ... but really just a handful ...[I] don't get that from staff or a majority of people. (D4)

District #5 (D5). This district leader discussed the positive support of the community measured by success of budget votes in recent history, but declining enrollment and an application for merger study with a neighboring district were also discussed. Relative to community comments or suggestions, the following was stated: *"I have only heard positive things from the community – though I know there are negative opinions" (D5).*

District #6 (D6). The respondent stated that community members, *"always offer me suggestions about how to spend their tax dollars" (D6).* Particularly cited were older taxpayers without children in the school system that raised concerns about enrollments and class sizes being lower than they have been in the past. Further suggested was that the opinions expressed resulted from frustrations over ever increasing taxes. *"The majority of the community love our school, [we have] done great things, we are a community center: we open our building for community movies, plays, a lot of different things, so it's not dissatisfaction with school, but with paying more money" (D6).*

District #7 (D7). *"Given the financial times we are in, I am proud to say that I have not gotten any strong opinions from anyone on cutting classes" (D7).* Evident in the manner of the response was the respondent's sense that this resulted from community support of opportunities provided.

Influence of financial decisions on course offerings. The culminating question relative to financial impact asked if district leader's decisions were impacted by financial considerations.

Strong influence. Those who reported it was an influencing factor stated the following:

District #1 (D1). "... the money always drives what we do" (D1).

District #2 (D2). "Yes . . . I would like to implement more college courses, but don't think it is going to happen. At this point I feel like I am in survival mode to just keep the school going" (D2).

District #7 (D7). "I think finances dictate everything, so from that perspective yes" (D7). Discussed was the recent growth of wind farm development in the area, from which the district initially anticipated financial gains. Instead of being able to offer additional offerings as a result of the anticipated revenue, that money is simply allowing them to continue as they have in the past.

Slight influence. There were others who less vehemently defended the financial impact on decision making:

District #1 (D1). "It hasn't been so far, but probably will be in the future" (D1).

District #5 (D5). "Not a major factor, but always has to be in the back of your mind . . . finances is a factor that is outlying, but not the major factor" (D5).

No influence. Only one respondent suggested that finances did not impact decision making.

District #3 (D3). *"We try not to let it, and actually don't think it has here" (D3).* The respondent went on to speak of the success of the existing educational foundation and that organizations ability to financially provide for opportunities.

Research question #3 summary. The data collected relative to research question #3 suggest the following:

1. There were significant concerns about financing opportunities in the future, given the manner in which wealth, and subsequent state aid, was generated, particularly if aid continued to be decreased.
2. Finances had some influence on district leader's decisions regarding course offerings, but only a small number of courses were actually eliminated for financial reasons alone.
3. The possibility existed that Driver Education could be a casualty in the near future for financial reasons alone, and, for one district, this has occurred.
4. Along with financial considerations, decisions regarding courses were also impacted by student enrollment and certification of staff.
5. Despite current economic conditions, communities were supportive of opportunities provided to students. Though there is frustration among community members with taxation as a means of financing opportunities, there has been not been opposition to expenditures relative to course offerings.

Findings suggested that the relationship between available finances and course offerings has been minimal, but that there is a growing concern, given the current economic climate in New York State and the nation coupled with existing policies, that this relationship would grow. Further, findings suggested that finances alone rarely impact offerings, but, rather, it is the symbiotic relationship of finances coupled with other factors.

Research Question #4

Is there a relationship between a school district's capacity and a district leader's decisions regarding academic opportunities?

Given the various pieces that define capacity (physical plant, technology and staffing) and the nature of the interview questions used to address this particular research question, this section will be organized differently. There were five interview questions, the first three relative to physical plant, including the ramifications of any proposed or realized building projects and/or building closures. The remaining two questions addressed technology and staffing.

Table 7 reports responses regarding building projects and/or closures and their impact on academic opportunities. All seven participants reported recent building and/or renovation projects, and six of the seven suggested these projects had impacted academic opportunities. Only one of the respondents reported a closure that did not impact offerings.

Table 7

Academic Impact of Building/Renovation Projects and Closures

	Yes	No	N/A
Recent building projects	7	0	0
Academic impact of recent building projects	6	1	0
Recent closures	1	6	0
Academic impact of closures	0	1	6

Table 8

Capacity and System Leader's Decisions About Academic Offerings

	Yes	No
Physical plant limitations	4	3
Technology limitations	3	4
Staffing limitations	6	1

Table 8 indicates the impact of the components of capacity on academic opportunities. Four of the seven respondents reported physical plant limitations had impacted academic opportunities. Three of the seven reported impacts due to technology limitations, and six of the seven suggested staffing limitations had impacted academic opportunities.

Impact of physical plant limitations on academic offerings. Relative to the physical plant, respondents were asked if there had been recent proposed, approved, and/or completed building renovation projects. The same was asked regarding closures. In both cases they were asked if such events had impacted programming at the high school level. Additionally, they were asked if the building in its current state had physical plant limitations that limited academic opportunities at the high school level.

Building renovation projects. Each district leader reported one or more building propositions, which had been brought to voters, with the oldest dating back ten years and the newest just in the past few months. The nature and scope of these projects varied: some provided for additional space, others addressed infrastructure needs, and one provided for total reconstruction of the school building at a new site. In some cases the bond vote passed as introduced while, in others, subsequent proposals with adjustments were needed in order to gain taxpayer support. In all cases, some iteration of the initially proposed project passed.

Given the disparity of these projects and the manner in which passage was achieved, a description of the project or projects in each of the districts will follow along with the perception from the perspective of the respective district leader, of the impact of the project on academic opportunities:

District #1 (D1). The respondent reported that the board of education had conducted a comprehensive study three years ago that identified nearly $10 million worth of work to be done

on the building. Their hope was to phase in this work. The initial project proposed was in the amount of close to $3 million and was not supported by the voters. *"A review of the reasons for the failure pointed to economic times" (D1).* There were items in the proposed project that the board of education felt needed to be done despite the lack of support; particularly the need to install a generator due to frequently experienced power outages and improvement of handicapped accessibility to meet regulation. A revised project went to the voters this past October in an amount just over $1 million, which included the generator and items to ensure compliance under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). *"No new science labs or space, strictly compliance and the generator" (D1).* The referendum passed.

When asked of the impact of the proposed project on academic opportunities, the respondent stated the lack of science labs or space was *"unfortunate" (D1).* Additionally, since high school courses occur on upper floors of the building, any accessibility issues had been addressed.

District #2 (D2). A district wide committee was established 12 years ago to look at building needs, inclusive of the addition of a gymnasium and library. At the same time, the board of education looked at the possibility of merging with a nearby district. A straw vote of the public in both communities suggested that the communities were greatly opposed to such a consideration. Since merger was no longer a viable option, a $5.5 million project that would include renovation only and no new space was put before the voters. It was voted down significantly.

In 2002 another stakeholder group was formed and proposed a project of over $13 million, including a gymnasium, which passed. The respondent suggested this was a *"groundswell of support from those who feared merger" (D2).*

When asked if the project had impacted academic opportunities the response was, *"Yes, we have a better facility and upgrades to technology and better infrastructure. We have been able to work on labs and purchase computers. It has certainly helped with the ability to integrate technology into instruction" (D2).*

District #3 (D3). "We had one renovation project twelve years ago, in the amount [nearly $6] million that included a building project, which would have been only [about 20%], state aid able" (D3). Currently, they are completing *"an energy performance contract" (D3)* which includes lighting and windows but is being funded through the general operating budget.

When asked if the project had impacted academic opportunities, the participant responded: *"Absolutely, we now have two fully equipped science labs ... expanded space means more high school art offerings, music and phys ed. It has made a huge difference – has enabled elementary and secondary classrooms to be separated" (D3).*

District #4 (D4). The respondent reported a [nearly $2] million project last year that involved no space, only infrastructure, and included roofs, bleacher upgrades, floors and lighting, which was supported by the community. It was suggested it has had neither a positive or negative impact on academic offerings, *"It has not changed anything as far as course offerings" (D4).*

District #5 (D5). The respondent reported that the district had just completed a $6.5 million project that was dedicated primarily to infrastructure and included an addition to the bus garage. *"The initial proposal which included a new library was voted down" (D5).* The revised project which eliminated the library but increased technology capability passed overwhelmingly, despite the fact that the dollar amount was comparable. Further explanation suggested concerns over declining enrollment were likely a factor of the defeat, as was the addition of space. *"They*

recognize like a house, you need to keep the buildings maintained, but space we might have difficulty maintaining down the road" (D5). It had been hoped by the respondent that the absence of a public library would have garnered support for the proposed space, as would the conversion of the existing library into fitness center, thus making the facility, *"A center for students and community families" (D5).*

The respondent felt strongly that the project impacted high school offerings: *"Oh Yeah! Not necessarily new courses - but improved" (D5).* Further explanation pointed to significant improvements in state assessment performance over the past two years, suggesting that it resulted from the ability to better integrate technology into instruction due to the infrastructure and technological improvements that resulted from the project: *"kids are excited [about learning] as are teachers" (D5).*

District #6 (D6). In this district, a recent project resulted in the construction of a new building, *"We have a new building, a beautiful building that is only ten years old, we moved in 2001. For the most part it's been wonderful" (D6).* Also reported on was a more recent project, *"Three years ago we took advantage of the opportunity to do a small EXCEL project which upgraded technology – projectors and cameras" (D6).* This was quarter of a million dollar project at no cost to taxpayers.

When asked if academic opportunities had been impacted by either of these projects, the initial response was, *"I'm not sure" (D6).* Further elaboration revealed that more than programming, it had impacted the perception among the community of education:

> *I think it had a huge impact on the impression of education for our students, as well as attracting new staff. Applicants notice creature comforts and resources available ... The*

science labs are wonderful; the building is well designed to accommodate needs, yet meet the diversity of a K-12 program. (D6)

District #7 (D7). The respondent's pride in the facility was evident in the response. *"Our facility is something we are very proud of. Though the original building is [over 50] years old, it is hard to tell the [over 50] year old part from the 10 year old part" (D7).*

The respondent spoke of a recent $10 million building project, which was completed ten years ago as a "*major project" (D7).* The scope included the addition of a four room science suite, relocation of the library to the first floor to facilitate access by the public, and the addition of a fitness room and some elementary classrooms. Also shared was information about a more recent project, *"a few years back" (D7),* in the amount of $150,000 to update computer servers and communication throughout the building. It was indicated that these projects were overwhelmingly successful and supported by the community, and that they were currently working on another project that included roofs, lighting, and infrastructure, *"just fixing things up" (D7).*

The superintendent suggested that the science program is stronger as a result of the upgrades that resulted from these projects but also indicated that the program was successful due to competent staff, "*If you put a good teacher in a lousy room, they are still going to be a good teacher ... so I can't really say anything has been effected, but has been enhanced" (D7).*

Building closures. There had been a building closure in only one of the districts being studied. This closure resulted due to the construction of a new facility. Though particular impacts on program opportunities were not indicated, it was suggested, "*the previous building was not conducive to teaching" (D6).* In response to a previous question, the same respondents

comments included: *"the previous school was located down town, one mile away, built in the 1920's, literally falling apart and in need of much repair" (D6).*

Physical plant limitations. There was much consistency apparent in responses of various participants when asked if the existing physical plant impacted academic opportunities.

District #1 (D1). The superintendent reiterated disappointment in the lack of adequate science rooms and the instructional limitations that result, though the comment was made, *"but we have our outdoors available, our environmental science class goes to local ponds and rivers, it's nice to have"(D1).*

District #2 (D2). The superintendent suggested that academic opportunities were adversely impacted by physical plant limitations, stating, *"our classrooms are okay, because of the most recent project, but there are still some limits in our science labs" (D2).* The participant went on to describe how the age of the building adversely affected the ability to incorporate technology into instruction, particularly the limited number of electrical outlets in classrooms. *"Electrical availability is still problematic, and does not lend itself to how we teach today" (D2).*

Additionally the respondent talked about the lack of a large group instructional space being problematic, but conceded, *"We make do with the cafeteria, though it is not ideal" (D2).*

District #3 (D3). The only opportunities discussed by this respondent were vocational offerings, particularly the *"old tech wood shop" (D3),* with the suggestion being that it could be more current.

District #4 (D4). The respondent did not believe that the physical plant limited academic opportunities. Accessibility was discussed: *"handicapped accessibility is okay" (D4).* Some desires were voiced, *"We would love to have more as far as science labs, but we make do" (D4).*

District #5 (D5). The participant suggested that having only one gymnasium limited physical fitness activities available to students. Also cited was the positive impact of science labs and an added technology wing completed as part of the most recent building project.

District #6 (D6). This superintendent leads a district that is housed in a ten-year-old *"new" (D6)* facility that resulted from a recent building project, and, as such, indicated that the current physical plant did not adversely impact educational opportunities. *"The building is new and was well designed to meet our needs" (D6).*

District #7 (D7). This respondent reported that physical plant limitations that have surfaced were addressed through numerous building and/or renovation projects that have occurred in recent history.

Summary of physical plant limitations. Each of the participating districts reported some level of building and/or renovation project in recent history. Four of the seven respondents reported that said projects had positively impacted program offerings, not necessarily by providing additional opportunities, but by enhancing those in existence. Two of the remaining leaders suggested that the limited scope of projects had no real influence on program opportunities. One of these suggesting that having no increased space or improved science labs was unfortunate. Ironically, the superintendent of the district that conducted the project that resulted in a new facility reported that opportunities were not improved as a result. This leader did suggest, though, that the perception of education in the community had been enhanced.

Often noted relative to physical plant limitations on offerings were science labs. In some cases, they were cited as inadequate, while those that had improved labs as a result of recent projects cited the positive impact.

Impact of technology on academic offerings. When asked if technology limitations impacted academic opportunities, participants responded as follows:

District #1 (D1). The superintendent reported that the district was fortunate in this regard, citing a T3 line and distance learning to support the claim. Additionally indicated was the support of the community and board of education for technology related expenses. *"Technology is not an issue. The Board is always supportive of investments that way. Certainly, not all kids have laptops, but we are fortunate that way" (D1).*

District #2 (D2). The respondent suggested that the dense walls in the building do interfere with wireless connectivity but also cited the benefits of technology: *". . . on the positive side, technology has provided us many opportunities, like electronic microscopes and digital cameras" (D2).* The same participant, when responding to a different question, spoke of a district wide committee currently exploring replacing textbooks with laptops and making buses wireless.

District #3 (D3). The respondent suggested that, until recently, the availability of technology had been problematic, but that now that it is available as a result of the educational foundation, both at home and school, it does not remain an issue: *"We did not have broad band until the last couple of years until a foundation that works with the school said we need broad band for every kid, and we are going to figure out how to get it done, and now they have done it" (D3).* Cell coverage was cited as still lacking.

District #4 (D4). The participant suggested Distance Learning as something that had been considered, but that it was not pursued due to other opportunities that were available. Thus, it was not considered a limitation. Also alluded to was the district's 5 year technology plan, which the respondent felt addressed any technology needs. Available technology in the building

was cited, and included Smart Boards and computer labs. Also mentioned was the district's collaboration with NERIC, including that it was a positive and beneficial relationship relative to meeting the districts technology needs.

District #5 (D5). No limitations were expressed on the part of this respondent. It was suggested that adequate technology was a district goal and, as such, had been addressed through building projects: *"We have actually been pretty good about trying to keep up with the technology. Part of our last project was to get thirty classrooms with Smart Board technology. We have made it a priority through district goals to maintain technology" (D5).*

District #6 (D6). Consistent with previous responses provided by this participant, it was reported that technology did not hamper opportunities given the newness of the building, along with the contributions of a local cable company to make the building, as the respondent stated *"accessible" (D6).* It was indicated that there were times that the connection was slow, but not to the point it interfered with opportunities and that what is in place would support potential Distance Learning opportunities. One concern mentioned was that not all students have Internet access at home or have only limited (dial up) access. In response, the school library remains open to students beyond the instructional day twice a week and provides transportation.

District #7 (D7). *"We are catching up, BOCES has set up fiber optic connections for us, and there are now desk tops in each classroom" (D7).* Funding to support this was reported to be through BOCES purchasing and building projects. The participant reported that, though Smart Technology is not currently in place, the district is considering using federal funding available in the coming year to address this. Also alluded to was a Distance Learning Lab included in a previous building project that did not come to fruition as a result of cost over runs. The respondent insinuated this impacted opportunities: *"We would be a good school for that*

because of our small size and lack of robust course offerings, but we have been unable to make it happen" (D7).

Summary of technology limitations. Participating district leaders did not view the available technology as a limitation to academic offerings; in fact, it was seen as an advantage, encouraging opportunities or enhancements to opportunities. It was suggested though, that this was a recent phenomenon. The technology that existed and was utilized varied among the districts studied. All participants were pleased with the opportunities afforded by currently available technology, though the desire to stay current with emerging technology was conveyed. A concern that was raised by two of the respondents was Internet accessibility of students and parents from home.

Impact of staffing on academic offerings. When asked about staffing, the responses of participants suggested that staffing was problematic for small rural Adirondack schools, particularly at the secondary level where certifications can limit what staff is qualified to teach. Having, finding, and keeping dually or multiply certified staff provided these districts with much needed flexibility. When unable to find or secure such individuals, student opportunities may be impacted.

District #1 (D1). Consistent with the responses of others, this respondent spoke about the difficulty in providing physics as a result of staffing, *"In the past we had a multiply certified science teacher, and were unable to find such to replace, so we can no longer offer physics, which I see as a real problem" (D1).*

In New York State, teacher certification is granted by subject area and grade level. Most certifications at the secondary level are granted under a broad heading, such as English, mathematics, and social studies. As such, an individual may be certified in one of the

aforementioned areas and be qualified to teach any number of courses in that particular subject area. For example, a teacher certified in mathematics could teach algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, or any other secondary mathematics course.

Certifications in sciences at the secondary level are not granted in such an all-encompassing manner. There are particular criteria and certifications required for particular branches of science including biology, chemistry, earth science and physics. For a teacher to be qualified to teach, for example, a physics course, they would require certification in physics specifically. It is possible to hold multiple certifications, though the requirements for each differ, and there is a cost associated with securing each.

District #2 (D2). In response to earlier questions, this particular participant had suggested the district was not isolated, yet when asked about staffing, the participant suggested that it was difficult to attract staff due to the region, coupled with declining enrollment, *"Applicants sense the possibility of closure or merger" (D2).* Further suggested was that if state funding continued to decline staffing would suffer: *"If we continue to lose state aid, we will lose more staffing, hampering the flexibility of staff who will be stretched thinner" (D2).* Also repeated was an earlier statement that the community had been vocal about reducing administrators.

District #3 (D3). This respondent spoke passionately about the necessity of applicants to hold more than one certification and the flexibility that this affords the district. *"Most definitely, for anyone to be hired here, they need to have multiple certifications to afford me flexibility. That's really a survival thing on my part" (D3).* Also suggested was the possibility of hiring part time teachers and the difficulty in finding individuals seeking less than full time employment. The participant indicated having had much luck finding unique combinations of certifications,

one particular example shared was a dually certified Biology/Special Education teacher. *"Hot Damn its good!" (D3).*

District #4 (D4). This was the only respondent who suggested that staffing was not a limitation, *"We have always had someone to teach what we have wanted" (D4).*

District #5 (D5). The respondent echoed the sentiments of others relative to certification being problematic, *"We had a few issues with certification, we have a science teacher doing math AIS ... we have a few dually certified folks, the rest just fall in the right spot" (D5).* Further indicated was that opportunities for students were impacted by the number of staff members available and, as such, trying to be more efficient in using teaching staff to teach and not perform other duties, essentially outsourcing some of these duties: *"We want teachers teaching classes, we farm out our ISS [in school suspension] students to BOCES, it is cost effective and better for our overall program" (D5).*

District #6 (D6). Consistent with others, this respondent cited certification as problematic, particularly in science, *"Yes, physics – we can't always support or afford specific isolated classes. As much as we can we try to hire dually certified staff who can be as flexible as possible" (D6).*

District #7 (D7). The participant, too, cited similar concerns, attributing them to geographic location and size, suggesting that to offer much more than what is mandated for an advanced Regents diploma would not be economically feasible,

> *Our geographic location is a hindrance for things like music teachers . . .science is problematic due to certification requirements, we are currently uncertified in physics . . .we are working on variance through BOCES - on NCLB he shows up as not HQ [highly qualified] – that's tough. (D7)*

Summary of staffing limitations. Cited often as impacting decisions regarding opportunities, was having appropriately certified staff. Mentioned particularly was science, and physics specifically. The ability to secure dually or multiply certified individuals was seen as helpful, and in some cases necessary. Though mentioned specifically by only one respondent, there was a sense that luck played a role in having the appropriately certified and qualified individuals to provide the necessary and desired offerings.

Research question #4 summary. Responses to interview questions relative to research question #4 suggested that a relationship exists between a school district's capacity and a district leader's decisions about academic offerings:

1. Physical plant and structure can either promote or hamper opportunities. Several examples were cited.
2. Physical plant limitations were in some cases rectified, or will be in the near term, as the result of building and renovation projects.
3. There were no true instances where physical plant kept courses from being offered. *"We make do with what we have,"* was a common statement suggesting that, though not ideal, existing physical plant was adequate.
4. Technology seemed to be far less of a problem than it was just a few years ago and provided students with increased opportunities. It was anticipated that opportunities would continue to expand. Among the remaining limitations were Internet accessibility for students from home and financing continued opportunities and improvements.

5. The ability to find and keep staff necessary to implement opportunities was an ongoing challenge for these small rural Adirondack districts. Their ability to do so was improved when they found dually or multiply certified staff.

Three particular aspects of capacity were studied (physical plant, technology and staffing), with participants being asked a series of questions to determine the impact of each on academic offerings at the high school level. The influences of these factors did not necessarily exist in isolation from one another, but often in concert. A relationship was found to exist between capacity and a district leader's decisions about academic offerings. In some cases the individual components of capacity studied impacted decisions, though in many cases it was the cumulative effects that had the greatest impact.

Closing Interview Question

Having spent ample time asking about and discussing with participants four potential factors influencing decisions about academic offerings, the concluding question asked participants to speak about the primary factors influencing their consideration of such opportunities. The responses clearly indicated that student interest and value to students were a high priority when making decisions about course offerings; other primary factors influencing such decisions were staffing and cost. Table 9 summarizes these responses.

Table 9

Rank Order of Factors Influencing System Leader's Decisions About Academic Offerings

	1st Priority	2nd Priority	3rd Priority
Staffing	2	2	0
Students and student interests	5	2	0
Finances	0	0	2

District #1 (D1). *"Number one is what will help students in their life . . . the courses we offer – I want to make sure are useful to them" D1.* When elaborating the respondent spoke specifically of college credit bearing courses that would not only benefit students, but their families financially, *"If we can offer a course here and the family only has to pay $50 for a three credit course, it's wonderful we can offer that opportunity" (D1).* The second influencing factor cited was having the right staff to teach the course and, if such is the case, that course can be offered to other schools using Distance Learning. *"Critical to that is having the right teacher" (D1).*

District #2 (D2). Student interest was the one determining factor: *"If I have the students, I will find a way to make sure programs are offered, so far I have been able to do that" (D2).*

District #3 (D3). The respondent suggested that staffing expertise was the primary influencing factor followed by, or perhaps in conjunction with, student interest. *"I can offer a great program, if they [students] don't care, it doesn't matter" (D3).*

District #4 (D4). With no explanation or elaboration: *"Staffing, student interest, finances" (D4).*

District #5 (D5). *"First is student interest, if students are interested in a course, we try to make it happen" (D5).* Several examples were given of courses that evolved from student interest cultivated by teacher run clubs. *"Finances are a factor, but not a main factor. Most classes are not that expensive if you have staff available and the capacity" (D5).*

District #6 (D6). *"Student interest is absolutely the most important thing for me" (D6).* Further suggested was the importance of providing students opportunities to explore what is available to them. *"It's about exposure, giving students as many opportunities as we can. How*

do we let them know that there is more beyond rural upstate New York and give them the skills and experience they need to make informed choices?" (D6)

District #7 (D7). The respondent provided a more emotional response based on personal experience and spoke of the lived experience of being raised in a small rural area in a different yet similar region of New York State and having been raised by parents who had not completed high school. He stated, *"[I] myself thought college was unattainable until a series of things happened" (D7).* As such, providing students opportunities to experience college level course work is paramount to this leader. Alluding to college level credit bearing courses offered to students, it was suggested that this gave students the opportunity to determine if college was feasible for them, "*This allows them to give it a try" (D7).*

Also important to this respondent was providing students other opportunities, *"I want to provide enough variety that offers each kid the opportunity to find out who they are" (D7).* Again speaking to his personal experience:

> *I am also from a hard core blue collar background and know college is not the only way. I want every student to find out what they are good at ... our coursework should offer enough for students to find what there element is and meet their needs. (D7)*

A relationship exists between the, in some cases isolated and in others cumulative, effects of the factors studied and a district leader's decisions regarding academic opportunities.

Emergent Interview Question #24

How many students graduate annually?

In discussing course offerings in the context of the various factors being studied, thus across the research questions being studied, student enrollment was often raised, in particular, the number of students required to offer a particular course. The typical graduating class size in the

participating districts ranged from 14 to 60. In most cases, there were enough students to justify only a single section of even the mandated courses. This question was not included in the initial interview script. It emerged during the initial interview. Subsequent participants were asked to discuss average graduating class size and the minimum enrollment requirements necessary to support a course offering. Suggested and/or reported were the following:

District #1 (D1). When discussing policies or procedures in place in the district for considering academic offerings, the respondent suggested that a minimum of three students would be required to justify a course. Also reported was an average graduating class size of 14. Though a particular example was not provided, it was alluded to that the minimum of three could, in the right circumstances, be reduced.

District #2 (D2). *"We offer classes with as few as three students and have done so with as few as two" (D2).* This statement was made during a discussion of the conscious efforts on the part of the Board of education to provide Advanced Placement courses, even if student numbers were low. This leader reported an average graduating class size of approximately 25. When responding relative to the financial impact of decisions, the same leader stated, "*If a couple of kids have interest and we have the appropriate staff, we find some way to give opportunities to students" (D2).*

District #3 (D3).

> *We have classes with three or four kids, and that's ok. There is no number restriction on any of our courses. I don't have to have an enrollment figure. If I did I probably wouldn't have a whole lot of things. Even if there are two kids who want AP Calc[ulus], we teach AP Calc[ulus] if I have the teacher, it's great for the kid and the teacher. (D3)*

District #4 (D4). When the respondent was discussing how class offerings were determined, it was indicated that offerings beyond what were mandated were determined, in large part, as a result of student interest and choices indicated by students during an annually held curriculum fair. When asked about the smallest enrollment accepted for a class to run, it was stated, *"Usually four or five. We have had a class of two and may have had a three" (D4).* Further indicated was that classes of such low enrollments were allowed to enable students to complete sequences.

District #5 (D5). The respondent reported that average graduating class sizes averaged between 25 and 35 students and that typically courses were not carried without an enrollment of eight to ten, though sometimes as low as five with historical enrollments as low as two.

District #6 (D6). Average graduating class sizes of 22 were reported by this respondent, with a low of 16 and a high of 32, and the respondent stated:

> *The smallest class we have had is [an enrollment of] one – not typical, but three to six is not out of the ordinary. The 'one' was a calculus class, the student had been accelerated, and a few other students had left. I don't advertise that, but we wanted to do what was in the best interest of the student. (D6)*

Further suggested was the willingness and flexibility on the part of staff members, which made such accommodations possible.

District #7 (D7). Average graduating class sizes were reported as averaging between 38 and 60 but were reported to be declining annually. The respondent spoke specifically to low enrollment in upper level foreign language courses, with enrollments as low as two. Further reported was that there was no minimum requirement to offer a course. *"We have had classes with two or three students in them before" (D7).*

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that the four influencing factors under study: culture, geography and isolation, finances, and capacity do influence district leaders' decisions regarding academic opportunities at the high school level in small rural school districts in the Adirondack Park in New York State. Further discovered was that the influences of these factors do not occur in isolation, but, instead, it was their combined influences that impact decision making about academic opportunities.

Chief among the findings was the commitment and subsequent influences of the communities associated with these districts. District leaders and the communities at large valued education and, as such, were very supportive of opportunities. District leaders were cognizant of the needs and desires of the communities they serve.

Also revealed were the challenges faced by these districts and communities to offer opportunities, primarily due to the ability to secure adequate staff opportunities in the form of appropriately certified teachers. Certification requirements in science, in particular, were a significant obstacle to affording students opportunities. Reportedly, and to a lesser degree, funding presented challenges. It was found that participants were able to *make do;* yet there was growing concern that this would not be able to continue given the current economic climate. Courses viewed as valuable to the community, including Driver Education in particular, were in danger of being eliminated as a result of the availability of qualified teaching staff coupled with the financial obligation required to support such offerings.

Opportunities to incorporate and utilize technology as a means to support academic offerings have recently become more available and prevalent within rural and geographically

isolated districts. It was anticipated that these opportunities would continue to expand. Some apprehension existed about the ability to continue to finance such opportunities.

The findings of this study will be discussed in further detail and in relation to the existing literature in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Schools throughout the country struggle to provide comprehensive academic opportunities for students at the high school level given the scarcity of various resources. In particular areas and regions, this struggle is compounded by factors that are unique to the particular region. Small rural schools located in the Adirondack Park in New York State share many of the burdens of rural districts throughout the country. However, the unique geographic nature of the terrain occupied by these districts, coupled with scarcity of resources, has them facing challenges that are equally unique.

Purpose and Research Questions

It was the intent of this research to study four factors and their influence on school district leader's decisions regarding the academic opportunities available to high school students in small rural Adirondack school districts. The factors researched were culture, geographic location and isolation, finances, and capacity. For the purposes of this study, capacity included physical plan, technology, and staffing. The research questions were as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between a school district's culture and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
2. Is there a relationship between a school district's geographic location and isolation and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
3. Is there a relationship between a school district's available finances and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?
4. Is there a relationship between a school district's capacity (physical plant, technology, and staffing) and a system leader's decisions about academic offerings?

Nature and Analysis of Data

Qualitative phenomenological research was deemed most appropriate to conduct this research. Non-probabilistic sample selection was utilized since certain attributes were required of participants given the nature of the research. The initial criterion for selecting participants was to identify superintendents of school districts that included a high school and were located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park. There were 53 such schools. This sample was further refined using theoretical sampling. The quality of being a superintendent of an Adirondack school district had obvious relevance to the purpose of the study. Refinement of the sample was accomplished by further identifying Adirondack districts that would be considered small and rural utilizing the same definition as the United States Department of Education, of which there are 22. Of these 22 districts, seven agreed to participate in the study.

Data was collected through on-sight interviews with district leaders in each of the seven participating districts, and a review of documents was also conducted. The semi-structured interview script was piloted and refined with the assistance of a retired Adirondack Park superintendent. Participants were provided the script in advance of scheduled interviews. Interviews were conducted during a two-week period. Conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher into a word-processed document. The one exception to this was in the case of equipment failure, and, in said case, the responses were hand written by the interviewer and then transcribed into a word-processed document.

The researcher then analyzed the transcribed documents and supporting documentation was used to confirm information reported. Copies of the transcribed interviews were sent to participants to ensure accuracy. The analysis of the transcriptions and documentation yielded findings relative to the purpose of the study and the particular research questions.

Major Findings

A relationship was found to exist between each of the four factors (culture, geographic location and isolation, available finances and capacity) and a district leader's decisions about academic offerings. A precise description of the relationship of each of these factors independently was problematic given the inextricable link that exists among them. The relationship that exists was more of a cumulative and overlapping one.

Of great concern to district leaders relative to available resources, was the nature in which small rural school districts in the Adirondack Park were funded and financed, particularly in regard to state aid based on calculated wealth of these districts. Also of concern was the ability to secure and maintain certified staff given the requirements for certification, particularly in the sciences. Compounding this concern were the implications of not having Highly Qualified staff under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The most prevalent factor in a district leader's decisions regarding academic offerings was the impact on students, particularly providing students with courses they want and what they and the community perceive they need. Other prevailing factors included the ability to consistently staff and fund opportunities above and beyond what was simply mandated.

Conclusions

Culture, geographic location and isolation, finances and capacity in the form of physical plant, technology, and staffing, impact the decisions of school leaders in small rural districts in New York State's Adirondack Park relative to academic opportunities. The degree of influence of these factors varies. Rarely do the influences of these factors act in isolation. Instead, they act concurrently and in concert with one another to shape district leaders' decisions about academic offerings at the high school level. This finding is consistent with current research.

Culture. Apparent in the findings of the study was that inherent in the culture of the districts under study was a high regard for and value associated with education. This was evident in the desire reported of parents and community members, as well as district leaders, to provide opportunities to students that exceeded those mandated by state regulation and to support financially and otherwise these opportunities.

Among what was valued and had even come to be expected was the availability of courses that would better prepare students for opportunities beyond high school and for college in particular. Such offerings included Advanced Placement courses, varied opportunities through local BOCES, Distance Learning opportunities, and college credit bearing courses. Also conveyed was a desire among parents for their children to be able to attend college, an opportunity many of them had not had themselves.

Community members and district leaders also valued courses that would allow students to stay in their communities and meet with success. As such, opportunities were supported that allowed students to develop the skills necessary to successfully gain employment in the region. While balancing the desires of the community relative to opportunities for students, leaders were cognizant of providing experiences for students to acquire knowledge of opportunities beyond their current reality.

This cultural influence and support was consistent with the findings of Gardner (2003) and Bethel (2001) who, in their case studies of small rural districts, each suggested that academics were of significant importance and grounded in community desires. Those offerings that would support future success for students could "open a world of opportunity by freeing students from the limitations of their parents" (Bethel, 2001, p. 25). Also supported by the

findings is Bethel's (2001) contention, "For rural people it is about learning to live and work in a rural environment" (p. 15).

Further apparent was that the leaders who participated in the study were well aware of and responsive to the needs and desires of the members of the communities served by the districts, a phenomenon described by Budge (2006) as a *sense of place* aimed at improving opportunities for students, and ultimately these communities.

> Leaders with a critical leadership of place support community as a context for learning, understanding that schools and their local communities are inextricably linked, and that the ability of each to thrive is dependent upon the other. They work to conserve what is beneficial to the well being of students, families and communities, while actively leading efforts that address the challenges and/or contradictions found in the local context. (Budge, 2006, p. 8)

This leadership of place could be deemed even more important for superintendents of the districts under study since, as Bethel (2001) contends, this individual is the key figure in districts since in many cases, including several in this sample, he or she may be the only full time central office figure. Such a leadership of place and intimate knowledge of community can assist superintendents in these small rural Adirondack districts to perform the delicate balancing act necessary to address their community's cultures and desires and to offer students opportunities for success.

> In rural America, finding a happy medium between the past with its rich tradition of rural life, and the future with its promise of opportunity and prosperity, requires school leaders to have a keen sense of where the school and its community have been and where they hope to go. (Harmon & Branham, 1999, p. 15)

There was current available research with which the findings did not align. Budge (2006) suggested that parents in rural districts had a limited understanding of their children's needs and limited aspirations. Arnold et al. (2005) suggested that aspirations and expectations of the community could have negative impacts on schools. This was not evident in the communities studied in this research. In small rural districts in the Adirondack Park, parents and community members understood and supported opportunities that would perpetuate student success.

Geographic location and isolation. The descriptions provided by participants of the geographic location and setting of their districts encompassed the attributes that were prevalent among and unique to communities of the Adirondack Park. Participants exuded a pride when talking about the landscapes their districts inhabit, but they also alluded to the difficulties presented by the geography and subsequent isolation that resulted from their location.

Location and isolation alone were not cited as influencing academic opportunities, more so indicated were the residual effects of isolation, among them small enrollments and proximity to educational opportunities offered other than on district campuses. Though each of the participating districts was located wholly or in part within the Adirondack Park, their particular geographic attributes and locations varied, consistent with Gong's (2005) suggestion that variation or differences within the rural category exist. Based on the descriptions provided, though, it can be argued that the geography of the districts in the park were more similar than they were different.

The challenges faced by these districts, resulting from their location and unique geographic attributes and subsequent isolation associated with it were consistent with what Arnold et al. (2005) found: "Rural schools face a unique set of challenges largely due to their geographic isolation" (p. 1).

The geographic attributes of the region were described by participants as being desirable and, having drawn individuals to their communities, had kept them there. This aligns with the suggestion of Budge (2006) that such attributes are a benefit.

Consistent with the research of Sasala (1996), limited enrollment may be the result of location and isolation. The findings were inconsistent though with the those of Sasala (1996) and Budge (2006), who both indicated lesser opportunities exist for students as a result of location and isolation.

Shared services and consolidation as indicated by Sasala (1996) and SUNY (2009) as a means to increase opportunities, had and would continue to be explored by the districts in the Adirondack Park.

Finances. The findings suggest that though small rural districts in the Adirondack Park struggled because of diminished funding opportunities inclusive of state aid and higher tax rates than were typical across the state, they were able to manage and provide for students beyond what was mandated. It was extremely rare to find courses not offered or eliminated for financial reasons alone. Community members, though frustrated with the manner in which education was funded in the state and their financial responsibilities in this regard, did not begrudge students opportunities nor did they expect districts to limit such opportunities.

Findings in this regard were rather inconsistent with the available literature. Previous research in the field (Monk & Bliss, 1992; Sasala, 1996; SUNY, 2009) suggested a diseconomy of scale for these districts relative to costs for providing students equitable opportunities. Per pupil cost and inequity were not raised during the research study and, as such, not reported among the findings.

Cost associated with staffing was found to be of concern. Sasala (1996) suggested that financial constraints coupled with decreasing enrollments limited offerings in higher level mathematics, sciences sand foreign language. Difficulty securing appropriately certified physics teachers was among the findings. This was, however, not necessarily as a result of funding, but in relation to availability of qualified individuals.

BOCES was raised in the existing research as a means of offsetting financial impact on opportunities (SUNY, 2009). Consistent with the work of Monk & Bliss (1992), there was much variation in the degree to which districts took advantage of these services.

Finances relative to building facilities and technology cited in current literature were not consistent with the finding of this study. Arnold (2005), Lewis (2003), and Monk and Bliss (1992) each cited staffing costs unique to rural districts. This was not found in the context of the current study. Though staffing was raised, it was not for financial reasons alone. Emerging technology as suggested by Sasala (1996) had and was expected to continue to provide opportunities. Her further contention that such means could become cost prohibitive, though this was not yet the case, was a future concern among the participants.

Capacity. Physical plant might either promote or hamper opportunities, with the impact contingent upon the current state of the buildings under study and the scope and capacity of recent building and renovation projects. The support among community members, in the form of a positive referendum vote, was more positive in cases where projects were aimed primarily at maintaining and upgrading current facilities as opposed to expanding upon or replacing them, though instances of support for the latter were found. Physical plant, though found to be at times problematic, did not keep courses from being offered and often suggested was “we make do with what we have.”

These findings were in part consistent with those of Bethel (2001). Similar to his contention was the reality that the facilities served as more than centers for education, but also as centers for community activity. He further contended that overuse and lack of skilled facility staff resulted in inadequate unsafe buildings and that improvements and maintenance were not a priority of residents. That was not consistent with the findings of this work. Buildings were reported to be safe and adequate. District residents supported expenditures to maintain facilities, though the support was less consistent when such projects included new space.

Technology was found to have emerged as a means to support academic opportunities in the recent history of the districts under study. Concern remained among district leaders relative to student and parent access to technology from home. Continued ability to finance improved opportunities resulting from technology was a concern.

These findings were consistent with those of Sasala (1996) and Arnold et al. (2005) who contended that opportunities in small rural districts expanded as a result of technology. Bethel's (2001) suggestion that infrastructure and facilities could limit opportunities technology could make available, was not as accurate a contention as it might have been just a few years ago.

Staffing necessary to provide and maintain opportunities was a struggle for small rural Adirondack districts. This challenge resulted from the combined influences of location, certification and funding.

Staffing, though problematic for the districts under study, did not necessarily result from what Gardner (2003) cited: salary and increased responsibility of teaching staff in these districts. Staffing was problematic, instead, as a result of location and isolation. Additionally finding appropriately certified teaching staff has been problematic. In cases where non-certified staff

could be utilized, this created an issue of compliance under the Highly Qualified provision of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. This was consistent with the findings of Eppley (2009).

Closing question. Despite the influences of the various factors under study on decisions regarding academic opportunities for students, small rural Adirondack districts, regardless of the implications, met students' needs and desires, sometimes going to the extreme of offering a course to two or three and in one case, a single student, because that is what is in the best interest of those few, or that one, students. This was consistent with the findings of Monk and Haller (1986), Sasala (1996) and Bethel (2001), who all suggested that opportunities should not be limited for students simply as a result of where they live. Arguably, the commitment to provide opportunities, even when enrollments are so limited, is inherent in the nature of schools in rural communities. As Gardner (2003) stated, "Rural schools possess certain indefinable attributes, that set them apart" (p. 12).

Recommendations

Innovation and collaboration. Students should not be held hostage to limited academic offerings because of the geographic location and subsequent implications of the school they attend, nor should parents and districts be obligated to send their children elsewhere to receive such opportunities.

The districts involved in the study had begun to rethink the manner in which opportunities were presented to students at the high school level and, in doing so, had provided opportunities for success beyond high school. They have had to be innovative in their efforts. The success of such opportunities has been in large part due to increasingly available technology. Such efforts must continue and districts must be able to access the necessary technology, both structurally and financially if such efforts are to continue to be successful.

Apparent was the lack of consistency or implementation of innovative programs across the districts being studied. Some innovative programming that might have met success in one or more districts had failed or not even been tried in others. The opportunity to share experiences, both good and bad, among the district leaders of the schools in the Adirondack Park, could provide these districts a venue to enhance collaboration providing a better shared understanding and potentially enhancing opportunities.

There are currently vehicles in place that could assist in facilitating such collaboration. Each of these districts is a member of a BOCES. Though there are different BOCES within the park, these BOCES are organized by NYSED into Joint Management Teams (JMTs). Many of these districts qualify for and may participate in the Rural Schools Association. In their responses, many of the districts alluded to the assistance of the NERIC relative to helping them meet their technological needs. Other respondents alluded to their work with CFES.

A collaborative venture facilitated by some or all of these agencies, along with others that may have a vested interest or something to contribute, would give these specific district leaders an opportunity to discuss their districts' uniqueness. The potential of this to influence offerings could prove beneficial. Though a daunting undertaking and one that would need to be ongoing, it could be an initial step toward assuring the districts and the students in the Adirondack Park would be provided the same opportunities as their counterparts across the state and country.

Funding. It is imperative that the way districts are funded by New York State and the federal government be reviewed. Of particular concern for Adirondack school districts and their year round residents is the manner in which vacation homes in the region negatively impact the perceived wealth of the district as a whole, resulting in the reduced availability of funding, and increased financial obligations in the form of taxes.

Certification and staffing. The ability of districts to locate, secure and maintain certified staff is greatly impacted by their geography and size. Stringent certification requirements, which are compounded by the implications of the No Child Left Behind Act, need to be reconsidered for districts with such unique circumstances. With the requirements as they are, districts have not and will continue to be unable to provide opportunities for students based on the lack of available qualified staff. I urge New York State's policymakers to reconsider the certification requirements in the area of science, and physics in particular, and the federal government to reconsider their one size fits all approach to the highly qualified requirement of No Child Left Behind.

Recommendations for Further Study

Of the 22 districts that met the criteria for participation in the study, seven participated. It is suggested that the instrumentation and process described herein be utilized with the remaining fifteen districts should they be willing to participate. Increasing the sample could strengthen the findings and add to them.

Despite the comparable sizes of the districts under study, the number and responsibilities of administrative staff varied substantially. Warranted is a study that explores the nature in which these districts are staffed administratively and how the administrative staff is deployed.

Small class size was inherent in being small and rural. Consideration to further study on the impact of class size could be considered.

Often mentioned was the lack of cell phone coverage in the areas under study. Given that cell phones have become a primary communication tool for high school students in recent history, it would be interesting to see if the students of this region are impacted by their lack of exposure to this technology.

Closing

In each of the districts under study, respondents shared their own rendition of their current reality. Though each story was a bit different, there was a unique commonality in the circumstances of these chosen districts, which made their struggles relative to the factors under study and the subsequent impact on academic opportunities offered similar. Despite these struggles, at the core of how each of these districts responded, as described by their district leader, was a desire to provide what was in the best interest of the students, communities, and schools they served.

Scarce resources challenge school district leaders throughout New York State and the nation as they struggle to provide adequate and rigorous academic opportunities for students at the high school level. The scarcity of resources among the districts under study is heightened as a result of the factors under study, despite this, these districts managed to provide students with adequate opportunity. Perhaps this is because as Gardner (2003) suggests, ". . . rural schools are consigned to making do with less" (p. 12). There was a looming fear expressed by respondents though, that it is becoming more difficult to do so, further supporting Gardner's (2003) contention, ". . . that "less" [is] becoming more difficult to manage" (p.12).

The commonality of sharing residence in one of the most unique geographic settings in the country and the educational struggles that result from this cohabitation creates an undeniable bond among the school districts of New York State's Adirondack Park. Evident in the information shared by respondents and the findings of the study was a keen awareness among these district leaders of the communities and schools they served. This awareness was defined by Budge (2006) as a *sense of place*. Apparent is that the *sense of place* held by the participants

in this study proved to be a primary influence on their decisions relative to academic opportunities provided to students.

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Appendix A

Invitation to Superintendents

January 30, 2010

Dear _____,

I am writing to request your participation in a research study that will investigate various factors and their impact on the decisions made by school district leaders regarding academic opportunities. The study will focus on geographically isolated districts that are rural in nature.

Your participation would include the provision of available documents containing course descriptions and offerings, and completion of an interview that will not exceed one hour in length. The interview may be conducted by phone or in person and will be scheduled at your convenience. Interview questions will be provided in advance, and all responses will be kept confidential.

I understand your time is valuable, but I am hopeful the results of this study will prove beneficial to your district and others like it.

Please indicate your willingness to participate no later than February 15, 2010 via email: longm2@sage.edu as well as complete and return the attached consent form; An addressed stamped envelope has been enclosed.

I appreciate your consideration and thank you for your anticipated participation. Upon receipt of your intent to participate you will be contacted to arrange an interview at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Maureen A. Long

Doctoral Candidate

The Sage College

Appendix B

District Demographic Data Sheet

District Demographic Data Information

Directions: Please confirm the following information about the school district by which you are employed. Please provide any missing information and correct any information which is not accurate.

Basic Information:
School District Name: _____
BEDS Code: _____
Enrollment: _____
Size (sq. miles): _____
Configuration:
Number of Buildings: _____
Number of Campuses: _____

Building Name	Grades Served	Total Students

Staffing:
Number of Teaching Staff: _____
Number of Administrators: _____
Number of Other Staff: _____
Funding:
Current School Year Budget: _____
Are you currently receiving funding from the following sources, and if so, what is the current allocation:

Title VI, Part B:
Yes ____ No ____ Allocation: _____
REAP (Rural Low Income Schools Program):
Yes ____ No ____ Allocation: _____
SRSA (Small Rural Schools Achievement Grant Program)
Yes ____ No ____ Allocation: _____

I confirm that the information as it appears is accurate to the best of my knowledge:

_____ _____ _____

Print Name Signature Date

Appendix C

Interview Script and Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. The following questions are meant to help me to investigate the impact of various factors that might influence academic opportunities and course offerings in small, rural school districts, particularly at the secondary level. Given that the nature of my research is qualitative, I would ask that you provide as much supporting detail as you are able in response to the questions. The first three questions are intended to provide some cursory information, while the remaining questions will be specific to the factors being researched.

1. How long have you served in the position of Superintendent of schools in this district?

2. Were you previously employed by the district (Y/N)?

If so, for how long and in what capacity?

3. What policies and/or procedures are in place in the district for considering academic opportunities at the high school level, particularly the addition or deletion of course offerings?

Have recent changes been made in these procedures, or are they long standing?

[CULTURE]

Questions 4 -7 will pertain to your understanding of the school community and their expectations regarding academic opportunities:

4. Are there expectations on the part of the board of education or community members relative to course offerings at the high school level?

5. Are there particular courses that have been considered for **adoption** or adopted as a result board or community insistence?

6. Are there particular courses that have been considered for **deletion** or deleted as a result of community or board insistence?

7. From your perspective as a school district leader, does the culture of the school community influence your decisions about course offerings at the high school level?

[GEOGRAPHY]

Questions 8 – 11 pertain to your understanding of the impact of geographic location on academic opportunities.

8. Describe the geographic location of your school district? Do you consider your district to be geographically isolated?

9. Are there particular courses that have been considered for **adoption** or were adopted at the high school level that as a result of the geographic location and/or isolation of the district?

If so, was consideration given to other options to provide students with this opportunity?

10. Are there particular courses that have been considered for **deletion** or were deleted at the high school level as a result of the geographic location and/or isolation of the district?

If so, was consideration given to other options to provide students with this opportunity?

11. From your perspective as a school district leader, do the geographic location and/or isolation of the district influence your decisions about course offerings at the high school level?

[FINANCE]

The next several questions (12 - 17) pertain to the perceived impact of finances on academic opportunities:

12. Have high school course offerings been considered for **elimination** or eliminated for financial reasons alone?

If so please explain by giving some details.

13. Explain the financial considerations taken into account when a new course is proposed or being considered at the high school level.

14. Have there been cases when courses have **not** been added at the high school level for strictly financial reasons?

15. If courses have not been added or have been eliminated for financial reasons coupled with other factors, what have the other factors been?

16. Because of these financial times, have people suggested courses be cut at the high school?

What people?

Which courses?

Are these courses successful?

Have they been considered for elimination at any other time? When?

17. From your perspective as a school district leader, does the financial situation of the district influence your decisions about course offerings at the high school level?

[CAPACITY]

Questions 18 - 22 pertain to the perceived impact of capacity on academic opportunities. For the purposes of this study, capacity includes: physical plant and buildings, technology, and staffing. Each of these will be addressed separately.

18. Have you recently had any proposed building and renovation projects?

If so have they successfully passed? (Explain)

Have these projects (passed or rejected) had an impact on academic offerings at the high school level?

19. Have you recently had any building closures in the district? (Explain)

If so, have these closures impacted academic offerings at the high school?

20. Are there cases where **physical plant limitations** have impacted decisions about academic opportunities at the high school? (Explain)

21. Are there cases where **technology limitations** have impacted decisions about academic opportunities at the high school? (Explain)

22. Are there cases where **staffing limitations** have impacted decisions about academic opportunities at the high school? (Explain)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you again for your time today; I will close with the following question:

Closing Question:

23. What are the primary factors that influence you as you consider academic opportunities at the high school level, particularly the addition or elimination of courses?