

Simply Different: A Multiple Case Study of Two Title I Schools in Rural Wisconsin under  
No Child Left Behind

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2012

Date of final oral examination: 05/04/12

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## **Acknowledgements**

There is so much, obviously, that goes into crafting a project like this and seeing it through completion. I need to thank my parents, not only for their generosity throughout my lifetime, but for instilling a value of continuous learning and an appreciation for education and the arts from a very young age. My parents always encouraged me to dream big and “do what I love” never for the money but for the happiness in life that follows. I must also thank my spouse, John Underly, for sticking with me through this, and for allowing me (guilt-free) time away from the family responsibilities that working adults and parents of two toddlers must share. If I did not have the time to write on the weekends this project would never be finished.

I am blessed to have some very good friends. I must especially acknowledge my dear friends Michelle and Will who forced me out of the house some weeknights to work on this project and entertained my children in my absence. I always knew they were in very good hands and therefore I was able to focus on my project outside of the house. I must acknowledge the efforts of one of my very best friends, Georgette, who edited my papers and challenged me to become a better writer. Georgette, you are a wonderful friend and an amazing editor and I am lucky to have you in my life. My in-laws are pretty good friends of mine as well. My mother-in-law, a former Title I reading specialist, was particularly supportive of my studies and this project!

I need to thank the individuals I interviewed for this study. Without them generously and graciously giving me their time to speak with them about their schools, this study would not have been possible. I enjoyed speaking with each of them and learning about their schools in the process and will be forever grateful to them for their contributions. I also wish to acknowledge

my colleagues at the Department of Public Instruction who provided me with so much encouragement and support: Rachael, Katie, Shelly B., Jennifer, Cathy, Ross, Tim, Mary, and Shelly G. I enjoy working with such smart people and am fortunate to like the work that we do. I hope this study helps us make better decisions on behalf of the schools and students that we serve.

I am indebted to my committee members, Rich Halverson, Carolyn Kelley, Geoffrey Borman, and Mary Louise Gomez, and especially, Eric Camburn, my advisor, for incredible patience and critical feedback that helped me grow as a scholar. Dr. Camburn gave me latitude to explore my interests and repeatedly bounce ideas off of him. He was the perfect advisor and applied the ideal amount of pressure and support as needed. In addition, I wish to acknowledge the history department faculty and my friends at Indiana University, specifically Wendy Gamber, James H. Madison, and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Dave, Brian, and Josh, who cultivated my interest in Midwestern U.S. rural life and history, and encouraged me to attend graduate school in the first place. Those were wonderful years where I learned so much and I will never forget their support.

Finally, I must thank my two little children, David and Rachel. They were both born during this process, and at the time of this writing, are now five and nearly four years old. You are the biggest reasons that I finished this project and obtained this degree. I love you both so much and more than you can ever imagine. I am proud to be your mom and excited to watch you discover your passions and grow as scholars in the near future. You are so close to my heart.

Jill Semko Underly  
Fitchburg, Wisconsin  
May 2012

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## Abstract

Rural school districts must comply with the rules set forth through federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in exchange for their share of federal education funds. In general, research shows that when policy is conceived, it is framed with urban school districts in mind; rural schools must apply rules designed for urban schools onto their rural contexts. This qualitative case study analysis of two rural school districts aims to demonstrate how seemingly general policies complicate educational practices in rural schools. The research questions attempt to address the consequences of one-size-fits-all educational policies imposed in rural Title I schools. This study identifies the sources of conflict that emerge as rural school districts attempt to comply with the provisions of NCLB. Related to the sources of conflict, this study identifies how specific factors, either in the design of the education policy or in local context and circumstances, hinder compliance with NCLB. This comparative case study analyzes interviews, NCLB monitoring documents, and artifacts from each community to understand the context in which rural schools operate. A comparison and analysis of the case studies determined that 1) burdens on rural schools can be reduced through modification of policies when the context of rural schools is taken into account during the policy design phase, 2) local contexts and local leadership capacity determine the success or failure of policy, and 3) federal dollars can be leveraged to improve local initiatives. This study adds nuance to the critique of “one-size-fits-all” policies applied onto different local settings and examines how rural schools maintain compliance with the federal regulations.



## Chapter 1

### Overview of Study

#### Introduction

Rural public schools, like many of their urban counterparts, depend on Title I funds from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as operational funds for their instructional programming. To continually receive funds, the schools must demonstrate compliance with certain rules and regulations scripted throughout ESEA. Title I's purpose is to "improve the academic achievement of the [economically] disadvantaged" and "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 1001). Title I funding is based on a per-pupil amount of the total number of low-income children attending a school. The funds are used to purchase supplemental instructional supplies, salaries for additional teachers, and other supplemental educational experiences for students attending that school.

After the funds are accepted, there are "strings attached." Schools must follow the rules set forth in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), such as assessing the academic needs of all students in the school, serving academically needy private school students, reporting student assessment scores, following the state and federal accountability regulations, involving parents meaningfully, ensuring that all teachers are highly-qualified for their instructional areas, and complying with sanctions as necessary (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 1112, 1113, 1114, 1115, 1116, 1118, 1119).

The instructional goals and outcomes for both urban public schools and rural public schools are the same: to ensure that students graduate from high school career- and college-

ready. However, the means through which these goals are implemented are inherently different based on the context and setting of a school. The “strings attached” limit the abilities of rural schools to provide the highest-quality education possible in some of the poorest non-urban areas of the state. Statewide, there are high-poverty rural areas that rival the deepest urban poverty in Wisconsin; many rural schools have poverty rates between 75 and 90 %. However, because these schools have small populations, they receive smaller amounts of federal Title I dollars to accentuate their instructional programming. I argue that in the circumstances of high poverty and low population, the Title I dollars and the rules that schools must follow are illogical to the local rural context, and that the regulations could do more harm than good to students’ educational experiences in these already economically disadvantaged settings by diverting attention from serving high-needs students in favor of policy compliance.

At one time, most American public school students went to small schools in small school districts in small rural communities. In recent decades, however, both schools and districts grew dramatically in size. Districts merged, consolidated, and grew in size as they decreased in number, from about 115,000 school districts at one time. Most of those 115,000 school districts were responsible for single schools or one-room schools a century or more ago. Today, there are about 15,000 school districts. In 50 years, from 1940 to 1990, the size of the average school district increased more than tenfold from 217 to 2,637 students, while the size of the average school increased from 127 students to 653 students (Walberg & Walberg, 1994).

### **History of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and No Child Left Behind**

Rural education and the poverty that permeates many rural schools rarely make headlines. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson put poverty front and center when he challenged Americans to declare a “War on Poverty” as a part of the Great Society, his domestic

agenda. This “War on Poverty” was the hallmark of the first authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Title I of ESEA addressed urban poverty and helping urban children achieve in reading and mathematics. The rules for national and federal legislation such as ESEA are “one-size-fits-all” as Congress authorizes rules for school districts to receive federal education funds. Since 1965, it appears that ESEA has consistently aimed to help urban children because the rules are designed with urban schools in mind. For example, tenets of Title I discuss strategies that increase parental involvement in low-income schools or how to attract and retain highly-qualified teachers. The rules ascertain how to equitably serve private school children in need of Title I services, and they mandate that schools that are more than 75% low-income are automatically served. Most telling, however, is how the funding formula for Title I funds is applied to school districts across the country. The funds are based on a “per-pupil amount,” and each low-income child generates an allocation. The regulations state that the children most in need of services receive Title I services (meaning that the child who generates the allocation may not be the one who needs the academic services). In urban areas, where there is high poverty and large populations of students, Title I formulas guarantee that these urban school districts will receive larger allocations. In rural areas, where there is high poverty and often a greater need for funds due to lack of other resources, , coupled with smaller student populations, provides rural school districts with fewer Title I funds simply because there are fewer students.

Increasing poverty rates during the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century lead to additional challenges for rural schools. Recent U.S. Census data shows that the rate of Wisconsin children ages 5 through 17 who are living in poverty has risen by more

than 4 percentage points in 3 years, from 12.9 percent in 2007 to 17 percent in 2010 (U.S. Census, November 11, 2011).

Long-term societal repercussions are associated with child poverty. A review of research shows that children who live in poverty have less access to good medical and dental care as well as nutritional meals, and they are less likely to have parents who read to them and are able to invest in supplemental educational opportunities (UNC, 2006). The long-term effects could be seen in the criminal justice system. People who lack medical and dental care as children could have long-term health problems and lower life expectancy, therefore straining community resources.

I must state that I am not advocating that ESEA accommodate all of the problems associated with poverty; rather I am arguing that society must address the ills of poverty if it expects academic achievement to improve in low-income students. Other federal funds or programs could potentially target these areas of need and would directly and positively impact the students who receive these services. Because ESEA funds are intended for academic interventions only and are not intended to provide social services such as medical, dental, or mental health care to high-poverty areas, other programs must step in to address these needs. For schools to do so, they would need a much larger allocation or investment by the country.

Rural poverty made headlines in Wisconsin in October 2011 and January 2012. The first series in the *Wisconsin State Journal* investigated the gap in rural health care. Journalists discovered that there are areas in the state of Wisconsin that are more than an hour from the nearest trauma center. There are multiple counties where there are no health centers for low-income individuals without insurance to receive routine care, such as immunizations and checkups, and cancer screenings. The second series investigated the growing problem of

homelessness in rural areas. In urban areas, homeless individuals and families have more resources, such as soup kitchens and shelters, while there are no such resources in rural areas. Children and adults who are a part of the growing numbers of the rural homeless find themselves living in campgrounds in the warmer months and doubled up in apartments with relatives or in motels during the colder months.

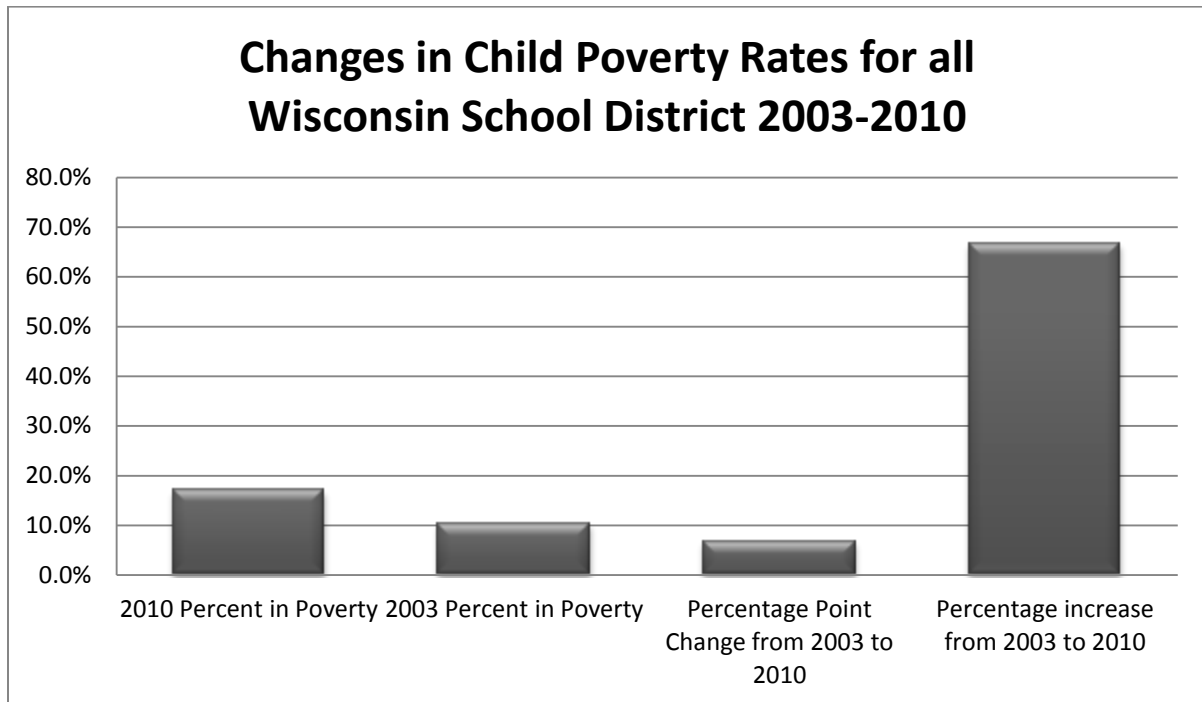
Recent U.S. Census data shows that the changes in child poverty rates by Wisconsin school districts increased overall by 66.7 percent from 2003 to 2010. From 2007 to 2010, the increase in child poverty rates was 31.8 percent (Denavas, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). The 2010 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) data are available for 3,142 counties and nearly 14,000 Title I-eligible school districts in the country. The data represent the only current, single-year income and poverty estimates available for all sizes of counties and school districts. While these estimates are released annually, 2007 was chosen by the U.S. Census Bureau for comparison because it was a pre-recessionary year.

According to federal guidelines, a family of four is considered to be living in poverty if its annual income is less than \$22,350. The U.S. Census data shows that most U.S. counties did not experience significant change in the poverty rate for school-age children. However, areas with an increase in child poverty were clustered around southern California, southern Nevada, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, and parts of Arizona and Illinois. According to the U.S. Census Bureau analysis, 47 of Wisconsin's 72 counties (65 %) experienced a significant increase in school-age children living in poverty.

The charts (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate the difference in poverty percentages for all Wisconsin School Districts combined. The increase between 2003 and 2007 is significant with a 66.7% change.

Figure 1

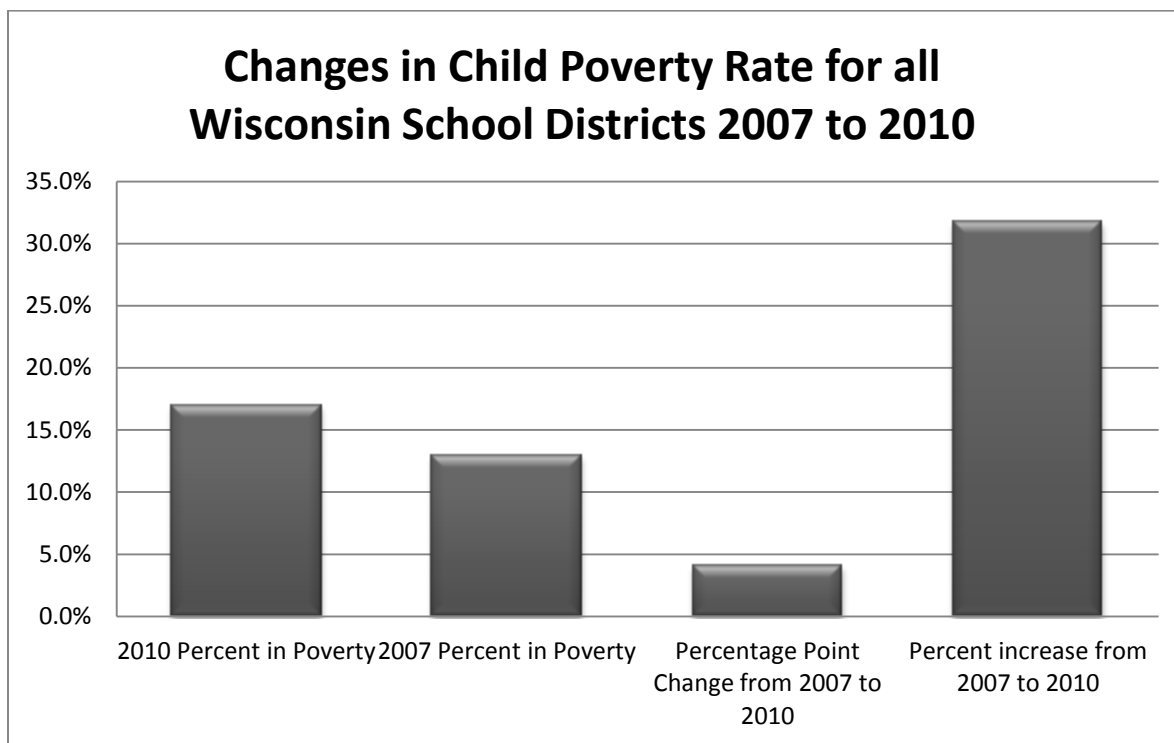
*The Changes in Child Poverty Rates for all Wisconsin School Districts from 2003 to 2010*



When comparing the change between poverty in 2007 to 2010, the overall percentage over the last decade gives one pause. The overall numbers of children in poverty increased significantly from 2007 to 2010, from the onset of the last U.S. economic recession.

Figure 2

*The Changes in Child Poverty Rates for all Wisconsin School Districts from 2007 to 2010*



The increase in children living in poverty is mirrored in the increase in numbers of children eligible for free and reduced-priced school meals. According to federal guidelines, children must be in households with incomes at or below 130 % of the federal poverty rate to be eligible for free meals, and at or below 185 % of the federal poverty rate to be eligible for reduced-price meals. For the 2010–11 school year, 41 % of Wisconsin students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals, an increase of 8 percentage points from 2007–08, when 33 % of students qualified for subsidized meals. The percentage of students eligible for subsidized school breakfast or lunch has increased steadily for the past seven years and is expected to increase in upcoming years.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) entered the domestic education policy agenda in 2001 under the George W. Bush Administration. NCLB is the most recent reauthorization of ESEA (which expired in 2008 and survives under continuing resolutions), and the policy is expected be reauthorized again in 2012 or 2013. NCLB significantly changed the rules for Title I schools. As a condition of accepting funds, schools and their districts became “accountable” to the statewide standardized test. Each year schools needed to show improvement in their reading and mathematics scores and, at the very least, to meet the state-determined proficiency percentage. If they did not meet the cut scores for proficiency and did not show improvement, they would be identified as missing adequate yearly progress (AYP). (The cut score on a test is the score that separates test takers into various categories, such as a passing score and a failing score. If this continued for two consecutive years, these Title I schools were labeled “schools identified for improvement,” or SIFI. Districts could be labeled as “districts identified for improvement,” or DIFI, if all schools in the district did not meet proficiency in reading, mathematics, graduation rate, or test participation.

NCLB, for the first time in ESEA history, withheld funds from schools that did not have sufficient test scores or attendance or graduation rates. If a school became a SIFI, it had to withhold 20 % of its Title I allocation for school choice and supplemental educational services (SES). This withholding reduced the amount of money in a school’s instructional budget, directly impacting services to children and putting additional stress on high-poverty schools.

### **Problem Statement**

This study contrasts federal education legislation and its requirements with the contextual realities of rural Midwest life. My interest in rural schools stems from experiences I had teaching in central Indiana from 1999 to 2004. I witnessed rural poverty and the impact it had on students



in my classroom firsthand. I also witnessed how school districts tried to ameliorate poverty issues by providing children with medical and dental care while in school, nutritional meals, and supplemental educational experiences (SES) through Title I and other state funding sources. It appeared that the rural districts, much like the one I taught in, used their Title I funds to supplement children's educational experiences. However, when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law in 2002, accountability requirements and changes in federal compliance further strained rural school districts' resources by diverting federal dollars from what school districts valued and considered beneficial to students, to specific required elements that the federal government considered valuable, such as ensuring that the teachers hired were considered "highly-qualified" or supplemental educational services were provided in low-performing schools. NCLB's highly-qualified teacher provision, the school accountability formula, and the sanctions for schools and districts identified for improvement placed additional burdens on rural schools already challenged by local contextual issues. The challenge under NCLB that administrators struggled with was that there was increased regulation and more rules that required documentation. There is not a correct solution, but the reality in rural schools is that locally, the administration understands what the students and the school may need, and those needs often are in direct conflict with funding mandates from the federal government.

Rural America has changed in the past 50 years, both economically and demographically. With the decline of the railroad and the reliance of interstate commerce transportation on the national highway system, many rural economies succumbed to economic depressions as job opportunities declined and unemployment increased. Reflected in this economic change is the increasingly shrinking number of family farms. The number of family farms has declined since 1960 and much more rapidly since 1980. As farms have grown larger to become more profitable,

or as farmers have sold to their more prosperous neighbors or to agribusiness or corporate farms, rural populations have dwindled. As one positive outcome of this, and to meet the labor challenges of running these large farms, immigrants relocated to rural areas for work and either increased or stabilized some rural populations. A challenge to this change, however, is that in the past five years, rural school districts have found that the numbers of children who do not speak English have increased substantially, and many districts did not have the resources or expertise to instruct English language learner ELL students.

Although I noticed these economic and demographic changes in rural districts firsthand, I was a classroom teacher and somewhat removed from the realities of administering educational programs under these challenges. I was aware of the contexts of rural life as a teacher and community member but sheltered by school administration from the impact that rural social problems bring to the educational setting. For example, I was unaware, at least in those first years, that my salary as a teacher positioned me as one of the more affluent community members. As a single teacher, I earned more than many of the families that I taught. I also lived in the community but was blissfully unaware of the economic stress there: the vacant storefronts, the abandoned railroad yards, the foreclosed farms and homes, and the brownfields across town. The schools, with their limited resources, did their best to ameliorate these economic effects in the community.

I did not grow up in a rural area. I grew up and was educated in Northwest Indiana, very close to Chicago, Illinois. My parents had non-agricultural employment throughout my childhood. My father is an electrician, and my mother is a secretary for a local doctor. I was the first in my family to complete college and did so in southern Indiana. I learned to appreciate rural culture and its challenges through some of the friendships I made in college. I completed a senior

thesis on Great Depression–era farmwomen’s homemakers’ associations and housekeeping clubs, and I learned to appreciate the importance of oral history. My first teaching position in the late 1990s afforded me the opportunity to live in a very rural area of Indiana, where all of my students lived either on farms or in an economically depressed town. The town was in decline at the time; there was very little manufacturing or industry, but there were the beginnings of immigration from Central American countries for farm labor purposes. In many ways this immigration revitalized the town: Homes were no longer vacant, restaurants’ and markets’ sales increased, and the local economy improved.

As I transitioned to new opportunities in my life — I married, and my husband and I sought employment in the same community (which ultimately was the reason I left my first teaching position) — the town began to show additional signs of economic decline. More industry began closing its doors, crime increased, and the community retreated into much more conservative fiscal and social policies. For several years in a row, school referenda were defeated, the school district began to close buildings, and long-term citizens attempted to consolidate power and became vitriolic toward newer immigrants. The community struggled because it experienced weak leadership, and the few voices that people listened to were misguided and racist.

As I continued in graduate school, my master’s thesis researched why some rural schools consolidated in the 1960s in Indiana while others did not. I also researched the unintended consequences of school consolidation as suburban sprawl continued in the metropolitan regions of Indianapolis and Northwest Indiana. My fascination with rural life, its people, and its schools continued, and it has always maintained a front-running position in my research. Now, as I live in Wisconsin and work for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), my work centers on Title

I. I work with both urban and rural schools and am able to understand the contradictions, nuances, and successful components in educational policy that both types of schools face on a daily basis.

If the purpose of Title I is to aid the economically disadvantaged student by providing supplemental instruction in reading and mathematics, infusing additional money into high-poverty schools is a good first step. However, with all the “strings attached” to the money, my experience is that the districts welcome the funds but will use them where the need is greatest, even if that need is not within the parameters of the laws. It would be helpful for Title I to be flexible in high-poverty schools instead of forcing the schools to conform to the rules that are irrelevant to their setting. The law can still ensure that the funds are used for high-poverty students who are most behind in reading and mathematics without prescribing how the funds must be spent, other than noting that the funds are supplemental and must not supplant district responsibilities to these schools. Practitioners understand that each school is different and that the needs of each school (even within the same district) will vary, so it is interesting as to why the federal government would allocate billions of dollars to help these schools but assume all schools have the same needs (in reading and mathematics) and use for the funds.

I desired to learn more about rural school districts in the context of Title I legislation’s impact on rural schools. If a policy is designed with an urban locale in mind, I was curious as to how the rural districts adjusted to the rules and how they met compliance — or were there elements of Title I that were simply no longer applicable and ignored? I was also curious about the contexts in which rural schools exist, and I hope to inform how significant financial resources, such as Title I, can contribute to a better education for so many low-income rural students.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions attempt to identify the unintended outcomes or results of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) compliance emerge for rural school administrators. Therefore I ask:

1. What sources of conflict emerge as rural school districts attempt to comply with the provisions of NCLB?
2. Related to the sources of conflict, I am curious as to what specific factors, either in design of the education policy or local context and circumstances, hinder compliance with NCLB. Therefore, my second question is, specifically, what policy design or contextual factors impede compliance with provisions of NCLB in rural school districts in Wisconsin?

## **Methodology**

I sought to answer these research questions by conducting interviews of rural Title I school personnel in two districts in the State of Wisconsin. One school is located in the southwestern rolling hills or “unglaciated” region of the state. The other school is located in the “Northwoods” of Wisconsin, in the northeast region. I wanted to understand not only whether two rural areas of the state experienced the same phenomena with regard to following Title I rules but also whether they experienced the same rural contextual changes I have read about in recent years, such as a lack of access to health care, an exodus of middle-class sustaining jobs, an increase in homelessness, and an increase in immigration. I wondered, based in the realities of rural life, how these schools complied with Title I regulations and whether administrators felt that the regulations helped their students succeed or that these regulations were increasingly counterintuitive to their needs.

I conducted interviews over the phone with Title I school building personnel and visited each community several times over the course of four months of research. Next I constructed a case study for each school and tried to provide a rich description of the community and its contextual issues coupled with the experiences of Title I personnel implementing federal Title I programming. I constructed a cross-case analysis to inform the study and used the research questions to frame the study. Other sources of data used are newspaper articles, yearbooks from the local community libraries, school and district newsletters, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Title I and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) monitoring reports, census data, and Wisconsin Department of Justice data. I wanted to provide as much contextual information about each community as possible in order to understand why Title I personnel may struggle with certain requirements related to their rural setting and to determine if it was the policy design or rural context that led to the implementation challenges in these schools.

### **Importance of the Study**

My desire is that this study will illuminate the issues prevalent in rural school districts not only in Wisconsin but also throughout the Midwest and the United States. The war on poverty is the heart and soul of Title I; however, Title I is flawed in the fact that it leaves rural schools wanting more relevant and contextual legislation in addition to the flexibility needed to address issues of poverty prevalent in rural school districts that differ from urban poverty issues.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This review of literature explores three different research interests. The first strand is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, and the impact this legislation had on rural schools. The second interest is education policy design and implementation. The last area of research explores rural schools, their communities, and the problems that are unique to their “place.”

Within the research area of challenges that public schools experience as they implement NCLB, three main strands of research emerged: hiring highly-qualified (HQ) teachers, meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP), and fulfilling the requirements of schools identified for improvement (SIFI). It was difficult to find a body of research that specifically addressed these challenges in the rural school context. There is a deficit in the amount of research that is available on the topic of rural education and federal reform (Eppley, 2009). In the past 20 years, most public education and federal reform research has focused on urban schooling, and rural education research appears to be an “endangered species” (Sherwood, 2000). The challenges of meeting AYP and hiring HQ teachers, however, is not unique to rural schools. Urban schools also experience these issues while implementing NCLB.

#### **Highly-Qualified Teachers**

Shortly after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized in 2001 as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), researchers began investigating the impact that the new “highly-qualified teachers” provision would have on school districts. NCLB brought attention to the fact that teachers need to be qualified to teach their subjects, particularly in rural and urban

schools that have high minority populations and are largely low-income. The highly-qualified (HQ) provision brought attention to the fact that schools must have skilled teachers to help high-need students succeed. But there were unintended consequences to this provision, and it adversely affected rural schools.

Rural education research indicates that the most prominent issue facing rural school districts in meeting the federal requirements of NCLB and state education agency (SEA) compliance is the HQ teacher provision (Brownell, et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Eppley, 2009; Jimerson, 2004, 2005; Reeves, 2003). NCLB states that “beginning with the first day of the first school year after the date of enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, each local educational agency receiving assistance under this part shall ensure that all teachers hired after such day and teaching in a program supported with funds under this part are highly-qualified” (NCLB, 2002). This provision highlighted that teachers need to have the content knowledge to be licensed for subjects they are assigned to teach and that all children should have access to high-quality teachers. This provision also focused on inequality in urban and some rural classrooms in that children’s access to qualified teachers varies and that the highest-need schools often have the least prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004, 2006).

To be HQ, a teacher must have graduated from an accredited post-secondary institution with a major in the subject area he or she wishes to teach. This emphasis on coursework de-emphasized teaching methods and arguably made the profession weaker because teachers may be strong in content but lacking in pedagogical skills (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Critiques of this provision claim that new teachers can be prepared in content knowledge, but a lack of methods courses and observations may make them underprepared for the realities of teaching students of varying abilities and needs (Darling-Hammond, 2003). If teachers are versed in content but less



capable in classroom management, assessment, and pedagogy, they are likely to be less effective and have a higher rate of turnover in the profession and in high-need schools. The HQ designation also pushed for a very narrow definition of knowledge and skills for teachers as they should have a host of subject matter and the ability to teach it (Berry, et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Recruitment of HQ teachers and retention of these individuals also posed a problem for rural districts. The most high-need schools, urban and rural, need highly skilled teachers, but the HQ provision does little to address these needs (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher education programs produce more graduates than there are positions — by about 100,000 teachers — yet there is always a supply-and-demand problem in the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2002). Shortage areas are localized as people tend to take teaching jobs near places they grew up or attended college (Boyd, et al., 2003). Shortage areas usually exist in rural areas or high-need urban schools because teachers are most likely to leave these areas due to lower pay and working conditions (Ingersoll, 2001). So although there is a tendency to have enough applicants to fill teaching jobs, high-need places have a difficult time holding onto the applicants; 50% of teachers in high-need schools will leave after the first year (Berry, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1998), Ingersoll, 2001).

Teachers in high-need schools need teaching-methods backgrounds and the skills required to teach challenging learners. In rural areas and alternative schools, teachers need to be able to teach multiple subject areas. After NCLB was first released in 2002, license-certification challenges with the HQ provision became immediately evident for rural schools. Rural districts struggled with recruiting teachers who were licensed in multiple areas. In schools with smaller populations, such as rural schools and alternative schools, teachers need to teach multiple or

interdisciplinary subjects. NCLB requires that teachers hold a license for each subject area taught. After rural schools and alternative schools recruited these teachers, retaining them in their workforce was difficult (Darling-Hammond, 2004, 2006). Other working conditions factor into whether a teacher remains in a rural school. In many areas, rural schools compensate their teachers less than in urban or suburban areas, adding to their retention problems (Jimerson, 2003). As teachers gain experience in rural areas, they eventually leave to teach in areas that compensate them more for their experience, subject area, and skill.

SEAs and teacher preparation programs also adjusted to NCLB's HQ teacher requirement. States mandated HQ teachers for all students in core subject areas by the end of the 2005–06 school year (NCLB, 2002). States also must report the distribution of underqualified teachers and submit a plan that outlines the steps taken to ensure that poor and minority children are not disproportionately assigned inexperienced or unqualified teachers (Barry, 2004).

The common theme through all the research on the HQ provision of NCLB is that it was perhaps passed with the best intention: to ensure that all students have access to the most qualified instructors. The repercussion for small schools and urban schools is that meeting the provision is not practical in situations in which teachers need multiple teaching licenses. The most common subject areas in which this situation is found are in science and interdisciplinary courses. The HQ requirement affected recruitment of teachers to rural areas, as it is already difficult to attract and retain individuals to high-need areas (Jimerson, 2003; Monk, 2007).

## **The Consequence of Small Populations**

### **School Funding**

School funding and supporting a local education agency's (LEA) capacity for reform, whether through federal policy or not, is a continual challenge. Rural areas have smaller populations and draw from a tax base that can be mostly agrarian or contain state and federal land, such as parks and shorelines. This diminished tax base inversely impacts rural schools, and they rely more on state and federal aid for educational programming. Therefore, some scholars argue that due to the unique circumstances of rural schools, they should have more flexibility in meeting federal requirements or be exempt from requirements entirely (Guthrie, 1979; Reeves, 2003). In fact, one federal program, the Rural Education Achievement Program, or REAP, is a policy designed specifically to help rural schools compete for federal funds. REAP is, by design, flexible. This program contains a flexibility provision that allows eligible LEAs to combine funding under certain programs, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to carry out local activities under other specified federal programs, such as Carl Perkins, NCLB, or the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

#### Assessment and Accountability

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is based on accountability and testing for all students. In brief, under the accountability provisions in NCLB, all public school campuses, school districts, and the state are evaluated for adequate yearly progress (AYP). School districts are required to meet AYP criteria on three measures: reading/language arts, mathematics, and either graduation rate (for high schools and districts) or attendance rate (for elementary and middle/junior high schools).

If a school district receiving Title I, Part A funds fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years, that district is subject to certain requirements, such as offering supplemental education services (SES), offering school choice, and/or taking corrective actions. The test results

determine if a school meets AYP, and if it doesn't, it lands on the state's list of schools identified for improvement (SIFI). Each subsequent year a school is on the list, the consequences for not improving grow.

Most researchers agree that the intentions behind accountability are good. If schools are not serving students well, something should be done to improve the schools. Measuring accountability, however, is difficult because many variables factor into whether a school is a quality school. Furthermore, some variables are difficult to measure or take into account, such as student motivation and the effects of poverty on students (Jencks, 1972, 1979, 1992; Lareau, 2003).

The validity of year-to-year accountability is questionable, and many rural researchers believe that rural schools are at an inherent disadvantage in meeting accountability standards because of their small size (Coladarci, T., 2003; Farmer, et al., 2006; Lee, J., 2003; Linn, et al., 2002). By nature, rural areas are underpopulated, and rural schools are generally small. Therefore, class sizes can potentially fluctuate from one year to the next, with some classes larger than other years. Additionally, student mobility (much like in urban areas) impacts the number of students tested and the students' collective results on the state exam. In general, poorer areas, both rural and urban, have more students moving in and out of the school population than in more affluent attendance areas.

Under NCLB, accountability decisions are made (at least in part) on test scores. In rural areas, test scores can be particularly unreliable because of mobility and small sample sizes. The data used to make accountability decisions is therefore less reliable in rural settings. As a different cohort of students is tested each year, there can be wide variances in the student

population, such as more students with special needs or more English language learner (ELL) students, allowing for large swings in year-to-year test scores. In small populations, one or two students not testing or perhaps not doing well on the test can determine whether a school makes AYP that year. Above all, the main concern among rural education researchers is that rural school populations are too small, and therefore data are potentially too volatile, to allow for a valid representation of AYP under NCLB (Coladarci, 2003; Farmer, et al., 2006; Jennings, 2006; Jimerson, 2004; Lee, 2003; Reeves, 2003).

One study — a random sample of AYP results in small Title I rural schools — indicated that schools that disproportionately served low-income students were more likely to be sanctioned and identified under NCLB AYP rules. The researchers challenged that there is a high degree of diversity in rural populations: ethnic, socio-economic, and age. Therefore, a few children can determine a district's chances of making AYP one year over the next, and NCLB disproportionately sanctioned schools with high numbers of low-income students (Farmer, et al., 2006). These results are applicable to both urban and rural schools. Another study found that among children who lived in high-poverty areas of rural Mississippi, where rural schools had more than 80% poverty, 70% of those children who missed AYP were minority group members (Jimerson, 2005).

As schools focus on meeting AYP in reading and mathematics, other curricular areas suffer from neglect. If a school is accountable for test results in reading and mathematics, school goals focus on improving scores in those subjects. If a school misses AYP, the stakes become higher each year to increase the amount of reading and math instruction while other curricular areas are cut. Schools, rural and urban alike, see a decline in recess, social studies, art, and music, and kindergartens often see decline in the time reserved for downtime such as rest periods

(naps) and play (Powell, et al., 2009). It is only logical that other areas of the curriculum will seem less important, but what could be the long-term effects of neglecting these subjects?

Overall, more research is needed to completely critique AYP and rural schools. Alternatives other than AYP to “grade” schools and instead measure student growth and annual progress are needed in rural, urban, and suburban schools alike. Another area to explore is how schools can be measured for AYP without necessarily looking solely at test scores, e.g., in what other ways can we look at a school and determine if it meets the needs of its students? AYP should be a complete, holistic measure of a school’s quality before labeling the school as not meeting AYP, failing, or persistently low-achieving. Other indicators, such as teacher quality, student involvement, and academic engagement, should be used to measure the “whole” school and judge it on quality prior to labeling it as failing or identified for improvement.

### **Sanctions: School Choice and Supplemental Education Services**

When a Title I public school misses adequate yearly progress (AYP) two years in a row, it is labeled as a “school identified for improvement,” or SIFI. After a school becomes a SIFI, districts must implement two rather expensive programs to help improve the school: school choice and supplemental education services (SES).

School choice allows students who attend a SIFI to transfer to another (non-SIFI) school in the district. The SIFI school’s per-pupil Title I allocation transfers with the student; additionally, the district pays the cost of transporting the student to the non-SIFI school. The authors of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) believed that school choice gives students the opportunity to succeed in a neighboring school and alerts district officials and the community

that the troubled school needs reform. School choice was intended to provide those students who are most at-risk of failing state academic standards the opportunity to transfer to a new school.

Rural schools are in unique positions with school choice and SES. In many cases, rural SIFI schools cannot fulfill the requirements or sanctions outlined under NCLB. There is only one elementary school in many rural districts; therefore, students who attend a SIFI elementary or junior high school simply do not have the choice to transfer to another school in the district (Jimerson, 2003; Reeves, 2003). Logistically, school choice and SES are more beneficial to suburban and urban districts because students and parents have more schools to choose from and can choose to send their children to higher-performing schools (Jennings, 2006).

SES, another provision of NCLB, created an opportunity for eligible students to receive free supplemental academic support services outside the regular school day. Schools must provide students with the SES option after a school becomes a level 2 SIFI, which means that the school missed AYP for two years in a row and must begin implementing sanctions. SES providers are often external for-profit providers that deliver tutoring services to students on or off campus and either before or after school. In Wisconsin, SES providers are regulated through the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). SES providers must apply for eligibility through an agency review process. If the SES providers pass the review, DPI provides their names to the districts with level 2 SIFI schools. Parents can then, at district expense through reduction of Title I funds allocated to schools, choose SES providers to administer supplemental instruction to their children.

The studies that claim school choice and SES are beneficial to urban students also claim that an increase in a student's test scores occurs if the parents are actively involved, review

information on choice, and have access to good choice options (Hastings, 2008). Choice “threats” in which parents indicate that they will remove their student to a non-SIFI school modestly spur a low-performing school to do better (Cullen, Jacob, & Leavitt, 2003). There is little evidence that transferring to a non-SIFI school increases students’ test scores. In all cases (rural, suburban, and urban), parents value proximity to their neighborhood school or choice school. Further studies show that parents will choose the school with the highest mean test score, which increases with a student’s income and academic ability (Hastings, Kane, & Staeger, 2005). In all cases, these situations are most applicable to urban and suburban areas where schools are closer in proximity to where children live and there are more options for public (and private) schools. In rural areas, children have one option for school choice, and that is the school designated in need of improvement.

There is also research that demonstrates that school choice and SES provide no tangible benefit and that those students who transfer to a higher-performing or non-SIFI school actually do no better than they would in their home school. A longitudinal study sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) in 2007 found that there was no relationship or a slight relationship between a student’s school choice and SES options and an increase in the student’s achievement (Zimmer, et al., 2007). This confirms what other studies have shown: Transferring to a higher-performing school or receiving SES does not improve student achievement (Burch, 2007; Burch, et al., 2009). The result is that a district reserves 20% of a school’s Title I allocation for private services that have demonstrated no effect on improving student achievement. That 20% is not spent within the school where it arguably could be put to better use.



## **Education Policy Design and Implementation**

There is a superb body of research on policy design and implementation. The most important research, and perhaps the most cited, on implementation of federal policies at the local level was conducted by Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin when she was a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation. Her 1978 study on “Federal programs implementing and sustaining change” is what first interested me about the topic of Title I implementation challenges in rural schools. McLaughlin’s findings concluded that effective practices at the local level promoted what she called “mutual adaptation” and that local factors (rather than federal program guidelines or project methods) dominated project outcomes. In this case, a successful federal policy or federally sponsored project adapted to the reality of its institutional settings, while at the same time teachers and school administrators adapted their practices in response to the policy or project (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). McLaughlin revisited this study in 1990 and found that the findings still held a decade later. In the revisited study, McLaughlin reinforced the connection that teachers have to policy implementation in their classrooms and underscored that contexts of schools and communities play an even greater role than initially thought (McLaughlin, 1987, 1990). Her findings and reflections indicated that policy is “ultimately the problem of the smallest unit,” whether it is the locale where it is implemented or the classroom. Furthermore, policy will not mandate the outcomes at the local level; the individual who implements the policy ultimately determines the fate (1990).

On a more local level, a study of how a regional district implemented literacy coach reforms on 20 partner districts and schools concluded that it is the context at the most local level (in this case, the school) that determines the success or failure of the policy (Mangin, 2009). The teachers and administrators who implement the policy have the most control over whether the

policy either succeeds true to its design or perhaps succeeds at a modified level (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Mangin, 2009).

Kirp and Driver studied policy implementation longitudinally in a suburban California school district and how the district responded to years of federal and state mandates in the mid-1980s through 1994 (1995). What they found is that Title I and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) became tightly regulated and much narrower due to inappropriate spending of funds in the 1960s and 1970s. Districts had more rules to follow, which made for good compliance but made little sense pedagogically. Kirp and Driver also found that “present realities, prevailing relations among those who occupy different rungs of the federal-state-local ladder, are much more complicated now,” and that policy is not really conceived at the top and then carried out at the bottom of the ladder. Rather, states appear to have more control over proposing policies, and the local education agencies (LEAs) implement the policy (Elmore, 1980; Sabatier, 1986).

This literature suggests that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) will be implemented in different ways in different contexts. The design of federal education policy conceived at the “top” ultimately looks different when it is implemented at the local level. A parallel example would be in research that shows that “scaling up” a policy conceived at the local level would look differently and have different implications and outcomes when transplanted in other schools within a district, statewide, or in a national reform effort, as local contexts inevitably vary. Between the federal and the local levels are the interpretation of each state, layers of regulation, and varying interpretation of guidelines. Conversely, by the time the policy is implemented at the local level, it may exercise its effect differently depending on how it is shaped and enacted in the school. For the purposes of this research, the implementation of NCLB in rural areas will likely

look very different than implementation in other areas, particularly urban areas for which the policy seems to have been designed.

### **Poverty, Economics, and the Context of 21st Century Rural Communities**

There is an absolute drought of research information about poverty in the rural Midwest in the past 20 years. As one wanders through small-town Wisconsin, moves down country highways in both the southeastern corner and northeastern part of the state, and observes the abandoned or derelict barns and buildings, it is almost fitting, then, that researchers, too, have forgotten rural America.

Many factors led to changes in rural economics and populations in Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest. It must be noted first that there is a national perception that poverty in America is an urban problem (Tickamyer, A. & Duncan, C.M., 1990; Delaker, J. & Proctor, B., 1999); therefore, most research on poverty in the United States analyzes urban poverty. When one examines poverty regionally, such as poverty in the South or in Appalachia, more information and quality research are available on the causes and impacts of poverty in those regions. Yet with regard to recent peer-reviewed articles on rural poverty in the Midwest, there appears to be very little contemporary literature. Most of the information I was able to find on poverty in the Midwest and rural economics and education was located through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

The majority of the studies on rural poverty in the Midwest occurred from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. This coincides with the changes in U.S. economic policies that led to shifts in rural employment, a decline in manufacturing, and the farm crisis. Technological improvements decreased the human labor need on many farms, and many farming communities lacked the

amenities to keep younger populations from leaving (McGranahan, D.A., and Beale, C.L., 2002a). Lacking amenities, these small communities failed to attract new residents or retirees, thus increasing the likelihood of population decline (Deller, S.C., Tsung Hsiu, T., et.al, 2001; McGranahan, D., & Beale, C.L., 2002b). Furthermore, the farm crisis led many young adults to seek employment in larger towns or urban areas because they saw how hard their parents worked for very little income (Goetz, S.J. & Debertin, D.L., 1996). As rural communities age and jobs remain scarce, they have a disproportionate share of the U.S. poverty population. Like in poor urban communities, the persistence and severity of poverty in rural America can be linked to a limited opportunity structure that is the outcome of both past social and economic development policies and current economic transformation (Tinkamyer & Duncan, 1990).

The farm crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, changes in U.S. economic policies of the 1980s, and the decline in manufacturing in the 1980s and 1990s led to the rise of agribusiness and corporate farming (particularly livestock) in many Midwestern states (Knapp, T. 1995; Labao, L., & Meyer, K., 2001; Tinkamyer & Duncan, 1990). As families abandoned or lost their farms, corporate agriculture purchased the land and installed substantial agricultural operations focused on mass production. Farm consolidation of this magnitude seen in other Midwestern states, primarily Iowa and Indiana, has not happened on such a large scale in Wisconsin. Surprisingly, rural population decline and the loss of the manufacturing sector have not been researched thoroughly. In the context of school consolidation, for example, scholars addressed rural population declines mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet researchers have not investigated rural economic decline connected to the farm crisis as comprehensively as one would expect when between 1980 and 1990 many farming-dependent counties lost 20% of their residents (Goetz & Debertin, 1996).

The 1990s brought different challenges to rural economies in the form of big-box stores. It is difficult to discuss rural economics in the United States and not implicate the effects of Wal-Mart on the local economy. The most current research on rural economies surrounds the controversial discount store, and it has been well documented (Fishman, 2006). Some recent studies research the impact of Wal-Mart specifically on rural areas, employment rates, the decline of downtown commercial centers in small towns, and property values (Basker, 2005; Goetz & Rupasingha, 2006; Goetz & Swaminathan, 2006; Newmark & Zhang, 2008). In one particular and very interesting study, counties with more Wal-Mart stores or counties that added additional stores during a 10-year period experienced increased poverty among families living in those counties during the 1990s economic boom period, making a direct correlation between rural economic depressions and Wal-Mart (Goetz & Swaminathan, 2006). Local businesses are important to rural economies in that they provide employment (usually above minimum wage) and financial support to local schools through taxes, donations, and sponsorships, and that money is then reinvested locally. Wal-Mart effectively removed that tax base from rural communities (Bauch, 2001; Lyson, 2002).

### **Immigration to the Rural Midwest**

One of the more noticeable changes in rural America, specifically the Midwest, is the increase of Latino immigration. With a couple of exceptions, the majority of research on “emigration” to rural areas of the Midwest explores suburban sprawl and white America’s exodus from urban centers. However, specific to Wisconsin and many places throughout the Midwest, such as Iowa and Indiana, is the increase of Latino immigrants in rural areas previously dominated by white residents. These families and individuals moving to the Midwest are not migrant workers. It is well documented that the sudden influx of significant numbers of Latinos

in the rural Midwest stems from the recruitment of workers by food-processing plants and small factories springing up in rural areas (Millard, A., & Chapa, J., 2001). Many large food-processing plants relocated to rural areas throughout the Midwest because it was cheaper to operate in non-metropolitan areas.

Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides for the language instruction of non-English speakers. Very little funding is appropriated for this purpose outside of urban districts. Most rural school districts in Wisconsin receive less than \$10,000 annually for this purpose. Funding aside, most rural school districts are unprepared to instruct students whose first language is not English. In rural areas, it is difficult to recruit bilingual educators and expand existing programs (Cantu, 1995; Espinosa & Massey, 1997). Due to limited funds, most rural schools in Wisconsin cannot infrastructurally support dual-language or bilingual programs and instead provide a part-time translator to assist parents of English language learners (ELLs) with transitions to public school (Epstein, 2001; Flynn, 2005).

To complicate matters, there are studies that document both the support of Latino immigrants moving to the Midwest by their white neighbors as well as studies that demonstrate that sufficient racism is expressed toward newcomers. Many religious institutions, particularly Catholic churches, support Latino immigration to rural communities and have embraced the newcomers (Crane & Millard, 2001; Diaz McConnell, 2001). In many Midwest communities, there is evidence that because aggregate Latino immigration happened rapidly within a span of several years, racism and discrimination turned to acceptance much more quickly than during other immigration waves in the past (Dalla, 2004). As in urban areas, racism does happen, and it is documented that there are white neighbors who strongly and blatantly oppose immigration to rural communities in the Midwest (Dalla & Christensen, 2005). But overall, racism and

discrimination have been muted because new residents, no matter the ethnic background, breathe new life into rural communities suffering economic depressions and declining populations (Dalla, 2004; Dalla & Christensen, 2005; Gouveia, L. & Saenz, R., 2000). If Latinos experienced racism upon arrival in new rural communities, incidences of racism significantly declined in following years (Valdivia, C., et.al., 2008).

### **Summary of Themes from the Literature Guiding This Study**

The review of the literature set the context for this study with the objective of demonstrating that specific regulations in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) challenge rural schools and that certain requirements, even with the best intention, stretch already lean resources. These challenges also depend on the context of rural areas: the context within the school and the context surrounding the school in the local community.

First, there are the rules and regulations outlined in NCLB. Rural schools have historically struggled with small populations. In the context of NCLB, small populations result in larger variances in annual test data, affecting data validity but also placing schools on lists that identify them as in need of improvement. Additionally, student population variances make it difficult to plan the amount of Title I funding that a rural district receives each year. Other provisions, such as offering school choice and supplemental education services (SES) after a school becomes a level 2 SIFI (school identified for improvement), are also challenges to Title I rural schools that often do not apply but nonetheless add additional stress. Often students have no alternative schools to choose, and implementing these sanctions can prove to be very costly in already cash-strapped districts. Rather than using Title I money to enact whole-school improvement efforts, the money is funneled to outside private SES providers. If a school is

available through choice, students can take their Title I dollars with them in that transfer, resulting in fewer funds to the struggling school.

Rural schools have traditionally struggled with attracting and retaining qualified and effective principals and teachers. Rural locations are disassociated with urban and suburban areas that might contain teacher preparation colleges and lack partnerships with these institutions. Home-grown programs, in which districts recruit principals and teachers from their rural locations, have shown to be effective but need to be funded and encouraged at the state level in order to thrive. State education agencies (SEAs), such as the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), need to do more to prepare principals to work in high-poverty rural areas.

Second, there is the local context impacting and massaging the implementation of a federal policy. School administration, faculty, student populations, family affluence, facilities, community support, and the local economy all impact, directly or indirectly, the educational process in a local school. Two examples of variables that impact the direct educational process, for example, are the quality of teachers and the quality of systemic professional development. Professional development and instruction will look different in schools with weak instructional leadership than in buildings with strong instructional leadership and intentional professional development for staff. Outside the school building, school leadership cannot control numerous variables: the local economy, the distance that students travel to and from school, access to technology in homes, and parent involvement in students' education. Each of these variables looks different in every school community.

Finally, the last theme is the way in which policy is conceived at the executive level, debated and compromised at the legislative level, and then implemented at the state and local



levels of government. Policy is “ultimately the problem of the smallest unit.” If policy is designed with the urban educational context in mind but required of all contexts, it is the problem of the smallest unit to comply and ensure that the rules are followed in exchange for the federal dollars attached to the policy.

### **Cross-Case Study Analysis**

There are a couple of frameworks for cross-case analysis that guided this study. Robert Stake (1995, 2006) has several resources that I used and served as a primer to guide how I performed my data analysis and cross-case analysis for the cases. The method of coding the individual cases and then comparing the findings by classifying them under themes was the most useful component for this study. Additionally, Robert Yin’s (2009, 2012) work guided how I analyzed the two cases. His work suggested a matrix to organize the interviews; a matrix that I included in the methods section and also used to assist in interpretation of the data. Both resources proved to be invaluable in helping make sense of complicated and rich data from the various interviews.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

This research paper uses a qualitative multiple-case study that describes specific instances of how the design of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) generated unintended consequences when implemented in rural Wisconsin schools. The units of focus for this study, or cases, will be rural Title I schools in Wisconsin. Merriam (1998) explains that the benefit of descriptive multiple-case studies as qualitative research is that the research can be more compelling overall. Another benefit of case study research is that it is more contextual (Merriam, 1998). Case study research is appropriate for this study because it examines how each case's context experienced different outcomes and challenges as a result of a one-size-fits-all educational policy such as NCLB. Every school is different. There are different faculty and school administration; there is variety in the student population and the parent involvement. These contextual factors also contribute to whether proper implementation takes place. As Kirp and Driver indicated in their longitudinal study (1995), small variations in contextual factors can determine whether the policy is implemented successfully in one building and not in another.

### **Research Design**

This multiple-case study compares two rural Title I-funded schools in different districts in Wisconsin. I did not select the subjects or schools randomly; instead, I selected subjects based on characteristics of interest in the study. In this study, I desired rural schools with Title I programs recently reviewed or monitored by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The case study method is suitable for this project because it provides valid and useful evidence about Title I implementation in rural schools.

Driftless School District is located in the “driftless” and unglaciated area of southwestern Wisconsin, and it is within one hour’s driving distance to two cities with populations of more than 200,000. The other, Northeastern School District, is located in a sparsely populated area of the state, among Native American reservations and federally protected forest preserves. School and community demographics are similar in both districts with the population of white students at about 75% of the student population. Both local economies have a history of mining, while Northeastern is also known for logging. Other similarities, as well as important differences, will be described in the actual multiple-case study. However, I want to underscore that the districts were chosen because they have characteristics that provide particularly useful insight into the research problem and because both have been reviewed by the State Department of Education fairly recently. Since their Title I programs have been evaluated for compliance with federal laws in recent years, I insured that the individuals I interviewed would have some familiarity with Title I.

The propositions described below are characteristics the literature suggested are issues with Title I implementation in rural districts, and therefore selecting schools with these characteristics allowed opportunity to investigate these issues. The first proposition asserts that smaller schools, particularly those in rural areas away from densely populated urban areas, have a difficult time attracting and retaining teachers. The literature explains how No Child Left Behind (NCLB) made the process even more difficult with its “highly-qualified teacher” (HQ) provision. In summary, the HQ provision states that a Title I-receiving school must have teachers certified in each area they teach. However, the provision established that to be certified as HQ, a teacher must have an undergraduate major in the subject he or she teaches. For example, to teach science in any school, a licensed teacher must have a major in physics,

chemistry, biology, or geology (among others). If this teacher instructs additional science subject areas, he or she must have additional majors to be considered “highly-qualified.” This provision is prohibitive for many teachers who teach multiple subjects, particularly in smaller schools where there are not enough students to have multiple sections of just one academic subject. Additionally, there may not be enough sections of a subject area to warrant hiring a full-time teacher of a specific subject. Splitting a position into two subject areas or hiring personnel on a part-time basis in a rural area may make some teaching positions difficult to fill.

The second proposition identified in the literature is that other requirements of Title I programming, such as private school services, parent involvement, and adequate yearly progress (AYP) parameters and sanctions, are cumbersome requirements for smaller schools and that rural schools will comply with the practices to the best of their ability. If they are not in compliance with these requirements, it is not intentionally so. Rather they will “do what they need to do to” meet the needs of their students; if it is against the rules, they acknowledge this fact and rectify the issues if they are caught out of compliance (K. Bergstrom, personal communication, January 24, 2012). Research over the past 10 years of NCLB implementation has shown that rural schools have more inconsistency in year-to-year test results as a factor of having small student populations. One or two students can determine whether a school meets AYP as designated under NCLB or is labeled a failing school. After they are identified as failing, rural schools — and small school districts in general — cannot meet the sanctions outlined in NCLB for failure to meet AYP. School choice and supplemental educational services (SES) sanctions, crafted by legislators with the best intention of targeted groups of students who need supplemental academic services, are difficult, if not impossible, to implement in rural school districts. School choice is often not an option because in many small school districts, and rural schools in

particular, there are simply no other choices for public schooling than the student's current district. If there is a choice, distance to the other school and longer bus rides might be the prevalent issues deterring a child from attending the other school. There are more choices for SES providers in urban and suburban areas simply because the providers want to reach the largest student population possible to increase their financial bottom line. SES providers often choose not to serve rural areas because distance is also a factor impacting their profit margin.

The last proposition is that the rural context has changed in the Midwest in the past 30 years. In an economy that was primarily agricultural and driven by manufacturing through the 1980s, the past 20 to 30 years have brought incredible changes to rural communities. Many of these rural areas struggle to retain jobs that sustain the middle class and individuals who may leave for employment in larger towns. Immigration to rural areas, primarily from Mexico, has also changed the economic and cultural fabric of the Midwest's rural areas.

### **Study Sample**

My primary goal in using purposive sampling was to select rural schools with Title I programs. I also wanted to ensure that the subjects interviewed in these schools had significant familiarity with Title I programming. I chose to use the state education agency's (SEA) Title I monitoring findings to select my districts because I wanted to interview individuals in the rural schools who would be familiar with Title I requirements as a result of their recent experience with a Title I monitoring visit. The propositions identified in the literature review suggest that schools with these characteristics will provide fruitful insight into the research questions. I knew upfront that I would be able to find some schools in Wisconsin that met either all of the propositions described in the preceding section or would at least meet some of the proposition and would have been recently monitored by the SEA. For example, very few rural schools in

Wisconsin have been identified for improvement since 2003; therefore, the adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirement and school sanctions would not become a part of the study. Furthermore, there was the possibility that some No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, such as serving private schools with Title I funds, may not be a part of the study because many rural areas lack the ability to meet that requirement (such as not having private schools within district boundaries). Ultimately I wanted two schools monitored by the SEA that 1) were located in rural areas of the state, 2) had smaller student populations (fewer than 1,000 students in the district), and 3) indicated increases in poverty trends since the 2000 U.S. Census and 2010 U.S. Census. My propositions yielded three results. I chose two schools from the finalists: one in the northern part of the state and the other in the southwestern corner of the state with the desire to provide contrast in the multiple-case studies.

Upon further review of the selected schools, I was able to find some common characteristics. Historically, both schools' communities are rooted economically in mining. In the last century, however, the southwestern community embraced agriculture after the mining industry waned, while the northern community embraced tourism and recreational economies. Demographically, both schools contain nearly the same percentage of white students (about 85% in both districts). The southwestern school's minority population is mostly Hispanic, non-white, while the northern school's minority population is Native American, with a small percentage of students of Hispanic origin.

I learned that the southwestern school experienced stability in the school population in the past five years and projected potential growth in coming years, even as their population trend over the last twenty years demonstrated decline. The result of this was that the community and surrounding areas experienced decline in the traditional or native white population but

experienced growth in immigrant population. Related to this, as I analyzed monitoring documents, I discovered that the southwestern school struggled with implementing English language learner (ELL) programming because it had little funds to create a viable program amid the rapid growth of its Spanish-speaking population. Further investigation of this community and its demographic shifts solidified my desire to study this community as it became apparent that it experienced cultural changes, language barriers, and challenges associated with educating and assimilating new immigrant students.

I also wanted to study a school that was located in the northern part of the state that would be more “stereotypically” what the general public, statewide or nationally, would picture when they thought “Northwoods” Wisconsin. I was fortunate to find an appropriate school amid supper clubs and snowmobile trails. When I visited the community in the months of November 2011 and February 2012, the quiet was uncommonly eerie, and the community had a “ghost town” aura as the vacation-property and tourism population deserted town for the winter and spring. I attempted to visit the library in the northern district, but it was closed both times I visited (once on a Friday and the other on a Sunday), as it kept irregular hours. The school principal I spoke with put me in touch with a local woman considered to be the town historian. After several informal conversations over the phone and one in-person visit, I was able to amply describe the community and provide a description for the multiple-case study.

The southwestern community’s population lived there year-round, and the town did not give me the feeling that it was abandoned. There were some closed stores and vacant buildings, but overall, it appeared to have more verve. I visited this community twice for observations. The main community is about 90 minutes from my home, which made it more accessible than the five-and-a-half-hour drive to visit the northern community in my study. Overall, the

southwestern community was easier to study and largely seemed more accessible. The southwestern community has a local newspaper that is published every weekday, and the downtown area was much more active in the winter and spring during my visits. One of the restaurants I visited had Wi-Fi Internet access, and during both visits, I observed several individuals of various ages using the Wi-Fi connection with their laptops. I also felt more welcome in the southwestern community and felt as though I blended in with the local population.

In all, I felt the two communities met the needs of the research laid out above very well. I contacted the Title I coordinators of the districts to see if they would be amenable to interviews, and to my delight, both agreed. Initially I was planning on interviewing only the two individuals. As the conversations continued, a snowballing effect occurred when both administrators recommended that I speak to other individuals in each district. Ultimately I spoke to a total of five individuals in both communities. This opportunity was serendipitous because these five individuals provided me with very interesting and diverse perspectives on Title I implementation in their schools. I would not have been able to provide rich detail had I not spoken to the three additional individuals. Each interview took about an hour to two hours (see Appendix A for consent form and Appendix B for the interview script).

### **Conceptual Framework**

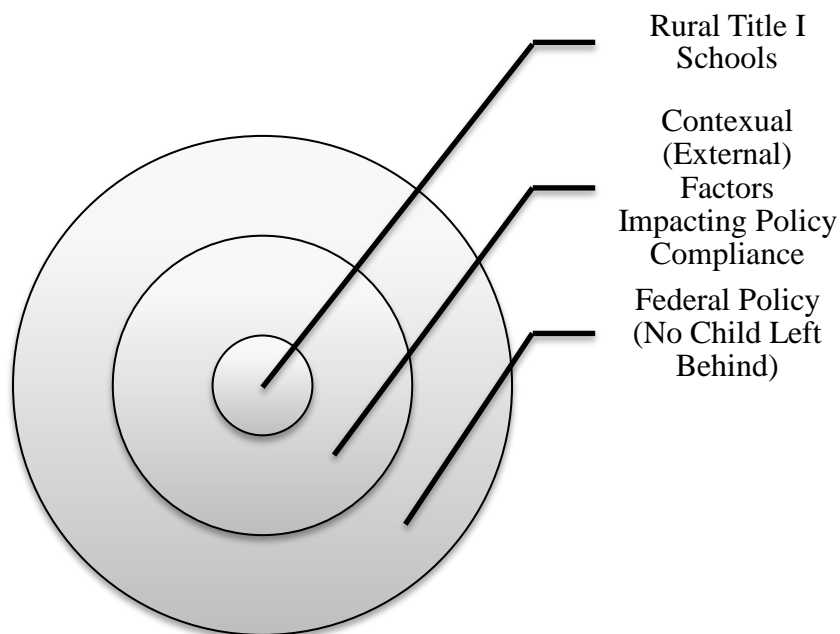
For the purposes of this study, I chose to use McLaughlin's framework of policy implementation (1987). Specifically this study explores the sources of conflict that emerge as rural schools follow policies crafted at the federal level (Congress and the U.S. Department of Education [USDE]) and implemented by the state education agency (SEA). Additionally, this study explores which policy design and context factors impede compliance with the provisions



of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). I chose to study the rural school as the base unit of analysis because the effects of implementing the policy at that base unit are most noticeable and potentially have the most likelihood for variation in implementation. I also considered that the context of each rural school is different and was curious if one rural school, if based on that context, could implement a policy successfully or more completely while another rural school might not be successful. I also wanted to document how the rural school might struggle with implementation and how a well-meaning policy can have unintended consequences or challenges at the local level.

The following target diagram is the basis of the conceptual framework for this study and is used to demonstrate the relationships between federal policy as both the underlying and surrounding policy in a rural Title I school. The rural school's compliance and implementation of NCLB is determined by the external, or contextual, factors. Schools find themselves potentially in conflict as they are to address the very real and local needs impeding policy compliance as well as the basic federal requirements in order to secure federal education funds. This diagram suggests that rural schools are insulated by their external or contextual factors. These factors also influence how the policy is implemented in the rural school. The federal policy in this diagram is completely removed from the rural school's unique situation, separated by the contextual or external factors that impact policy compliance at the local level.

Figure 3

*Conceptual Framework Target Diagram*

It is the federal-state-local dynamic of education policy implementation that is the most relevant to this study. Implementation, compliance, and oversight involve all levels of government (Bardach, 1977). The federal level designs the policy, the state level provides guidance for implementation, and the local level is the unit held accountable for the policy's success or failure. Successful implementation of federal policy depends entirely on the capacity of those in the local institutions (McLaughlin, 1987). McLaughlin explains that policy success depends on two broad factors: local capacity and will (p. 172, 1987). Sufficient capacity — specifically adequate state and federal funding, adequate staffing, building and district leadership, expertise, and professional development at state, district, and school building levels — is needed to ensure compliance with a policy (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Fireston, Fuhrman & Kirst, 1989; McLaughlin, 1987, 1989). Will, or the motivation and commitment of those

implementing the policy, reflect the implementers' value of the policy. I argue that contextual contingencies are critical to success of policy at the most local level and take McLaughlin's design an additional step further in this study.

For policy to succeed, it is essential for buy-in to occur at the most local level, perhaps with teachers or school administrators (McLaughlin, 1987). Support at the state level, through guidance and technical assistance, is essential because the state level holds the local level accountable for implementation (while the state is held accountable by the federal level). However, contextual factors, such as personnel implementing or interpreting the policy, local poverty, immigration and emigration, or even the vitality of the local economy, may impede the successful implementation of federal policy, no matter how well-designed. Under the most ideal circumstances, a policy can be expected to target its intended outcomes and succeed.

Several factors are extremely important to successful policy implementation. The first is the active commitment of and support from school district leadership (McLaughlin, 1989, 1990). The district's role is critical as a unit to interpret policy and implement it at the local level (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005). Equally critical are the roles that building-level leaders play in helping teachers understand rules and requirements of policy and in influencing how those under their supervision implement the policy at local levels (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005). McLaughlin describes "implementation contingencies" from her experiences in the field. Her experience in organizational compliance and policy implementation argues that it is incredibly difficult to "make something happen, most especially across layers of government and institutions."

This study analyzes Title I implementation in rural schools. Title I is the largest federal education program. Its intended outcome is to improve the education of disadvantaged children by providing supplemental funds to high-poverty public schools. The multiple-case study method is ideal for this study because it allows the researcher to directly inquire with the local education agency (LEA), or the rural school, to determine the contextual factors that perhaps impede compliance with NCLB. The literature indicates that both rural and urban schools struggle with attracting and retaining highly-qualified (HQ). Both settings struggle with adequate yearly progress (AYP) for their own unique reasons; in rural schools, this situation is due to the volatility of smaller populations tested annually and child poverty, while low scores in urban schools may be due to higher concentrations of children in poverty and more diverse ethnic and English language learner (ELL) populations.

Propositions outlined in this research argue that the actual design of the policy impedes progress and implementation at the local level when the local level is, in particular, a rural school. Federal policy, often designed as a one-size-fits-all policy, has different applications and consequences based on the size of the unit where it is applied — in this case, rural schools. In much research, the contextual factors are missing: the realities of rural life in the Midwest, the realities of operating a rural school, and the variation in policy implementation simply because individual agents or administrators are different. Different contextual factors inevitably impact how policies are implemented in local schools. As a result, no two rural schools are exactly alike in how NCLB implementation occurs or in the eventual outcomes. These contextual factors are not taken into account when the federal government designs educational policy and then requires compliance in exchange for funding rural districts. The federal government attempts to control

for implementation variation by charging SEAs with monitoring federal programs to ensure compliance.

I hypothesize that a relationship is present between the contextual factors (such as poverty, rural economy, population decline, and immigration, for example) and the challenges that rural schools face in Title I compliance. In the data gathering process, I use this hypothesis to place my data into various intellectual “bins”: policy design such as the definition of HQ teachers and accountability mandates to avoid financial sanctions; private school equitable services; and the historical, social, cultural, and economic components, such as poverty, joblessness, and remote location, which impact a rural school.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Information on these cases was gathered from multiple data sources. Multiple data source collections allow for enhancement of data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). The main source of data collection was interviews. The interviews contained open-ended and semi-constructed questions. There are benefits to this form of inquiry in research. For example, open-ended questions allow the participants to engage in discussion with the researcher. It also allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions or probing questions to gain a greater understanding and context of each participant’s experiences with the topic (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Keval, 1996). I followed Keval and Brinkman’s (2009) seven stages of an interview inquiry: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, verifying, analyzing, and reporting.

As I designed the study, I clarified the purpose of the interviews before I began the interview process and before I designed the questions. In crafting the interview questions, I kept two things in mind: the individuals I planned to speak with had 1) knowledge of Title I and

federal education policy and 2) knowledge of their rural setting for context. This pre-existing knowledge helped in the interview process; having this knowledge was a rich and productive way to gain access to each participant's in-depth experience.

After I identified schools for the study, I interviewed the school administrative personnel for the Title I program that included building administration and Title I program administration (See Appendix A consent form and Appendix B for interview questions). I made sure to provide introductions to the study, including the purpose of the study, and asked permission to record the interview. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and then later transcribed to ensure accuracy and to generate a record that could be referred to during later research. The interviews were archived after they became electronic documents. Following the interviews, I visited each community of the targeted audience at least twice to observe the local economy and customs.

After the transcription concluded, I began the analysis stage. I used a cross-case analysis framework developed by Robert Stake (1995). Stake's cross-case analysis framework is based on a constructivist paradigm that truth is relative and subject to perspective. This research method allows the subject to tell his or her story, which enables the researcher to better understand the participant's actions (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This multiple-case study is, according to Stake, "intrinsic." The purpose of an intrinsic case study is to provide insight into an issue or help refine a theory. The key stage of the multiple-case analysis is the comparison between cases, or cross-case analysis. Stake identifies three tracks for doing this. The tracks may be thought of as sequential processes, or they may be self-contained. The first, which maintains the greatest level of situational detail, identifies themes

in each of the cases. The second moves from themes to the identification of factors. The third describes the most difficult part — cross-case analysis. The cross-case analysis involves generating a case-ordered descriptive matrix that establishes a basis for comparing the cases on a number of factors.

The following table, Table 1, contains the coding list and the keywords derived from the interview context. The coding was done manually. First, the transcript text of each interview was classified into the categories of ‘Policy Design’, ‘Policy Implementation,’ and ‘Local Context.’ The three categories of policy design, policy implementation, and local context, are used to distinguish between which issues raised in the interview related to NCLB, or policy design; NCLB implementation; or whether the issues are a result of the local environment or context. \*Technology is classified as implementation because technology is needed to simplify and ameliorate the implementation process. It could be classified as a local issue, depending on whether the capacity exists or not.

Table 1

*Coding List and Key Words List*

Policy Design	Policy Implementation	Local Context
AYP: Accountability and high stakes testing, sanctions	COM: Compliance burdens	ALC: Alcohol
DIF: Differences between rural and urban locations	FLX: Flexibility	DIS: Distances between home and school
HS: Homeless students	PI: Parent involvement	DRU: Drugs (marijuana and crystal meth)
HQ: Highly qualified teachers	PS: Private schools	ELL: Increase in immigration
PAR: Paraprofessionals	TEC: Technology*	JOB: Joblessness, unemployment
		POV: Rural poverty
		RES: Lack of resources related to rural location (after school programs, shelters, food pantries)
		SOC: Social opportunities



The next table, Table 2, is the partially-ordered meta-matrix that I used to distinguish between which of the variables are NCLB-related and which variables are simply local issues.

Table 2

*Partially-ordered Meta-matrix*

NCLB or Title I Rule	Other Education Issue	Rural Context
AYP: Accountability and high stakes testing, sanctions	HS: Homeless students	ALC: Alcohol
HQ: Highly qualified teachers		DIF: Differences between rural and urban locations
PAR: Paraprofessionals		DIS: Distances between home and school
COM: Compliance burdens		DRU: Drugs (marijuana and crystal meth)
PI: Parent involvement		ELL: Increase in immigration
PS: Private schools		FLX: Flexibility
		JOB: Joblessness, unemployment
		POV: Rural poverty
		RES: Lack of resources related to rural location (after school programs, shelters, food pantries)
		SOC: Social opportunities
		TEC: Technology

Finally, Table 3, contains the cross-case matrix of Title I challenges in rural schools that I used as the foundation for the cross-case analysis and the comparison of the two cases. The table below provides only a sample of all the issues and how the data was interpreted in the study. The entire cross-case matrix can be found in Appendix C.

Table 3

*Sample of the Cross-case Matrix of Title I Challenges in Rural Schools*

Title I or Rural Indicator	Similarities	Differences
AYP: Accountability and high stakes testing, sanctions	Small cell sizes may lead to volatility in scores year-to-year. Driftless and Northeastern have similar subgroups of low-income or free-reduced-lunch, special education students, and ethnic minorities.	Subgroup for ELL students applies only to Driftless Elementary School.  Northeastern does not have a language minority subgroup.
HQ: Highly qualified teachers	Driftless and Northeastern expressed trouble attracting and retaining teachers to teach in small schools.  Driftless and Northeastern stated that people who teach in the schools are vested in the community or are tied to the community.  Neither school is very close to a college from where they could recruit student teachers.  Driftless and Northeastern desired more flexibility in staffing and that they have trouble hiring teachers on a part-time basis.	Driftless Elementary School appeared more innovative in recognizing that they have a problem attracting and retaining teachers, so they make the positions attractive and invest in their personnel through “growing their own” teachers.
PAR: Paraprofessionals	Paraprofessionals were initially difficult to certify as highly qualified, but the state became more flexible and the issue was resolved.	Driftless cut their paraprofessionals due to budgetary concerns and invested only in teachers.

The benefit of cross-case analysis is that it is a flexible qualitative method in which researchers can gain a meta-perspective on an issue. Challenges are associated with conducting a cross-case analysis in that drawing fair comparisons between cases is difficult. I reread the interview transcripts and made notes in the margins about items I found interesting, comments that supported information found in the literature review, and themes that emerged from the collective respondents' answers. I then began crafting the case studies based on some of the quotations taken from the interviews, and I simply began writing by first outlining common characteristics or similarities in the issues that Title I administrators described as they implemented programming in their schools. With the propositions serving as a template, I began to relate quotes and context from the interviews to a relevant proposition. I then did the same with my on-site observations. From a sociological perspective, it was interesting for me to relate my experiences to the propositions that I discovered during preliminary research. Third, I used the archival information to provide more flesh to my outlines and continued writing each case to tell the stories of Driftless and Northeastern as they materialized through all the data.

### **Validity**

The organization of the analysis, especially through identifying themes in each respondent's answers, allowed me to triangulate each respondent's answer. I was able to determine that the information provided to me from the subjects was valid information because each respondent affirmed information I learned through the literature review or in my own experience as a Title I administrator, or it related directly to an experience of another respondent in the study. Finally, I shared, or reported the results in both the case study description and the analysis section.

The convergence of multiple data points adds strength to the findings. To achieve this, I used additional artifacts to add to the description of each case. Archival records such as Title I/No Child Left Behind (NCLB) monitoring reports were used to identify potential districts, and an analysis of the reports generated two districts of similar size and student demographics but in opposite corners of the state for the final study. Other archival data included information on the communities from local historical societies, the state historical society, local newspapers, and school newsletters. Interviews were conducted over the period of one month, and visits to the community followed in order to gain direct observations of the local surroundings and culture.

I followed a standard protocol to maintain anonymity of the individuals interviewed. First, I generalized the names of the schools for which they served as administrators by naming the schools after regions found in Wisconsin. After the interviews concluded and the conversations were transcribed, I saved the files with a pseudonym as the file name. The genders of the individuals remained accurate in the multiple-case study, but their first and last names were changed to protect their identities.

## Chapter 4

### Case Studies

Both cases are meant to serve an illustrative purpose. They are intended to be used with each other and serve as a basis for comparison. The sources for each case are similar: I interviewed between two and four Title I program personnel from each school district to gain an understanding of their rural school's context with an overlay of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Title I requirements. I discussed the application of NCLB in the rural school setting and what the rules mean for the school's ability to comply with those requirements. In both instances, I spoke with at least two administrators from the districts who also live in the community. I visited each community twice to better understand it, and I visited the local historical society or library to provide more depth and history to my research.

The role of the cases is to illustrate how rural schools struggle as they implement NCLB policies. NCLB was written with urban schools in mind, which is something that all Title I personnel in the rural school districts noted in our conversations. While the application of NCLB is one-size-fits-all, it challenges and sometimes impacts and impedes the work of rural school administrators in a variety of ways outlined in the introduction: staffing issues, limitations to curriculum opportunities, disadvantageous funding, and penalization for an increasingly diverse student body. In urban areas, schools have many more resources for students of which take advantage: libraries with Internet and other technological access, food pantries, after-school programs, and alternate transportation. Rural life is not more difficult than urban life; it is simply different. Each location has its own challenges, yet when a policy is written with one location specifically in mind, the other — in these cases, the rural location — suffers.

The cases are lightly disguised and presented in this manner: I used pseudonyms for the community and school names as well as for individuals who are specifically mentioned in the interviews. One case, Driftless School District, is located in the community of Hilldale in southwestern Wisconsin; the other case, Northeastern School District, is located in the community of Leopold in northeastern Wisconsin, about midway on a diagonal line between Lake Superior to the north and west and Green Bay, Wisconsin, to the south and east. Both districts are considered to be consolidated, encompassing more communities and those schoolchildren rather than simply the children living within village or township boundaries. School demographics are similar, and each district has fewer than 1,000 students attending all three schools: elementary school, middle school, and high school. The racial demographics are slightly varied: Although the majority of students in both school districts are white, the minority population in Driftless is Hispanic, while the minority population in Northeastern is Native American Indian and of Hmong descent.

### **Driftless School District**

Driftless School District is located in Blanchard County, nestled among the unglaciated rolling hills of the “driftless region” of the state of Wisconsin. The school district encompasses four townships within a county about 50 miles southeast of Madison and 50 miles to the northeast of the Quad Cities. Welsh and Norwegian immigrants settled these communities for mining purposes in the mid-19th century. The immigrants brought customs such as their language, religious beliefs, and other cultural components such as cuisine, farming practices, food preservation habits, and architecture. They settled in Hilldale to mine for lead, mostly; however, they decided to stay because they found the climate to be temperate and similar to that

of their native lands. After mining declined in the late 19th century, dairy farming took its place as the most important industry in the area.

As mentioned in the methods section, downtown Hilldale exhibits promise of economic revitalization. The community is tidy, and it is apparent that residents take great pride in their community. Interview subjects commented that the community is close-knit, and its remoteness from larger cities encourages residents to support local businesses. The reading specialist interviewed mentioned that when the schools “need” something, the local businesses are likely to contribute funds because they see their “support put to good use” (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Hilldale is quaint as well as bustling. The main downtown street is very narrow, giving off an “old-world vibe.” There is a hardware store with an antique Pepsi sign in the window and a gas station with an old Sinclair logo. There is an ice cream stand and a couple of diners. One of the busier places on the main street was a coffee shop that had free wireless Internet. The library and the post office are both busy during the day, and the Veterans for Foreign Wars (VFW) were advertising a fish fry in partnership with the Catholic church.

Among the rolling hills, dairy farms dot the countryside. Many of these farms used to be family farms, settled initially by Norwegian immigrants. Farmers in this area historically make a modest living. According to one longtime school administrator, Karl Bergstrom, farmers were not necessarily “well-off,” but they had steady income to invest in their communities.

Their children came to school clothed and fed, and parents, when they could, were involved with the school (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview, January 25, 2012).

He witnessed firsthand how some families “lost everything” in the farm crisis when food prices bottomed out and previously low interest rates on farm loans increased suddenly and rapidly. Farmers could not afford to take out their operating loans or pay them back to the bank at the end of the season because of the soaring interest rates. He also noted that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, farmers had to find work off the farm in order to supplement their farm incomes.

As a result, kids left the community after they graduated high school. They didn’t want to farm. If their parents were lucky enough to still have the farm after the recession in the early ’80s, their kids noted how hard their parents worked in order to get by on very little (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview, January 25, 2012).

Rural populations decreased when the younger generation left and the rural communities population grew older. The farm crisis of the 1980s permanently altered the agricultural economy and the social makeup of many areas of the Midwest; Hilldale, in southwestern Wisconsin, was not exempt.

In the past decade, many family farms stayed in business because they adjusted to the changing agricultural landscape and embraced the cultural and economic shift toward organic farming. Numerous farms in the region are now Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, which provide organic produce through “shares” to members who live off the farm. Many shareholders live in Madison or the Quad Cities. An organic dairy plant, one of the largest in the Midwest, established itself in 1988 as a side-project of several dairy farmers who desired to expand their business and bring organic milk and cheese products to larger markets. It is one of



the larger employers in the area and established vocational education and agricultural education partnerships with neighboring schools.

Wisconsin's Hispanic population was heavily concentrated in the urban, southeastern parts of the state in 1990, but now it is increasingly dispersed in rural areas. Blanchard County, where Driftless School District is one of three school districts, experienced a 262% increase in its Latino population from 1990 to 2007. After the farm crisis ended, farmers who still owned farms began buying up neighboring farms to increase their acreage to remain competitive. Larger farm operations meant that farmers could hire more workers, yet not many local residents were left ready to pick up this work. From 2000 to 2010, the immigration of Spanish-speaking children and their families to Hilldale and its surrounding communities increased exponentially.

In Driftless in 1999, I believe we had three Spanish-speaking children at the elementary school...Now we have 32 Spanish speakers in a population of about 300 students (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview January 25, 2012)

Adam Shulls, the principal of Driftless Elementary School and a lifelong Hilldale resident, remarked:

We were once a school district in decline, having conversations every so often about whether we should consolidate further or close our doors. The Hispanic population has breathed new life into this district (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Immigrants moved to south-central and southwestern Wisconsin increasingly over the last decade to work on the dairy farms in the region. Dairies employ about 5,300 immigrants in

Wisconsin, making up an estimated 40% of the industry's workforce, up sharply from about 5% a decade earlier, according to the UW-Madison Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATs). In a region populated by dairies, it is no surprise that more Spanish-speaking students are in the public schools.

With that number of students speaking Spanish, honestly, we are ill-equipped to serve them. We have one Spanish teacher, and we don't have an ELL [English language learner] program. We receive about \$600 for Title III (federal funds for 'Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students'), which isn't enough to hire a translator for our district... Clearly \$600 doesn't go very far (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Despite challenges in serving Spanish-speaking children effectively, the increased diversity through immigration has, as Shulls put it, "breathed new life into small rural communities" such as Hilldale. But the global industrialization and the lack of opportunities in rural communities brought challenges such as drug abuse and high unemployment to rural areas of southwest Wisconsin. According to Bergstrom:

The schools just deal with it. We serve all kids. If they are hungry, we feed them. If they need school supplies, we buy them, and if they don't have the proper clothes for the elements, teachers put their money together, and the next thing you know, the child has a jacket or gym clothes (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview January 25, 2012).

In a district where the poverty rate in the schools, based on a count of free and reduced lunch applications, is 82%, evidence of poverty is everywhere. Bergstrom continues:

I have seen more generosity in rural communities than anywhere else I've ever been. It is not uncommon for a high school student to bring several sandwiches in his lunch just because he knows one or two of his friends won't be able to bring a lunch that day. It is not unusual for a teacher, who notices a child doesn't have the appropriate clothing for the weather, to say, 'Oh look, I found this bag of clothes in my son's closet — I hope you'll take them.' I know teachers feed kids who are hungry. I've seen teachers bring food or give a child some lunch money, particularly at the high school, where I know some kids are ashamed to take assistance for food (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview January 25, 2012).

Bergstrom tells a story about a girl who was friends with his daughter in the 1970s when he was a new teacher in the area:

There was a girl, Jessie, who was in my daughter's grade back in 1979. My wife was the Girl Scouts troop leader, and Jessie and my daughter were chosen to represent the state of Wisconsin in 1979 for the international Girl Scout Roundup. They were going to go on a trip to Interlaken, Switzerland. I remember my wife and I, we were able to pull the money together, and although it was a financial stretch, we got the \$2,000 so that our daughter could go. And Jessie told my wife, 'There is no way I can go.' Jessie's dad lost his farm in the farm crisis, and he had a farm implement business on the side; I know he lost that, too. Her mom worked

at Cousin's Cafe in town as a waitress or a cashier or something. Well, my wife called up Jessie's mom and explained about the trip and the cost, and after some silence, [Jessie's] mom said, 'I'll do my best to get the money together' (Bergstrom, Driftless School administrator, interview January 25, 2012).

Each individual interviewed from the Driftless School District remarked about the generosity of the community's individuals and the kindness that permeates the community fabric. Everyone remarked about the connection that rural business owners and farmers have to the students and the pride that they have in their local schools. Bergstrom further illustrates this point:

The people of this community are its heart and soul. Would you know that in two weeks, this community raised the \$2,000 that Jessie needed to go to the Girl Scout Roundup? Her mom made some signs, and her friends, her coworkers made doughnuts and cookies. Jessie's dad's friends at the fire station, they were selling doughnuts and coffee on Saturday and Sunday morning outside the fire station and the gas station, and in two weeks, they had enough money to send her to Switzerland (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview January 25, 2012).

Hilldale is not without other challenges than changes to agricultural economic conditions and immigration. Inevitably illegal drugs find their ways into most communities, but one particular synthetic drug, crystal methamphetamine, or "crystal meth," according to Title I reading specialist Teresa Gustafson, has a "vise grip" on Blanchard County and on many rural American communities.

Meth is popular in western Wisconsin. It's cheap, and kids know where to get it. They find people on Facebook or other Web sites, meet up with them, and the rest is history (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Based on statistics from the Office of Justice Assistance, synthetic drug arrests (which include methadone such as crystal meth) in rural Wisconsin have increased steadily each year since 1997. Between 1997 and 2001, arrests for sale of synthetics increased 157.8%; arrests for possession of synthetics increased 154% (Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance, 2001, 2004, 2008). To illustrate how crystal meth abuse is a rural problem, Office of Justice Assistance statistics compared Milwaukee County drug arrests to those of other Wisconsin counties. The sale of synthetics in Milwaukee County decreased 35.7% from 2001 to 2004; in other Wisconsin counties, the sale of synthetics increased 81.4% over the same time period. The number of people arrested for possession of synthetics in Milwaukee County increased by 38.9% from 2001 to 2004, while in rural Wisconsin, the number of people arrested for possession of synthetics increased 100% (Office of Justice Assistance, 2001, 2004).

We don't have the money to focus on drug abuse prevention or drug awareness, nor do we have the resources to help those who are addicted to drugs, unlike larger communities. It would be nice to have a treatment center or the money to provide more educational opportunities to demonstrate to kids the harmful effects of drugs, particularly meth (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Despite the issues of illicit drug abuse in the region, both Gustafson and Shulls claim that illegal drugs have not made their way into the schools. They acknowledge that it is a problem in the greater community, and although they wish there were more resources to address the problems, they do what they can through local partnerships to educate the students.

## **Title I Challenges in Driftless Elementary School**

### **English Language Learners**

Very few of the Spanish-speaking children who move with their parents to the Driftless region to work on the dairy farms are fluent in English, which poses additional challenges for the public schools charged with educating them. Adam Shulls remarked:

We don't have a translator, so it's me and my high school Spanish getting by [communicating] with the parents. We are quickly evolving to meet the needs of those kids, but it's not something we have district experience with [doing] (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

The language issue relates to the challenges posed to small schools with Title I rules on licensing and hiring highly-qualified (HQ) teachers.

So let's talk about licensing here. An ESL [English as a Second Language] or ELL [English Language Learner] professional wouldn't want to work here to serve the majority of white kids and a handful of ELL students on a part-time basis (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

The assumption is that these professionals would prefer to work in a larger school district where they could use their skills on a full-time basis.

In Driftless, the funding isn't there to help [Spanish-speaking families], and the local expertise isn't there. So if we have an influx of special education students, for example, we have a network of people to talk to, but when it's ELL, we can call the CESA [Cooperative Educational Service Agency], which is a start, but it's been an awful long time since that one particular ESL resource has been in a classroom working with kids. You lose a lot [of time making the transition], and we don't have a lot of resources (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

One of those missing resources is funding, and another is human resources. If rural schools are held to the same accountability standards as urban schools, which presumably have such resources to educate immigrant children, it is challenging and unfair to small schools without these resources to be held to the same standards.

### **Equitable Services to Private Schools**

Another issue for which rural schools are held to the same standard as urban schools is the provision that mandates that private schools with eligible Title I students are also served with public Title I funds. The provision forces public school administrators to visit each private or independent school within district boundaries to offer Title I services in reading and mathematics to private school students. In larger districts, administrators often devote a part-time person to administer Title I in private schools, including all the paperwork and student instruction.

However, in small rural schools, that responsibility belongs to administrators who are already stretched for time.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) rules on private school equitable participation require that public school administration contact and consult with private school administrators on an ongoing basis. Private school administrators must sign a form that states whether they want to participate in Title I, Title II, or Title III services for that year. Therefore, administrators like Shulls must connect with private school administrators multiple times throughout the year.

One of the most challenging components of administering Title I, for me, is the programming for private schools. The complexities are there; there are multiple tasks, particularly in a small district like mine where you don't have an individual who is solely focused on Title I (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Shulls explains that the process for establishing private school Title I services is no less difficult than in a small public school.

The requirements for paperwork, assessing students, evaluating students, funding a teacher, and supervising that teacher to go out to multiple private schools in the area for a small number of kids are no different or less complex than administering a program within my one public school building (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Shulls explains another challenging facet to the process:



In my experience, there is always leadership turnover in private schools at a more rapid pace than in the public schools (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

This means that as Shulls educates private school principals, often clergy, on Title I purposes and laws, there is no guarantee that the same individual will be the principal the following year.

The cycle starts all over again, and there is constant re-education (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Serving private schools with Title I funds is a complicated process because the rules are the same as they are with public schools, and it does not matter if there is one child or 100 children in need of services. The responsibility for following the law rests with the public school.

I know this is my own personal bias, but I would like to see private schools responsible for ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act): training their own staff, implementing programs, identifying students, etc. That is significantly a large part of my time educating and training, and takes away from my job (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

From the classroom level, Teresa Gustafson, reading specialist at Driftless Elementary School, concurs that serving private school students poses challenges.

It stretches teachers to have to serve public school students well and also serve the private school students well. We don't get much money for Title I in the first

place, and then to share the funds with the private school causes significant job strain (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

A larger district, presumably with more Title I money, is able to hire a teacher whose sole responsibility is providing Title I services to private schools. Shulls also explains another nuance to the Title I private schools requirement:

We have a very large Amish population, and each settlement is considered a different private school (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Wisconsin has the fourth-highest Amish population in the United States, and about 10,000 Old Order Amish are in western and southwestern parts of the state (Amish, 2011).

So meeting the needs of the private school Amish students in a community that has no interest in government or the use of technology poses its own set of challenges.

Shulls further illustrates his point:

I have to take a trip out to the country and figure out which of the Amish gentlemen is the elder for the schools for this year; it's difficult to track him down (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

When Shulls finally determines which Amish gentleman he needs to speak to, the situation is anti-climactic because he already knows the answers to the questions he is about to pose regarding Title I services.

I locate the elder, who is, by the way, generally on a plow behind a team of horses, to ask him whether he wants to participate in a government-sponsored program called Title I, and his answer is always, ‘No, thank you’ (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Shulls shrugs his shoulders and sighs, and with slight annoyance in his voice, says:

So I spent about a day visiting two different Amish communities to track down a verbal answer to a question I already knew the answer to; I could have spent my time better in my building among my faculty and students (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Shulls and other administrators express that they would like to see multiple-year “opt-outs” for private schools, particularly the ones, like the Amish, who will never request federal funds for education purposes.

Of course, these communities could have the option to opt in if they wanted to, but it would be great if we didn’t have to track them down, in the case of the Amish, every year. The Amish school, based on religious beliefs, will never request Title I services. It’s an unnecessary hurdle in that I have to contact them each year (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

### **Highly-Qualified Teachers Requirement**

If rural public schools provide Title I services, they need a highly-qualified (HQ) teacher to instruct Title I students. This situation is also true if a private school desires Title I services;

the public school has to supply a highly-qualified teacher to instruct private school students as well as public school students in Title I reading and mathematics. The HQ teacher requirement especially challenges rural schools because it is a requirement that can be addressed differently depending on the urban or rural setting of a school. Urban schools presumably have a larger pool of candidates and partnerships with local colleges and universities to recruit teachers. The HQ teacher requirement states that if a teacher is teaching a subject, he or she has to be licensed in that subject. To be licensed in that subject, the teacher must have an undergraduate major or minor or significant graduate study in that subject. It is an especially difficult requirement for middle and high school social studies and science teachers because specialties are in each subject area, such as history, geography, biology, and chemistry. There is not a general science or social studies major any longer. The issue of licensing is troubling for Title I reading instruction. A teacher cannot simply be an “English teacher” who teaches reading, according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). A “reading teacher” must hold a 316 license that ensures that he or she has a master’s degree in reading instruction (DPI, 2011).

One of the biggest challenges I face as a rural school principal and Title I coordinator is finding teachers with a 316 license. What I have found is that the list of those people who would live and work in the community of Hilldale with that license is not a very long list (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

This problem requires administrators like Shulls to be very creative in order to fill this requirement.

We instead hire professionals who have potential of being very good teachers, and then support them in their training as they become licensed. We had one of our key Title I reading teachers decide in October to take a different opportunity with another district. So I posted the position and had five applicants. One of those applicants had the required 316 license, but she couldn't answer basic questions on reading instruction (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Expressing the nimbleness and ingenuity that can be the hallmark of small schools, Shulls explained:

Since we had five people to choose from, I instead hired the person who could commit to being a good teacher — someone I could coach, and someone who I could invest in. We often 'grow' our own teachers and create our own programs (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Hilldale is about one hour from a city of 200,000. Shulls continues his point on the resources available to Hilldale and the ability to take advantage of those resources.

You generally have a group of people who live in Hilldale because they farm or work in farming support, such as implements, fertilizer, or dealerships, and often their spouses work in the city. The other thing we see frequently in town is that we're effectively becoming a bedroom community for Riverbend (a growing community known for health-care and organic agriculture processing). The property values are significantly lower in Hilldale, and if you want 5 to 10 acres

in the country, you can buy that here for what you could buy a three-bedroom house in the town of Riverbend (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Shulls and district leadership take advantage of the positive reputation that the school and the community hold for being a great place to raise families. They acknowledge that attracting and retaining personnel is a challenge, but they feel that through proper investment in their promising teachers, they will retain them in the district. Shulls acknowledges that a significant group of individuals are now commuting from Hilldale to larger communities and using Hilldale as a bedroom community. As a result, Hilldale's student population is growing, and it is not in danger of being a school district in decline.

### **Compliance and Paperwork**

Significant paperwork is involved with maintaining a Title I program that meets compliance standards outlined by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) as mandated by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). For each Title I program in their schools, school districts, no matter the size, must demonstrate that they have the appropriate assessments and evaluations of teachers and programs, that students' needs are accurately identified, that teachers are highly-qualified (HQ), that private schools have been consulted, and that parents are involved in all components of the programming. This compliance includes agendas, minutes, sign-in sheets, evaluations of interventions, time sheets, copies of teacher licenses, purchase orders, and many other artifacts that demonstrate physical evidence of an effective Title I program. In addition to Title I, other schools may have Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds, federal vocational education funds, Title II funds, and Title III funds. Each of those federal programs maintains its own standards for compliance and

accountability for taxpayer dollars. Ms. Gustafson explained that having multiple federal education programs causes significant stress and confusion in rural schools:

There is a bastardization of Title I and RtI [or Response to Intervention, an outgrowth of the IDEA to provide interventions to all students before they are referred to special education programs] (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Gustafson explained that teachers and administrators do not understand the differences in programs well enough.

Some administrators will say that RtI and Title I are the same thing. Teachers are pulled in so many different directions. I'm not sure if it's an NCLB conflict or a conflict between two federal regulations (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Gustafson explained that the fact that administrators and teachers often perform multiple jobs spanning several federal or state programs adds to the confusion.

As a result, I'd say that nobody implements things with as much fidelity as they should. We do what we have to do to educate children, and then we think about whether we followed the federal rules later! (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Another challenge is the amount of paperwork and overhead required to implement a large federal program. The compliance component that ensures that rural schools follow Title I rules is time-consuming for administrators who are already stretched for time. Rural school

principals and administrators wear multiple hats. Title I coordinators often have multiple roles within a district as part-time building administrators and part-time district superintendents. It is not unusual for the same person to be the director of curriculum and instruction, the Title I coordinator, and sometimes the special education director. Shulls jokes:

When I need to talk to the director of instruction about a new reading intervention I'd like to train our teachers in, I can just have a conversation with myself in the car on the way to work (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Joking aside, however, maintaining programmatic compliance can be a full-time job in and of itself.

What matters is what's happening in the building opposed to the write-up of what's happening. So if you have a great instructional model, there is still the expectation that the school can produce required artifacts [for compliance] that explains all of it: how you came up with it, what research supports it, and who was involved in the planning of it and the assessment of it. That time comes from me. I know that we're compliant with the law, but I didn't necessarily type it up. That [compliance] can be a hurdle (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Rural schools, despite challenges, have flexibility afforded to them that is not a quality found in urban school districts. According to Shulls:

The thing I'll continue to say about our school and rural schools is that the nimbleness and ingenuity that small size represents. For example, we decided that



we would prepare our kids for life in a technologically literate world. We explored ways to teach kids how to code or write HTML or create video games. This is an example of a conversation that three people had over 6:30 a.m. coffee that became a collaborative agreement with UW [University of Wisconsin]-Madison a reality. If someone says the school should do this, we don't have to go through a long bureaucratic process because we are so small. Innovation can happen overnight. There are struggles and challenges for small schools, but there is also opportunity. That night we called the computer science department, which then connected us to the epistemic games development team on campus. There was this snowballing effect; there is an educational gaming development company that we are now connected to [as a result of that initial contact with UW]. Then they are looking for a partner with districts to learn about educational games that need to be created, they call us because UW steers them to us (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Compliance and maintenance of the appropriate documentation does not appear to be a problem for Driftless Elementary School. Rather, the amount of time that goes into planning and maintaining records to demonstrate compliance appears to be time that can be better spent on instructional leadership.

### **Decreasing Funds**

Flexibility or nimbleness, however, is neither encouraged nor allowed under Title I as a large federally funded program. Small schools like Driftless desire the flexibility to hire teachers who may not be highly-qualified (HQ) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or state Title I licensing rules, and they desire the flexibility to circumvent private schools that will never

participate in services. Many of the requirements pose additional hurdles to small districts, particularly rural schools that do not have the human or financial resources to implement on a daily basis.

The biggest challenge is the lack of flexibility with the funding. It would benefit students if we had more flexibility to use the funds to hire more teachers to lower class size, for example. When I started here [at Driftless], we had six Title I teachers, a reading specialist, and three paraprofessionals. We also had instructional resources, Title I professional development, and a Title I coordinator (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

Gustafson expressed concern over the decreases in funding over the past five years:

We are now down to three teachers, about \$5,000 for the coordinator, and very little for materials and professional development. We completely laid off the paraprofessionals and never hired them back as we had hoped (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

The amount of Title I funding allocated to Wisconsin has decreased as student poverty has increased over the years. Generally, the state of Wisconsin receives about the same amount of Title I funding each year, which it then distributes to its roughly 440 school districts. The amount given to each school district is based on a poverty amount determined by the decennial U.S. Census. If the amount of money never increases substantially, but the numbers of children in poverty do, districts and schools must make the same amount of money stretch further.

The pot [of money] has gone down so much for our district, and then with the increases in poverty levels, it is hard to understand why that happens. Yet our

staff is creative enough and innovative enough in how they use the money they have in order to serve students. It would be nice if we had more flexibility, however, and did not have to always follow the rules (Gustafson, Driftless Title I reading specialist, interview January 22, 2012).

The desire for flexibility appeared to be a theme in conversations with each of the school administrators and Title I personnel at Driftless Elementary School. They desired flexibility in how they can hire teachers and for what assignments they could use those teachers. The school personnel also desired flexibility in the amount of paperwork, justifying that they do not have nearly as much funding to account for as larger districts do. Additionally, Title I personnel expressed concern that it was more important to describe and implement an effective Title I program on paper, as opposed to demonstrating that they were effective. Each person argued that demonstrating instructional effectiveness is more meaningful than having a perfect written account.

### **Contextual Characteristics**

Driftless Elementary School has solid school leadership, including a particularly strong principal in Adam Shulls, who grew up in the area and knows many of the families. He noted that many students who leave after high school eventually return to Hilldale with their children because they value the close-knit and safe community. Although problems exist, such as illicit drug use, the community overall is safe, and most social ills do not permeate the schools.

Recognizing that Hilldale is rural, Shulls explained that it is a vision of the school and district leadership to integrate technology into every facet of the school curriculum in order to give students an advantage in the workplace after they graduate and to keep students competitive

with their suburban and urban peers. Technology is Driftless Elementary School's niche; just as the farmers in the community adapted to organic farming and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) niches, Driftless's school board adopted a technology niche to set it apart from other schools in the area and to provide an environment that is both nimble and innovative.

Other advantages to living in a small community like Hilldale exist, and parents recognize these benefits. For example, parents know that there are more leadership and athletic opportunities for their children should they decide to try out for the basketball team or run for student council. Their children simply would not have as many opportunities in a large, comprehensive high school in one of the nearby larger towns or cities. Parents also know that they have a direct pipeline to school leadership if they ever have any concerns about their child or the school.

Driftless Elementary School embraced its increasing diversity, particularly among Hispanic students, and realized the value that all children and their families bring to the community. The school leaders acknowledged that they do not serve the Spanish-speaking students as well as they would like but are doing their best to ensure that these students are integrated into the school and the community fabric. They are also exploring innovative ways to reach the families of Hispanic students and have applied for grants to assist in funding a full-time translator and English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

There is a clear delineation between regular curriculum and Title I curriculum and requirements in Driftless Elementary School. Driftless Elementary School is innovative and understands that its size is an advantage when adopting new initiatives. The mere bureaucracy of

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with its paperwork and compliance components (such as following procedures for Title I private school participation), is a nuisance but still manageable for small school administrations who are both effective and efficient with their responsibilities. There is understanding that with federal grants, there are “strings attached” and rules to follow to ensure that taxpayer money is spent according to the rules. However, there is a desire that the rules allow for flexibility among the smallest schools due to a lack of staff to implement certain policies. Additionally, there are aspirations for more flexibility with the funds for small schools whose needs, such as with highly-qualified (HQ) teachers, are different than those of urban schools.

Strong and visionary leadership is paramount in small rural Title I schools, and effective Title I programming needs strong instructional leadership. Driftless Elementary School is able to recognize its deficiencies and turn them into strengths. The school uses its size as a marketing advantage that appeals to both teachers and families in the community. The building leadership recognizes that there are struggles with hiring HQ teachers, for example. Rather than accept that there is a small candidate pool, the leadership instead turned this weakness into strength by providing mentoring, professional development, and graduate-level reading coursework to grow its own teacher education program with individuals already vested in the community. Driftless Elementary School also recognized that extended-day learning throughout the school year and summer months would be a benefit to the families and students in the area. They used community partnerships and grant funds to grow their own after-school mathematics and reading program for students and to create a video-gaming development program in the summer, which is in line with the district’s technology goals for students.

## **Northeastern School District**

Northeastern School District is located primarily in Orange County, about halfway between Superior, Wisconsin, to the northwest, and Green Bay, Wisconsin, to the southeast. Northeastern is one of the largest school districts in the state, encompassing territory that spans three counties, several Native American reservations, and two national forests. It is also one of the poorest school districts in the state, with about 90% of the students living in families that are at or below the poverty line. The counties surrounding Orange County, where some of the children attend Northeastern, have some of the highest unemployment rates in the state.

The educational experience at Northeastern Elementary School can be characterized only as weathered, or rugged, in a positive way. Students attend school in smaller and older buildings built in the 1920s. At one particular school, the floors are wooden, cabinets are built-in cedar and hardwood, and cubbies have partitions and hooks for supplies, coats, and boots. The large windows let in extraordinary amounts of winter daylight. No air conditioning is in this school, and a radiator hisses on and off in the back of every room. Each classroom is equipped with a ceiling fan that slowly circulates the air in the room.

The community is breathtakingly beautiful. There are dozens of lakes and towering pine trees, along with soaring bald eagles, and often the call of a loon can be heard in the distance. This environment is the backyard and the playground for students and adults alike. In Leopold, Wisconsin, there are some roadside stores, such as convenience stores, small grocers, a post office, a library, and some older homes that double as retailers or professional offices with apartments on the second floors. People meander through the grid of four streets, and children ride four-wheelers on the side of the road where the snowmobile trails should be (had this been a typical winter with many more inches of snow on the ground).

Northeastern School District's main office is located in Leopold, named after one of the greatest conservationists in Wisconsin history, Aldo Leopold. Conservation, however, was not always so prominent in Leopold's history. Its neighboring communities — Genesis, Wisconsin, about 10 miles to the north, and Packard, Wisconsin, about 25 miles to the southwest — are old logging communities. In the mid-19th century, these communities were settled by loggers who had relocated from Kentucky after a sawmill closed and put hundreds of workers out of work. The company that closed the Kentucky mill opened a new one in the pristine forests of northern Wisconsin. With the promise of jobs ahead of them, these loggers and cutters moved north, settling the areas now contained by Northeastern School District's boundaries.

The logging industry declined in the late 20th century, and so has the economy in Leopold and its surrounding communities. The families living in this school district are employed in a few of the logging and paper-processing jobs that remain, casinos on the reservations, or tourism, or they commute to jobs in Green Bay, Wisconsin, or the Fox Cities of Appleton and Oshkosh. Their children, due to the large size of the school district, spend hours each day on the school bus, as low revenues have forced some smaller districts to consolidate with Northeastern. Over the past 10 years, Northeastern needed to both consolidate and eliminate bus routes due to rapidly increasing diesel fuel costs.

There is a higher rate of alcohol abuse in Orange County than in other parts of Wisconsin. Part of the reason, according to some administrators at the schools, is that alcohol is socially acceptable and unfortunately ingrained in the community's social fabric. A recent study by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services indicated that in 2011, Wisconsin teenagers had the seventh-highest rate of underage alcohol abuse in the United States. For adults, Wisconsin has the nation's highest rates of binge drinking and heavy use in the country (Wisconsin

Department of Health Services, 2010). In fact, two of the three counties that include Northeastern School District have the highest percentage of liver cirrhosis deaths per capital in the state.

Alcohol is not the only issue, although it is certainly related to the underlying problems for the abject poverty in this region.

Orange County, Frances County, and Lake County have some of the highest poverty in the state. I think that Frances County has 18% unemployment? It's really high. And as a county, they don't have much in the way of an organized economic development, and they suffer from being a tourist destination (Jon Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Taxes on vacation and second homes can be significant, but the amount collected for school taxes is taken on a primary residence, not a second home. "We don't see any of that money," states Bergeron.

One of the neighboring school districts nearly dissolved in 2006. Fortunately for the students and families, the district passed a referendum to raise tax levies over the following six years. Had that district dissolved, some of those students would have been bused to Northeastern. There is frankness and sometimes brusqueness in conversations with school district administrators about Northeastern and its overall challenges in keeping the doors open for students.

We get some impact aid, but it's not going to entirely make up for the amount of money we could get with single-family homes on the state or federal property (Jon Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).



Impact aid payments are distributed by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) to school districts that are burdened by federal activities. In the case of Northeastern, the impact aid is a result of having national forests and reservations within the school district's boundaries. Funding was the number one issue that both the Title I coordinator and the Title I reading specialist, Julia Forrester, wanted to talk about when looking at the challenges that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) imposed on their school district.

A lot of school districts have simply downsized or closed their doors because they don't generate enough revenue. [Over the past 28 years] I worked in three districts at 33% of a full-time position in each of them. Because the funding formula for Title I is so skewed toward numbers of children instead of absolute poverty, rural districts like ours can't generate enough money to finance their programming, so they can only afford part-time personnel; in fact, I often tell schools that they are better off dissolving and sending their kids elsewhere in the county because it is challenging to find someone 'highly-qualified' for a part-time position (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

Forrester continued to speak about the stretches and sacrifices that many school districts make to keep some programs running. One of the biggest issues for her is that schools cannot hire enough support staff or administration for mandated federal programs such as Title I. In addition, the administrators that the school already has are pulled in so many directions that they are often unprepared for the challenges of rural school leadership.

Most of these buildings are K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) with one principal for all grades, and they have a part-time district administrator or a retired

administrator who is employed by multiple school districts (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

Due to Northeastern's remoteness from major cultural and economic centers in the state, it is difficult to attract and retain promising new teachers. Most people who teach in the Northeastern School District have existing ties to the surrounding communities. Forrester grew up in Leopold and attended Leopold schools before it consolidated with neighboring districts. Bergeron was born in Genesis, where his father worked for the logging company as a cutter. He describes the lack of opportunities and local jobs for Northeastern's graduates and the area residents:

It used to be that you could graduate high school, or maybe not even finish high school, and get a decent job as a cutter at one of the mills. When those cutting jobs became automated, a machine began doing the work of four men. All that the company needed to hire was one highly skilled employee to man the cutter (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Almost all school districts in this region of the state are experiencing a decline in student populations as families leave the area in search of middle-class sustaining jobs. Poverty increases, particularly in Leopold and Genesis, are rapidly climbing; a lack of services compounds the poverty issue for most families. Bergeron points out the following:

In Green Bay or in Superior, there are resources: If you need food, there are food pantries, or there are homeless shelters if you need a place to spend the night while your family gets back on their feet. In the middle of Orange County, there isn't much; individuals have to rely on their neighbors or their family to help them

through the rough times. People have a lot of pride. If they need help, they won't announce it (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Poverty, notably, is increasing in the communities surrounding Leopold, according to Forrester. The number of communities in deep poverty has substantially increased in this region since 2000. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) measures poverty in its schools by Title I thresholds. The USDE will automatically make a school eligible for Title I assistance if the school's poverty amount is 35%. However, the 40% poverty mark is significant in Title I because it means that a school can apply for schoolwide programming, which targets the entire school population rather than specific students for Title I services.

A couple of years ago, I pulled the poverty data for our region, just because I was curious mostly, and then I traced the number of schools in our area that hit the 40% poverty mark. I found that of the 14 schools I looked at, which just 10 years ago perhaps one or two had 40% poverty, now 13 of the 14 schools had over 40% poverty and the majority are over 70% [poverty]. So Jon [Bergeron] said to me, 'We need to help these kids and their families,' and we went to the county [seats] where we have schools, and I'll tell you, it was harder than heck to get through to some of those county people and find out which county services they have. I pressed them on which resources they had, and they were overwhelmed just like we were! Unless you live close to the county seat, there isn't much there for you (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

A lack of technology and Internet resources also poses a problem for the youth in the Northeastern School District. This deficit could have lasting implications after the students graduate and compete for employment in larger cities or continue in post-secondary education.

Bergeron explains:

A lot of families can't afford to have Internet access at home. I would say with great certainty that the majority of families don't have cable or Internet because of the remoteness of where they live. Even in town, most people will have a satellite dish connection; adding an Internet connection through satellite is very expensive (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Both Bergeron and Forrester remark that the local library is open three days a week. They also acknowledge that through DPI grants, they were able to provide Internet wire throughout the libraries in each of the schools. "There is Internet at the public library, and we have service at the schools through grants from the Department of Public Instruction, but once those kids go home, they are without that technology," explains Forrester.

Over the years, Bergeron has worked with various groups to bring an economic development council to the community to explore ways in which industry could take advantage of the large number of adults in need of work. He said that it never "has legs" because people think of Leopold as purely recreational — hunting land and fishing lakes. Many of the people who own homes do not live in the community year-round, and there is little interest in the region beyond recreational opportunities.

## **Title I Challenges in Northeastern Elementary School**

There was some difficulty in teasing out the challenges that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has placed on a rural school like Northeastern. I found it interesting that when asked about Title I requirements and the impacts on the schools, the Title I coordinator was unable to distinguish the differences between school or district responsibilities and the federal goals outlined in Title I. There appeared to be overlap between what is required by the state education statutes and what is required as a component of the federal Title I grant. Title I is strictly supplemental; however, it did not actually appear to be implemented that way in Northeastern. Therefore, one of the challenges I had was disassociating the problems of a declining school district and the economic problems of a community from challenges associated with Title I policies.

### **Highly-Qualified Teachers**

Northeastern is a prime example of the financial problems facing rural school districts and how Title I laws, which are meant to provide supplemental educational opportunities and interventions to low-income children, exacerbate those problems. One provision in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is that Title I teachers need to be “highly-qualified” (HQ) in order to be paid with federal funds and teach students identified for Title I programs. To be HQ, a teacher must have an undergraduate degree in the subject that he or she teaches. If the teacher is a “reading teacher” in Title I, Wisconsin also requires that the teacher have a reading teacher license, which requires master’s degree–level courses and ultimately completion of that master’s degree.

[The] highly-qualified teacher [requirement] is huge. For example, two individuals apply for an open reading teacher position. One person will have the

required license, and we offer the position to them. Then they turn the offer down. What do you do? We simply need more flexibility for licensing (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

Bergeron also agrees that the HQ teacher requirement limits options in a small rural school district.

What do you do if you need a geometry teacher for two periods a day? I've got a science teacher who is more knowledgeable in math than those who apply for the job with a math degree. I'm stuck because then I have one guy working part-time in science, and I'm posting another part-time position in math. It's almost impossible to attract individuals to apply for those part-time jobs (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Both Bergeron and Forrester commented that attracting teachers to Leopold is difficult because there is very little social life in the community outside of the summer tourism season. If there are no jobs for spouses or other family members, there is very little to keep teachers in Leopold for more than a year. Rural schools struggle with attracting and retaining teachers for many reasons, but mostly economical reasons. The living conditions may be harsher, depending on the area. Young adults may be attracted to technology, such as an Internet connection or cable, in the home. Getting either of those innovations in towns in northern and northeastern Wisconsin is difficult without more initiative by state and local leadership.

### **Parent Engagement**

One of the rules of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is that the school must meaningfully involve parents in the planning and evaluation of Title I programming. Schools must have a

parent involvement plan as well as hold meetings and meaningful engagement activities throughout the school year. Ms. Forrester commented that parent involvement should be easier to achieve in smaller schools, but for some reason, in Northeastern, the school struggles.

There is a sense of family, but because of distance factors present in Northeastern, it is very difficult to engage parents and community members (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

The distance for many families to the schools is an hour or more, unless they live in Leopold.

You can go into any school up here and sit down and talk with the administrator, which is a great feature — unique, I think, to rural schools. School administration and teachers know the students, and they know the families. It's wonderful, but not sufficient (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

Bergeron also brought up the point that in some families, school is not high on the priority list of things to accomplish in life.

My experience has been that some parents had negative experiences in school. Therefore, if their child isn't doing well, they chalk it up to, 'Well, Dad didn't do too well in school, either.' Some will use that as an excuse to fail (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Forrester had a different and more positive perspective on parent involvement:

I know that parents are welcome in the school because I see some parents walk right in, and they have a direct connection to the principal; however, because some parents did not do well in school or felt that because they dropped out of school to work in the mills, they aren't as welcome here. There isn't that connection to the school that parents who succeed in school have to teachers or principals. Really, we could be doing more to make those parents feel welcome and have a voice in this school (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

There are issues with school consolidation and closure, which are beyond the scope of this research. However, it would be worth researching how community and parent engagement diminish in rural schools as schools and districts consolidate. Additionally, school administration should explore other means to communicate with parents rather than face-to-face meetings. Yet with technological hurdles, such as the lack of Internet and computers in homes, virtual communication is also prohibitive. More studies are needed on the effects of longer bus routes for children in consolidated schools and the impact that this time on the bus has for both student and parent engagement in public schools.

### **Dwindling Resources**

Transportation is a challenge for rural schools such as Northeastern. "Talk about changes over the years," exclaims Forrester.

One of the best things about Title I was that we could have students experience the core instruction during the school day, but when districts had to cut back, the first thing to go were the late buses. As a result, we don't have after-school Title I



programs for the kids who really need that extra help (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

Instead, the school adapted to accommodate Title I services during the day. With the elimination of late buses, athletics also suffered. Bergeron explains:

When students live 45 minutes away from school and cannot drive, or because fuel prices are so prohibitive nowadays, they take the only bus they can take home; that's the bus that leaves at the end of the school day. We had to stop running late buses (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

There are also fewer curricular opportunities as a result of population decline. Most students receive the core curriculum of mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts at Northeastern. The school has a part-time Spanish teacher at the middle and high school levels, along with a part-time art teacher and a part-time music appreciation teacher. Students do not have orchestra or band. A program exists at another high school in the area, and if students want to participate, they must commute another hour south. The high school eliminated its football program due to expenses and liabilities, and it downsized other athletics. The only Advanced Placement (AP) courses available are English literature, composition, and U.S. history.

The school also shares a nurse with three other buildings. The nurse is at Northeastern about three times a week; otherwise the main office secretary acts as a nurse as needed by the student body. Northeastern also trimmed its media specialist (school librarian) down to 25% time. Rural schools in decline, such as Northeastern, are caught in a perpetual contradiction. They consolidate because they lack the population to sustain local community schools but then

end up trimming resources considerably to the point that the consolidated school is not in any better fiscal shape. One of the main reasons that smaller schools advocate for more licensing flexibility is so they can hire fewer teachers who happen to be licensed or experts in multiple curricular areas.

### **Small Size and Accountability**

A specific Title I challenge (and unique Title I requirement) is the mandate for testing and school accountability. Smaller schools experience greater fluctuations in student populations. Rural schools are held to the same standard as urban schools that have both larger populations and more resources to serve low-income students.

I wish that we could do away with high-stakes testing and move to a growth model or promote student growth over multiple measures (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

Forrester explains that this change might reduce the burden of high-stakes testing on rural schools. Bergeron concurs:

I have 120 kids in Dunn Elementary [20 miles east of Northeastern Elementary], and it is ludicrous to do a data analysis there because the numbers are so small. A growth model based on individual students would be a wonderful thing (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Forrester explains the anxiety that accompanies high-stakes testing for both teachers and students:

When there is so much variation year to year and then couple it with small numbers, it is pretty easy to identify which kids are pulling the scores down. It's not fair to the students that their anonymity can so easily be compromised (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview January 24, 2012).

When schools miss adequate yearly progress (AYP) two years in a row, they are subjected to sanctions mandated through No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

A couple of years ago, we had a scare in Northeastern Elementary because the district missed AYP for the special education subgroup two years in a row. The second year Northeastern Elementary also missed for the low-income student subgroup. I can only say that my teachers are the best, and they were doing everything they could to educate every child. But then to have to pull them aside and say, 'You need to be doing more, and by the way, we need to start preparing to serve our kids with SES [supplemental educational services] providers — it's a slap in the face (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Bergeron was notably agitated by this memory:

It was stupid. Already we're stretched, already we cannot offer late buses to our kids, yet we were going to be required to offer SES after school and pay for it with Title I funds — not additional funds, mind you, but the funds we already had devoted to other programming (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

Fortunately for the district and for Northeastern Elementary, the school made AYP the following year and did not have to implement SES.

### **Lack of Statewide Leadership**

There is a general sense that the people in this part of the state are forgotten, not only in industry, agriculture, and commerce, but in public education as well. Multiple school personnel, including Bergeron and Forrester, noted the “random acts of education” that occur in the state. According to Forrester, some years the state will emphasize literacy, and other times the state brings awareness to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) or English Language Learners (ELL), but it appears that it is not targeted to the rural schools or fits the needs of the rural schools (J. Forrester, personal correspondence, 1/24/2012). This feeling of neglect is also directed toward the federal education policies crafted by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and Congress. A common theme in interviews was that schools “do what they need to do” in order to survive, and if they are found out of compliance with the federal law, they fix it at that point.

Multiple pieces of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are simply unhelpful and pose additional obstacles and challenges to remote schools like Northeastern.

People do what they think is right or what they think is the best way to serve the kids in their schools. Even if it’s wrong, they just do what they need to do, and then if they get caught, they deal with it. That’s the attitude when there is no money and no resources; that’s exactly what they do (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

As I concluded our interview, Bergeron paused and posed the following questions to me:

I realize the rules still do apply and the rules are not helpful to student achievement, but instead we're given mandates that push schools into a box and punish us for not fitting into that box. How is serving a private school student helpful to the kids who are struggling economically in a public school? How is punishing a school for not meeting AYP helpful to the kids who come to school without having eaten dinner the night before or breakfast that morning? Aren't there other ways you can measure compliance or effectiveness of federal dollars? (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview January 19, 2012).

There is an initiative at the statewide level to improve the qualities of rural schools. However, if the underlying roots of the problems are unexplored — primarily the lack of economic opportunity in some rural areas — schools do not foresee any positive changes in the near future.

### **Contextual Characteristics**

Northeastern Elementary School is geographically isolated. The schools are safe, the community is beautiful, and the student achievement is average. Nothing, other than the fact that the community is in the middle of a pristine national forest, sets Northeastern apart from other schools in the region. An economic depression has enveloped the community since the early 1980s, when many of the paper mills and logging operations closed. Leopold and Genesis are primarily tourist destinations, with vacation homes along the many lakefronts, drive-in motels, and seasonal restaurants. The other jobs that exist are low-paying and not family-sustaining. Most employment and industry is seasonal, and residents work odd jobs in town or commute to larger cities the remainder of the year. The school district's tax base is also small, considering the

geographic size of the district. Most of the children who attend Northeastern are at or below the poverty line. Due to the lack of social scene, new teachers are less likely to move to the district and teach in the community unless they have existing familial ties. The area economic development council is stagnant, and the community struggles to attract new jobs and new residents. The anxiety, mixed with agitation, is palpable during conversations with members of the education community. There is a sense among them that their work is important and that most of the community values what they do, but that their struggles in educating children in such an economically depressed environment are invisible to statewide leadership.

Extensive research exists on the high correlation between poverty and low academic achievement. After all, the purpose of Title I programming in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is to bridge the gap between low-income students and academic achievement so they are on the same level as middle-class peers. Most years, Northeastern is able to beat the odds and make AYP. Due to small student numbers, however, it is a game of chance if the school makes AYP in any given year. Teachers can target students for additional instruction in reading and mathematics during the day, but due to transportation issues after school, students are unable to get additional assistance outside of the school day. Additionally, there is low parental engagement in the school. School leadership explains that this is due to parents working in communities more than an hour away or due to the distance that families live from the school.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

There is a sense of desperation in Northeastern — whether it is a desire for more state leadership or more local leadership is unclear. Northeastern's issues are not unique, but they appear to be magnified due to the economic realities in this part of the state. The community and

the region desperately need economic development to sustain the families that live in Leopold and Genesis and to ensure the vitality of the community and school district. Otherwise, the fear exists that school populations will continue to decline and that additional schools will consolidate with Northeastern or with other schools in the region. Consolidation and school closure will not solve the academic achievement problem for these very rural schools; it will not increase the rigor or the variety in curriculum, it will not increase the extracurricular options for students, nor will it improve parent engagement or teacher retention. In the case of a school district in decline, Title I provides funds that act as a Band-Aid for the district to help pay teacher salaries in Title I schools and provide instructional materials. I found that much of the time, the funds were used for the intent of NCLB, while at other times, the funds were used to manage the day-to-day operations of the school.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

Both Driftless Elementary School, a part of the Driftless School District in southwestern Wisconsin, and Northeastern Elementary School, a part of Northeastern Consolidated Schools in northeastern Wisconsin, are rural Title I elementary schools. The leadership in both buildings is experienced with Title I rules and regulations as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, reauthorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

The schools, on the surface, are very similar. Demographics are about the same, with 85% white and 15% minority or non-white. The percentage of low-income children in the buildings is 52% at Driftless Elementary's campus in Hilldale, Wisconsin, and 67% at Northeastern Elementary's campus in Leopold, Wisconsin.

I identified core NCLB components to determine whether any challenges were presented to the implementation of NCLB in these buildings. I was interested in the following components, which are also found in the matrix:

Highly-qualified (HQ) requirement

Equitable services to private school students

Adequate yearly progress (AYP)

Parent involvement

Demonstration of compliance to the policies

The contextual factors identified in the rural settings of interest to the study, also found in the matrix, are the following:

Local alcohol and drug abuse

Community economic conditions and unemployment

Distance to and from school and home

Immigration

Technology

Access to educational and social resources (libraries, food pantries, etc.)

First, I determined which information was entirely a result of the NCLB policy and which information was a result of the rural environment in which the policy was implemented. Second, I determined which contextual issues, or outcomes, were a result of the policy design and which outcomes were results of policy implementation in the rural context. Finally, I wanted to identify the components listed earlier that are unique to each school as well as the issues that are similar across both rural schools. Nuances are in the policy, obviously. Like many of the federal policy



studies lessons learned by Kirp and Driver (1995), or M.W. McLaughlin (1987), I was interested in the ladder of local-state-federal implementation, in which the policy is conceived at the federal level, interpreted by the state level, and then implemented by the local level. The capacity of the local level would determine the policy's successful implementation (Greenwood, Mann, & McLaughlin, 1975; Kirp & Driver, 1995; McLaughlin, 1987). The project outcomes reflect not the amount of money that is available, but the quality and behavior of the local staff.

The cross-case matrix found partially in Table 3 of the methods section, and completely in Appendix C, illustrates the framework from which I determined the results of the analysis.

### **Implementation Issues Specific to NCLB Policy Design**

Initially I argued that rural Title I schools experience challenges implementing No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in their local school setting because of NCLB's policy design and its bias toward urban education. The premise is that if a policy is designed to fit a specific context (urban schools), then the outcome would be different if the policy is implemented in a different context (rural schools). The process followed in the next section is that the issue is first described, and then, second, the challenges to rural schools are explained. The purpose is to illustrate the contrast between the idea of a one-size-fits-all policy and the burdens placed on rural schools as they implement the policy as well as the challenges these schools experience as they attempt to implement the policy.

### **Highly-Qualified Teachers**

Most public schools assign class sizes and subject areas to teachers based on two variables: the number of students in a particular grade or grade span and the subject area based on the teacher's licensing certification. Rural schools, in general, have smaller grade levels of

children. To illustrate this point further, the majority of rural Wisconsin school districts have only one building per grade span (elementary, middle, and high school). In these small districts and, by extension, small schools, teachers are needed to teach multiple grade levels and multiple subject areas because there simply are not enough children in the school to employ a teacher in one subject area alone.

Urban school teachers are able to teach one subject potentially all day and all year. The reality in a rural school is that teachers may teach one subject in the morning and an entirely different subject and/or content area in the afternoon. If they do not meet the licensing requirement, they cannot teach that second subject. The problem that rural school principals encounter is that they are either acquiring an emergency teaching license for that teacher or employing that teacher on a part-time basis. In many cases, administrators cannot find appropriately licensed teachers to fill subjects because either the credentialed teacher is a rarity in a rural area (such as high-need licenses in reading, special education, science, and mathematics) or they found a potentially good teacher who is not credentialed in the needed license area.

Case in point: Driftless Elementary School principal Adam Shulls explained in his interview:

One of the biggest challenges I face as a rural school principal and Title I coordinator is finding teachers with a 316 license [reading license]. What I have found is that the list of those people who would live and work in the community of Hilldale with that license is not a very long list (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Rural school principals and administrators desire a teaching licensing requirement (in NCLB or otherwise) that has flexibility for schools that either have a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers to their community or have the flexibility to use a licensed teacher in more than one subject area, even if they do not possess a license in that other subject area.

### **Equitable Services to Private School Students**

NCLB policy states that public schools accepting Title I funds must serve students in private schools in need of Title I services. Most schools that accept the funds are private parochial schools, the majority of which are Catholic or Lutheran parish schools in Wisconsin. The caveat is that the private school must first agree to receive the services through a consultation process, which ultimately most do. The onus for complying with the rules is on the public school's school administrator or Title I coordinator. If the public school does not follow the rules or if the private school feels that there is a violation of rules, the private school has the right to file a complaint against the public school district. An interesting nuance to this requirement is that in many rural areas of Wisconsin, particularly western Wisconsin, dozens of Amish settlements are considered to be independent private schools.

In brick-and-mortar private school buildings, such as Lutheran and Catholic schools throughout rural Wisconsin, administrators from both the public and private schools establish ongoing relationships. Private schools receive public school transportation, and the children ride the same bus routes, for example. However, when it is established that the private school will receive Title I services, the public school district is the entity providing the services: i.e., the teacher and instructional materials are expended through the public school's Title I budget. Most public schools accept this component, and the reasoning is that eventually the Title I private school students will become students in the public high school. There is a mutually vested

interest in all students, public and private, doing well in reading and mathematics. The challenging piece of the policy for public schools, and rural schools in particular, is the burden that this policy places on them as an institution. The first challenge is acquiring consent for services from the private schools, because even if the private school does not want to participate, it needs to sign the consent form rejecting services. The second challenge is that the public school must implement a program in the private school that follows all the same procedures as the public school program.

Another challenge is the most time-consuming piece of providing services to private school students. Usually one rural administrator accounts for all the paperwork in the public school's Title I program. That same paperwork must also be kept for the private school program. Additionally, NCLB requires that the services are "instructional"; therefore, a reading specialist, already in high demand and short supply, is providing services to the public school Title I students and to the private school students, usually in a different setting. These challenges are unique to rural schools (even though urban schools must also provide private school Title I services under NCLB) because rural schools lack the personnel to both administer the program and instruct students in private schools.

### **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)**

Accountability and adequate yearly progress (AYP) are central to NCLB. Under NCLB, schools and districts must meet AYP in each of about 20 different areas. The most common areas in which schools do not meet AYP are reading scores, mathematics scores, subgroups of students scores (low-income, non-white ethnicities, English language learners [ELL], etc.), and attendance and graduation rates for the district. The issue that rural schools have with AYP is that they experience greater fluctuations in scores from year to year because of their smaller

populations and cell sizes. A larger cell size is more valid and produces more reliable results. A larger cell size also results in smaller increases or decreases year to year.

Under the accountability rules, schools must make progress annually in each of the areas described earlier. If the school misses one year, no consequences occur as long as it makes progress the second year. If it does not make progress the second year in the area previously missed, the school becomes a level 1 school identified for improvement (SIFI). If the school misses the third year in the same area, it becomes a level 2 SIFI. Sanctions and penalizations begin with level 2.

Except for very few cases, rural schools in Wisconsin have fared well and have not had to implement level 2 sanctions such as school choice and supplemental educational services (SES). There are challenges to implementing these sanctions in rural schools. School choice requires the school to pay for the transportation of the student who desires to leave the SIFI school and attend another school *in the same district*. In the case of rural school districts, there is usually only one school that the child can attend. Even if the child does have an option to attend a different school in the district, many rural districts are so large that the child would attend schools miles from his or her home. The second sanction penalizes schools more than it helps schools improve, according to the research on SES. Schools must reserve 20% of its Title I allocation to implement school choice (which provides money for transportation of students) and to pay private SES providers.

The challenge for rural schools is that they must factor in natural fluctuations in percentages of students passing the state test in subject areas and subgroups that are magnified due to the low cell size. Lower cell size inevitably brings wider variations in results year to year.

The second challenge for rural districts is that if they are a level 1 SIFI, they must begin planning implementation for level 2 sanctions. This is another burden that small school administrators must accept as contingent on accepting federal NCLB funds. The unexpected challenge, or repercussion, of the accountability and AYP in rural schools is the bad publicity and public shaming that often results with the SIFI label.

### **Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement and engagement is another critical component of NCLB. A school has many responsibilities aimed at involving parents in the education of their children. The school must hold annual and semi-annual parent meetings, engage parents in the planning and evaluation of the Title I program, regularly inform and communicate with parents about changes in the policies or the programming, and respond quickly to parent requests to meet with school administration and teachers. The school must also inform parents on its annual report card and the individual child's achievement testing results.

Parent involvement requirements are not necessarily challenging for rural schools to meet. There are generally no issues establishing meetings or informing and communicating with parents via newsletters and other formal announcements. The challenge for schools is that it is difficult to engage parents in academics. It is difficult to find appropriate times for parents to attend meetings or to have parents engage teachers and administrators. It is not for a lack of effort on the school's behalf:

There is a sense of family, but because of distance factors present in Northeastern, it is very difficult to engage parents and community members (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview, January 24, 2012).

Anecdotally, most parents give good marks to their local public schools (Gallup, 2010). The challenge in rural schools is that parents may be employed in other communities, have long commutes, or simply live extended distances from the schools that their children attend. Even though a school is doing everything possible to engage parents and involve them in its Title I programming, it technically is not doing enough to meet the requirement if very few parents actually participate in the activities described in the policy.

Even under the best circumstances, most schools struggle to engage parents. In very large districts with few schools, where families live in remote areas, parental involvement is difficult, yet rural districts must prove that they do everything possible to comply with this requirement.

### **Overall Compliance**

This section is labeled “overall compliance” because I needed to classify the comments that the reading specialist and Title I coordinators made about the amounts of paperwork required to demonstrate that they follow NCLB’s rules. There is generally only one way for schools to demonstrate that they are in compliance with NCLB when they are monitored by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI): paperwork. There are forms for everything: budgets, private school consultations, certification for highly-qualified (HQ) teachers and paraprofessionals, free and reduced lunch, carryover amounts, and waiver requests. Additionally, schools must keep paperwork that demonstrates that they follow every rule: ranking students by academic abilities, assessing students appropriately, providing research-based or classroom-proven reading and mathematics interventions, documenting whether the interventions are successful, and so on; the list can potentially continue for pages. The point is this: When there is not a full-time person devoted to administering a Title I program in a small rural district simply because there are not enough personnel present to perform the position, it is a significant burden

on the district to ensure that each of the steps is followed exactly, the appropriate paperwork is completed, and the appropriate artifact or proof of compliance is accessible. The quality of the paperwork and the artifacts depends entirely on the capacity of the individual charged with the responsibility.

All personnel interviewed understood the reasoning why they must demonstrate that they are in compliance and why they should be accountable for federal funds. Historically, Title I was under scathing attack through partisan efforts in the 1970s and early 1980s. It was nearly disbanded under President Reagan. Title I is a behemoth; it is an expensive federally funded program, and schools must demonstrate that they are using funds appropriately and that there are gains in student achievement as a result of all the financial resources. The rural schools wish only that there were more flexible ways to demonstrate that they are following the rules.

### **Contextual Issues Specific to Rural Environments**

This section takes into consideration the elements of rural areas that are unique to rural Wisconsin and many rural communities in the Midwest. There is no doubt that several of the following contextual issues could also apply to urban areas; however, the purpose is to illustrate the nuances of rural life and again to affirm that it is difficult to replicate successful programs or to design programs for use in different settings and expect similar or identical outcomes.

#### **Local Alcohol and Drug Abuse**

Each region of rural Wisconsin has one of two vices: alcohol or crystal methamphetamines. Fortunately, crystal methamphetamine use is on the decline, although it is still popular in rural areas because it is inexpensive and easy to acquire. The more significant issue among rural youth is alcohol abuse. Alcohol is ingrained in the cultural fabric of much of



Wisconsin. For example, Wisconsin was one of the last states to adjust its legal intoxication limit to 0.08% blood alcohol content (BAC). Wisconsin was also one of the last states to change its drinking age to 21 from 18 years of age in 1987, and that was entirely because the U.S. government threatened to withhold federal highway funds if the age was not increased (Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, 1995). Even so, those under age 21 can still drink alcoholic beverages in the presence of a responsible adult. According to Wisconsin Act 337:

No one under the age of 21 may legally purchase, possess, or consume alcohol-containing beverages except when accompanied by a parent, guardian, or spouse of legal drinking age, and in certain other limited circumstances (Wisconsin Act 337, effective September 1, 1986.)

In 2000, Congress passed the DOT Appropriations Act of FY 2001, adopting 0.08% BAC as the national illegal limit for impaired driving. The statute provides that states that do not adopt a conforming 0.08% BAC law by October 1, 2003, will be subject to a withholding 2% of certain highway construction funds. Again, Wisconsin abided by the law. However, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) annually conducts the Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey and asks about student risk behavior regarding alcohol and illegal drug use, among other issues.

Table 3

*The 2011 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey Executive Summary*

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among youth (5 to 17 years old) in Wisconsin.
- Nearly one out of four students reported riding with a driver who had been drinking alcohol at least once in the past 30 days.
- Eleven percent of 11th grade students and 17% of 12th grade students reported driving after drinking alcohol at least once in the last 30 days.
- In 2011, a large percentage of Wisconsin high school students reported drinking alcohol.
- The percentage of students reporting binge drinking (five or more drinks of alcohol in a row) is higher in Wisconsin than in most states.
- In the past six years, the percentage of students who reported using methamphetamines at least once in their lifetime has decreased significantly (6% to 2%).

It is unclear if rural Wisconsin youth are more or less likely to participate in underage drinking than other youth are. Data does show that they are more likely to participate in crystal methamphetamine abuse than their urban peers. The purpose of placing alcohol and illegal drug abuse in the context of this study is that there are certain behaviors — namely alcohol abuse — that are more socially and culturally accepted by the parents of rural youth. For the purposes of this study, these issues came up in the interviews as problems in rural communities.

**Community Economic Conditions and Unemployment**

Rural Wisconsin has a higher unemployment rate than Wisconsin's urban and suburban areas. The most current data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (January 2012) shows that both the poverty rate and the unemployment rate are higher in rural Wisconsin (USDA, December 2, 2011).

Table 4

*Poverty Rate in State of Wisconsin*

Poverty Rate (Percent)	Rural	Urban	Total
1979	10.3	8.1	8.7
1989	11.5	10.4	10.7
1999	8.6	8.7	8.7
2010 (latest estimate)	13.1	13.3	13.2

Table 5

*2010 Poverty Rate in Counties Included in This Study*

Driftless School District	Wisconsin Rural	Wisconsin Total
County A: 14.3	13.1	13.2
County B: 14.8		
County C: 16.0		
Northeastern Consolidated Schools	Wisconsin Rural	Wisconsin Total
County D: 16.9	13.1	13.2
County E: 13.5		
County F: 11.4		

Table 6

*Unemployment Rate in Wisconsin*

Unemployment Rate (Percent)	Rural	Urban	Total
2009	9.3	8.5	8.7
2010	8.9	8.1	8.3

Table 7

*Unemployment Percentage for Counties Included in This Study from 2003 to 2009*

County	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
A	6.2	5.4	4.9	4.9	5.3	5.9	10.0	9.4
B	4.7	4.7	4.4	4.6	5.1	4.7	9.0	8.4
C	5.1	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.7	4.8	7.6	7.0
D	7.1	6.3	7.0	6.6	7.0	7.9	10.4	10.1
E	7.4	6.6	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.1	10.3	10.0
F	7.0	6.1	5.9	5.8	6.0	6.1	9.9	10.0

These tables hope to illustrate that unemployment is a large factor in whether a family is in poverty and, by extension, whether school-age children are in poverty. The school districts in this study are representative of many rural school districts across the state.

### **Distance to and from School and Home**

As schools consolidate and as districts merge and consolidate, bus routes for children become longer. In the schools studied earlier, students in Driftless spent a maximum of 60 minutes on a bus route, one way. Many students in Northeastern spent more than 70 minutes on a bus route, one way. Rural schools have few options as transportation costs continue to rise. Parents also feel the consequences of long distances from school in choosing whether they can volunteer or participate in school activities.

### **Immigration**

The addition of immigrant students to Driftless Elementary School is viewed positively as the numbers of students in the school increase. The Title I staff also view English language learner (ELL) students as a benefit for the student body and the community because they bring a richer diversity to the student body. Immigration benefits many rural communities in Wisconsin. In areas that are decreasing in population, which include many rural areas in Wisconsin,

immigration has revitalized the local economy. Immigrant children are also attending public school, which ensures the stability of the schools and reduces the likelihood of consolidation or closure. Through the course of this research, I learned that immigration is not limited to Spanish-speaking immigrants. Somali immigrants are locating to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to work in the food-processing plants. The families are split: The fathers work in Chicago in the transportation industry while the mothers work in Green Bay's food-processing plants. These immigrants, and many others, are locating to cities such as Green Bay and to rural areas not only for agricultural jobs, but also because the cost of living is lower there than in major cities like Chicago and rural and mid-sized cities are safe for their families.

Immigration and non-English-speaking students bring several challenges to schools; for one, the schools are ill-equipped to serve the students because they are unable to automatically serve the students' language needs and to communicate effectively with parents. Related to human resources challenges described in previous sections, rural schools also find it difficult to acquire funding for teaching or translation personnel to accommodate ELL students. Another challenge to the schools is that as the population of ELL students grows, they face the likelihood that they will test the students on the statewide accountability test. If the ELL subgroup misses adequate yearly progress (AYP) two years in a row, the school could face sanctions under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) rules.

### **Technology**

Rural areas of Wisconsin are well behind urban and suburban access to high-speed Internet. Many libraries in towns have the technology, but smaller towns and remote areas lack the infrastructure. Many families in rural areas, struggling with poverty, are unable to afford

high-speed Internet; additionally, remote areas lack cellular services, eliminating the possibility of acquiring Internet through a cell phone.

According to Northeastern's Title I reading specialist, schools do not have a good "handle on how many of the students have computers or other similar technology in their homes" (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview, January 24, 2012). There is research that describes the technological divide or the technology gap that a child without access to computers, iPads, and wireless experiences when compared to his or her peers with this type of access. The educational and future implications for a 21st century student without technological access are overwhelming, considering how quickly technology improves and changes.

A lack of technology also poses problems for administrators hoping to communicate with parents and for ameliorating the sense of isolation that many families, new teachers, students, and administrators experience while living and working in rural communities. The lack of technological infrastructure may also serve as a deterrent for new employees to relocate to a rural area.

### **Access to Educational and Social Resources**

In many examples, rural students and their families may lack access to quality health care, dental care, and other medically necessary services based on their location. Recent studies conducted in Wisconsin explain that the doctor and hospital shortage is becoming increasingly common in northern Wisconsin.

In urban areas, social support systems help with poverty conditions. Urban areas have food pantries, social services centers and translation services, shelters for homeless and domestic

violence victims, and after-school programs and shelters for children and teens. Rural areas very rarely have any of these resources. There is research that proves the benefits and impact of after-school programming, quality day care and preschool, and regular health checkups on a child's education. Again, the resources for quality social and educational programs in rural areas are extremely slight.

There are educational resources for urban children if needed. After school concludes in an urban or suburban area, there are public transportation options or even taxicabs to transport children if they miss the bus home. A suburban child who does not have access to Internet at home can go to the local public library and use a computer, or conduct research on the Internet, prior to going home for the evening.

The purpose of this section was to help amplify the educational advantages and disadvantages that living in a rural area may present to students and families. It is not to say, as one administrator explained, "that one is better than the other." Living, working, and going to school in a rural area are "simply different" (Bergstrom, Driftless School District administrator, interview, January 25, 2012).

### **Similarities between Cases**

Many of the similarities between Driftless Elementary School and Northeastern Elementary School can be generalized for many of the rural schools throughout the state of Wisconsin. The similarities between the cases are related to both the rural context and the application of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies. Overall, I learned from the interviews and from the research that there is a lot of potential for rural schools, but there is also a general feeling of isolation and sometimes a feeling of despair; rural schools do not receive much

attention from the media or the politicians crafting educational policies. Rural needs are as intense as the needs of urban schools; these needs are mostly financial, including access to opportunities that society values for all its children.

### **Highly-Qualified Teachers**

The highly-qualified (HQ) teacher concern is one of the most pressing issues in rural Title I schools. It appears that rural schools in this study struggle with attracting and retaining teachers due to location and, in some extremes, isolation. The southwestern and western part of the state is about an hour's drive to larger cities that have some of the social and educational amenities that many people desire: universities, cultural components, and recreational opportunities. The northern part of the state, in particular, is very isolated and remote for many individuals who are not native to the area. Both cases indicated that individuals who generally teach in the rural schools have existing ties to the community.

Driftless Elementary School made the point that it is difficult to recruit teachers for certain positions because the people who work in the schools generally have existing ties to the community.

One of the biggest challenges I face as a rural school principal and Title I coordinator is finding teachers with a 316 license [reading teacher license]. What I have found is that the list of those people who would live and work in the community of Hilldale with that license is not a very long list (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

You generally have a group of people who live in Hilldale because they farm or work in farming support, such as implements, fertilizer, or dealerships, and often



their spouses work in the city (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Recruiting teachers is even more difficult in a remote location such as Northeastern Elementary School. There are literally no jobs outside of state and county jobs because industry is so sparse. Individuals who live in the area are employed either in government-sector or recreational industries. If individuals in the area are employed elsewhere, they experience long commutes. As Northeastern's Title I coordinator put it:

Most people drive a great distance to work, maybe an hour or more. The accessibility of jobs and the ability to raise a family, that's what it comes down to (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview, January 19, 2012).

During one interview, the following came up in conversation, implying that if a teacher does not have existing familial ties to the community, it is undesirable to locate there:

Someone your age would not want to live in this area. It's not a social place. If you're married, it's not so bad, but if you're single... (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview, January 19, 2012).

Both communities struggle with attracting teachers, yet only one of the two communities struggles with retaining teachers in future years. This situation is explored in more detail in the section that describes and analyzes the notable differences between the two cases.

School administrators from both Driftless Elementary School and Northeastern Elementary School desired to see the HQ policy changed in NCLB's future reauthorization. They felt that the policy provided unnecessary burdens on rural schools. They also felt that the policy

is simply inapplicable to rural schools and that it also impeded the ability to attract teachers. As previously stated, smaller schools have fewer subject offerings or course sections than large urban schools do; therefore, a full-time teacher in a specialized subject is superfluous. Instead, the smaller schools desire multi-disciplinary teachers who can teach multiple grade levels and subject areas in order to maximize funding and curricular offerings.

### **Parent Involvement**

One of the findings in the monitoring documents used to locate cases for this study was the common concern with parent involvement in rural schools. NCLB requires schools to involve parents “meaningfully.” The actual amount of parent involvement is not defined, but for an issue that is already challenging for schools, the fact that it is a requirement adds stress to administering Title I programming. The issue of parent involvement is not unique to rural schools; suburban and urban schools also struggle with meaningfully involving parents. The issues among rural schools, however, differ from the issues in urban schools; rural schools struggle with parent involvement due to the context and complexities unique to rural areas.

The first issue is transportation and distance between home and school. In rural areas, people are spread out, and most families in consolidated districts live a considerable distance from the public school. When students spend an hour on the bus, it is assumed that they live far from school. As the Title I coordinator in Northeastern remarked,

Most people drive a great distance to work, maybe an hour or more (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview, January 19, 2012).

The assumption then is that parents are not involved because of transportation and distance. In more settled areas, particularly urban areas, alternative means of transportation can

assist parents getting to schools for meetings, focus groups, and conferences. The second issue (which can be applied to urban schools as well) is that in some cases, many parents may not feel connected to the school or feel welcome in the school.

My experience has been that some parents had negative experiences in school. Therefore, if their child isn't doing well, they chalk it up to, 'Well, Dad didn't do too well in school, either.' Some will use that as an excuse to fail (Bergeron, Title I director at Northeastern, interview, January 19, 2012).

Driftless Elementary School struggled with parent involvement but could not necessarily figure out why that was the case. The issue of parent involvement was insignificant enough that it was omitted from the case study description. However, the Title I coordinator and elementary school principal did mention that individuals who left Hilldale came back to the community after they had children of their own because they "valued the types of relationships they have with their friends and want their kids to have those same relationships as they grow up." He continued to describe the relationship between the school and the parents:

They're [the parents] back based on the values and community acceptance. They want the neighborhood feel ... parents know that if they have a concern, they have a pipeline access to school leadership (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

I interpreted this statement from Driftless Elementary School differently than the statements from Northeastern Elementary School, as a much more positive perspective about the school. It is not that the parents do not feel welcome in the school, for example, but perhaps they trust the administration at Driftless Elementary School more. "If they have a concern, they have

a pipeline access to school leadership” is a different perspective on parent involvement than “My experience has been that some parents had negative experiences in school.” After all, the parents in Hilldale moved back to the community because they valued the school as well as the relationships and opportunities that their children could have in that small school environment.

### **Compliance Burdens and Private School Equitable Participation**

Policy compliance is a time-consuming process for most schools. However, the issue of compliance in rural schools is magnified because fewer personnel are available to ensure that the school is documenting every step of implementation. In Driftless Elementary School’s Title I program, Adam Shulls is the school’s principal, the district’s Title I coordinator, and the district’s director of instruction. Each of those positions is potentially a full-time position. With fewer students, rural schools adapt with fewer administrators. Nonetheless, the requirements are the same no matter the size of a student body in the school or district.

### **Notable Differences between the Cases**

I found it interesting that the differences between the cases appeared to be very slight on the surface. There are nuances in different populations of students, or access to social and educational opportunities, but for the most part, I found the schools to be very similar in their challenges implementing No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The most notable differences came from the perspectives of the rural schools toward the challenges of implementing a large federal program. The perspective of the school’s leadership impacted the severity of the challenges of implementing NCLB. Both environments understood that there are challenges and had a general feeling that the policy set them up for failure, ultimately; however, it was the manner in which the schools coped with the challenges that were noticeably different. Driftless Elementary

School's reading specialist, Title I coordinator and elementary school principal, and district administrator had an optimistic and entrepreneurial perspective about Title I policies. On the contrary, while speaking with Northeastern's Title I administration, I sensed little positive feedback and widespread despair. In Driftless Elementary, the school administration's attitude about NCLB was that the funds could be leveraged to improve the school's situation and the education of the children. Northeastern's school administration appeared defeated; Title I was an additional limitation placed upon the school when other priorities constantly emerged. Title I, in Northeastern School, was a burden.

### **Highly-Qualified Teachers**

Although both schools decidedly have issues attracting teachers, Driftless Elementary School decided to be proactive and developed an innovative way to "grow their own" teachers. Driftless's school administrators invested in individuals with potential to be good teachers. The administration planned to send teachers to nearby colleges or universities to acquire a master's degree in reading instruction so that they will be highly-qualified (HQ) reading teachers. The idea is that if the school committed to investing in education and professional development for those teachers, they would remain at the schools. In this situation, Driftless Elementary School leveraged its Title I funds to meet the NCLB requirement for HQ teachers.

### **Parent Involvement**

Although both school settings struggle with parent involvement, there is a different level of optimism as to why they struggle or how they can improve parent engagement. In Northeastern, there seemed to be a different perspective between the district's Title I coordinator and the elementary school's reading specialist. The district Title I coordinator felt that parents did not feel welcome in the school because they may have had negative experiences, and then

they used that experience as an excuse not to be involved. However, the reading specialist felt that the school was welcoming and that parents disengaged for other reasons.

There is a sense of family, but because of distance factors present in Northeastern, it is very difficult to engage parents and community members (Forrester, Title I reading specialist at Northeastern, interview, January 24, 2012).

There is a slight conflict between individuals in the same school building in that the reading specialist felt that the school is a welcoming place but that the reason parents may not be involved had more to do with their own capacity for involvement.

### **Compliance**

One of the interesting outcomes from the interviews at Northeastern Elementary School was that I came away with the impression that the school leaders are not, in particular, paying full attention to the issue of compliance. In multiple places during the interviews, the comment was made that the school “does what it can” or “adjusts,” “we don’t follow the rule to a T,” and finally, “if we get caught, we’ll address it then.” The last comment was especially interesting because the likelihood that the school will get caught out of compliance is actually very small. It is my hunch that the school administration realizes that it is unlikely to be targeted for a program audit or monitoring visit and in some ways is taking a chance on the system.

The schools are financially audited in the summer, but most accountants are unfamiliar with the nuances of Title I programming, and it is unlikely that they would have an audit finding to force a school to address a Title I deficiency. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) monitors about 20 to 25 schools and districts a year (out of 440 districts and more than

2,000 individual schools). The odds that Northeastern will be monitored in the near future, especially when it has already been monitored once in the past 10 years, are very slim.

Contrast Northeastern Elementary School with Driftless Elementary School: Despite the fact that the school has recently been monitored, the administration continues to ensure that the Title I program is in compliance with Title I rules. It is possible that the administrator claimed to be following all the policy recommendations because I was speaking to him about it, but I doubt that he was exaggerating. I truly believe that he takes Title I programming seriously and strictly adheres to the rules. It appeared to me that Driftless Elementary School *used* Title I to its advantage; it almost seemed to use Title I as an incentive to promote some of the programs and justify some of the innovation achieved in the district. For example, recruiting and retaining HQ teachers would not be an issue if it were not required in Title I. Therefore, through innovative programming and leveraging its Title I funds effectively, the district is able to invest in its personnel. Without a “Title I reason,” I wonder if the district would still do this. The second issue of innovation derived out of compliance is the Title I summer program, after-school program, and video game program. This programming — an innovation of the district’s vision toward technology literacy — could not be possible without Title I funds. The school would not be able to use Title I funds for these programs unless they tied to Title I goals in reading and mathematics. What I found was that Driftless Elementary School has a symbiotic relationship with Title I and, by extension, Title I compliance.

What matters is what’s happening in the building opposed to the write-up of what’s happening. So if you have a great instructional model, there is still the expectation of required artifacts ... (Shulls, Driftless Elementary School principal and Title I coordinator, interview January 25, 2012).

Of course, not all pieces of NCLB policies can work in the favor of rural districts. In particular, hard feelings associated with Title I compliance focus on serving private school students. Northeastern Elementary School serves private school children because it is required to do so. There is no real “pushback” from the school, with the understanding that the private school students eventually will attend Northeastern’s high school; preparing all elementary school children, public or private, in reading and mathematics will benefit the district in the long run.

Driftless Elementary School asked hard questions about private school compliance and asked for justification as to why it was necessary to request consent forms every year, particularly from private schools with a history of not wanting Title I services. The Title I coordinator’s points are well-taken. I understand why it is a hassle, to say the least, to annually inquire whether a private school that has never participated in services before would want to participate and to acquire a signature from that private school administrator. I took this conflict not as a shot at not following the rules, but as a legitimate question of a policy’s benefit to Driftless Elementary School’s rural context. Its leaders know ahead of time that certain private schools will not participate, so acquiring the correct paperwork is an exercise in futility. Auspiciously, Driftless Elementary School’s inquiry implies that it still followed the NCLB policy but asked to modify it so that it is not a burden on rural public schools.

The difference in the two cases is exactly as M.W. McLaughlin (1987) stated in her research on federal policy implementation in public schools, echoed in the work of Kirp and Driver (1995): “From a means, rules had become an end. School districts were resorting to instructional strategies that made great book-keeping but little pedagogical sense” (Kirp and Driver, 1995, p.590). When the schools were selected, I expected the findings to be similar and



that the rural schools would represent, in general, other rural schools in Wisconsin. What I found is that the schools contextually represent two different types of rural Title I schools in Wisconsin. The first type is the rural Title I school that leverages Title I funds to become innovative and provide opportunities for rural students — opportunities the students would not have outside of school. The other type is a district that is, for all intents and purposes, in decline. Title I funds are viewed as another source of funding that helps pay salaries to keep the school running.

A comparison of the two cases affirms the point that schools “do what they have to do” to maintain compliance, but they do it for different reasons. Some schools “do it” because they are just following the rules, and if they deviate from the rules, they accept that they can deal with the consequences and fix it later. On the other hand, schools may adhere to the rules but use those rules in their favor. They use those rules as a vehicle to innovate and develop resources to propel the schools forward.

## **Summary**

The cross-case matrix allowed the researcher to understand many of the similarities present in each case but also to discern the differences that rural schools experience while implementing the same policies. I found it interesting that I initially felt that transposing a large federal policy designed for urban schools onto a rural school setting was unjust. Yet in many ways, I was guilty of executing the same “one-size-fits-all” transposition onto two rural schools, which on the surface seem similar but, after thorough investigation, are vastly different. The implementation outcomes of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are similar in rural situations (such as the impact that distance between home and school has on parent involvement and student

participation in programming, private school participation, and compliance), but there are still additional nuances unique to each school that I had not initially planned to discover.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Summary of Study**

In this multiple-case study, I interviewed Title I personnel from rural Wisconsin schools. I wanted to learn if local, contextual factors impeded implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and challenged the rural schools, or if challenges were a result of how the policy was designed, presumably, with urban context in mind. Additionally, I wanted to learn how a policy conceived “at the top” of the federal ladder was implemented in rural schools and how local leaders, at the bottom of that ladder, unpacked the implementation process. I wanted to discover 1) in which parts of the policy implementation did rural schools struggle or experience challenges and 2) if the local context impacted or added to the challenges.

Throughout the process of this study, which took just under 12 months, I interviewed personnel, visited the communities, and did extensive research on poverty in rural Wisconsin to fully understand the context in which rural children attend school and rural administrators act as instructional and managerial leaders. I also investigated other mitigating factors, such as drug and alcohol abuse in rural areas, access to shelters and food pantries, and the impact of recent immigration to rural Wisconsin. The latter contextual issues did not influence the study as much as I had initially planned, but nonetheless, the study of these issues aided in my overall understanding of rural life in Wisconsin and provided solid context for educational policy issues.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions attempted to identify the unintended consequences and challenges associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) implementation in rural schools.

1. What sources of conflict emerged as rural schools attempted to comply with the provisions of NCLB?
2. Related to the sources of conflict, what policy design or contextual factors impeded compliance with provisions of NCLB in rural schools in Wisconsin?

I learned that various sources of conflict emerged as leaders attempted to implement NCLB. There are policy components that are simply counterintuitive and against best practices in these rural schools. I also learned that each school, contextually, is unique; some provisions that are challenges in one rural school are not necessarily challenges in all rural schools. I further learned that leadership capacity in rural areas varies and that stronger leadership professional development is needed throughout the state of Wisconsin.

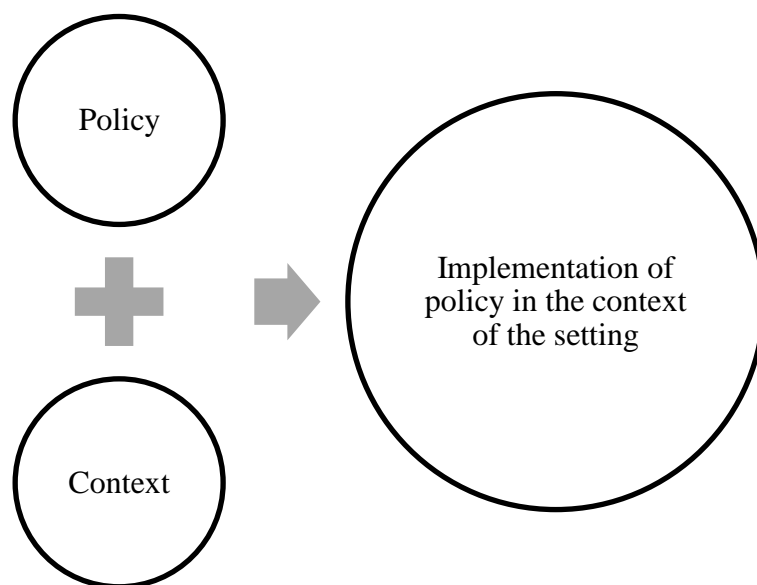
## **Literature Review**

The literature review contained two themes: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) regulations that rural schools struggle with as a result of policy design and transformations in 21st century rural “life.” Through the exploration of rural transformations over the past 20 to 50 years, my intention was to set a background to illustrate the sources of conflict that emerged, within the rural context, and to illustrate sources of conflict unique to rural schools. These sources of conflict are, without a doubt, related to the design of NCLB policy.

For the conceptual framework, I used the work of M.W. McLaughlin (Greenwood, Mann, & McLaughlin, 1975; McLaughlin, 1987, 1990). I had difficulty articulating how I wanted to demonstrate the insular nature, or the isolation, of the rural environment. If I replicated this study in the future, I would change the way in which I used the conceptual framework. Instead of using a “ring” or “target” diagram in which the local unit, or rural school, is the center and the rural context and federal policy are wrapped around the local unit, I would use a more diffuse or filtered diagram.

Figure 4

*Revised Conceptual Framework Diagram to Demonstrate the Difference that Context Creates in Policy Implementation*



Based on the preceding graphic, the application of the federal policy within the context (rural, urban, or other) will have different outcomes when the policy is applied within the local setting. Additionally, two schools within the same context, such as rural, would have different outcomes or implementations of policy because the settings are different, however slight.

Through the course of this multiple-case study, I learned that if there are two local units, or rural schools, the outcomes will vary simply because the units themselves vary. For example, Driftless Elementary School and Northeastern Elementary School are, on the surface, two rural Title I schools. They have a lot in common: similar demographics, poverty, and economic wealth. Despite these similarities, they cannot be generalized because there are nuances even within the similarities.

### **Methodology Review**

I first approached the methods of this multiple case study by interviewing Title I personnel in two pre-identified rural schools in Wisconsin. I narrowed my sample of all rural Title I schools down to three and then chose two based on different geographical and regional differences for variety in the study. Both before and after the interviews, I visited the communities; I explored local restaurants, diners, and libraries, and in one case, I visited the school during the school day. My employment affords me the opportunity to travel throughout the state, so in two of the visits, I incorporated a site visit into an already planned trip to that region. With McLaughlin's framework in mind, in which policy is "ultimately the problem of the smallest unit," I sought to determine how a large federal education policy such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was implemented in rural schools; I also wanted to discover what challenges emerged that were a problem of the local unit due to context or capacity, and what other challenges were simply flaws in the policy's design, as it had been designed to improve urban schools.

## **Individual Case Findings and Cross-Case Findings**

The first overarching finding is that there are, in fact, requirements in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that are difficult or challenging for rural Title I schools to implement based on the context of their rural location. Specific requirements, such as the highly-qualified (HQ) teacher requirement, are impractical to the rural school setting. Furthermore, other requirements, such as serving private school Title I students equitably, make good policy sense but are cumbersome to implement and add burden to the amount of compliance paperwork for small administrative staffs. Certain NCLB policy requirements are inherently difficult to implement in rural schools. Rural schools must comply with NCLB requirements, which are the same requirements that urban schools follow. Urban schools have more administrative personnel, and their Title I allocations are larger because funding is based on a gross number of low-income students. In rural areas, there are fewer administrators (who often have multiple roles within a district), and funding allocations are smaller because rural populations are smaller. Regardless of the size of the district or the school, the paperwork requirements are the same. If a school is monitored, it must produce the same number of artifacts, purchase orders, assessments, and lists of students receiving services to the monitoring agency.

The HQ teacher requirement is complicated for small schools because of the context of rural schools. The issue for rural schools, specifically, is that there often are not enough students registered to take one section of any specialized or advance courses; therefore, schools do not hire teachers in more advanced science or social studies. In the interviews, administrators pointed out that it is difficult to find teachers with multiple licenses in general, let alone in rural areas.

The private school equitable participation requirement is another NCLB requirement that is difficult to implement in rural schools. Rural schools adhere to the requirement of cooperating with private schools for Title I services, but the rules do not make it easy to provide services. In a large rural school attendance area, where the schools are generally farther apart and turnover in private school administration is a regular occurrence, cooperating and partnering with private schools is an annual challenge. For example, one administrator pointed out the difficulty of engaging Amish schools. One has to wonder if, when crafting the policy, the federal government considered the context of the rural school administrator engaging Amish elders for public education requests.

Accountability and meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) are difficult requirements for rural and urban schools alike. However, the biggest reason that rural schools struggle with meeting AYP is because of small cell size. AYP mandates that schools demonstrate progress each year in reading and mathematics; in small schools, where the number of students tested is generally small, there is more volatility in year-to-year percentages. AYP also brings up the tested subgroup issue. Under accountability regulations, subgroups of students — such as English language learners (ELL), special education students, low-income students, and minority students — also have their own progress measurement. In a small school, general population shifts, such as students leaving the school or moving into the school, may impact the score year to year and make the results much less reliable.

### **Rural School District Conditions Impede Best Practices**

Many people, for various reasons, find rural communities attractive places to live. Some are attracted to the calm evenings, the wildlife, the less congested roads, and the people. Despite



this calm and beauty, rural life is difficult and isolating. Rural areas have fewer resources, and people have less access to employment, health and medical services, and technology. As rural populations decrease and other costs, such as transportation and living expenses, increase, rural schools make tough choices to close buildings and consolidate with neighboring districts. The result is the loss of a community center and identity, as well as greater distances between homes and schools.

Title I educational best practices embrace after-school or extended day programming for students most at risk of not meeting the state's academic standards in reading and mathematics. In rural schools, transportation issues make this practice impractical. Title I funds are able to pay for programming in rural schools, but the addition of transportation costs to the budget makes it prohibitive for schools to offer this type of academic service. As a result, rural schools may find alternative ways to fund after-school programming, but they still need to fund a later bus route. The difference found in the case studies is that one rural school embraced innovation to provide the best Title I services to fit the needs of the student population. The other school used Title I funds for operational costs and to uphold the status quo.

Instructional technology, especially in the past 10 years, has infused itself into the modern classroom. Driftless Elementary School has embraced technology and gives its rural students a competitive edge. The school leadership's vision is to equip the school with the latest technology and to ensure that faculty and students understand this technology. The community possesses the infrastructure to support broadband Internet. The point was made, however, that outside the village limits, access to Internet technology is severely limited. After school hours, students who live outside the village limits have access to technology only through expensive

satellite connections, through cell phone connections, or at the library either in the village or at the school.

Contrasted with Driftless Elementary School, Northeastern Elementary School, which I believe is more representative of most of the rural schools in northern Wisconsin, is in a community entirely isolated from technology. The school cannot afford to outfit its building in broadband and wireless Internet because the building is older. It would take an expensive capital project to update the electricity and effectively “wire” the school. Therefore, the few computers that the school has must be shared among students and staff alike. The community does not have access to wireless technology or broadband Internet. The community library may have access through Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) initiatives, but the hours are so irregular and the location is so far from many students that the resource is entirely underutilized after school hours. The school personnel feel that most families do not have access to technology in their homes, but they are not certain because they have never conducted a study that measures access in homes. Under these assumptions, communicating with parents is slightly more difficult than in other communities; students are also placed at a technological learning disadvantage against their rural peers in southern and western Wisconsin as well as their peers in suburban and urban areas.

### **Local Leadership Impacts Local Capacity**

If specific NCLB policies challenge rural schools, the second finding is that there is a difference in how rural leadership responds to those challenges. When the leadership, in all positions, is presented with difficult choices or challenges, how it responds (either effectively or not) widely impacts the outcome. That local leadership impacts local capacity is not a new

concept. In my approach to this research, I did not expect to find such an obvious difference in the leadership at the two schools in this study. One of the strongest lessons learned in the study is the level by which resourcefulness and capacity of local leadership can either impact or impede the implementation of Title I and NCLB policies. Two schools with similar financial and community contexts can have two different trajectories toward effective Title I implementation, based on the local building leadership's capacity, vision, and resourcefulness. What I learned from Driftless Elementary is that a visionary leader can leverage Title I funding to be proactive in curriculum and programming change. Whereas in the other case study of Northeastern Elementary, I was able to view how Title I requirements made a school reactionary toward implementation of curriculum and programming.

Driftless Elementary School harnessed the “challenges” identified through NCLB and embraced them in order to turn those challenges into opportunities. Through identified Title I challenges, the school pursued financial grants to improve instructional services and human resources in both the school and the district. Recognizing that the school could not attract teachers to meet the HQ teacher requirement, the school hired individuals who had potential to be great teachers. Driftless intended to retain those teachers through investing in professional development and more higher education. After they were hired, those teachers stayed at Driftless Elementary School because of the value that the administration placed on their teaching abilities. These teachers continue the high-achievement culture established at Driftless and reinvest their skills into the community.

Driftless Elementary School acknowledged that deficits in after-school programming and Title I summer school programming existed due to budgetary concerns and distances that students traveled between school and home. Rather than accepting these instructional deficits

and sending students home immediately after the school day ended, the elementary school leadership deliberately established an after-school program rooted in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). This STEM program is partially funded with Title I dollars, but overall, it meets its operational costs through STEM grants and local funds. This program not only solved the problem of how to provide additional mathematics and reading interventions to students beyond the school day but also provided extended afternoon care for children while their parents worked. The program, piloted during the school year, became a summer program that is open to all students in the district. The STEM program expanded with additional grants, and an added feature was the video-gaming and computer programming component, included after a partnership with Wisconsin-based educational video gaming. This innovative and resourceful school was able to harness Title I requirements, and instead of accepting them as challenges, it turned them into opportunities to capitalize on its strengths.

One of the biggest surprises for me in this research was discovering how great an impact that local leadership can have on the Title I programming and outcomes in one building. My intention is not to portray a negative light on Northeastern Elementary School, where Title I is apparently stagnated. Rather, my desire is that identification of schools such as Northeastern Elementary can be used as a call to action for state leadership or regional leadership to focus resources on these rural schools in order to bring them back from the brink of decline and to revitalize the learning communities. There is little innovation or resourcefulness by the leadership to bring additional opportunities to the elementary school. The school leadership and teaching personnel are understandably overwhelmed and sometimes paralyzed by the lack of community resources. Due to its remoteness, dormant economy, and dwindling population, the school is in apparent decline.

## Individual Case Findings

Northeastern Elementary School experienced more abject poverty than other schools did due to several factors: high unemployment, alcohol abuse and local social ills, and a lack of resources available to residents (such as shelters, soup kitchens, and food pantries). Poverty also led to other issues, such as a lack of access to technology because so many families live in remote places and cannot afford an expensive satellite or cell phone connection. These contextual factors made attracting highly-qualified (HQ) teachers difficult. Another observation is that Title I funds were used for operational expenses, not for innovative purposes. Most of the population in this school is economically disadvantaged, and it appeared that Title I funds were not set apart from the rest of the school operations, which can make compliance confusing.

Driftless Elementary School experienced fewer poverty-related issues but more educational challenges, such as adequately serving immigrant students and English Language Learner (ELL) students. It recognized the cultural advantage to having ELL students in the community but felt that it was unable to serve them in the way that they deserved to be served. This issue came out of the fact that Driftless has trouble attracting and retaining teachers, particularly teachers in high-need subjects such as world language, science, mathematics, and reading. Despite these challenges, Driftless was much more resourceful in attempting to solve its challenges. Some of those challenges are initiated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), while other challenges are due to local context. The administrators recognize that they cannot attract teachers or find teachers with specific licensing requirements, so they instead “grow their own” teachers.

Driftless also recognized that it did not have a community after-school or summer programs for children and that such programs would be beneficial to student achievement.

Instead of those children being unsupervised after school, the school decided to create its own extended day and summer school programs. Instead of accepting that it had to cut its after-school and summer school programs because of a lack of funding, Driftless Elementary School crafted a campaign to raise money and won several grants to fund the programs for upcoming years. The administration also recognized that technology would be a huge benefit to students as they graduated and left for college or the workplace, so Driftless, understanding that many families cannot afford Internet and computer technology in the home, made it a priority to wire its school with the best technology available. The school also taught students video game and application development through a computer science partnership with a Wisconsin-based video-gaming company. Again, Driftless was resourceful and created its own programs to serve the needs of its school and community. The district and the school are small enough to be nimble and can quickly implement programs.

### **Limitations of Study**

This study was not without limitations. There are only two cases in this study, and therefore two schools. The fact that only two rural schools are studied and a total of five individuals interviewed indicates that this study cannot represent the situations of all rural schools in Wisconsin. Ideally, to ground the study in existing research, it would be beneficial to have more cases or more schools participate in the study in order to determine if the findings are at least more general and less specific to the sites in this study. Another limitation is that the researcher did all the data transcription, interviews, and analysis. To acquire more validity and reliability, it would be best to have additional researchers conduct the study or have independent contractors transcribe the data or conduct the interviews.

The researcher is an employee of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). While the researcher works with an entirely different group of schools on a regular basis, she indicated her involvement with the state department to potential research subjects. In both cases, the subjects knew of the researcher and the type of work she performed while a DPI employee. A potential limitation would be whether the subjects expressed honest views in the interview, knowing the researcher worked for DPI. While conducting the interviews, some information provided by the subjects that cast themselves in a negative light, left the impression upon the researcher that indicated their honesty. In several cases, the subjects predicated their answers with phrases like, "I know this isn't how we should do it, but..." and "for awhile, we've been doing it this way; we know that's against the rules." If the subjects were dishonest or withholding information, it is the researcher's belief that they would not have presented their statements in such a manner.

Another limitation to the study is that the scope had potential to widen as each of the contextual issues was addressed and as each of the challenges in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy was addressed. It was difficult to harness the amount of data and the evolving contexts, as well as to keep the scope of the study narrow. There was always a looming potential to lose focus and become mired in the minutiae of the details, particularly as the interview subjects steered the conversation to other issues in the school outside of policies addressed under NCLB.

As the researcher, I felt as though I did not do justice to some of the issues raised in this study, due to the fact that I needed to stay focused on the research questions. For example, so much more can be explored about the consequences of rural school consolidation. When a school is closed or consolidated in an urban area, normally another school is still within walking or driving distance, or on a bus route, for a child to attend. In a rural area, the situation is not that

simple. Children travel great distances to go to school. This distance causes other issues as well, such as the disengagement between home and school, particularly in low-income families. Schools and state policymakers need to factor distance into their conversations when they consider school consolidation. Rural access to technology is another needed conversation, and states need to heavily consider how they can provide the infrastructure to rural areas at a lower cost so that parents and students can more fully participate in public education and become technologically literate.

### **Implications for Practice**

I think that this study brings up some very important points. The first point is that many rural areas are truly isolated and that as policy makers and researchers, we cannot assume that policies are to be implemented the same way in all locations. The educational, social, and environmental needs in rural areas are going to vary greatly, and they will inevitably differ from the needs in urban areas. I think that this study provides value to future policy design in reminding policy makers and researchers alike that rural schools, particularly high-poverty rural schools, experience some of the same challenges as urban schools. The biggest difference between the two settings is that urban schools are consistently researched while rural schools struggle for recognition and voice. There is little research on the various components of large educational policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) — or even the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) prior to its reauthorization as NCLB — and their impact when implemented in rural schools. If more studies are completed on rural schools, they can add richer



value and context to large educational policies that can truly influence and help all schools and students, not simply those located in urban areas.

The second point is that as researchers we can speculate and identify possible solutions to aid rural schools as they implement federal educational policies. In the case of NCLB and the challenges that it presents to rural schools, primarily the highly-qualified teacher requirement, licensing flexibility would ameliorate many problems with recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools. For example, if the highly-qualified provision requires that teachers have a major or minor in a subject area prior to obtaining a license to teach in that subject area, it would be practical to have teachers who demonstrate competence (through an exam or other means) to obtain a dual license. Subject areas where this could be applied are in science/math, English/reading, and any of the science or social studies subject areas. In rural schools where teachers do not teach the same subject all day and are forced to split their time between subject areas because of class sizes, these rural schools would be able to retain teachers who demonstrated their competency and dedication to the school and community.

This study also brings recognition to the widely varying abilities and leadership capabilities of rural school administration. Some administrators are visionary while others are reactionary in how NCLB can be implemented in their schools. In addition, this study recognizes how isolated rural schools and school leadership are from the rest of the state. Many administrators are pressed for time; they wear so many “hats” and are responsible for so much in their rural schools. There needs to be state leadership to engage rural school administrators and provide professional development on literacy initiatives, among other practices. State leadership also needs to proactively engage rural administrative voices in policy-making decisions. As rural

schools admit that they have difficulty attracting and retaining teachers, the problem extends to attracting and retaining school leaders as well.

### **Future Research**

There is a need for future research on each of the challenges that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other large-scale federal education policies place on rural schools. A few studies analyze the funding formulas for rural and urban schools districts. As a result, states such as Vermont have adapted new funding formulas so that rural schools are not adversely impacted. More needs to be done to ensure that federally funded programs do not inadvertently disadvantage rural schools. Private foundations, such as the Rural School and Community Trust, and other not-for-profit interest groups have conducted much of this research. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) should be spearheading these studies, but it is a start that these other institutions have brought rural schools into the funding conversation.

There is little research on the impact that serving private schools in rural areas has on the capacity and resources of rural public schools. It would be helpful to have a larger study that analyzes the challenges that occur as rural public schools implement Title I programs in private schools. This research could inform future policy decisions and revisit the role of public and private education and public funds. In the case of Amish schools, it would be interesting to see if a study on serving private schools could influence education policy decisions and perhaps provide waivers and exemptions for public schools with Amish communities within district boundaries.

There is some research on small cell size and accountability, but more is needed to understand the effects of negative labeling due to missed adequate yearly progress (AYP) on

small rural schools. As a result of these labels, particularly outside of Wisconsin where it is more of an issue, it would be helpful to understand how rural schools have adjusted to the negative labels and what outcomes occurred.

Finally, rural school administrators and state leadership do not have a good understanding of the technological divide that has occurred between rural communities and every other community in the state. For the future of public education, access to employment, and information, large-scale studies need to occur that amplify the great need for rural access to broadband Internet. Rural schools and communities are left behind in the technology age.

## **Conclusion**

Rural schools and communities are not better or worse than urban schools and communities. Both environments have their virtues, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Specific challenges make implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) difficult, but through some perseverance and resourcefulness, rural schools are able to ensure that their students can receive a quality education. In fact, I would argue that in one of the cases, the school rivals some of the best urban or suburban schools in the state. On the other hand, there are significant challenges that other rural schools manage on a daily basis, which makes me question, as an educator, if we are doing enough at the state level to aid these schools. As one administrator put it, "Rural schools are not better or worse than urban schools; they are just different."

This research project led to a personal discovery of my own, as a researcher. One of the cornerstones of the research questions was that I was critical of a federal policy's generalization of schools. I critiqued the policy as being written for urban schools and yet it was applied to rural

schools with the expectation of the same results. What I learned from this project is that that same expectation of generalization cannot be applied even to the same types of schools.

I researched two rural schools, provided context for the case study description, and then methodically reviewed the impact that each of the policy requirements in NCLB had on each school's ability to implement Title I programming. All along, I was generalizing these two schools, assuming on the surface that they, too, were the same. What I found was that yes, superficially, these two schools are similar. They are in the same state and have similar demographics, but that is where the similarities ended. The context of every school is unique; as educators we preach individualized learning and differentiated learning, but then we expect each school to respond to the same federal policy treatment in the same way, and if they do not uphold that standard, they are penalized and labeled.

Through the process of analyzing these two cases, I learned that NCLB is a burden on small rural schools and promotes challenges in them. The first lesson learned is that small schools cannot afford the personnel to manage a large federal program with multiple policy rules that potentially will not apply to their setting. The policy stretches the already-stretched school administrator to perform responsibilities in the name of compliance alone. The policy challenges small schools that must perform time-consuming tasks, not in the name of instructional improvement, but rather in the name of compliance, such as reaching out and serving private schools.

The second lesson is that rural schools desire flexibility in how they can use their federal dollars to reach more students by using those dollars in a way more suited to their needs. A good example of this is found throughout the case studies and the descriptions on acquiring highly-

qualified (HQ) teachers. Due to the lack of flexibility afforded to rural schools, I also learned that schools will use funds to meet compliance, but they will also use funds in ways that may not be legitimate to the policy regulations. These comments gave me the impression that Title I is seen as an operational fund; it keeps schools going. The schools “do what they have to do” to educate the students with whatever funds they have. I feel that this behavior is not uncommon. In my experience working with Title I schools, I have found similar behavior throughout the state. Title I is a funding source. The program has transitioned from one of inputs, as it was originally designed in 1965, to one of “outputs” or results through accountability testing. What I have found is that the program requirements are met throughout the year to ensure that the paperwork is filed, but I would question the fidelity of implementation in schools that struggle to keep their doors open.

The third lesson learned is that rural schools have some educational similarities to large urban schools. For example, both rural and urban schools, in general, struggle with parent involvement. Other similarities exist within the context of these communities. Although it might appear that the two locales are vastly different geographically and culturally, there are similarities in attracting and retaining teachers (albeit rural communities cannot incentivize teachers with larger salaries or active social scenes).

Ultimately, rural Title I schools are not better or worse than urban Title I schools; they are simply different. Perhaps a lesson learned is that we, as policy makers and implementers, should not expect both settings to meet the same rules in the same way — that just like with students, differentiation is needed and would be welcome in all schools that do their best to educate all students of varying needs. It would be helpful to identify the needs of individual

schools and help them achieve as institutions so that they can further engage students to solve problems in the road ahead.

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## Appendix A

### UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON Research Participant Information and Consent Form

**Title of the Study:** NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND AND THE CHALLENGES TO RURAL WISCONSIN SCHOOLS

**Principal Investigator:** Eric Camburn (phone: 608-263-3697)

Student Researcher: Jill Underly (phone: 608-886-2334)

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the requirements of the No Child Left Behind/Title I in rural schools in Wisconsin.

You have been asked to participate because your school district receives Title I funds and you have a Title I-funded school located in a rural area.

The purpose of the research is determine how rural schools are challenged by the requirements of No Child Left Behind and if there are specific components that are difficult to comply.

This study will include interviews with Title I personnel at the district or school level.

The research will take place through a phone interview.

#### **WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?**

If you decide to participate in this research you will be asked to answer questions about No Child Left Behind and Title I policy in your school district.

Your participation will last approximately 45 min per session and will require 1 session which will require 45 min in total.

#### **ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?**

There is a very small risk that the information you provide might accidentally be seen by someone besides the researcher. To protect against that from happening the researcher will store the interviews on a password protected computer. The researcher will also protect your confidentiality by replacing your name with a pseudonym (fake name) in study publications.

#### **ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?**

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

**HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?**

Neither your name nor any other identifiable information will be recorded. Pseudonyms will be used in the final document. During the research phase all identifying information will be on a password protected computer. Once the project is complete, identifying information will be destroyed.

**WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Eric Camburn at (608) 263-3697. You may also call the student researcher, Jill Underly at 608-886-2334.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education Research and Social & Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study it will have no effect on any services or treatment you are currently receiving.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

#### No Child Left Behind and Challenges to Rural Wisconsin Schools

Interview:

Date of Interview:

#### **Part I: School and District Information:**

Title I School: school receives federal Title I funds through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As a result of receiving these funds, Title I schools must comply with rules and regulations of the NCLB policy. If a Title I school does not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading and math, for example, they become a school identified for improvement (SIFI). If a district does not meet AYP for a portion of all (Title and non-Title) schools, a district could become a district identified for improvement (DIFI).

1. Are you aware of No Child Left Behind in your district?
2. Are you aware of NCLB implementation, such as reading and math improvement for students most at risk of not meeting the state achievement standards, at the school building level?
3. Are any of the Title I schools in your district SIFI?
  - a. If so, which grade span are they?
  - b. Is there more than one SIFI in your district?

#### **Part II: Professional Information**

Title I services are usually coordinated by a district administrator or an ESEA Coordinator. Services are usually delivered, depending on the programming, by a Title I teacher, a reading specialist, or math teacher. This list of instructional professionals is not all-inclusive as it depends on the goals of the Title I program in the school and the available instructional staff.

1. Could you please describe your role in the Title I Program in your district? (i.e. are you a coordinator? A district administrator? A building administrator? A teacher?)
2. How many years have you provided Title I services in your district?

3. As a part of your position responsibilities, have you personally participated in a Title I/ESEA Consolidated monitoring visit?
4. How would you describe your level of knowledge of NCLB requirements for Title I programming?

**Part III: District and School Programming Information: Sources of conflict between the role of educator and also steward of NCLB.**

**Research question: What are the sources of conflict that emerge as rural school districts attempt to comply with the provisions of No Child Left Behind?**

1. Of the required components of Title I (listed below), which are the three most challenging components for your district to implement?
  - a. Conducting a needs assessment and designing a program, such as interventions, to match the needs of the students or the school;
  - b. Parent involvement
  - c. Serving private school students
  - d. Ensuring/employing highly-qualified teachers and paraprofessionals
  - e. Coordinating services and serving students who are homeless
  - f. Complying with sanctions and providing support for schools identified for improvement (SIFI) such as school choice and supplemental education services for students
  - g. Meeting comparability
2. Of the three requirements mentioned above, which has been the most challenging to implement or comply with at the Title I school building level?
  - a. What makes this requirement challenging for your district or your school?
  - b. As a Title I administrator, do you encounter push-back from staff, or perhaps internal conflict with what you think is best for students?
  - c. What policy or exception would make this requirement less challenging? Is this a challenge or conflict with the policy (meaning is it something that can be amended or removed from policy) or is it something that is out of “control” (poverty, local school funding, facilities)?
3. If there was one area of NCLB that you could wish your district did not have to comply with or that the government could waive, presumably because it would benefit students, what would it be?
4. In which ways could the U.S. Department of Education or Congress, in designing school policy, help your rural school district?
5. If you could recommend policy changes to Congress with regard to ESEA, perhaps with pending reauthorization that would be of benefit to rural schools like yours, what would you suggest?

Part IV: One-sized-fits-all policies obviously do not work well in every setting. Please reflect on a recent ESEA monitoring visit. **Research Question: Specifically, what policy design or context factors impede compliance with provisions of No Child Left Behind in rural school districts in Wisconsin?**

1. Are there areas of NCLB that your school struggles in meeting compliance? If so, which ones?
2. Why do you think these areas are difficult for rural schools?

**Part V: Describe your rural community and the community's school.**

Questions:

1. What makes your rural school unique? What is special about this place?
2. Are the challenges faced by the school or district related to unique characteristics of the community, (for example, high unemployment, homelessness, immigration, drug use, etc.)?
3. What do students do after they graduate high school? Do many of them go into the work force? Post-secondary?
  - a. If students leave their community after high school, do they come back to work after graduation and raise families in the community?
  - b. For students who do not come back to your community, do you have any anecdotal evidence as to why?
4. If there were one or two things you could “brag” about because your school does well, what would it be?

## Appendix C

### *Cross-Case Matrix of Title I Challenges in Rural Schools between Cases*

Title I or Rural Indicator	Similarities	Differences
AYP: Accountability and high stakes testing, sanctions	Small cell sizes may lead to volatility in scores year-to-year. Both schools have similar subgroups of low-income or free-reduced-lunch, special education students, and ethnic minorities.	Subgroup for ELL students applies only to Driftless.  Northeastern does not have a language minority subgroup.
HQ: Highly qualified teachers	Both schools expressed trouble attracting and retaining teachers to teach in small schools.  Both schools stated that people who teach in the schools are vested in the community or are tied to the community.  Neither school is very close to a college from where they could recruit student teachers.  Both schools desired more flexibility in staffing and that they have trouble hiring teachers on a part-time basis.	Driftless appeared more innovative in recognizing that they have a problem attracting and retaining teachers, so they make the positions attractive and invest in their personnel through “growing their own” teachers.
PAR: Paraprofessionals	Paraprofessionals were initially difficult to certify as highly qualified, but the state became more flexible and the issue was resolved.	Driftless cut their paraprofessionals due to budgetary concerns and invested only in teachers.
COM: Compliance burdens	Driftless and Northeastern discussed the problems with complying with the private school services.  Both schools expressed frustration at the amount of paperwork needed to demonstrate compliance.	Northeastern insinuated that they are not following the federal policies in favor of local policies and priorities.
PI: Parent involvement	Both schools expressed that surprisingly it is difficult to involve parents. One would assume, they said, that rural schools had better parental involvement.	Driftless had better parental involvement, but that may be due to more community resources and less distance between homes and school.
PS: Private schools	Both expressed frustration in serving private schools.	Driftless was much more vocal and had appeared to have thought about the issue of serving private schools more; the reading specialist didn't correctly understand how private schools are served through the policy.

		Northeastern did not like serving private schools but also admitted they did not have many private schools in the area.
ALC: Alcohol	Both expressed problems with Alcohol in the community/teens	Northeastern expressed more difficulty combating alcohol abuse in the community; the counties serving Northeastern have the highest rates of alcohol abuse in the state.
DIF: Differences between rural and urban locations	Comparisons were made in both schools that rural communities are neglected in policy design and that rural schools are not better or worse than urban schools.	Driftless used the differences between rural and urban to work in their favor.
DIS: Distances between home and school	Both expressed long bus rides but for different reasons.  Rising transportation costs make it difficult for families to participate in the school culture.	Northeastern has repeatedly consolidated with other schools making bus rides up to 2 hours for students in one direction. Northeastern also eliminated their late bus route.
DRU: Drugs (marijuana and crystal meth)	Both schools expressed that other drug than alcohol is present in the community.	The reading specialist at Driftless appeared to be more knowledgeable about crystal meth abuse in the community (which was backed up by state-data on drug abuse); the reading specialist had high school and college aged children and works more directly with kids in the community, so she may just be simply more aware due to proximity to the issue.
ELL: Increase in immigration		Driftless definitely experienced more impact from recent immigration to the community. The rise in Hispanic students is considerable in the past 10 years.
FLX: Flexibility	Both Driftless and Northeastern expressed desire for more flexibility in how the rules are followed, and in how the funds are spent.	Northeastern implied in several occasions that even though they don't have the flexibility to interpret the policy differently, they do anyway and would claim ignorance if caught.
JOB: Joblessness, unemployment	Both communities expressed concern with the jobless rates.	Joblessness is a major issue in Northeastern. The counties have some of the highest unemployment in the state.
POV: Rural poverty	There is pride in rural communities and individuals don't advertise they need help. Both communities have to seek out individuals to provide them with resources.  Poverty is rising quickly in both communities, but alarmingly so in	

	Northeastern.	
	There are few resources in rural areas for low-income residents to seek assistance.	
RES: Lack of resources related to rural location (after school programs, shelters, food pantries)	Food pantries, unless affiliated with a church, are non-existent. In some of the more remote areas, particularly if transportation is an issue, they are inaccessible.  Shelters for homeless individuals and families and domestic violence victims are nonexistent.	Driftless developed their own after-school program with additional grant funds to compensate for the fact that they did not have a program funded through Title I and that they could not afford it with district funds.
SOC: Social opportunities	Neither Driftless nor Northeastern demonstrated social opportunities for students and staff.	Staff and students appear to have more opportunities at Driftless due to its proximity of about an hour to major cities.
TEC: Technology	Technology is a challenge for both Driftless and Northeastern. Wireless and internet connections are issues in students homes due to expense and infrastructure. Schools have wireless at least in the library.	Driftless has made technology their niche in the public school market. All classrooms are hard wired and have wireless abilities. Each classroom also has a document camera and smart-board. The schools are investing in mobile iPad labs and are currently investigating a 1 to 1 laptop initiative for all students.