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## One Head – Many Hats: Expectations of a Rural Superintendent

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## One Head – Many Hats: Expectations of a Rural Superintendent

### Abstract

Although urban and suburban school superintendents serve the largest group of students in terms of sheer numbers of schoolchildren, there are actually more superintendents serving in rural school districts in the United States. I examined the expected roles or “hats” of the rural superintendent by collecting data from several districts located in NE Colorado. Interviews of school board members and superintendents provided data, which suggested that the expected roles of a rural superintendent are multiple and varied. Five major themes or “hats” emerged that rural communities expected their superintendent to wear. These themes or hats included those of manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community involvement. Included in each of these major themes were many subcategories of hats that are forced on the heads of rural superintendents by their communities and by events that occur daily. This study suggests that there are differences in the expectations of rural superintendents from those serving urban or suburban districts. Administrator training programs at colleges and universities might better serve those students aspiring to rural superintendent positions by offering a specialization in rural school administration or at least offering a separate course designed to cover these unique expectations.

### Keywords

Superintendents, Qualitative Research, Rural, Leadership, Expectations

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## **One Head – Many Hats: Expectations of a Rural Superintendent**

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*Although urban and suburban school superintendents serve the largest group of students in terms of sheer numbers of schoolchildren, there are actually more superintendents serving in rural school districts in the United States. I examined the expected roles or “hats” of the rural superintendent by collecting data from several districts located in NE Colorado. Interviews of school board members and superintendents provided data, which suggested that the expected roles of a rural superintendent are multiple and varied. Five major themes or “hats” emerged that rural communities expected their superintendent to wear. These themes or hats included those of manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community involvement. Included in each of these major themes were many subcategories of hats that are forced on the heads of rural superintendents by their communities and by events that occur daily. This study suggests that there are differences in the expectations of rural superintendents from those serving urban or suburban districts. Administrator training programs at colleges and universities might better serve those students aspiring to rural superintendent positions by offering a specialization in rural school administration or at least offering a separate course designed to cover these unique expectations. Keywords: Superintendents, Qualitative Research, Rural, Leadership, Expectations*

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### **Introduction**

In the United States, even though the majority of students by numbers are educated in urban and suburban schools, the majority of schools by number of campuses are rural by definition - 28,902 of 88,000 schools (Chen, 2010). In Colorado, 558 of the total number of school campuses out of 1,672 are defined as rural by the United States Department of Education, which is approximately one third. This classification of schools contains the largest number of campuses in Colorado (the other classifications being city, suburban, and town; (Chen, 2010). Therefore, many of Colorado’s superintendents, by sheer numbers, serve rural Colorado schools. I have served as a rural superintendent in four public school districts in two states – Texas and Colorado over the past twenty one years. Therefore, because of my personal experience and interest and the fact that there are more rural superintendents by number than any other category, this study topic speaks to me and many others. I conducted a case study to see if a typical profile of a rural superintendent emerged in small and rural public school districts located in northeast Colorado that could help refine administrative preparation programs for those who would like to specialize in rural education.

The school normally provides most all of the recreational and social activities of any small, rural community and most communities fight to keep their local schools (Salinas, 2000). Almost all major activities in small rural communities take place at the school and, on any given night, the school is bustling with activities (Hadden, 2000). I propose that the expectations of a rural superintendent in small schools in northeast Colorado vary from expectations in larger and more urban school districts, and the purpose of my study was to further define those differences - if they emerged - for rural superintendents.

I will complete my twenty- first year as a Superintendent of a small, rural public school district on May 20, 2013. I have served in this capacity for four different school districts across two western states, the most recent of which is located in northeast Colorado. In my experience, I have worn many different “hats” – some of my choosing, some of the choosing of others (Jenkins, 2007). I have come to see the community in which I live as a large haberdashery containing various hats, chosen by the people of the community, which I am forced to wear during my tenure. Some of these hats are worn only occasionally, while others are worn every day. Some of these hats, I voluntarily put on my head, while others are forced upon my head by the community or events that take place.

I came to work early on March 29, 2011, for what I thought would be a typical day. It had been snowing lightly and the ground and pavement was covered with a few inches of heavy, wet snow. The halls were still empty as the first students had not yet arrived. The custodian opened the doors, and the first few teachers began to arrive. At this time of day, I organize my schedule, check my emails, and get a bit of paperwork finished. On my head was the hat of “manager,” which I usually wear until the bell sounds, at which time I switch to the hats of “communicator” and “listener” and begin to tour the school talking to staff and students. About thirty minutes after I arrived, the town siren began wailing. Almost all rural communities have a siren that sounds whenever there is a need for first responders, whether it is for a fire, an automobile accident, or in some cases for a tornado. I dread hearing this sound at this time of day since many staff and students are on their way to school – including our three buses that pick up students who live in outlying areas of our school district. My worry began to subside since about fifteen minutes passed and no word of problems had arrived. Just as my mind began to ease, our principal came down the hall in a rush and told me that one of our buses had indeed been involved in a wreck. My heart raced as I quickly grabbed my coat and hat, and we got into my vehicle. As we travelled to the site of the wreck, our principal was on the phone and found out that the other vehicle was a car driven by one of our students and carried two student passengers. One of them was trapped in the car and had to be extracted by the first-responders. As we topped the hill, a line of vehicles over a mile long was stopped, the road completely blocked. We drove past the line and came to the scene. The bus was stopped off the road on one shoulder, while the car was stopped on the other shoulder. Both vehicles were damaged, but the car was worse. I got out and boarded the bus and checked on the riders and the driver. The heavy, wet snow was still falling. Lucky for us, they were okay and did not need medical attention, but students did need some comfort and calming presence. They were relieved to see us. Parents were at the scene. I asked the principal to stay on the bus with the students, and I walked over to the car. The paramedics and firemen were working with the eighth grader who was trapped in the back seat, and they were using the Jaws of Life to extricate him from the car. This was all in clear sight and earshot of the bus riders, who were visibly shaken. I tried to quickly decide what role I needed to play that would be most helpful. I called in a bus and driver to pick up the riders and transport them away from the scene and on to the school. I told our principal to stay with them. I also instructed him to call all the parents when he got back to the school to inform them about the accident and answer any questions. I comforted the eighth grader who was in a great deal of pain until he was finally loaded onto the ambulance. In order to meet with the parents, I decided to go on to the hospital rather than return to the school. As I drove, I remembered that the driver had to be drug and alcohol screened within a specific time period, so I called the school and reminded my transportation director – who is also our maintenance director - to arrange for this requirement. As I continued to drive down the snow-covered highway, I also remembered to inform the members of our school board. I arrived at the hospital about twenty minutes later where all three passengers in the car had been taken and the parents

were in the emergency rooms with their children. I waited outside, along with several others, and eventually the parents came out and updated us. Wearing a counselor/comforter hat, I was able to comfort them a bit and found out the extent of their students' injuries. The driver, who was the brother of the back seat passenger, had a concussion. The other front passenger had broken ribs and both had lacerations. The eighth grader in the back seat had major injuries and was flown to Denver Children's Hospital. Known injuries included: a broken femur, broken arm, fractured pelvis, fractured eye socket, and broken wrist. I stayed with the parents until their son was transported to Denver. I made sure they did not need anything at the time, and then I travelled back to school to resume the rest of the day. How many and which hats did I wear to start this day? This is one incident of many that I have experienced and that I could describe that makes this topic near to my heart. It helps explain why I conducted this case study to explore the many hats that the rural superintendent must wear.

### **The Research Study – Methodology**

What are the expected characteristics of Superintendents in small, rural public school districts? What are the expectations of small communities for their school superintendents? This case study sheds light on the unique expectations of these communities - through their school board members and their superintendents' experiences - for their school leaders. The results will assist to focus administrative preparation programs in colleges and universities on rural settings similar to those in this case study. A more focused graduate level preparation of programs offered specifically for this type of rural setting may better prepare school administrators for rural schools and even create a niche that would encourage prospective administrators to specialize in rural education. This qualitative research study is bounded by geographic location – NE Colorado, and by district type – rural (defined in this study as those public school districts with less than 250 enrollments – K-12), which aligns with Creswell's definition of case study (Creswell, 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the social constructionist tradition, I will incorporate the paradigm assumptions of an emerging profile, context-dependent inquiry (interviews), and inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2007, pp. 74-75). The social constructionist tradition emphasizes that we are already embedded in social and conventional institutions that have preceded us and from which we construct meaning (Crotty, 1998, pp. 52-57). Rural communities seek to construct meaning from their perceived realities, which shape their expectations of their school superintendent and his/her role.

### **Participants and Setting**

Before beginning my research, I obtained approval through the University of Northern Colorado Internal Review Board process for research involving human participants. I personally called six individuals and asked them to participate, using a purposeful sampling approach (Merriam, 2009, pp. 78-80). I focused on individuals in NE Colorado districts that have recently (within the last two years) conducted a superintendent search or are currently searching for a new superintendent. The participants in my study consisted of three past or present school board members of public school districts located in rural NE Colorado. These individuals were personally contacted by me and asked if they would participate in this study. I also interviewed three current public school superintendents from the same NE Colorado

region. I used the Executive Director of the Northeast Colorado Board of Cooperative Educational Services (NEBOCES) as a resource for advice and to help narrow my selections. I also obtained public materials that they used in their superintendent job searches, such as flyers used in recruitment, and board meeting minutes.

The three superintendents that were interviewed are located in Northeast Colorado – all in small rural districts (see Table 1).

**Table 1 – Superintendents Interviewed – NE Colorado**

Superintendent	District enrollment	Years in position	Experience with non-rural districts?
<b>A</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>no</b>

One Superintendent was in his first year as superintendent of a district that contained approximately 250 students. He had past teacher and principal experience in large and small districts, but this was his first superintendent position. He lived outside the district and drove into work every day. His children attended a neighboring school district. One of the other superintendents was also in his first year as superintendent. His educational background was in business and he had earned an MBA. He was also fluent in Spanish and began his career as a Spanish teacher. After earning his M.Ed., he has worked eight years as an educator. His district enrollment was just under 200 students, and he had three children enrolled in his school. The third superintendent interviewed was the daughter of a retired Colorado superintendent and had been with her district three years. She also had the dual role as elementary principal and her district had an enrollment of 120. Her youngest child graduated from the district last year.

**Table 2 – Board Members Interviewed – NE Colorado**

Board member	District enrollment	Years in position	Experience with non-rural districts?
<b>A</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>no</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>yes</b>

Board Member A had served as a board member in his community for 12 years (see Table 2). His district had an enrollment of approximately 100. He attended school there, and returned after college. He had three children graduate from the school. Board Member B graduated from his school, moved away and had a career along the Front Range and then retired back in his childhood community. Two of his grandchildren graduated from the school and he had one grandchild that still attended. He served as a board member for eight years. He completed his last term in 2007. Board Member C was serving his twelfth year on his board and was the Board President. He grew up in the community, went away to school and had a career in the Armed Forces, then moved back to his childhood home.

## Procedure

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the board members and superintendents in face-to-face interview sessions, which were audiotaped. The questions were designed to ascertain their thoughts on their expectations for their school

superintendent, or in the case of the superintendents what they believed were their community's expectations based on their personal experiences. I also asked about their personal experiences with superintendent job searches. See Appendix A for the basic list of questions. The superintendent interviews were triangulated with the findings from the school board interviews. The transcripts of the superintendent interviews were compared to the interviews of the board members in order to discover common themes, descriptions, and terms or phrases used in order to strengthen the validation of the findings of my study. For example, the board members and the superintendents were asked to list traits they believed were important to the success of a superintendent in their communities. Answers were analyzed to discover similarities between respondents' perspectives based on their personal experiences in their individual roles. A total of eighty-two pages of transcribed interviews were collected. I obtained job descriptions for the superintendent for analysis from two NE Colorado school districts.

The tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then compared for similarities and differences, and emergent themes were categorized into five broad themes (Merriam, 2009). As I read the transcripts and the major categories began to organize themselves in my mind, I created a filing system whereby I highlighted on the transcripts the phrases of each interviewee, be they from board member, staff member, or superintendent into the five major categories. A different color highlighter was used for each of the five major themes. This allowed me to quickly pick out relevant quotes as I was writing this paper. A profile of what is considered a "successful" superintendent of a small, rural district in NE Colorado was developed from the data. Quotes from the interviews were used to support the findings. The combination of data provided a profile or description of the expectations for a superintendent from the perspective of several rural communities in NE Colorado.

There were minimal risks associated with the participants in this study. Participants did not personally benefit from this study other than a \$25 gift certificate to an area steakhouse. However, an indirect benefit is the knowledge gained from the results of this study that could help guide future superintendent searches, refine or expand the expectations of superintendents in their districts, and/or a better understanding of the relationships and mutual expectations of the characteristics of the superintendent in rural districts and their communities.

### **Data Handling**

Confidentiality was assured in that the only two individuals that will have access to this taped interview are the participant and I. No real names or real district names were used in any public documents for this study. I explained that the recordings would be stored in my locked home office. All written data collected, including transcriptions of interviews, and artifacts will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the same location.

### **Analysis of Data**

According to Lahman's description of data analysis, a "bottom up" approach was used in this study (Lahman, 2010, p. 26). Transcriptions of the audiotaped interviews were completed after each interview was conducted. I used an open coding approach initially, highlighting every phrase in the transcripts that had a connection to an expectation of the superintendent. Those highlighted phrases were eventually organized into broad categories (Merriam, 2009). I began the analysis of the transcriptions reading and re-reading them numerous times until five major themes developed in my mind. I developed a coding system

using five different colors of highlighters. Each of the original phrases was color-coded according to which of the five major themes identified in my initial analysis that there was an obvious connection. In some cases, they were connected to more than one of the five themes. These colors represented my identified themes, which could describe various roles or “hats” that rural superintendents are expected to wear – either individually or in combination. After examining these coded themes, which emerged from the interviews, these became the “hats,” which represent the expected roles of the superintendent that emerged from my study. Numerous secondary themes naturally fit within one or more of the major themes (See Table 3).

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Creswell, there are six criteria for evaluating or validating a good case study (Creswell, 2007):

- Is there a clear identification of the “case” in the study?
- Is the case used to understand a research issue or used because the case has intrinsic merit?
- Is there a clear description of the case?
- Are themes identified for the case?
- Are assertions or generalizations made from the case analysis?
- Is the researcher reflexive or self-disclosing about his or her position? (p. 219)

I took each of Creswell’s criteria and re-examined my study to determine if they were all met. The case is clearly identified and described in the methodology section. The merit of the case is discussed in the introduction. The procedure section of this article describes how themes were identified and the conclusions section contains my generalizations from the results of this study. Although I have clearly described my own reflexivity in that I have described my role as a current rural superintendent in NE Colorado and my past experience in other rural districts, I avoided using any personal opinions or reflections when analyzing the data. I used triangulation of the data in that I collected data from community representatives (board members) and from current superintendents in the bounded case (Merriam, 2007). I compared their answers with each other and also with other artifacts collected, such as job search advertisements, and job descriptions from their own districts. Themes were identified as described in the data analysis section.

## **Results**

### **A Day in the Life:**

To call any day in the life of a rural superintendent “typical” is a bit dangerous because there are so many variables that can insert themselves which can change the entire complexion of the day. However, this description is a blend of six different interviews (three from rural superintendents, and three from board members) conducted which will give a picture of the many hats that a rural superintendent is expected by their communities to wear each day.

The rural superintendent generally arrives at school before anyone else. The times most mentioned were between 6:30 AM and 7:00 AM. One of the superintendents interviewed actually unlocked the doors each morning. All of the board members and two of the superintendents mentioned that it was important to be the first one (or close to the

first one) to arrive in the mornings. Expectations are that the superintendent personally handles any problems that might arise. This might include bus route issues, substitute issues, and parent issues. Everyone expects access to the superintendent (Tobin, 2006). The superintendent might wear the hat of manager, communicator, and custodian or cook all before the first bell even rings. All three superintendents mentioned that it was important for them to be out of their office in the mornings as students and staff arrived. This allowed them to be visible and to communicate, while at the same time supervise to make sure staff were performing their roles.

The superintendent is also responsible for all written reports to the State of Colorado. They felt a personal responsibility to complete these accurately and, indeed, made the point that they had no one to which to delegate this chore. Therefore, all indicated that part of their day was filled with completing required paperwork for the State. Rural superintendents will also spend part of each day working with the finances of their districts. Whether it is planning the budget for the coming year, trying to find current dollars to make up for a shortfall in an area, or simply projecting enrollment numbers or future dollars, all spend time working on the finances of their districts and feel this is one of their important “hats” (Moody, 2008).

The “listening hat” is another mentioned by all six who were interviewed as an important one. All believed that their day was normally filled with listening to various parties, whether they were staff, parents, students, community members or board members. One stated that he found it was important to listen to all input. However, if he did not respond in some way, then it was assumed that he agreed with the input being given. Therefore, silence was not usually an option after listening to others lest it be taken as agreement and a superintendent had to be ready at all times to articulate his opinion or judgment. Much of the input is unsolicited (Yavin, 1990).

All superintendents attended the student lunchtime and used this time to communicate with students and staff. The rest of the afternoon was described as more of the same: walking the halls supervising, communicating, listening, completing paperwork, and planning until the end of the day. Of course, any of this can be disrupted by a particular incident or event, which can be as simple as a phone call, a parent conference, or bus trouble. The end of the day varied depending on what activities were scheduled. All mentioned the importance of attendance at as many school functions as possible. These included games, concerts, open houses, plays, etc. All indicated that a superintendent’s day might well go into the night on many occasions since there were so many activities involving the school.

All communities regard their superintendent as a leader, much in the same way as the president of the local bank or mayor (Jenkins, 2007). Included in that leadership role, there were five major themes that emerged as hats or roles of a rural superintendent. These five major themes can be further subdivided into many sub-themes or categories.

**Table 3 - The Five Major Hats of the Rural Superintendent**

<b>Manager</b>	<b>Planner</b>	<b>Listener</b>	<b>Communicator</b>	<b>Community Involvement</b>
Staff	Budget	Staff	Staff	Visibility
Finance	Facilities	Parents	Parents	Church
Perform any task needed	Staffing	Board	Board	Social organizations
Facilities	Staff develop.	Students	Students	Parent
Transportation	Schedule	Accessible	Media	Resident

## **Manager**

The first theme or hat is that of manager. This hat includes many sub-roles such as organizer, finance manager, decision maker, and supervisor at school and during school activities. Webster defines manager as “One in charge of managing an enterprise or business; supervise people” and defines to manage as “To direct or control the affairs of or use of; supervise people” (Suplicki & Molino, 1999, p. 513). This is a role that encompasses many tasks and can devour much of a superintendent’s day. Indeed, the role of supervisor is an umbrella that includes the broad categories of staff and students. It can range from evaluating staff to the ability to “jump-in” and perform any number of duties necessary when others are absent. All superintendents mentioned numerous roles they had performed as necessary such as “shoveling snow,” “driving a bus,” “subbing in the cafeteria,” “emptying trash,” and “sweeping the floors.” These tasks further define the manager role of a rural superintendent as one who performs menial tasks that may not be generally regarded as management tasks, but in the rural superintendent’s daily reality are part of the necessary and expected management of his school. Board members and superintendents alike saw those roles as unique to superintendents of small, rural districts. None expected a superintendent of a larger district to perform those tasks, but all expected their own superintendent to do so if needed. Performing as a finance manager also falls under this theme. Boards of smaller districts rate this role as higher than do boards of large districts (Moody, 2008). Related to this role is the desire of rural superintendents for the “how-to” expertise needed to complete their roles rather than a philosophical explanation of why those tasks are required (Hooper, 1999). Perhaps this is because time to consider philosophy or background is a luxury that rural superintendents simply do not have. The hat of manager is worn most of the time, in addition to others because it is related to almost all the roles that emerged.

## **Planner**

The hat of planner is another major theme or hat that emerged from this case study. The superintendent is expected to plan for all things necessary in a school district. This includes budget, curriculum, scheduling, activities, remediation, and financial among others. Mentioned earlier is the perceived importance of finance knowledge for the superintendent – especially in small districts. Not only was this mentioned by all the interviewees in this study as important, it was also mentioned in the employment brochures as a required or expected trait for the prospective candidate. While managing finances is important, planning for the financial stability of the district is considered as paramount. The ability to plan for the academic progress of students and teachers was also an oft-mentioned expectation. The ability to diagnose needs and plan for staff development is a vital and expected role as mentioned by all of the board members and was also listed in the job vacancy brochures. In one of the districts, during their superintendent search, a focus group was asked to list “qualities desired in a superintendent” and fully half of the items on the list dealt with some form of planning.

## **Listener**

When asked for traits that they, as board members, looked for in a superintendent, the hat of a listener was one that was expected to be worn much of the time. This hat covered a wide range of activities. It includes the expected accessibility of the superintendent. Access

to the superintendent is expected from the board, the community, parents, teachers, and students. This emerged and was made clear from statements such as:

1. "They want to see, shake the hand and talk to him. . ."
2. "One of the things that I think is important is that the superintendent have an open door – so the community can come in and chit chat about the budget or whatever . . ."
3. "You know in bigger schools, a good superintendent might be able to lock himself in his office, do his work and be pretty successful – not gonna happen in *District A*. You're gonna have to be out there . . ."
4. "I have people stop at my house at 6PM just to talk about something, if you can't or don't want that – if you want to get off work and want to be alone, you're probably not going to be successful here . . ."
5. "You know, you're in Wal-Mart and a parent comes up to say hi, or comes up to do whatever, if you're unwilling to talk to them, you're going to be unpopular right away. . ."

All of these quotes illustrate the importance of wearing the listener hat and being accessible.

Another trait mentioned as desirable for the superintendent was being flexible. Wearing the hat of listener, thereby paying attention to the input from the community, is part of being flexible. When asked if there were any traits that would "kill" a person's chances of being hired or of being successful, inflexibility was often mentioned. Statements such as "...we don't want a person who draws a line in the sand" or "we want someone who will carry out the wishes of the board even if he doesn't agree with it . . ." were common. Treating community members and staff with respect are also traits that would fall into this theme of being a listener. Being a listener is seen as a way of showing respect. A study was conducted to rank the expected traits of a superintendent in rural Texas from school board members, superintendents, and staff. The results indicated general agreement that being empathetic, and maintaining cordial relationships with superiors were included (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).

## **Communicator**

Of all the hats that emerged in this study, the hat of a communicator was seen as especially vital. This was mentioned as one of those hats that if not worn, or if not worn competently, would negatively affect the success of that superintendent. This hat was worn in addition to almost every other hat placed on the superintendent's head. The ability to communicate well is imperative (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). The following quotes from my interviews support the importance of being a good communicator, by highlighting the expectations of a rural superintendent to possess comprehensive communication skills:

1. The rural superintendent is expected to have the skill of relating to their constituents at their level-not to appear arrogant: ". . . being able to talk to people, on their level – not over or under them . . ."
2. The superintendent is expected to come across as friendly to the community: ". . . has to be outgoing, has to be able to talk to community members at any time . . ."

3. The superintendent is expected to use communication skills to squelch inaccuracies and not hesitate to use time to do so, even if it means readjusting the daily schedule: “. . . You’re gonna have to be out there talking to parents. I had a conversation with our superintendent this morning and she said she hadn’t been able to get any of her stuff done, been on the phone putting out a rumor . . .”
4. A rural superintendent is also expected to have the communications skills that allow connecting to various constituencies: “. . . And good communications skills – can that person communicate effectively with everybody – the kids – if the superintendent walks through the school and sees somebody, can they have a conversation? Parents – can they have a conversation with parents and explain why the board or superintendent did this . . .”
5. The skill of being able to be transparent in the job and being able to be clear about what is being done and why to everyone was illustrated by this quote: “. . . one of *James*’ (pseudonym for a former superintendent) weaknesses was frankly public relations. It was just the fact that he didn’t explain to people why he was doing things; I think most people would’ve agreed with what he was doing if he had explained why he was doing them, but he just didn’t explain so that people understood . . .”

Speaking of board expectations and relations, and realizing that good relations between a superintendent and the board is dependent on good communication, Doug Eadie, in advising school boards how to hire “board-savvy” superintendents listed a “positive attitude towards the board” as the first trait to look for in an interview process (Eadie, 2007). He lists a positive relationship between the superintendent and board as the most important characteristic that determines the success of the school and clear, honest communication between them is what makes that relationship positive.

The importance of a positive relationship between the rural superintendent and the community at large is reflected a study that showed a connection between student academic achievement and the stability of the board and the superintendent relationship. It was found that where there is a negative relationship between the superintendent and board, the result is more turnover of the both superintendent and the board members and lower student achievement (Alsbury, 2008). As seen from these quotes and references, the communicator hat, if not worn correctly by a superintendent, can cause failure.

### **Community Involvement**

The community involvement hat is one that also emerged as a recurring theme in this study. Most patrons of larger schools could not identify their superintendent if presented in a line up. However, in rural communities, they know which church they attend, how often and how much he tithes. Most know the vehicle he drives, and all know where he lives (Jenkins, 2007). One rural superintendent described his job as his “life” since there is little separation or time when he is not perceived as accessible to the community, unless he is completely out of town with no phone (Jenkins, 2007). Surveys taken from superintendents in rural communities list high job satisfaction and perceived strong support from the community as factors that influence them to stay in their positions (Ramirez & Guzman, 1999). Indeed, many rural superintendents actually used some type of community connections to get a foot

in the door to obtain the job originally (Hadden, 2000).

A connection to the community emerged as key to the success of a superintendent. This hat has many colors: that of parent, church member, community service organization member, neighborhood resident, benefactor, and comforter when needed. One trait listed by a focus group in one NE Colorado community was worded “Finding a superintendent who will settle in the community and build long-lasting relationships” as an important one.

All the board members and two out of the three superintendents interviewed saw it as important to the community that they live in the district and if the superintendent had school-age children that they be enrolled in their school. The one superintendent who did not live in the district, and whose school aged children attended a neighboring district, admitted that he was asked “why” by many community members, and that he could see that it might develop into a problem for him. Board member A stated

. . . And I think we learned our lesson with the one that was not willing to bring his family. He just wanted to come in and basically did his job out of a suitcase. Cause we’re looking for someone to become part of the community. And I think that’s real important for a rural school – maybe compared to a big school.

All interviewees stressed the importance of the superintendent of their schools becoming an integral part of community life outside of the school day. Superintendent C stated, “It’s very important to the board that I’m very visible and involved in the community.” Board member C indicated the importance of community involvement:

I think it’s important that the superintendent attend Rotary and we pay their membership because that’s the whole community and there’re people there that you need to be aware of and what’s the pulse of the community.

Board member A said

. . . ‘cause that’s one thing that’s very important to the community – HERE and other rural areas, they want someone that’s going to be part of the community. Somebody that’s going to go to church with them, that’s part of the community, which maybe will be seen at the farm sales. It makes them feel like that person is vested into that school and into that district.

It is apparent from these quotes and from others in the interviews that anonymity is not something that can be had by a superintendent of a rural school. When asked about the challenges of fitting into her community, Superintendent C stated “Anonymity – everybody knows you . . . everybody knows you and yours’ . . .” These quotes indicate that community involvement is very important to a rural community and is tied in some ways to a community’s pride and ego.

## Conclusions

Five major hats for the rural superintendent emerged from the rural “community haberdasheries:” manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community life. The five themes that emerged from the data analysis might be considered essential hats for all superintendents in all types of school districts – big and small. However, when considering

the data collected – especially from the individual interviews, the many sub-roles that were included and that were described in each of these five major themes show that there were definite hats that rural superintendents were expected to wear which were unique to the rural community. Board member B had a unique perspective of the three board members interviewed of having been a school administrator in a large suburban district before retiring, returning to his home and serving as a board member of his rural district for eight years. He pointed out several differences between the expectations of large districts as opposed to the expectations of small, rural ones for their superintendents, which were included above in the individual theme's discussions.

Most of the characteristics that I read in the literature of a rural community's expectations of their superintendent did indeed emerge in the interviews and artifacts. These themes contained several what I call sub-roles or hats that were shared by more than one of the five major themes. Accessibility was an expectation from all those interviewed and falls into more than one of the themes. It is included in the listening theme, and the community involvement theme. Flexibility is an expected trait that would be included in the manager theme, the listening theme, and the planning theme. There are indeed interconnections between the five major hats themselves. Listening is related to communicator, but those interviewed always listed it as a separate expectation, which exalted it to its own hat for the superintendent. Visibility was another expectation and is related to the manager hat, the community involvement hat, the communicator hat, and finally the listener hat.

In conclusion, all those interviewed believed that there are differences in the expectations for rural superintendents by their communities. Board member B stated, "The anonymous nature of working in a larger district makes a person somewhat immune to things that are not accepted in a rural district." Since he had worked in a bigger district and served on a school board from a rural district, he had the life experience to make the distinction. These rural communities expected their school superintendents to wear many hats – some given to them by the community, others dictated by events out of their control. The data from this study should encourage those in charge of developing administrator-training programs at our colleges and universities to pay closer attention to the unique expectations for rural superintendents. This could be accomplished by possibly offering a specialization for those interested in pursuing rural administrative positions, or at least by offering a course dedicated to addressing these special needs.

The results of this study were not a surprise for me since as I have previously stated, I have twenty one years of personal experience as a rural superintendent and have personally experienced these expectations. However, I was somewhat surprised that all of those interviewed readily admitted that they believed their communities had different expectations of their superintendents than did urban or suburban districts. I did not hear a single comment that stated they believed the expectations were anywhere near the same. I did not realize that they were so aware of these differences in their expectations. In my personal experience, many in the state education departments or agencies do not perceive any differences in leading a rural school district other than the location, isolation, or place of rural districts.

### **Limitations to the Study**

Not all of the participants had the perspective of personal experience with large districts, in addition to their universal characteristic of personal experience in small, rural districts in NE Colorado (See Table 3). This case study was designed to only include superintendents and board members of small, rural districts located in NE Colorado. This was a limitation in that a true comparison between expectations of small, rural districts as opposed to larger districts based on personal experience was not possible with all

participants. Some participants' comments were conjecture and opinion rather than actual experiences.

### Further Study

I would recommend that further study might be expanded to include similar interviews and artifacts from those in large districts so that responses could be closely compared and any differences between the expectations of the large communities and the rural communities could be further ascertained. Also, I suggest possibly a study where focused sampling would include those participants with personal experience in both large and small districts or urban and rural districts would be appropriate.

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## Appendix A

### List of Possible Interview Questions for Past/Present Board Members

1. Describe the history you share with this community.
2. Tell me about your experience as a board member in terms of years of service, and your perceptions as to your role in school operations.
3. If you had a dual role as a parent while a board member, tell me how that changed your perspective while fulfilling your duties in both roles.
4. Describe your involvement in any superintendent searches that the district undertook during your tenure.
5. Do you consider it difficult to find a superintendent who is a good fit for your district?
6. What traits do you look for in a prospective superintendent for your district?
7. Tell me about what you would consider a typical day for a superintendent in your district.
8. Are there any traits of a prospective superintendent that would cause you to "veto" in a sense his/her employment?
9. List any characteristics that you believe are a must for your superintendent to possess.
10. Think of the superintendent in your district that you thought was generally unsuccessful. What specific traits did he/she possess that caused the lack of success?
11. Think of a superintendent in your district that you thought was generally successful. What are some specific traits that contributed to his/her success?
12. How important is it for the superintendent to attend school functions? What types of functions are more important for him/her to attend?
13. Are expectations different for rural superintendents than for urban/suburban superintendents? How are they different?
14. Are there any other closing thoughts you'd like to share on this topic?
15. This is what I heard you say (summarize thoughts)

### List of Possible Interview Questions for Past/Present Superintendents

1. Describe your history with this school district.
2. Is your perspective only as a superintendent, or do you have other perspectives such as parent or long term community member, etc.? If so, elaborate on how those perspectives intertwine.
3. Tell me about your experience of interviewing for this position?

4. What are some of the challenges in your “fitting in” in this community? Describe them.
5. What community/board characteristics did you look for in deciding to accept this position?
6. Tell me about what you would consider a typical day for you in your district.
7. Do you believe it is important for you to have children attending (or that have attended) your school? Why or why not?
8. List any characteristics that you believe are a must for a superintendent to possess in order to be successful in this district.
9. What specific traits do you have that causes you to be a successful superintendent in this district?
10. Are there any traits that you have that cause you to have problems as superintendent in this district?
11. How important is it for the superintendent to attend school functions in your district? What types of functions do you believe are more important for him/her to attend? Which are less important?
12. Do you think your community’s expectations for you are higher than the expectations of superintendents in larger and less rural districts?
13. Are there any other closing thoughts you’d like to share on this topic?
14. These are some thoughts that I heard . . .

#### **Author Note**

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