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Strategic Management of Human Capital as Rural Praxis

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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN CAPITAL AS RURAL PRAXIS

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A Dissertation

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An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
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The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate teachers' and administrators' perceptions about the current state of human capital management in a rural Northern state. The study also sought to uncover ways in which rural districts could better leverage their unique advantages and minimize their place-based challenges by investing in a more strategic approach to human capital management (HCM). Human resource practices within the education industry have not kept pace with advances in the human resources profession (Tran, 2015). Strategic HCM is a crucial underutilized approach to helping districts deliver on their vision of equitable access (Odden et al., 2011; Tran, 2015; Tran et al., 2020).

This study used a survey, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups to assess the degree to which human capital management programs are perceived as effective by district leaders and teachers in four rural Maine school districts – two in the north (Region 1) and two in the south (Region 2). To better understand educator perceptions of how HCM practices are being carried out, the study developed and administered a survey (overall Cronbach alpha = 0.974) and analyzed responses of teachers (N = 127) and administrators (N = 18) on eight constructs covering human resource planning, recruitment, selection, new teacher support, performance

evaluation and professional growth, recognition and reward, community engagement, and school environment. When comparing responses of teachers and administrators, there were statistically significant differences between their perceptions of certain constructs. There were also significant differences in perceptions across northern and southern regions of the state. When analyzing survey data in conjunction with open-ended items and interviews, key themes emerged that included, for example, the importance of integrating and aligning HCM practices, strengthening alliances with higher education, formalizing hiring, streamlining evaluation, and using data and professional development more strategically. These and other study findings have implications for scholarly practitioner practice and future research and should help to inform improvements to local and state educational policy as it relates to strategic management of human capital in rural education.

Keywords: human capital management; human resource planning; recruitment; selection; new teacher support; performance evaluation; professional growth; recognition; reward; compensation; community engagement; school environment.

DEDICATION

To my beautiful and brilliant wife, Lisa Joaquin, for your love, laughter, and

unwavering belief in me and my work.

To my daughters, Margaret, Olivia, Kayla, Julia, and Sophia, each as bright, kind,

and beautiful as the next, for your boundless love and encouragement.

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my imperfect path, and dedication to education which fueled my aspirations and

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Heartfelt gratitude for the love of family.
-SAH

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To the 145 teachers and administrators from across Maine who agreed to participate in this study – your generous contribution of time and perspective, especially in light of the many more pressing priorities you faced during this unprecedented period in education, was enormously helpful and appreciated. Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"More and more research is available that demonstrates the impact that great teaching has on students and schools, but school districts will not be able to attract and retain these teachers unless they modernize their human capital systems. Doing so could improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of schools, with benefits for teachers and students alike."

- Annette Konoske-Graf, et al (2016)

Every child regardless of place deserves excellent teachers and building principals, according to Maine Department of Education (Maine Equity Plan, 2016). Likewise, every educator regardless of place deserves access to the resources, supports, and working conditions required to deliver excellent instruction and social-emotional support to every child. Research is replete with the obstacles faced by rural districts in achieving equitable access to excellent instruction for all students (Monk, 2007; Barley and Beesley, 2007; Gallo & Beckman, 2016; Morris and Johnson, 2018; Fairman, et. al. 2019, Tran et al., 2020). This study seeks to build on emerging research in the field of human resources to uncover ways in which rural districts can better leverage their unique advantages and minimize their place-based challenges by investing in a more strategic approach to managing their most valuable asset, human resources.

Strategic management of human capital (SMHC) in schools is about integrating and aligning every aspect of human resource policy and programing with organizational vision, values, mission, and strategy with the intent of attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining a

workforce of high-performing educators. It is not a panacea for all challenges brought on by

poverty, geographic isolation, inadequate facilities, insufficient resources, increased (or

severely decreased) class sizes, and lack of quality learning materials (Gallo & Beckman, 2016).

Yet, it is a crucial underutilized approach to helping districts deliver on their vision of equitable

access (Odden et al., 2011; Tran, 2015). A strategic process can help to ensure that

organizations have the people in place at the right time to operate at optimal levels (Jacobson

& Sowa, 2015). By implementing human capital management practices effectively, school

districts can cultivate a high-quality workforce with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions

needed to be successful learning organizations (Bal, Bozkurt, & Ertemsir, 2014).   Research

shows that investments in human capital improve organizational performance—including team

effectiveness, employee retention, and innovation—in both private and public sectors (Crook,

2011). According to Tran (2015), however, human resource practices within the education

industry have not kept pace with advances in the human resources profession. Tran argues that

the education industry continues to embrace the 'personnel' philosophy which emphasizes

transactional activities like payroll, benefits, and compliance issues rather than proactively and

strategically managing human resources.

Based on this and other research cited throughout this paper, schools that do embrace a

more strategic orientation to human resource management will be in the strongest position

possible to deliver on their promise of equitable access. Phase one of this study endeavored to

understand educator perceptions of human capital management strengths and improvement

opportunities at four participating rural districts in Maine – two in the north (Region 1) and two

in the south (Region 2). Based on the results of this initial phase, a second phase of the study

aimed to corroborate phase one findings and uncover evidence for building a compelling, anti-deficit case for more robust educational policy, programming, and support at local and state levels to ensure human capital management is being optimized in each of Maine's 619 rural public PK-12 schools (MDOE, 2019).[1] Only when human capital management is happening with strategic intent, sufficient resourcing, and fidelity should the public be satisfied that educational leaders are doing everything possible within their sphere of influence – people-wise – to ensure excellent instruction and whole-child support for all students all the time.

Context

More than 178,000 children spend 175 days and roughly 1,200 hours every year in public school classrooms in Maine (MDOE, 2019). Over the course of their elementary and secondary careers, that amounts to more than 15,000 hours in the life of each child. During these hours, teachers matter most. The quality of an organization's teaching force has direct impact on the level of student instruction and learning in the classroom (Egalite, Jensen, Stewart, & Wolf, 2014; Shuls & Maranto, 2014). In a 2019 study conducted by researchers at Rand Corporation using student scores on standardized tests, they validated the common perception that teachers matter more to student achievement than any other in-school factor. "When it comes to student performance on reading and math tests, a teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school factor, including services, facilities, and even leadership" (Opper, 2019). The impact of an ineffective teacher on student achievement is

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[1] An example of this state level support could include regional service centers equipped to deliver on-demand human capital management expertise, needs assessment, and follow-on guidance to rural school districts in Maine.

also significant and enduring. "The negative effects of a poor-performing teacher on student achievement persist through three years of high-performing teachers" (Mendro, 1998). Also, research finds that by replacing a teacher who is in the bottom 5th percentile of effectiveness with an average teacher, the lifetime income of the class's students can increase by approximately $250,000 (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014). Further, since principals are responsible for hiring teachers and creating the conditions that enable teaching and learning success, they too play a pivotal role in student growth and achievement. Building leaders have the greatest influence over helping teachers succeed (Murphy 2002; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005). Research has proven that school principals are second only to classroom teachers as the most influential factor in student achievement (Grissom and Loeb, 2011; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010); principal quality accounts for roughly 25% of a school's total impact on student achievement (Fenton et al., 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Despite the importance of these roles to student learning and growth, acquiring, developing, engaging, and retaining effective educators can be a challenge for rural schools.

In a recent Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) study (Fairman, Mills, & Lech, 2019), researchers found that staffing continues to be a serious challenge across Maine schools. [Maine is the most rural state in the U.S., according to the U.S. Census 2010.] This is also true in rural schools across the country, especially those that cannot compete with wealthier communities that are able to offer higher salaries and benefits for teachers and administrators (Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, & Theobald, 2016; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). In addition to lower pay scales, rural districts face other difficulties

regarding educator recruitment and retention including inadequate facilities, increased (or severely reduced) class sizes, lack of quality learning materials (Gallo & Beckman, 2016), lack of community amenities, geographic and professional isolation, and higher poverty rates (Miller, 2012). Effective human resource leaders respond to these challenges by putting into place more strategically oriented human capital management strategies that address the lack of quality teaching talent and drive the work of the human resource function to recruit and retain quality teachers (Merry, 2014).

Strategic management of human resources is about *integrating and aligning human resource related policy and programs with organizational objectives* and thereby gaining competitive advantage through adding value for the stakeholder (Ellers and Lazenby, 2007). Applying this private sector concept to education, Odden states that "strategically managing human capital in education is about restructuring the entire human resource system. That means that recruitment, selection, distribution, induction, professional development, performance management and evaluation, compensation, and career progression are all restructured to boost teacher and principal effectiveness in ways that dramatically improve instructional practice and student learning" (2011). Investing in such work is crucial, even for time and resource-strapped rural districts. The reason for this is simple --- people and performance matter, which makes it all the more important that each of the many components that comprise a school's human capital management system work in concert together to optimize district success at acquiring, developing, engaging, and retaining a high-quality workforce. A high-quality workforce is one made up of educators with the core competencies (knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors) needed to accomplish planned goals and

assigned tasks in accordance with school goals (Campbell et al. (2004: 61). For teachers, this means consistent delivery of excellent instruction and whole-child support to all students.

Problem Statement

The State of Maine has established its policies and procedures related to educator effectiveness around the view that "every child deserves excellent teachers and building principals" (Maine's Equity Plan, 2016). As the largest rural state in the country (U.S. Census, 2010), Maine faces a significant equity challenge, where students in rural, isolated, and high-needs schools lack consistent access to excellent educators. On the basis of data generated by the Maine Department of Education (MDOE), the following equity gaps have been identified:

1. Students from high-poverty, isolated-small, and high-risk schools are served by inexperienced and out-of-field teachers more often than are students in other settings.
2. Students in high-risk, isolated-small schools and high-poverty schools are served by teachers who work in the school for shorter periods of time (higher turnover) than are students in other settings.
3. Students in high school are served by principals who work in the school for shorter periods of time (higher turnover) more often than are students in elementary schools and, overall, principal turnover is higher than teacher turnover (The Maine Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2017).

Alongside research showing that teachers have the greatest in-school influence over student learning (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2001), findings from another recent MEPRI

study (Morris & Johnson, 2018) show teacher turnover in Maine to be 12%--a rate consistent with national trends in rural education. Although some teacher turnover is to be expected and can sometimes be a good thing for districts, high turnover rates are costly and can reduce achievement for all students in the school, not just those whose classrooms are directly impacted (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In terms of financial costs of turnover, the most significant are those associated with separation, recruiting and hiring new teachers, and training replacements. Based on estimates derived from various studies, the average cost of replacing a teacher in a rural district is $9,000 (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007); Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Shockley, Guglielmino & Watlington, 2006). In addition to financial costs, there are academic costs associated with teacher turnover. When rural schools face teacher shortages they often respond by hiring inexperienced or unqualified teachers, increasing class sizes, or reducing class offerings, all of which can offer quick solutions that can sometimes come at the expense of student learning and growth (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Teacher inexperience and rates of turnover can negatively impact student learning (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Teacher turnover can also disrupt school stability, collegial relationships, collaboration, and the accumulation of institutional knowledge all of which can negatively affect all students in the school (Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2013). Similar turnover effects have been uncovered by Fairman, Mills, & Lech in a recent MEPRI study of staffing challenges in Maine schools.

> *The consequences for high teacher turnover or difficulty filling positions have negative implications for schools, teachers and other staff, and especially students. Staffing shortages or turnover may result in unfilled positions or hiring educators out of field or who are not highly qualified. These situations negatively impact other staff and students*

as a result of larger class sizes, fewer support staff and, potentially, less effective instruction. (Fairman, et al., 2019)

According to MEPRI researchers who conducted this 2019 study, the primary causes of teacher turnover in Maine's rural schools include, for example, a reduction in the supply of qualified candidates, salary competition, characteristics of rural districts, qualifications of new teachers, turnover of leadership, low parent / community interest and investment in education, and low mentoring support. School districts may have limited control over labor market quality. However, all other contributing factors to teacher turnover cited above are human resource related and district- and building-level leaders have significant influence over the importance placed on them and the fidelity with which related policy and programming are designed and carried-out. By making a gradual and systemic shift to strategic human capital management within an organization that values human resources as a strategic partner increases the likelihood that SMHC will have a substantive impact on organizational goals (Jacobson, et al., 2014).

Purpose

Despite aforementioned research and the well-accepted truth that teachers have significant impact on student learning and growth along with the substantial investment districts make in educator compensation and training (80% of total expenditures is comprised of salary and benefits according to National Center for Education Statistics, 2021) coupled with the financial and academic costs associated with employee turnover (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016; Kini and Podolsky, 2016; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013, Fairman, et al., 2019), many districts still fail to invest adequate time, attention, and resourcing

in the strategic management of their human capital (Odden et al., 2011; Tran, 2015). Based on anecdotal evidence from my work with 20 mostly rural districts in Maine between 2011 and 2020, which includes leading two federally-funded Teacher Incentive Fund grants, there may be several contributing factors. These include, for example, an inadequate focus on strategic human capital management in educational preparation and leadership coursework, an observation substantiated by Mette, et al. in a study of educator perceptions of performance evaluation and professional growth system implementation (2019). As a consequence, there may be a lack of awareness among educators for what strategic human capital management means, looks like, and how it differs from current compliance-oriented 'personnel' practices. As an extension of this point, there may be a resultant under appreciation by district leaders for the return on investment that could be realized by a more integrated and aligned approach to human capital management, supported by modern and efficient human resource management technology. Exacerbating these two factors could be the indirect and unintentional influence that school law firms *may* have over a district's view of human resource management. In the absence of specialized training and experience, strategic human capital management thinking and sound behaviorally based programming can sometimes take a back seat or be altogether stifled when the lens for assessing organizational needs and priorities is *solely* a legal one.

In addition, there tends to be a shortage of relevant data as well as guidance on data-driven means for continual school improvement. Though there is no paucity of data in most school districts, what is oftentimes lacking is timely access to relevant, meaningful, and longitudinal data and measures, along with clear guidelines about what data are most important and what measures are most predictive of student achievement. Complicating

matters for many rural districts are small data sets which can weaken the utility of results. In the absence of valid and reliable data and measures which are intentionally tied to the school improvement or strategic plan, schools can neither fully understand nor make informed improvements to organizational operations and/or student learning outcomes.

Outmoded policies and practices can also hinder strategic management of human capital. Examples include internal transfer policies that limit recruitment strategies aimed at casting a wider net of applicants; delayed hiring timelines; or budget and data cycles that are out of sync with human resource planning. Also, teachers may be inequitably placed across the district in part due to insufficient or non-existent incentives to teach in high need schools. Further, incentive programs and other equity- and behaviorally-based programming designed to reinforce district mission and goals can sometimes be at odds with egalitarian principles – equality for all – that underpin union interests and engagement.

The importance of meaningful union engagement and support in local and/or state sponsored human resource related improvement efforts cannot be overstated. In the most favorable of circumstances where such support exists, policy and programing changes to improve teacher acquisition, development, engagement, and retention stand the strongest chance of common understanding, critical-mass acceptance, and institutionalization. In the absence of such support, organizational improvement efforts can be cumbersome and futile, failing to live up to their intended potential. Finally, competing priorities, limited resources, and insufficient time and mindshare to devote attention to additional administrative work, coupled with the ease of continuing to do things as they have always been done -- especially if school

performance is currently 'acceptable' – is another barrier to making meaningful and sustained improvements to human capital management policies and practices.

This last point deserves special attention because of its relevance to district intentionality and likelihood of success associated with creating sustainable SMHC improvements. Most educators are aware of or been part of those top down 'flash in the pan' initiatives that tend to be imposed on school districts, require considerable time and effort to check off the boxes, and then disappear as soon as attention switches to a 'shiny' new topic. The negative effects which can result from ill-conceived or poorly planned and implemented change initiatives are beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say, however, the time and credibility forfeited when engaging teachers and leaders in non-value-added work can undermine authentic efforts at systemic school improvement. For school districts to realize meaningful return on investment in improving human capital management, certain conditions are needed. Factors such as clear vision, sound design, effective planning, employee engagement and participation, regular and frequent communications, sufficient training, etc. all are well known foundational ingredients to successful organizational change. Additionally, and possibly most importantly, leadership and employee commitment and accountability for carrying-out change with fidelity is paramount.

Oftentimes, this collective commitment and accountability of key stakeholders can be secured more readily when the organization faces an outside threat. The tension generated from such a threat, channeled the right way, can help to galvanize employee commitment to overcoming barriers and achieving significant goals. A threat can take many forms. Take for example the State's school accountability system (NEO) with its annual assessments and public

reporting of proficiency results. This system can be seen as a threat and source of creative tension for schools. Whether one approves or disapproves of the state's accountability system (or individual components that comprise it), for those school districts that are performing at acceptable levels on their state assessments there may not be the collective will nor determination to initiate, let alone follow-through on organizational improvement initiatives which could translate into even higher levels of performance. This is especially true when the nature of change requires stakeholders to step outside their comfort zone. The general sentiment might be something like, "Student outcomes are fine, no need to rock the boat and add more work to an already full plate." Conversely, for districts that struggle to meet the state's current accountability goals and/or fail to attract and retain qualified educators – which is the case for a preponderance of Maine's rural districts – the tension fueled by an urgent need for course correction can serve as a source of energy for creating meaningful and sustained improvements to human capital management policy and programming, thus the driving intent behind this study.

The primary purpose of this current study is to shine a bright light on key aspects of SMHC and the value potential to schools that deliberately and thoughtfully devote sufficient time, attention, and resources to this work. In so doing, districts can benefit from a well-orchestrated set of policies, programs, and practices that help them to attract, develop, engage, and retain a workforce of high-quality educators who are equipped to increase academic achievement for students (Battelle for Kids, 2016; Odden et al., 2011; Tran, 2015).

Positionality

As the principal investigator in this study, I am the primary agent for gathering and analyzing data related to my inquiry into the *efficacy of human capital management in rural education.* My positionality with regard to this research has been shaped by family and friends, education, career experience, and other elements such as allegiance to my home state of Maine that have played a part in my personal and professional journey. In light of my worldview as it relates to this work, I have taken care to anticipate and prevent any assumptions or beliefs that could bias and/or otherwise compromise the quality and fidelity of this research.

My interest in education, eventual entry into the field, and perspectives on educational policy and practice has been influenced by my parents, both of whom attended Gorham State Teachers College and became elementary school teachers in the 1950s. My father spent the last 25 years of his career as Superintendent of Schools in Yarmouth, Maine. As Yarmouth's first superintendent, he helped chart the course and create the conditions that continue to contribute to its success as one of our state's consistently high performing school systems – the Frank H. Harrison Middle School is named in his honor. Inspired by my parent's work, I decided to follow in their footsteps and attended University of Maine at Orono to pursue a degree in education. After my first year, which included a semester-long "early experience" in the classroom, I was less certain about a future in this field and decided to take a break from school. Following two years of work experience, I returned to school, this time at University of Maryland (UMD) to pursue a degree in business, with a concentration in human resources and labor relations.

Writings and research that resonated with me most while at UMD (and later on in graduate school at University of Southern Maine), included strategic planning, organization design, leadership and followership, systems thinking, and theories of motivation and equity. During my time at UMD, I had the opportunity to assist goal-setting theory pioneer, Dr. Edwin Locke with his research – a brief but fascinating foray into social science investigation. His goal-setting work continues to find its way into my professional life.

In 1994, I started a consulting firm specializing in organization-wide performance system design which borrowed from Dr. Locke's research, as well as Dr. William Abernathy's work in incentive compensation. Between 2011-2017, I led a team charged with creating and managing a $40 million federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant called Maine Schools for Excellence (MSFE) covering 45 rural, high-needs schools across Maine. At the heart of the MSFE project was improving student learning and educator effectiveness, which involved grassroots development and implementation of human capital programs and resources that addressed school culture and climate, educator preparation and employment, evaluation and professional growth, and recognition and reward. This work combined my background and experience in human resources with my underlying interests in education.

In 2018, after the federal grant ended, I joined University of Maine at Presque Isle as Executive Director of Central Aroostook Council on Education. In this role, I worked with 10 local school districts and the University to help strengthen connections across PK-16 programs and people, collaborating to strengthen human resource systems and conditions that support the success of educators and students. In 2021, I joined Regional School Unit 21 in Arundel, Kennebunk, and Kennebunkport to serve as their first-ever Human Resources Director.

Looking back almost forty years to when I first embraced and then abandoned the notion of following in my parent's footsteps, my journey has come full circle. Though the prospect of becoming a classroom teacher or school administrator is unlikely, the remainder of my career is committed to working closely with the educational community in Maine to strengthen human resource related supports and conditions needed to continually advance the quality of education for all students.

Considerations for Scholarly Practitioners

According to University of Maine Graduate School, a scholarly practitioner endeavors to "make substantial contributions to the leadership of PK-12 education and are committed to making a positive difference in their leadership practice and workplace." (2021) By definition, they "blend practical wisdom with professional skills and knowledge to name, frame, and solve problems of practice" (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2021). For scholarly practitioners reading this paper, the study's focus on people and performance makes it not just germane to their work as educational leaders, but vital to their success in this role.

Strategic management of people in schools is about connecting every facet of human resource policy and programing with the district's vision, values, mission, and strategies for purposes of attracting and retaining a workforce of high-performing educators. By implementing human capital management practices effectively, school districts can cultivate a high-quality workforce with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be successful learning organizations (Bal, Bozkurt, & Ertemsir, 2014). This study offers scholarly practitioners a common language and framework for understanding and exploring human capital management issues and opportunities.

Six human capital management domains are identified and defined, including measures for assessing the strategic orientation of each. These domains are nested in a research-based conceptual framework that relates SMHC efficacy and outcomes. Educational leaders possessing this subject area knowledge and relevant theory and research, will be better equipped to understand the crucial importance and inherent value of SMHC to their schools and district. Further, these leaders will be better able to discern the difference between a compliance- and strategic orientation to HCM and use this information to structure HCM policy and programming based on common standards that reinforce effective practice and student learning. In short, scholarly practitioners possessing a working knowledge of strategic HCM will be in the strongest position possible to ensure a workforce of contributing performers in their own districts who are connected in purpose, teamed in their efforts, and motivated to advance and excel in delivering highest quality instruction and whole child support to all students.

In addition to gaining greater insight into the meaning and value of SMHC, scholarly practitioners can also benefit from the methods and tools used in the study. The 64-item SMHC assessment tool and interview protocols are easily adaptable by scholarly practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness of human capital management in their own districts. Self-assessment data can be compared with study results to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities to improve the overall effectiveness of human resource planning, employment, evaluation, professional learning, compensation, community engagement, and school environment.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The nature of strategic human capital management is complex and multi-dimensional and to-date has been more of an applied field, less tied to research-based underpinnings. Emphasis has been placed on demonstrating the value of effective human resource management (Delery & Doty, 1996; Lado and Wright, 1992; Tsui, et al., 1997; Dimba & K'Obonyo, 2009) with professional journals rife with articles touting the benefits to organizations of various human resource programs. Despite this applied focus, there are theoretical perspectives and related frameworks that are both relevant and useful to the current study. This section begins with a brief description of three general modes of theorizing strategic human capital management (i.e., universalistic, contingency, and configurational) followed by four theories that directly support this study (i.e., resource-based view, signaling theory, strategic management of human capital framework, and deficit theory). The chapter concludes with recent research related to recruitment and retention of teachers in rural districts with findings highly relevant to the current study.

General Modes of Theorizing SMHC

Researchers operating in the universalistic perspective posit that there are certain human resource practices that are consistently better than others (i.e., "high-performance work practices" or "best practices") and that all companies should adopt them (Tsui et al., 1997; Wright and Snell, 1991; Delaney, Lewin, & Ichniowski, 1989; Huselid, 1993, 1995; Osterman, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994; Terpstra & Rozell, 1993). Universalistic arguments are seen as the simplest theoretical statements in the literature because they imply that the "relationship

between a given independent variable [i.e., human resource practices] and a dependent variable [i.e., organizational performance] is universal across the population of organizations" (Pfeffer & Cohen, 1984). The process of developing universalistic predictions requires first, identifying individual human resource "best practices" followed by developing arguments that relate the individual practices to organizational performance.

The contingency perspective argues that in order to be useful, human resource practices must be consistent with other aspects or strategic positions of the organization (Butler, Ferris, & Napier, 1991; Dyer, 1985; Fombrum et al., 1984; Golden & Ramanujam, 1985; Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Milkovich, 1988). Researchers operating in this perspective argue that there are no best practices per se, rather specific human resource management practices should reflect "contingency variables" such as internal and external environments (Colbert, 2004; Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005). For example, an organization's performance evaluation program might include all the right features for it to be deemed exemplary by those in the field yet fail to fit with the organization's unique needs, nuances, strategic goals, or external environment.

Researchers operating with a configurational perspective differ from universalist and contingency theorists in scope and rigor of analysis. That is, the focus for configurational theorists is not on how individual independent variables relate to the dependent variable but rather on the "pattern of multiple independent variables" and how these patterns relate to the dependent variable. Configurational theories are based on "typologies of ideal types, and explicitly adopt the systems assumption of 'equifinality'" (Doty, Glick, & Huber 1993; Doty & Glick, 1994; Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993; Miller & Friesen, 1984; Venkatraman & Prescott,

1990). That is, organizational goals can be achieved by a variety of means. The configurational perspective "acknowledges system interaction effects – that the whole may be more or less the sum of the parts" (Colbert, 2004). This "systems" focus makes the configurational perspective most relevant to the current study. The hypothesis being that school effectiveness is dependent on the quality of the human capital management system and the degree to which the components (i.e., bundle of human resource practices) comprising the system are aligned both vertically and horizontally. Delery and Doty refer to this as "fit." Horizontal fit means internal consistency of human capital policy and programs, while vertical fit refers to the congruence of the human capital management system with organizational characteristics, such as school vision, mission, strategies, and goals (1996).

Theories Supporting SMHC Improvement

The resource-based view (RBV) (Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991) is a theoretical framework for understanding ways in which organizations can achieve sustainable competitive advantage through valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). Scholars argue that human resources meet these four criteria and should be considered an important potential source for improved performance and competitive advantage (Kaufman, 2015; Snell, Youdt & Wright, 1996). The fundamental aim of resource-based HR strategy is to develop a workforce that provides sustained competitive advantage. RBV has served as the principle theoretical model for understanding human resource's role as a strategic organizational asset (Boselie et al., 2006; Wright & McMahan, 1992; Wright et al., 2001). RBV also attempts to explore the 'black box' of organizations by identifying those resources and capabilities unique to the firm that account for variance in performance across

firms (Amit & Shoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). This perspective places

emphasis on factors under the control and direction of the managers (Carmeli & Tishler, 2004),

which is what makes this framework relevant to education and the current study. Most

building- and district-level leaders have direct, proactive control over many human resource

policies and practices which can contribute to workforce quality. When these (human)

resources rise to the level of being valuable, rare, and not easily imitated or substituted, this

advantage can be sustained (Barney, 1991, 2001).

Signaling theory as it is used in organizational behavior and human resource

management originated from the economics research of Spence (1973, 1974) on job market

signaling. According to Spence (2002), "the idea behind the job market signaling model is that

there are attributes of potential employees that the employer cannot observe and that affect

the individual's subsequent productivity and, hence, value to the employer on the job" (p. 436).

Organizational researchers (Rynes, 1991; Wanous, 1992) extended signaling theory to

understanding the perspectives of job applicants. According to Rynes, because job applicants

lack perfect information about the organization they rely instead on "cues or signals from the

organization to draw conclusions about an organization's intentions, actions, and

characteristics" (1991). Signals can supply information about what life might be like in the

organization (Breaugh, 1992; Turban, 2001; Turban & Greening, 1997). For example, an

organization's diversity policy could enhance its attractiveness to an employee since it signals

positive working conditions related to the management of diversity (Williams & Bauer, 1994).

Signaling theory's primary elements include the signaler, signal, and receiver (Connelly et al.,

2011) Signaling theory could be a useful lens for understanding how a school's human resource

practices (signals) might create psychological contracts with employees. Psychological contracts

reflect an employee's beliefs regarding the promises of the reciprocal exchange agreement

between the employee and organization (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Research on this topic has

largely focused on consequences associated with "broken" psychological contracts (Zhao,

Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). In particular, research has examined the implications of

psychological contract breach on the attitudes and behaviors of employees (e.g., Johnson &

O'Leary, Kelly, 2003; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Based on signaling

theory research conducted by Roehl (2018) that examined the impact of strategic human

capital management on the psychological contract of employees, the current study seeks to

examine the efficacy of district human resource practices based on interactional and structural

signals received by employees. Interactional signals are any "direct oral or written form of

organizational communication that signals future intent" (Rousseau, 1995), while structural

signals "convey information directly through HR-practices employed by the organization"

(Rousseau, 1995; Sonnenberg et al., 2011).

Strategic management of human capital can be defined as "the pattern of planned

human resource deployments and activities intended to enable a firm to achieve its goals."

(Wright and McMahan, 1992) As discussed earlier, despite widespread agreement that teachers

have significant impact on student learning and growth, many districts fail to invest sufficient

time and/or resources into strategic management of their human capital (Tran, 2015). If this is

occurring in education to the degree that Tran's research suggests, then one can expect to see

more of it happening in those resource-strapped rural schools that struggle to meet basic needs

like providing adequate facilities and quality learning materials (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). A

study by Campbell, DeArmond and Schumwinger (2004) uncovers that many human resource practices within school districts are grounded in "convenience, imitation, and administrative whim." Odden reveals additional concerns for school districts related to the strategic management of human resources. They include, for example, an absence of a strategic human management system that aligns talent acquisition, development, and retention with an organization's academic improvement plan; an inability to acquire the best and brightest teaching talent into school districts; challenges with securing talent to meet the academic needs of hard-to-staff school organizations that often results in hiring unqualified and ineffective teachers; teacher shortages in the areas of math, science, and technology; high rates of teacher attrition throughout K-12 school organizations; investing organizational resources in teacher professional development activities resulting in minimum to no impact on student achievement or organizational success; and compensation structures that do not align with or support organizational goals or reward effective instruction resulting in student achievement (2011). Odden provides a framework for restructuring school districts' human resource systems to align with best practices for strategically managing human capital in school organizations. He argues that for school districts to strategically manage their human capital, the instructional vision for the organization must drive its human capital practices. The fundamental premise of Odden's (2011) framework is for school districts to strategically address several key factors related to three main elements: talent acquisition, talent development; and talent retention. Building on these factors, the current study focuses on the acquisition, development, engagement, and retention of classroom teachers by means of more modern and strategic human capital management policy and programming.

Deficit theory is based on an ideology that places responsibility for one's failure on the individual's lack of effort or deficiency rather than on limitations levied by oppressive policies, programming, and structures. (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Haggis, 2006; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 1997, 2010; Weiner, 2003). Deficit thinking is multi-layered in its interpretation - at its core rooted in a belief that one's success or failure comes from work ethic and grit while achievement comes through hard work and perseverance. Through a deficit lens, according to Collins, "poor people are poor because of their own moral and intellectual deficiencies" (1988). Some scholars have expanded their interpretation of deficit thinking to include placing the blame for failure not just on the individual but those closest to them as well. "Scholars have noted that deficit thinking has evolved from primarily perpetuating perspectives that individuals' traits are the source of their own failures to implying that the cultures (e.g., communities and families) from which people come are responsible for the challenges that they face (Knight, 2002). Deficit thinking disregards systemic and structural forces that can influence differences in achievement levels (Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Ford, 2014; Valencia, 1997, 2010) and also posits that "dominant structures in society are the primary solution" to achievement inequities. Our educational system, for example, can serve to lift people out of poverty and address inequalities (Aikman et al., 2016) while at the same time reinforce those behaviors and outcomes that perpetuate social inequities.

Teacher recruitment and retention is influenced by many factors, including but not limited to those related to community, schools, and students[2]. According to Monk, there are

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[2] Other factors that may influence the recruitment and retention of teachers include: a) personal characteristics of teachers; b) teacher training and pre-service experience; c) degree to which the teacher is socially and professionally connected with the teaching profession; d) teacher satisfaction with their career; and e) other

characteristics related to each of these factors that are common to rural areas and can hinder a rural district's success with attracting and retaining top teaching talent. "Small size, sparse settlement, narrowness of choice (with regard to shopping, schools, and medical services), distance from population concentrations, and an economic reliance on agricultural industries" are fundamental characteristics of rural settings (2007) and despite the potential off-setting benefits of each of these factors, can be a barrier to adequately staffing rural districts. Monk's findings suggest that these factors along with attributes closely associated with them such as high poverty, aging populations, job loss, and out-migration can be formidable challenges for rural districts seeking to compete for highly qualified teachers. Similar research by Miller corroborates these "rural" district challenges, suggesting that staffing in these areas may be made more difficult due to "lack of community amenities, geographic and professional isolation, and higher poverty rates." (2012) In addition to community related challenges, rural schools tend to have a "higher share of students with special needs, higher share of limited English skills, and higher share of students who do not go on to college" (Monk, 2007), again issues that can make teaching more difficult and less appealing to candidates, especially beginning teachers.   These rural school challenges related to community, school, and students also hold true in Maine where the current study is situated.

According to a 2019 MEPRI study, staffing challenges are a recurrent problem across Maine, as they are nationally, and are the most serious in smaller rural school districts that cannot compete with larger, more well-off districts (Fairman, Mills, & Lech, 2019; Cowan,

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internal and external influences (e.g., salary and benefits, working conditions, alternative job opportunities). (Chapman, 1986)

Goldhaber, Hayes, & Theobald, 2016; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

Factors contributing to staffing and retention challenges in Maine include the "short supply of

candidates in some areas of education, the districts' inability to match more competitive

salaries, and the characteristics of rural communities" (Fairman, et al., 2019).   In a 2001 study

using data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center on Education Statistics

(NCES), Ingersol found that staffing challenges had less to do with staffing shortages and more

to do with "excess demand" resulting from teacher turnover, a large portion of which is "pre-

retirement aged teachers due to reasons related to job dissatisfaction" (reported by Morris &

Johnson (2018) from Ingersoll, 2001). "Teacher turnover in Maine averages approximately 12%

per year, with about 7% of Maine teachers per year leaving the public teaching workforce

altogether (due to retirement or attrition)" (Fairman, et al., 2019). Additionally, research has

found that a school's retention and turnover rate are strongly correlated to its demographic

profile. "Schools with higher proportions of beginner teachers [0-3 years] lose more teachers to

other schools. Higher percentages of beginner teachers are almost as strongly correlated to

higher leave rates as the percent of teachers 63 and older, confirming pre-retirement attrition

is an important component of turnover in Maine" (Morris & Johnson, 2018).

As evidenced by these studies and other local and national research on school staffing,

challenges faced by rural districts related to attracting and retaining talent are real with near-

and longer-term social and economic implications. Further, attracting and retaining staff is only

half the challenge - getting and keeping good teachers must be accompanied by human capital

policy and programing aimed at developing and engaging educators within a supportive and

high involvement school environment. Modernizing HCM policy and programming to support

rural districts along the full spectrum of human capital management will require time, effort, and financial resources – all of which are scarce commodities in most small rural districts that have in large part been marginalized by state policies and practices in the past. Success will require local and state policymakers to view district human resource management in new ways offering a hope giving framework that includes sufficient funding and supports (e.g., by reflecting SMHC in the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) formula) - incentivizing rural districts to pursue this important work more fully and with fidelity. The result will be expanded access to quality instruction and more widespread achievement of Maine's Learning Results.

Conceptual Framework

Equitable access to excellent teachers is a complicated and challenging endeavor, and achieving teacher equity goals requires an integrated and coherent approach to human capital management. Consistent with Odden's framework, this means that all district human capital policy and programming should be integrated with one another and structured using common standards that reinforce effective practice and student learning. Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework for this study aimed at assessing the efficacy of strategic human capital management in rural education. The study focuses on six (6) human capital management domains, including:

1. Human resource planning: the process of identifying core competencies (knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors) needed to accomplish school goals and forecasting near-and longer-term staffing needs to ensure a sufficient pool of talent with such competencies.

2. Employment: the process of finding and attracting qualified candidates for employment, making the choice of the most appropriate person from the applicant pool, and supporting new hires through a formal orientation (induction) and mentoring program.

3. Performance evaluation and professional growth: the process of improving or maintaining job performance through the use of performance assessment tools, coaching, counseling, professional learning, in addition to continuous feedback.

4. Recognition and reward: the approaches used to compensate teachers based on qualifications (education and experience), roles and responsibilities, and performance.

5. Community engagement: the process of involving parents, families, and community organizations in education.

6. School environment: the strategies for ensuring a safe and productive school and classroom climate and professional culture.

Human resource scholars argue for a systems approach to managing human capital. Human resources should be viewed as a system of interrelated parts, together aligned with the strategic goals of the organization to serve as a primary way to influence and shape the skills, attitudes, and behavior of all members (Collins and Clark, 2003). The overall efficacy with which human capital is being managed is a function of the degree to which activities within and across these domains are vertically and horizontally aligned – operating synergistically to acquire, develop, motivate, and retain a high performing workforce in each school (Odden, 2011).

Vertical alignment. Activities within and across the six domains should be anchored by the core competencies (knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors) needed to carry out

school goals and priorities. For example, job postings, recruitment advertisements, and interview protocols should include core competencies that all teachers should possess in order to achieving district vision, values and school goals (Henneman and Milanowski, 2011).

Horizontal alignment. Each of the six domains should be clearly aligned to one another, and structured using common goals and standards that reinforce effective practice and student learning. For example, the results of performance evaluation should inform individual and organizational professional learning needs and priorities. Teacher compensation should reflect not only qualifications (experience and credentials) but also performance as measured through the evaluation program (Henneman and Milanowski, 2011).

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Efficacy of
Human Capital Management in Rural Education
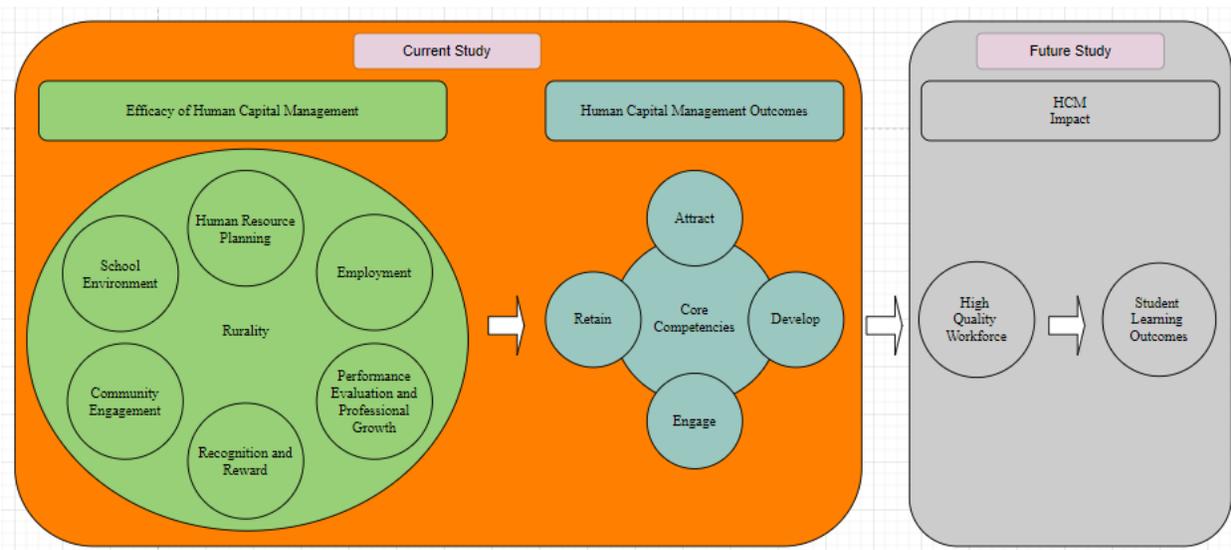
Through the use of a survey, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, the study sought to assess the degree to which human capital programs are perceived as effective by district leaders and teachers in four rural Maine school districts – two in the north (Region 1) and two

in the south (Region 2). Results from the study were used to: a) identify human capital

management strengths and improvement opportunities; and b) build a compelling, anti-deficit

case for more robust educational policy and support at the local and state level to ensure

human capital management is being optimized. The theory of action supporting this

conceptual framework for understanding the efficacy of HCM in rural education follows.

If rural districts design and implement their human capital management

programs with strategic intent and sufficient proficiency where programs are

aligned to clearly defined standards for students and core competencies for

teachers that are based on student learning outcomes...

Then they will be in the strongest position possible to attract, develop,

engage, and retain a workforce of high performing teachers and leaders who are

aligned in purpose, teamed in their efforts, and motivated to advance and excel

in achieving highest quality instruction and whole child support for all students.

(Adapted from *Maine Schools for Excellence* vision, 2011)

CHAPTER 3

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Setting and Context

Consistent with the Conceptual Framework (Figure 1), the current research sought to

understand educator perceptions of HCM strengths and improvement opportunities in rural

education. The study was conducted in four rural districts in Maine – two in northern Maine

(Region1) and two in southern Maine (Region 2). Table 1 below provides comparative

information on each participating district using the most recent data from the Maine

Department of Education ESSA Dashboard (2019-20). Region 1 is comprised of four schools, 51

teachers, and 484 students. Region 2 includes 9 schools, 221 teachers, and 2,458 students.

Table 1: Profile of Participating Districts

	Region 1 Northern Maine		Region 2 Southern Maine	
	District A	District B	District A	District B
# Schools	2	2	4	5
# Students	176	308	576	1,882
# Teachers	21	30	67.2	153.7
$ Cost per pupil	$17,330	$16,125	$16,972	$15,369
% Teachers with Doctorate degree			1.5	.7
% Teachers with a Certificate of Advanced Study			1.5	
% Teachers with Master's degree plus 30			3.0	16.6
% Teachers with Master's degree plus 15			8.9	2.0
% Teachers with Master's degree	23.8	3.3	42.1	37.5
% Teachers with Bachelor's degree plus 30	28.6	10		4.6
% Teachers with Bachelor's degree plus 15	9.5	3.3	17.7	4.3
% Teachers with Bachelor's degree only	38.1	83.3	25.3	33.8

Research Questions

Strategic management of human capital is a crucial ingredient to closing the equity gap in rural schools. Exploring the degree to which these four rural school districts – two in northern Maine (Region 1) and two in southern Maine (Region 2) - possess a strategic orientation with regard to their human resource policies, programs, and practices was a primary focus of this study. Specific research questions (RQ) that were addressed include:

- RQ1. To what degree is human capital management (HCM) in four rural Maine districts being optimized?

- RQ2. How are these districts performing with regard to attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining classroom teachers?

- RQ3. What are the implications of these findings for rural districts in Maine and what opportunities exist to strengthen local human capital management policy and programming and state- and regional-level support to districts?

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach to gathering data, beginning with a survey administered to district administrators—central office and building principals—and teachers. A common survey instrument was designed to uncover the perceived efficacy of districtwide human resource management programs (Question 1) and outcomes (Question 2). Responses to open-ended questions on the survey instrument along with individual interviews with superintendents and focus group interviews with building principals and teachers were used to corroborate RQ1 and RQ2 findings as well as inform (Question 3) lessons learned and educational policy recommendations.

Research Design

Guided by the conceptual framework (Figure 1) for assessing efficacy of strategic human

capital management in rural education, an exploratory-sequential mixed-methods approach

was identified as the best-fit strategy for answering the three research questions.

Figure 2
Study Methodology Goals

For strand one of the study, a common survey instrument was administered concurrently to district and building administrators and classroom teachers. The goal of the survey was to collect and analyze perception data from employees in each of these roles to answer research questions one and two. The survey sought to uncover differences in perceptions within and across roles on the efficacy of human capital management programs (RQ1) and the degree to which current human capital management practices are generating desired organizational outcomes (RQ2). Strand one survey results were used to refine interview and focus group protocols (see Appendix B: Preliminary Interview and Focus Group Protocol) for use in strand two. Three sets of interviews were conducted: a) one-on-one interviews with superintendents; b) focus group interviews with a sampling of principals from each region; and c) focus group interviews with a sampling of teachers from each region.

The purpose of the qualitative strand was to validate and build-on RQ1 and RQ2 related findings and to a greater extent help to inform RQ3 lessons learned and policy recommendations. Together, this two-pronged exploratory-sequential approach (surveys, interviews/focus groups) offered several opportunities to strengthen the research process and results (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989):

- Triangulation: Results from the surveys and interviews/focus groups were mined for corroborating evidence and new insights relative to the three research questions.
- Complementarity: Results from interviews with superintendents and principals added meaning and clarity to key findings from the quantitative results.
- Development: Cross-walking results from the survey of teachers with those of the administrators enriched research conclusions and recommendations.

- Initiation: Data generated from the surveys and interviews/focus group analyses was compared and contrasted to determine consistencies and variations.

- Expansion: Results from the teacher and administrator survey analyses helped to inform development of interview questions that led to a fuller understanding of the research issues.

The combined results from all methods (i.e., surveys, interviews, focus groups) were greater than those which could be generated using a single method, thereby enhancing the overall integrity and usefulness of the findings. (Hall and Howard, 2008)

Method

Participant Selection. Superintendents from prospective study districts received an initial phone call and a follow-up recruitment letter (See Appendix C: Recruitment Letter) via email that provided an overview of the study - its aim, process, timeline, and invitation to participate. The letter also highlighted the benefits of participating in the study which included: a) discovery and documentation of strengths and improvement opportunities associated with the six human capital management framework domains; and b) list of potential strategies for strengthening strategic management of human capital. In addition to these benefits, the study also sought to reveal the need for more robust educational policy and state-level assistance to ensure that each of Maine's 619 rural public PK-12 schools (MDOE, 2019) has access to sufficient resources needed to optimize management of their human resources.

Superintendents were given five business days to respond to the invitation. Once the four districts were selected, participating administrators and teachers from each district received an email describing the study and encouraged participation. The eligibility criteria for

participating in the study included all district- and building-level administrators who were

currently or had been involved in the design and/or implementation of human capital related

policy, programs, and practices at the district and all members of the teaching staff possessing a

valid teaching credentials.

For strand one of the study, electronic surveys were sent to the superintendent,

building-level principals, and all teachers. Survey instructions included a consent form (See

Appendix D: Consent Form) that described the study's purpose, importance of honesty,

integrity, and professional demeanor in responding to survey questions, and the researcher's

assurances of anonymity. By completing and submitting the survey, participants were made

aware of and consented to participating in the study. Participant consent was critical to

protecting the rights of the study participants and ensuring that participants clearly understood

their rights to confidentiality and anonymity.

For strand two of the study, each of the four superintendents were invited to participate

in one-on-one interviews and *all* district principals were invited to join an administrator focus

group, one per district. A sampling of teachers from all four districts were invited to participate

in a teacher focus group, one held in each district. Interviews and focus group sessions were

scheduled for 60 minutes each.

Data Collection. The diagram for studying the efficacy of strategic management of

human capital in rural schools (shown below in Figure 3) is adapted from Ivankova and Stick's

explanatory design diagram for studying student persistence in higher education (2007).

Figure 3
Exploratory-Sequential Design Diagram
Efficacy of HCM in Rural Education

Phase		Procedure	Product
Strand 1 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis	Data Collection	• Develop surveys • Obtain permissions • Administer web-based survey (N=145)	• Numeric data
	Data Analysis	• Data screening (univariate, multivariate) • Factor analysis • Frequencies • SPSS quantitative Software v.1.1	• Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, etc.) • Inferential statistics (Cronbach's Alpha, t-tests, etc.) • Effect sizes
Interview and focus group protocol development		• Review survey data in light of research questions to identify results to be explained, e.g., significant results, nonsignificant results, outliers, or group differences. • Use results to design qualitative data collection protocols	• Interview and focus group protocols
Strand 2 Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis	Data Collection	• Obtain permissions • Conduct interviews with superintendents and focus groups with building administrators and teachers	• Text data (interview transcripts, documents, etc.)
	Data Analysis	• Coding and thematic analysis • Within-case and across-case theme development • Cross-thematic analysis • NVivo 12 qualitative software	• Codes and themes • Similar and different themes and categories
Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results		• Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results	• Discussion • Implications • Future research

Instruments/Protocols. The data collection instruments (surveys and semi-structured interview / focus group protocols) were designed to answer the research questions while taking into account the role and sphere of responsibility of survey participants (i.e., administrator and teacher). As an incentive to participate in the study, participant names were included with

others from the district in a drawing for a $25 Amazon gift card. Three winners from each of the

four districts were drawn.

The study survey (HCM Rural Schools Survey) was adapted from the Colorado

Department of Education's *Healthy Human Capital Survey (2012)* (See Appendix A:

Administrator and Teacher Survey), modified to meet the broader aspects of HCM as

represented in the conceptual framework and required of this study. The 64-item survey was

administered to district superintendents, building principals, and teachers. The confidential

survey was administered through Qualtics, a web-based survey tool. All participants were

emailed an invitation to participate in the study along with a reminder(s) to encourage

participation. The format of the survey included both forced-choice response items for

demographic information, four-point Likert scaled items (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or

strongly agree) to measure perceptions about district HCM practices, and open-ended

questions inviting participants to provide comments. Forced-choice Likert scaled questions

explored participant opinions on eight (8) constructs: human resource planning, employment

(recruitment, selection, and new teacher support), performance management and professional

growth, recognition and reward, community engagement, and school environment. To

establish internal reliability of the survey, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated on all

forced-choice response items. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated on

each of the eight constructs which included five human resource planning subitems, fifteen

employment subitems, eleven performance management and professional growth subitems,

five recognition and reward subitems, five community engagement subitems, and five school

environment subitems.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was summarized using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations). Additionally, data was analyzed using inferential statistics (Chi square and independent t-test). Demographic data was provided by the survey respondents, including: title, district, grade level, number years in current role at this school, and number of years in current role at this and other districts/schools. Open-ended items (one per construct) invited respondents to provide their thoughts on what could be done to strengthen human capital management policy, programs, or practices in the district.

Qualitative data generated from the open-ended comments was analyzed by coding of themes reflected in the comments and used to corroborate and supplement quantitative data. Comments that did not provide a meaningful statement (e.g., "nothing" or "not sure") were not coded.

Interviews were conducted with all four superintendents. Two focus group sessions were planned in each district, one with building administrators and the other with a representative sampling of teachers. Due to COVID-19 related staffing challenges, one district in Region 1 was unable to convene a teacher focus group. Teachers invited to participate in the focus group included all those who participated in the survey. The study utilized a semi-structured approach to interviews and focus group sessions. Web-based sessions via Zoom were scheduled for 60 minutes. The general interview protocol used for all three groups is presented in Appendix B. Survey results were reviewed in light of the research questions to identify areas needing further explanation (e.g., significant results, nonsignificant results, outliers, or group differences) and protocol questions posed to each district were added,

modified, and/or deleted as appropriate. Data gathered through the interviews and focus

groups were used to identify patterns and themes associated with what educators described as

important human capital management practices in the acquisition, development, engagement,

and retention of classroom teachers. The semi-structured approach ensured a conversational

and informal tone that allowed participants to openly respond to the questions in their own

words. The open-ended questions were designed to stimulate thinking and reflection on the

degree to which human capital management was happening with strategic intent within the

district. Each individual interview was video recorded using a Zoom video conferencing

technology and then coded.

Ultimately, this mixed-methods approach drew on the strengths of each method and

generated sufficient data to inform the six HCM domains. Notwithstanding the sound design

plan and productive outcome, however, the process had challenges related to time, complexity,

and managing the volume of feedback.

A major challenge was limited availability of teachers and administrators to participate

in the study, especially the focus groups. As stated earlier, the research took place during the

COVID-19 pandemic, a time when educators were juggling the demands of hybrid teaching and

learning. The percentage of teachers responding to the survey was 47% (i.e., 67% (Region 1)

and 42% (Region 2)) – a higher than expected response given the circumstances. On the other

hand, securing focus groups during this period was difficult, and if it were not for previous

working relationships that existed between the principal investigator and participating districts,

the study timelines may have been impossible to meet.

In addition to time constraints caused by competing demands, the complex and multi-faceted nature of the study – eight constructs with terminology and concepts unfamiliar to most participants – made covering all areas evenly during these sessions a tall order. The scheduled 'one-hour' time commitments were honored in each session, although the study could have benefited from more time with each individual and group. To make best use of the time available, the interview protocol was carefully organized by construct, consistent with the survey, and each construct was verbally defined before probing more deeply with questioning. Despite this attempt to ensure a baseline understanding of each construct, there were several instances where individuals deviated from the protocol with responses that related to a different construct. Though this was to be expected given the newness of material (and allowed as long as the responses related to human capital management), it also resulted in more work to summarize, make sense of and analyze the results. To help with managing the heavy volume of data from each session, memos were used to record and help keep track of key words, concepts, and themes within and across districts. These efforts which admittedly were never tidy or well written, were in fact helpful in capturing the outflow of ideas and information. With this in mind, however, qualitative analysis still proved to be the most challenging aspect of the study requiring several iterations of review and refinement before landing in its final form in Chapter 4.

Study Timeline

Planning and preparation for this study began in earnest in January, 2021 following Internal Review Board (IRB) approval of the SMHC research proposal. The quantitative data collection and analysis phase (strand one) was launched in February, 2021. The survey window

remained open for approximately three weeks for each of the participating districts. (Due to

COVID-19 pandemic, the window remained open longer than

originally planned in order to optimize

participation response rate.) The

quantitative analysis ended in

June, 2021. The qualitative data

collection and analysis phase (strand two) began in April 2021 and the final interview was

conducted in July, 2021. The integration and summarization of study results was completed in

December, 2022.

January 2021 Study Proposal / IRB Approval

February - April 2022 Strand 1: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

April - August 2022 Strand 2: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

June - December 2022 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results
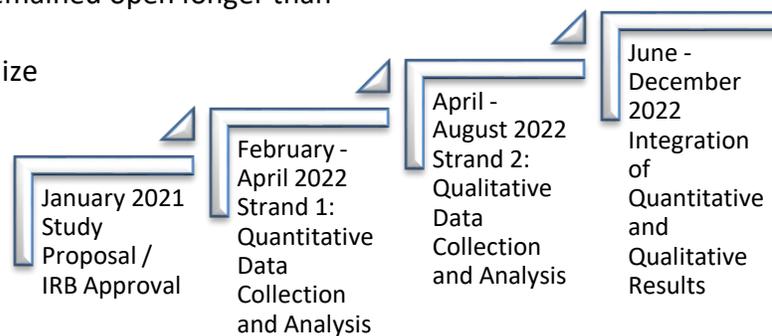
Positionality

As principal investigator for this study, I have over thirty years' experience in human

resources working for private and public sector organizations. Among the professional roles

that I have played include, for example, job analyst for a small consulting firm supporting

agencies within the federal government (i.e., Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Health

and Human Services, Office of Personnel Services, etc.); human resources specialist and

compensation director for a large financial services company; human resources manager at a

small community bank; human resources consultant specializing in organization-wide

performance system design at small to medium-sized organizations; project

leader/compensation consultant working for the University of Maine System; project

leader/human resources consultant overseeing two federal Teacher Incentive Fund grants for

the Maine Department of Education; Executive Director of a PK-16 educational collaborative

located at University of Maine at Presque Isle; and at the time of this study, human resources

director for Maine Regional School Unit 21, a 600-employee, 2,400-student PK-12 school district in southern Maine. Collectively, these experiences have influenced the methods used in the current study, including the setting, research design and methods.

In terms of setting, all four rural districts participating in this study are among districts that I have previously worked during my time at the University of Maine at Presque Isle and Maine Department of Education. I knew all but one of the superintendents with whom I interviewed as well as many of the building administrators and teachers who participated in focus groups.

My background and experience in human resources across a wide variety of settings and projects influenced study methodology and tools. The conceptual framework was informed by available SMHC research in addition to first-hand experience working with more than 20 rural districts in Maine where for many of them the implementation of human resource management functions was perfunctory at best, inconsistent or non-existent at worse. Because of this, the research questions were intentionally crafted and sequenced to build a compelling case for policy change and support. And, the design of the survey instrument was influenced by my background and interest in organizational consulting - strategically-oriented survey items crafted (and where possible, adapted from other surveys) not only to gauge the efficacy of SMHC in rural education but also to provide current and future rural districts using the survey instrument a means for self-assessment and roadmap for school improvement.

My worldview regarding the strategic management of human resources, its importance, and how its many components should look, feel, connect, and contribute to organizational success has been influenced by my many years' experience in the field. My motivation behind

the current and future studies are fueled in large part by an interest in working closely with the educational community in Maine to strengthen human resource related supports and conditions needed to continually advance the quality of education for all students.

Validity/Trustworthiness

Assumptions refer to those things that researchers take for granted or accept as truth without substantive proof or evidence (Ellis & Levy, 2009), and they provide an important perspective regarding the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The current study was conducted based on the assumption that all subjects responding to the administrator and teacher survey and the respondents participating in the voluntary focus groups or personal interviews that followed did so with honesty, integrity, and with a professional demeanor. Another assumption was that district- and building-level administrators completing the survey and participating in the qualitative strand were generally knowledgeable of district human capital management policy, programs, and practices. This assumption of expertise in these areas is based on the fact that their roles and responsibilities include direct involvement in and/or accountability for managing human resources at their district. These assumptions are necessary because the researcher was unable to control for such factors.

A limitation is a weakness or vulnerability that undermines the internal credibility of a study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). All studies have limitations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), or "potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher" (Creswell, 2005). A limitation for this study was the administrator/teacher survey, which is not a validated instrument. The survey items were created from scratch, adopted or adapted from existing surveys to capture the unique needs of this study and answer research question one, "To what

degree are human capital management functions in four rural Maine districts being

optimized?" and two, "How are these districts performing with regard to attracting, developing,

engaging, and retaining classroom teachers?" The expert panel charged with approving the

perception survey instrument was drawn from the researcher's dissertation committee and

may not truly represent universally accepted expert opinion. Another limitation for this study

was the need to conduct the semi-structured interviews virtually as opposed to face-to-face.

This limitation was due to constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic which precluded in-

person interviews. Another potential limitation for this study was that the principal investigator

has over thirty years of experience in human resources. Because of this experience it was

paramount for the researcher to refrain from over interpreting the data in ways that could

compromise the integrity and objectivity of the study. To minimize any perception of bias or

embellishment, the researcher made every attempt to be purposeful in anchoring any claims or

conclusions in the data according to the way in which it was revealed from participants.

Delimitations are factors, constructs, and/or variables that a researcher intentionally

excludes from the study which impacts the external credibility of the study (Ellis & Levy, 2009).

A primary delimitation of this research were the geographical boundaries based on the

parameters established at the onset of the research. The criterion was that participating

districts would have to be rural, public-school districts in Maine. These geographical constraints

could limit the generalizability of the study results on the efficacy of strategic human capital

management in non-rural districts in and outside of Maine.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The study was conducted in four rural Maine districts – two located in northern Maine

(Region 1) and two located in southern Maine (Region 2). The quantitative strand utilized a 64-

item survey instrument (Appendix A). Eighteen (18) administrators and 127 teachers

responded to the survey. Fourteen administrators participated in a voluntary interview or focus

group and nine (9) teachers participated in a voluntary teacher focus group (see Table 3: Study

Participation). The experience represented by the educators participating in this qualitative

strand was 406 years in education, 125 of those years spent in the current district (see Table 4:

Interview/Focus Group Participants).

Table 2: Study Participation

		Region 1 Northern Maine		Region 2 Southern Maine		Total
		District A	District B	District C	District D	
Survey	Administrators	10		8		18
	Teachers	34*		93*		127
Interviews & Focus Groups	Administrators	5		9		14
	Teachers	2		7		9

* The percentage of teachers responding to the survey was 67% (R1: 34/51) and 42% (R2: 93/220.9). This
is based on data gathered from Maine DOE ESSA Dashboard (2019-20): Northern [District A (21), District
B (30), District C (67.2), and District D (153.7)]

Table 3: Interview/Focus Group Participants

Region		Position	Experience (Years)	
			In Education	In Current Role
Region 1 Northern Maine	Interviewee 1	Superintendent/Principal	33	2
	Interview 2	Superintendent	11	2
	Interview 3	Principal	18	2
	Focus Group 2	Principals	13	2
			24	2
	Focus Group 3	Teachers	31	20
			8	4
Region 2 Southern Maine	Interview 1	Superintendent	38	20
	Interview 2	Superintendent	29	5
	Focus Group 1	Principals	13	3
			21	4
			24	4
	Focus Group 2	Principals	11	4
			20	7
			29	11
			Data Unavailable	Data Unavailable
	Focus Group 3	Teachers	23	1
			14	12
			12	6
			20	4
	Focus Group 4	Teachers	7	4
			Data Unavailable	Data Unavailable
			7	6
		Superintendent	111	29
		Principal	173	39
		Teacher	122	57
		Total	406	125

Results generated from both quantitative and qualitative strands informed responses to the three research questions that frame the current study as illustrated in Figure 4: Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Efficacy of HCM in Rural Education. To answer RQ 1, "To what degree is human capital management in four rural Maine districts being optimized?," the survey instrument was designed to address eight constructs, including: 1) Human Resource Planning (HRP), 2) Employment [(Recruitment (R), Selection (S), New Teacher Support (NTS)], 3) Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth (PEPG), 4) Recognition and Reward (RR), 5) Community Engagement (CE), and 6) School Environment (SE). Summary descriptive and inferential statistics and analysis associated with each these constructs are shown below.

To answer RQ 2, "How are these districts performing with regard to attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining classroom teachers, the survey included teacher-only questions for measuring human capital management outcomes – the ability of the district to attract, develop, engage, and retain classroom teachers. Summary descriptive statistics and analysis associated with each of these four outcome measures are shown below.

To answer RQ 3, "What are the implications of these findings for rural districts in Maine and what opportunities exist to strengthen local human capital management policy and programming and state- and regional-level support to districts?" interviews and focus groups were conducted utilizing semi-structured interview protocols (Appendix B). In addition, responses to open-ended questions in the survey informed RQ3. The survey questions were designed to elicit perspectives from teachers and administrators about how human capital management in their district could be improved. Data gathered through all three means were sorted according to HCM construct and further analyzed to uncover key themes and patterns.

Figure 4
Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Efficacy
of HCM in Rural Education
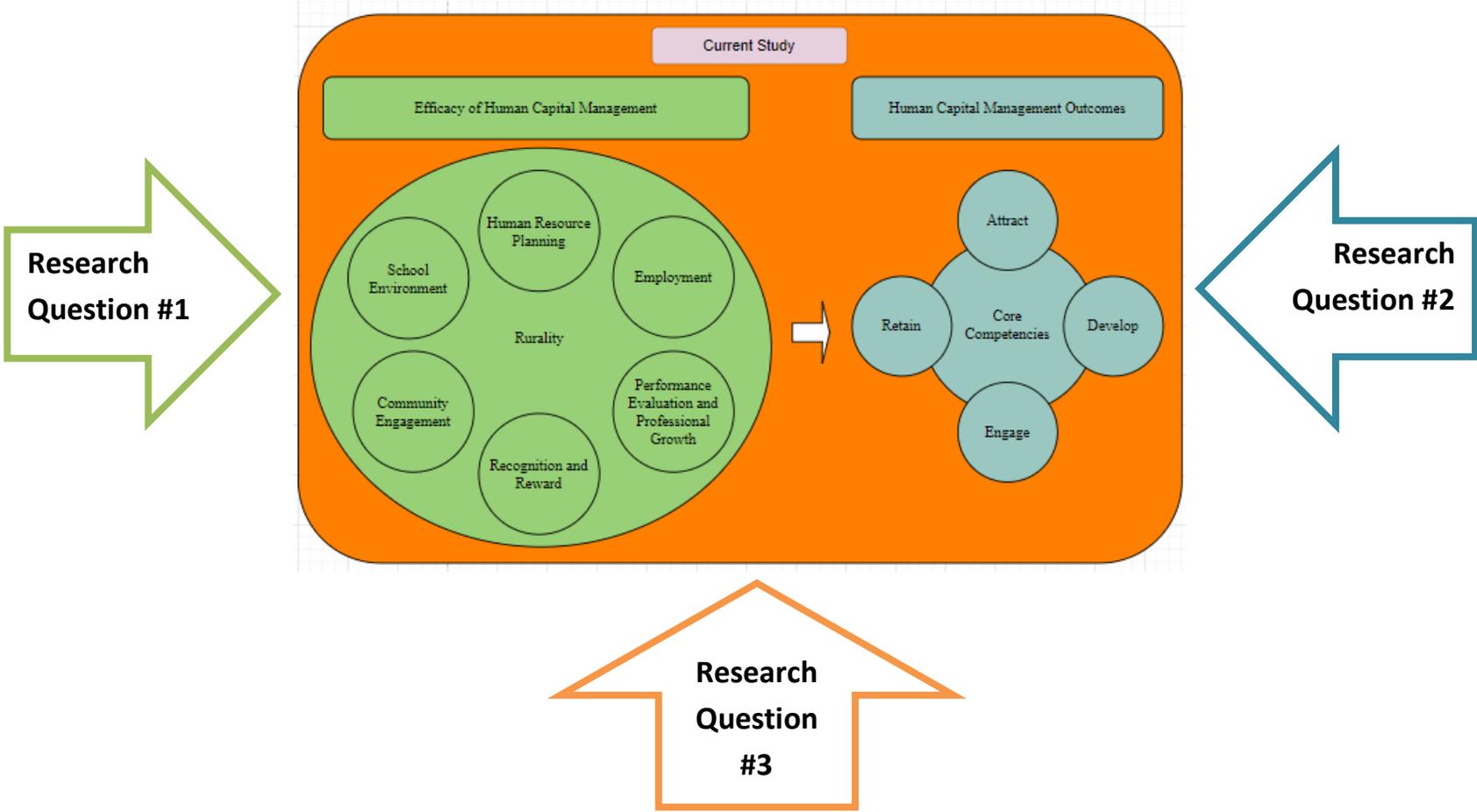
Finding 1: Optimization of Human Capital Management

In response to RQ 1, "To what degree is human capital management in four rural Maine districts being optimized?" the data presented in this section reveal clear, significant, yet varied opportunity for improvement across all eight HCM constructs. These findings hold true across both regions and from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. In addition to improvement opportunity, two additional findings are noteworthy. One, administrator responses to a majority of survey items across all eight constructs are more favorable than those of teachers; and two, Region 1 (northern Maine) ratings are more favorable overall than those from Region 2 (southern Maine) participants. Survey results and summary analyses for each HCM construct follow.

Human Resource Planning

Human resource planning refers to the process of identifying the core competencies – knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors – needed to accomplish school goals, and budgeting for those competencies to ensure a sufficient pipeline of highly effective educators. The survey instrument included five items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of human resource planning (HRP) practices at the district. Data presented below show the percentage of participants responding to the five survey items ranges from 70-90%. Average ratings range from 2.75 (ensuring there is a pipeline of high-quality teacher candidates) to 3.17 (encouraging notification of resignation or retirement).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
Human Resource Planning	HRP 1: Teacher roles and responsibilities	130	90%	3.11	.707
	HRP 2: Budgeting for human resource capacity	117	81%	3.00	.788
	HRP 3: Encourage notification to resign or retire	108	74%	3.17	.634
	HRP 4: Prioritizes high-quality teacher candidates	119	82%	2.99	.786
	HRP 5: Ensure pipeline of teacher candidates	101	70%	2.75	.793

Average ratings for all HRP items are favorable (M≥2.5). The highest rated item (M=3.17) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of district policies and practices that require or encourage current teachers to provide early notification of their intent to resign or retire. The lowest rated item (M=2.75) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness with which the district partners with local higher education institutions to ensure a pipeline of high-quality teacher candidates. Average ratings for all other HRP related items reflect survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at identifying and prioritizing the sources of high-quality teacher candidates (M=2.99); engaging in formal planning and budgeting processes that include assessing current human resource capacity and forecasting core competencies needed to accomplish school goals (M=3.00); and designing and assigning teacher roles and responsibilities in a way that matches current core competencies with school and student needs (M=3.11).

Recruitment

Recruitment refers to the process of finding and attracting qualified candidates to the school district. The survey instrument included five items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of recruitment (R) practices at the district. Data presented below show the

percentage of participants responding to the five survey items ranges from 57-83%. Average

ratings range from 2.44 (establishing a strong recruiting base) to 2.88 (highlighting job

competencies).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
	R 1: Recruits sufficient high-quality applicants	120	83%	2.75	.853
Employment - Recruitment	R 2: Tailors job postings & recruitment campaigns	115	79%	2.59	.837
	R 3: Highlight job competencies required	118	81%	2.88	.694
	R 4: Competencies used in the teacher evaluation	83	57%	2.71	.804
	R 5: Establishes strong recruiting base for teaching	117	81%	2.44	.803

Average ratings for all but one of the recruitment items are favorable (M≥2.5). The

highest rated item (M=2.88) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of

district job postings and recruitment campaigns and the degree to which they highlight the core

competencies required of the position. The lowest rated item (M=2.44) reflects survey

participants' perceptions of the effectiveness with which the district establishes a strong

recruiting base for teaching positions by providing aspiring teachers with clinically-rich training.

Average ratings for all other recruitment related items reflect survey participants' perceptions

of the districts' effectiveness at tailoring its job postings and recruitment campaigns to highlight

the districts unique brand (M=2.59); using core competencies in job postings and recruitment

campaigns that are the same ones that appear on the district's teacher evaluation rubric

(M=2.71); and district success at recruiting a sufficient number of high-quality teacher

applicants (M=2.75).

Selection

Selection refers to the process of choosing the most qualified candidates to the school district. The survey instrument included five items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of selection (S) practices at the district. Data presented below show the percentage of participants responding to the five survey items ranges from 43-77%. Average ratings range from 2.18 (final candidates demonstrating their teaching ability) to 3.06 (aligning hiring criteria with core competencies).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
	S 1: Utilizes tools and rubrics to assess candidates	100	69%	2.81	.800
Employment - Selection	S 2: Align hiring criteria with core competencies	112	77%	3.06	.763
	S 3: Provides candidate selection training	62	43%	2.69	.801
	S 4: Final candidates demonstrate teaching ability	100	69%	2.18	.796
	S 5: New teacher performance analyzed annually	98	68%	3.05	.791

Average ratings for all but one of the selection items are favorable (M≥2.5). The highest rated item (M=3.06) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the district at utilizing interview questions and hiring criteria that are aligned with the core competencies required of the position. The lowest rated item (M=2.18) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness with which the district requires final candidates of teaching positions to provide writing samples, sample lesson plans, and demonstrate their teaching ability. Average ratings for all other selection related items reflect survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at providing sufficient training to administrators on candidate selection processes (M=2.69); using standardized tools and rubrics to assess and

differentiate candidates (M=2.81); and analyzing new teacher performance data annually to validate selection outcomes (M=3.05).

New Teacher Support

New teacher support refers to access afforded new hires to formal induction and mentoring programs. The survey instrument included five items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of new hire support (NTS) at the district. Data presented below show the percentage of participants responding to the five survey items ranges from 57-92%. Average ratings range from 2.72 (PD needs are identified as part of hiring) to 3.34 (new hires are matched with an experienced mentor for support).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
Employment - New Teacher Support	NTS 1: Provides formal orientation to the district	134	92%	2.98	.780
	NTS 2: PD needs identified as part of hiring	110	76%	2.72	.814
	NTS 3: Match with experienced mentor for support	134	92%	3.34	.671
	NTS 4: Mentors attend formal mentorship training	116	80%	3.29	.646
	NTS 5: District improves mentoring program	82	57%	2.76	.924

Average ratings for all items are favorable (M≥2.5). The highest rated item (M=3.34) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the district with matching each beginning year teacher with an experienced mentor for on-going, regular support. The lowest rated item (M=2.72) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness with which the professional development needs of new teachers are identified during the hiring process and then incorporated into their onboarding plans. Average ratings for all other new teacher support related items reflect survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at

receiving and tracking feedback on the success of its mentoring program and using that

feedback to drive ongoing improvements (M=2.76); providing beginning teachers with a formal

orientation to the community, district, curriculum, and school (M=2.98); and requiring mentors

to attend formal training on effective mentorship responsibilities (M=3.29).

Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth

Performance evaluation and professional growth refers to the process of continually

improving and/or maintaining job performance through use of e.g., performance assessment

tools, coaching, counseling, collaboration, professional learning, and regular feedback. The

survey instrument included 11 items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation

of performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG) practices at the district. Data

presented below show the percentage of participants responding to the 11 survey items ranges

from 59-95%. Average ratings range from 2.48 (instructional coaching is individualized) to 2.99

(professional growth is individualized).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
	PEPG 1: Differentiates instructional effectiveness	128	88%	2.91	.736
	PEPG 2: Provides evaluation training to teachers	132	91%	2.73	.763
	PEPG 3: Provides training to support to evaluators	112	77%	2.71	.779
Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth	PEPG 4: Teachers receive feedback on instruction	138	95%	2.84	.813
	PEPG 5: Training is given to provide feedback	110	76%	2.53	.738
	PEPG 6: Evaluation is used for HR decisions	85	59%	2.66	.780
	PEPG 7: Performance data used to inform PD	106	73%	2.78	.730
	PEPG 8: Professional growth is individualized	126	87%	2.99	.663
	PEPG 9: Instructional coaching is individualized	120	83%	2.48	.788

PEPG 10: PD used to continually improve practice	137	94%	2.70	.780
PEPG 11: PD quality regularly assessed	113	78%	2.58	.788

Average ratings for all but one of the recruitment items are favorable (M≥2.5). The highest rated item (M=2.99) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the district with ensuring that all educators have professional growth plans linked to their individual needs based on performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG) data. The lowest rated item (M=2.48) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness providing instructional coaching to meet the individual needs of teachers. Average ratings for all other PEPG related items reflect survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at training administrators in how to give and receive feedback – and holding them accountable for doing it well (M=2.53); regular assessment of the quality and effectiveness of professional development (M=2.58); using PEPG results to make key human resource management decisions such as compensation, professional development, non-probationary status, and promotions (M=2.66); providing sufficient professional development opportunities to continually improve one's practice (M=2.70); providing regular training and ongoing calibration support to evaluators and instructional coaches to ensure a common understanding and application of the PEPG program and rubric (M=2.71); providing regular training to all employees on the PEPG program and rubric (M=2.73); delivering regular, timely, and specific feedback to teachers on their instructional performance, including strengths and weaknesses (M=2.84); and using the PEPG program to fairly and accurately differentiate levels of instructional effectiveness in improving student learning outcomes (M=2.91).

Recognition and Reward

Recognition and reward refers to the use of monetary and non-monetary awards to communicate and reinforce desired performance and results. The survey instrument included five items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of recognition and reward (RR) practices at the district. Data presented below show the percentage of participants responding to the five survey items ranges from 81-90%. Average ratings range from 2.26 (rewarding teamwork and collaboration) to 2.76 (rewarding teacher leadership).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
Recognition and Reward	RR 1: Competitive with local market	130	90%	2.62	.830
	RR 2: Helps attract and retain effective teachers	123	85%	2.42	.859
	RR 3: Rewards teacher leadership	127	88%	2.76	.761
	RR 4: Rewards teamwork and collaboration	117	81%	2.26	.733
	RR 5: Rewards teachers for performance	121	83%	2.31	.784

Average ratings for two out of the five recognition and reward items are favorable (M≥2.5). The highest rated item (M=2.76) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the districts compensation program at recognizing and rewarding various forms of teacher leadership, including e.g., mentor teacher, master teacher, PLC leader, PEPG coordinator, data coach, and peer observer. The lowest rated item (M=2.26) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness with which the compensation program recognizes and rewards teamwork and collaboration. Average ratings for all other recognition and reward related items reflect survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at rewarding teachers for performance, including e.g., instructional effectiveness, student learning growth, achieving school or district goals, etc. (M=2.31); helping the district attract and retain effective

teachers (M=2.42); and ensuring a compensation program (base pay, variable pay, and

benefits) that is competitive with the local market (M=2.62).

Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to the intentional process of involving parents, families,

and community organizations in education. The survey instrument included five items

intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of community engagement (CE)

practices at the district. Data presented below show the percentage of participants responding

to the five survey items ranges from 63-95%. Average ratings range from 2.65 (monitoring

school-community relations) to 3.07 (engaging parents and families).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
	CE 1: Engages community-based organizations	130	90%	2.98	.682
Community Engagement	CE 2: Engages parents and families	138	95%	3.07	.635
	CE 3: Fosters a collaborative school community	135	93%	2.84	.762
	CE 4: Includes parents and community members	124	86%	2.90	.731
	CE 5: Monitors school-community relations	91	63%	2.65	.721

Average ratings for all five of the community engagement items are favorable (M≥2.5).

The highest rated item (M=3.07) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the districts'

effectiveness at actively engaging parents and families to support the success of the students

and school. The lowest rated item (M=2.65) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the

districts' effectiveness at monitoring school-community relations with evidence and data

(M=2.65). Average ratings for all other community engagement related items reflect survey

participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at fostering a collaborative school

community where the school staff and community interact regularly and share ownership for

the success of the school (M=2.84); including parents and community members in reflection on how well the school is meeting its mission (M=2.90); and actively and effectively engaging community-based organizations and resources to help the district achieve its mission (M=2.98).

School Environment

School environment refers to deliberate strategies for ensuring a safe, caring, respectful and productive school and classroom climate and professional culture. The survey instrument included five items intentionally selected to measure the strategic orientation of school environment (SE) related practices at the district. Data presented below show the percentage of participants responding to the five survey items ranges from 81-97%. Average ratings range from 2.79 (gathering and analyzing data) to 3.19 (maintaining a safe environment).

HCM Construct	Survey Item	N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
School Environment	SE 1: Fosters a collaborative culture	138	95%	2.93	.737
	SE 2: Values free and open expression of ideas	141	97%	2.96	.788
	SE 3: Gathers and analyzes data	117	81%	2.79	.866
	SE 4: Honors the culture of students and adults	134	92%	3.05	.779
	SE 5: Maintains safe environment	137	94%	3.19	.681

Average ratings for all five of the school environment items are favorable (M≥2.5). The highest rated item (M=3.19) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at creating and maintaining a physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe environment that promotes effective adult practice and student learning. The lowest rated item (M=2.79) reflects survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at gathering and analyzing data on culture, climate, and/or working conditions in tandem with effectiveness data to inform school improvement efforts Average ratings for all other school

environment related items reflect survey participants' perceptions of the districts' effectiveness at fostering a collaborative culture in which teachers and leaders share ownership of a common instructional vision and student learning and growth (M=2.93); ensuring a culture in schools which reflect and value free and open expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs (M=2.96); and honoring the culture of students, adults, and the larger community, demonstrating respect for diversity and ensuring equity (M=3.05).

Comparing Regions

To examine if there are differences in perceptions across regions, means of the northern school districts and southern school districts can be compared. Northern districts were more positive than southern districts in all but one construct, employment selection, where southern districts were more positive than northern districts. In every other category, northern districts were more positive.

Table 4: Regional Comparisons

HCM Construct		Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Human Resource Planning		1-Northern	23	*3.30*	.536	.112
		2-Southern	56	2.85	.627	.084
Employment	Recruitment	1-Northern	22	2.77	.838	.179
		2-Southern	47	2.63	.706	.103
	Selection	1-Northern	19	2.80	.699	.160
		2-Southern	29	2.87	.624	.116
	New Teacher Support	1-Northern	23	3.06	.570	.119
		2-Southern	46	3.02	.660	.097
Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth		1-Northern	20	2.97	.607	.136
		2-Southern	42	2.70	.701	.108
Recognition and Reward		1-Northern	27	2.67	.874	.168
		2-Southern	72	2.35	.564	.067
Community Engagement		1-Northern	26	2.98	.558	.109
		2-Southern	64	2.80	.648	.081
School Environment		1-Northern	33	3.12	.548	.095
		2-Southern	79	2.94	.743	.084

* indicates significance at *p* < .01

As illustrated in Figure 5 below, the highest rated constructs in the northern districts were human resource planning (M=3.30) and school environment (M=3.12) while the lowest rated constructs were recognition and reward (M=2.67) and recruitment (M=2.77). In the southern districts, the highest rated categories were new teacher support (M=3.02) and school environment (M=2.94) while the lowest rated categories were recognition and reward (M=2.35) and recruitment (M=2.63).

Figure 5
Regional Comparisons
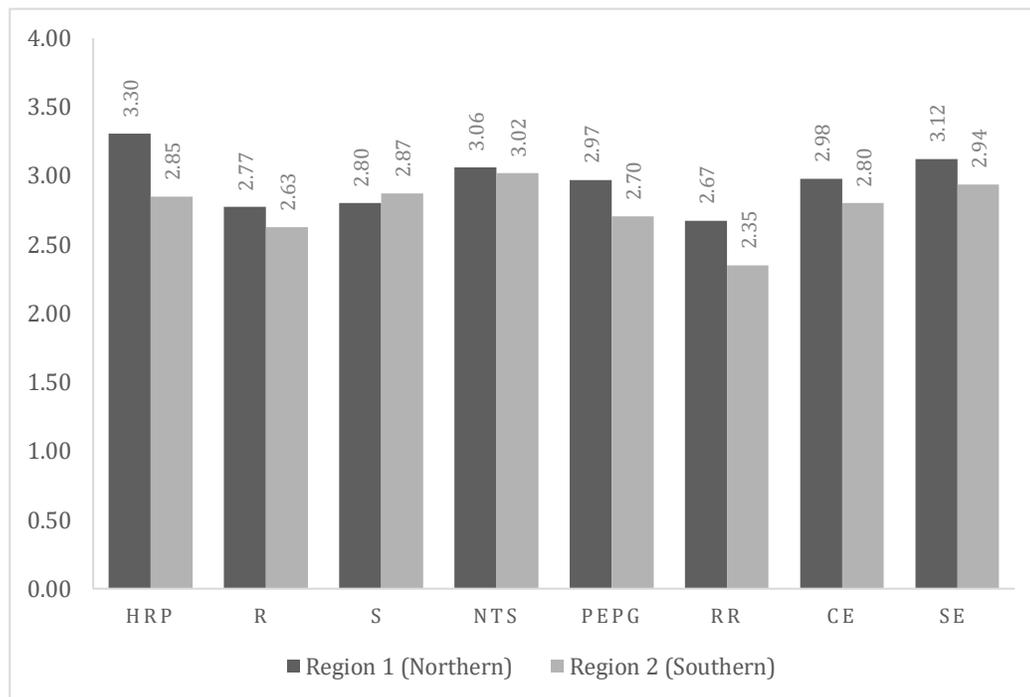
To examine if there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of Northern and Southern educators, independent t-tests were run on the eight constructs. Only human resource planning was significantly different - Northern school districts (M = 3.30, SD = .54) were significantly more positive than Southern school districts (M = 2.85 and SD = .63) about human resource planning, $t(77)$ = 3.071, p = .003. There was no significant effect for any other construct.

Comparing Differences in Position

To examine if there are differences in means by position, means of administrators and teachers can be compared. Administrators were more positive than teachers in every category.

Table 5: Positional Comparisons

HCM Construct		Position	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Human Resource Planning		1-Administrator	15	*3.29*	.433	.112
		2-Teacher	64	2.91	.653	.082
Employment	Recruitment	1-Administrator	17	2.82	.479	.116
		2-Teacher	52	2.62	.814	.113
	Selection	1-Administrator	17	2.85	.487	.118
		2-Teacher	31	2.84	.729	.131
	New Teacher Support	1-Administrator	14	3.07	.535	.143
		2-Teacher	55	3.02	.653	.088
Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth		1-Administrator	14	3.09	.524	.140
		2-Teacher	48	2.70	.697	.101
Recognition and Reward		1-Administrator	14	**2.96**	.643	.172
		2-Teacher	85	2.35	.643	.070
Community Engagement		1-Administrator	17	3.02	.338	.082
		2-Teacher	73	2.81	.671	.079
School Environment		1-Administrator	18	**3.44**	.453	.107
		2-Teacher	94	2.90	.699	.072

* indicates significance at $p < .05$
** indicates significance at $p < .01$

As illustrated in Figure 6 below, the highest rated constructs by administrators were school environment (M=3.44) and human resource planning (M=3.29) while the lowest rated constructs were recruitment (M=2.82) and selection (M=2.85). With respect to teachers, the highest rated categories were new teacher support (M=3.02) and human resource planning (M=2.91) while the lowest rated categories were recognition and reward (M=2.35) and recruitment (M=2.62).

Figure 6
Positional Comparisons
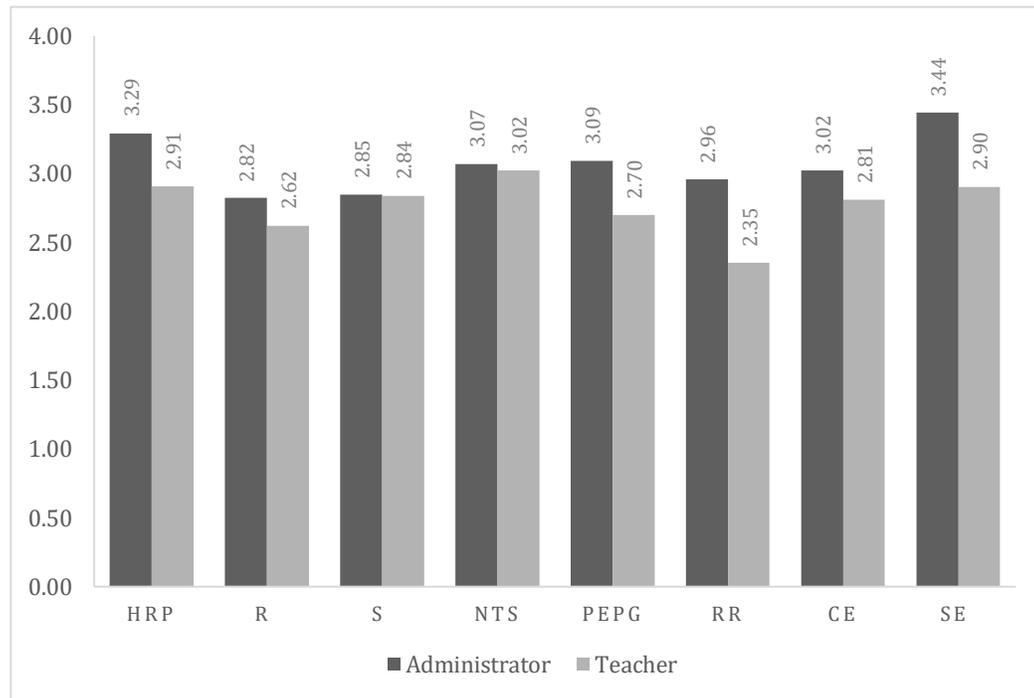
To examine if there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of administrators and teachers, independent t-tests were run on the eight constructs. Human resource planning, recognition and reward, and school environment were significantly different - administrators were significantly more positive than teachers on all three. First, administrators (M = 3.29, SD = .433) were significantly more positive than teachers (M = 2.91 and SD = .653) about human resource planning, $t(77)$ = 2.180, p = .032. Second, administrators (M = 2.96, SD = .643) were significantly more positive than teachers (M = 2.35 and SD = .643) about recognition and reward, $t(97)$ = 3.256, p = .002. Third, administrators (M = 3.44, SD = .453) were significantly more positive than teachers (M = 2.90 and SD = .699) about school environment, $t(110)$ = 3.146, p = .002. There was no significant effect for any other construct.

Finding 2: Insights into Attracting, Developing, Engaging, and Retaining Teachers

In response to RQ 2, "*How are these districts performing with regard to attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining classroom teachers?*" the survey instrument included four items intentionally selected to measure key human capital management outcomes – attract, develop, engage, and retain. Data presented below show a 100% participant response rate (N=127) for each of these outcome measures. Average ratings for each of these HCM outcomes measures were favorable (M≥2.5).

Outcome Measure[1]		Teacher Responses			
		N	Percent Response	Mean	Standard Deviation
Attract	Good place to work	127	100%	3.37	.699
Develop	Satisfaction with resources and support	127	100%	3.04	.750
Engage	Motivated and engaged	127	100%	3.18	.695

[1]For outcome measures 'attract,' 'develop,' and 'engage,' survey participants rated their level of 'agreement' to each question using a 4-point scale on which 4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree

The highest rated item (M=3.37) measures 'attract' by reflecting teachers' opinion about recommending their district as a good place to work. The lowest rated item (M=3.04) measures 'develop' by assessing teachers' satisfaction with the resources and support they receive to continually improve their practice. The average rating for 'engage' (M=3.18) is measured by assessing teachers' motivation and engagement to support the success of students and fellow staff.

The outcome measure 'retain' utilized a frequency (rather than agreement) scale and the results were also favorable based on percentage of teachers (89.76) who indicated their intent to continue working at the same school next year.

Outcome Measure[1]	Teacher Responses			
	N	Percent Response	Frequency	Percent Retention
Retain — Continue working at this school	127	100%	114	89.76

[1]For the outcome measure, retain, survey participants responded to the question, which of the following best describes your plans after the end of the school year?

Regional comparisons of average teacher responses to the HCM outcome measures are shown below. Again, average ratings for each of these outcome measures across regions were favorable (M≥2.5).

Outcome Measure[1]	Teacher Responses					
	Region 1 Northern Districts			Region 2 Southern Districts		
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Attract — Good place to work	34	3.44	.660	93	3.34	.715
Develop — Satisfaction with resources and support	34	3.26	.618	93	2.96	.779
Engage — Motivated and engaged	34	3.38	.604	93	3.11	.714

[1]For outcome measures 'attract,' 'develop,' and 'engage,' survey participants rated their level of 'agreement' to each question using a 4-point scale on which 4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree.

To examine if there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of Northern and Southern educators, independent t-tests were run on the three outcome measures. Only 'develop' was significantly different, with northern school districts (M = 3.26, SD = .618) significantly more positive than southern school districts (M = 2.96 and SD = .779)

about satisfaction with resources and support, $t(143) = 2.156$, $p = .033$. There was no

statistically significant effect for any other outcome measure.

Average ratings by teacher to the 'retain' measure were similar across Region 1 (91.2%) and Region 2 (89.2%).

Outcome Measure[1]		Teacher Responses							
		Region 1 Northern Districts				Region 2 Southern Districts			
		N	Percent Response	Frequency	Percent Retention	N	Percent Response	Frequency	Percent Retention
Retain	Continue working at this school	34	100%	31	91.2%	93	100%	83	89.2%

[1]For the outcome measure, retain, survey participants responded to the question, which of the following best describes your plans after the end of the school year?

Notwithstanding favorable results generated on all four outcome measures, significant

opportunity exists to improve the district's effectiveness with their efforts to attract, develop,

and engage effective teachers.

Finding 3: Lessons Learned for Rural School Districts to Harness Strategic Human Capital

Management

In response to RQ 3, "*What are the implications of these findings for rural districts in*

Maine and what opportunities exist to strengthen local human capital management policy and

programming and state- and regional-level support to districts?" qualitative data gathered

through interviews with superintendents, focus groups with teachers and principals, and

responses to open-ended questions in the HCM in Rural Schools Survey are combined with

quantitative highpoints and summarized below, organized by construct. Findings varied

somewhat by district and role, which was to be expected. District-to-district variance would be typical since each district selects its own policies and programming related to HCM. Role-to-role variance was also expected given the division of duties in education and differences in the degree to which teachers and administrators understand and are exposed to HCM. Whereas administrators in small school districts are traditionally charged with all duties associated with 'managing' human resources, teachers are typically less involved in this work. Notwithstanding these differences, capturing the perspectives of both teachers and administrators across different districts has generated a broad collection of insights and ideas into what HCM means, how it is working currently in and across rural districts, and what could be done more of and/or differently in the future to make it more effective. Major points related to each HCM construct are summarized below accompanied by a sampling of ideas generated by teachers and administrators on ways in which the district could improve HCM policy, programming, and/or practice. Each section concludes with key takeaways derived from the data for districts endeavoring to become more strategic in their management of human capital.

Human Resource Planning – Process, Participation, and Strategic Alliances

As noted earlier, administrators were significantly more positive than teachers in their response to questions related to their district's HRP efforts. Further, northern school districts were significantly more positive than southern school districts on the same topic. For the latter, the difference in district size could have contributed to this phenomenon. Northern districts participating in the study were smaller in terms of number of staff and students (see Table 1), which in itself would seem to make the process of forecasting and budgeting human resources simpler, more straightforward, and controllable – together contributing to a more favorable

experience for administrators. This is consistent with sentiment shared by an administrator

from region 1 in the north:

> *With such a small group of teachers… our administrators could probably nail down within a year or two when they [teachers] plan on retiring and so it's pretty easy for us to budget and anticipate that. I think that's probably a lot more difficult in a bigger system where you've got way more moving parts, but at least in our small school district our teachers are so communicative with administration that we tend to know way in advance if somebody's moving on. And, we're able to budget for that accordingly pretty easily.*

Though the HRP process may be simpler and more straightforward for smaller districts, it does

not imply that larger rural districts are any less effective at planning their human resources. An

administrator from one of the larger rural districts in the study shared the importance their

district places on engaging the entire district in what appears to be a highly formalized and

inclusive approach to planning:

> *I think this district does a very good job of identifying what its goals are and then making the appropriate decisions as a team across schools. I think in a lot of districts, decisions are made in isolation or everybody's kind of trying to put their stake in the ground to protect their school. I think we over the years have done a very good job of looking at the big picture across the district at all of our schools and understanding where the needs are. Even though I may not be at [principal A's] school, we have conversations as an admin team about the needs at [principal A's] school, so that I have an understanding. And, the same thing holds true with [principal B's] school and [principal C's] school – so we all end up with an understanding of where we are at as a district… having this global picture within the district makes the planning process better and I think that's different than it is in a lot of places.*

Another administrator from the same southern district echoed this point of view, sharing the

care taken by their district to understand human resource needs through the lens of both staff

and students for purposes of finding the "right fit."

> *When I'm looking at bringing in a new resource, or even hiring when a teacher is retiring or moving on, I look for balance on the team and sometimes it is specific. For example, if I'm hiring for my first-grade team, I might think about the strengths of the teachers that are a*

part of that team, and maybe the areas where we would like to grow. Specifically, I might look for someone that fits that profile to make a well-rounded team. Both from a balance of everyone working together for the benefit of the team perspective, and also having options for students who might need a certain profile of a teacher to be most successful. Sometimes it's from the strategic plan down and sometimes it's more within the school's local decision-making authority to find the right fit for a particular team or department.

Not all administrators reported this same formal, highly intentional, and team-oriented HRP experience. An administrator in a separate southern district describes their district's current planning efforts which resemble more of a seat-of-the-pants approach:

I live in survival mode versus long range planning mode, it's just trying to fill the need as it comes up. We don't really have the budget to put a lot of new programming or positions in place… we get really good at the shell game. How much can you make do with and get the most out of what you have versus having a real wish list. If we could blow this thing up and start from scratch and build it the way we want it to be – that would be ideal. We've never had real vision sessions or any real strategic planning. It's a numbers challenge, more than anything else, it comes down to enrollment and budget versus what you really like to see, and then, can you make something out of nothing. Whenever we get something that we really need, it usually comes at the expense of something else. It's always a trade-off, never an add-on.

Notwithstanding the relative advantage smaller districts have over larger districts with respect to fewer numbers and ease of planning and budgeting, the actual effectiveness with which HRP is occurring depends largely on the degree to which it is considered a district priority. Districts that make planning a priority, tend to have higher and more uniform expectations for making it happen with fidelity. However, regardless of size and current practice, most administrators (and teachers too) participating in the study agreed that there is room for improvement in their human resource planning efforts. Examples include greater and more timely access to reliable information on near- and long-term staffing needs, more

participation from staff and community members in the planning process, and stronger connections to colleges and universities.

From the perspective of teachers who offered input on this topic, the desire for more involvement in the process was a common theme. The perception was that teachers are on the front lines and in the classroom every day interacting with students and each other and have a keener sense for what is going well and could be improved as it relates to staffing. Regarding staffing effectiveness, teachers voiced strong opinion on the topic of teaching assignments, with the general sentiment being that teachers should be assigned to positions based on their area(s) of strength rather than convenience. Further, there were teachers who voiced strong opposition to what they described as an "inexcusable" tolerance for ineffective teachers. This latter point is summarized quite pointedly by one teacher:

> *Get rid of several dead weights in each building. The lowest common denominator seems to get the attention. The staff needs to be held accountable for their professionalism and ability to foster learners.*

In addition to making HRP a district priority, providing sufficient data and staff input, and controlling teaching assignments and performance more judiciously, study participants were universal in advocating for stronger ties with higher education. Teachers and administrators representing both regions of the state agreed that their district could benefit from greater collaboration with higher education to ensure sufficient numbers of qualified educators. Several respondents, especially those located in the most remote areas of the state, pointed to the importance of cultivating and/or maintaining strong connections with local colleges and universities to strengthen teacher recruitment and retention. This information is

consistent with data gathered from strand one showing low level of agreement to the survey question 'Our district partners with local higher education institutions to ensure a pipeline of high-quality teacher candidates.' Strengthening ties with higher education was a resounding rallying cry with educators from across the state.

Human resource planning is being performed with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the district. Though smaller districts have a distinct advantage due to lower numbers of students and staff, small size does not always translate into effective planning - HRP effectiveness requires making it a priority. In addition to prioritization, conditions identified by study participants which could foster a more strategic orientation to HRP include, for example, a formal process informed by reliable information on staffing needs; greater participation from staff and community members; and stronger alliances with colleges and universities.

Employment – Recruitment, Selection, and New Teacher Supports

Teachers and administrators from across both regions offered several thoughts on ways in which recruitment, selection, and new teacher support is happening currently and could be improved in their districts. As noted earlier, administrators were more favorable than teachers in their response to questions related to their district's recruitment efforts. Further, northern school districts were more favorable than southern school districts on this same topic.

The need to collaborate more with colleges and universities to help in the recruitment of high-quality candidates was a recurring theme carried over from the previous topic on human resource planning. One administrator emphasized the importance of strategic alliances with higher education along with other recruitment strategies such as improved advertising, more robust orientations for new hires, and maintaining connections with graduates:

[The district should] get the word out about postings, network more with colleges and universities, do more to welcome new staff, and maintain connections with alumni and former teachers in order to spread the word about an opening.

Teachers echoed a similar sentiment concerning the importance of creating positive

connections with higher education. One teacher described the potential benefits to teachers,

teaching, and school climate that could come from forging strong district-college connections:

Partnering with local colleges to get their students in our buildings helps not only the aspiring educator but brings new energy, fosters conversations about teaching and learning, and promotes reflection opportunities for professional educators.

In addition to the benefits generated by forging stronger ties with colleges, small class sizes,

collegiality, and community feel were cited by teachers and administrators from both regions of

the state as important "selling points" for teacher recruitment. Each of these should be

considered anti-deficit attributes of small, rural school districts in Maine and intentionally

parlayed into competitive advantage. According to one teacher, the "small school" feel is

something that should be emphasized when advertising open positions:

Well, for me, and I might be biased because I grew up in this district and now am working here, I just think that close-knit feeling that we have here at [district name] comes from being a small school and needs to be highlighted. Being close with your staff and community makes us strong.

Another teacher shared a similar sentiment regarding the benefit of smallness but from the

perspective of someone who did not grow up in the same community:

… I did not grow up here. I went to school at [a larger district in the same county] and my hope was to make it back there within a few years. I actually was offered a job in that district about a year and a half ago. I could not leave this district though - the class sizes are appealing and the teacher interactions and morale at the school is great. I love that the community cares about you, I see parents out and about all the time that stop and talk to

me, and I mean, I have a son in that other district and I see a real difference in that there is not that same personal connection. I have never been in a school where the superintendent just pops in to see like how you doing with a "hey, how's your day going, is there anything we can do to help you?"

An administrator from another district echoed the importance of strong community-

connections but also the challenges associated with selling this perk to prospective teachers.

What I'll often tell candidates when we do interviews is that the families that we have here are amazing and so supportive and want to partner with us for the benefit of their kids. I wish there was an easy way to show applicants how wonderful and supportive the community is - that's a hard thing to articulate to them and have them understand until they actually come into our school district.

Similar comments citing the benefits of being a small district were a common theme shared by

teachers and administrators across both regions, as were caveats to smallness like this one

offered by an administrator:

Our small class sizes are a benefit and the individual classrooms [we have] for each grade level is important. We also have a community feel within our buildings, which is nice. I also think it's a detriment that we are small. I'm in the process now of hiring five positions and we have some who are trying to come into the field brand new yet I don't feel like we can support them the way I would like to. And, it's not fair to set them up and we can't help them be successful. This really limits our pool as well. And a lot of times those are the candidates we are getting - we have limitations [in terms of capacity] and to try and throw them into this fire without having the proper supports just seems cruel. And, it's not in the best interest of our kids either.

Finally, as it relates to attracting talent, teachers and administrators offered myriad strategies

for improving recruitment efforts in their respective districts including higher pay, stronger

policies that allow for earlier recruitment, more effective advertising and timely postings, and

staying in touch with alumni who want to become teachers. It was also suggested that

advertising be done through a variety of job boards in order to cast a wider net geographically

with messaging that again highlights not just the district but the benefit of living in the

community. As a rural area, you have to "advertise the entire package in a positive light"

suggested one teacher.

Once the applicant pool has been created, the employment process continues with

candidate assessment and selection. As described earlier, administrators were more favorable

than teachers with respect to their district's selection efforts. Further, northern school districts

were slightly less favorable than southern school districts on the same topic. Several study

participants acknowledged the importance of selection related activities to their district's

success in serving students, a claim expressed by the following administrator:

> *The most important thing you can do as an administrator is to find the best possible people to put in front of those kids - that's it, everything else is ancillary. Who is the best possible teacher you can put in front of those kids? Who is the best possible person who can drive that bus? Who is the best possible person to be a food nutrition worker? Our people understand this and they have also come to understand the importance of [having clear and current] job descriptions in this process.*

This last point about job descriptions and their importance deserves special attention because

it surfaced in other district discussions related to, for example, human resource planning,

evaluation, professional learning, and compensation. One administrator shared the importance

placed on job descriptions by their district as well as the rigorous process required to get and

keep them current:

> *We were finding that many of our people didn't have a job description and even if they did, they had never seen it before. So, we've gone through an excruciatingly ugly long process of rewriting job descriptions for every position that we have. It's been a three-year process and we asked every employee to fill out [a questionnaire] and we did it on professional development time during the workday so they knew this wasn't something to do on their own time. We told them why we were doing it and gave them time to get it done - there was*

a lot of resistance… we have worked with the union on this and all of the job descriptions have gone through the Personnel Committee and been approved by the Board.

In addition to job descriptions, several other comments were shared regarding hiring, many highlighting the need for a more formal and inclusive selection process. Suggestions included doing a better job of integrating and aligning key HCM functions such as employment, evaluation and professional growth activities, and establishing a more prescribed selection process that utilizes a rubric to rate candidates and a standardized interview protocol for all applicants. Another suggestion included expanding the district's reference checking policy to include reaching out to pre-service professors to gather their perspective on a candidate's fit for the position. Several comments endorsed use of 'job exercises' to evaluate candidates, as shared by this teacher:

They [the district] could require prospective employees to provide lesson plans. They could also have them implement the lesson plan to a small group of students. How a person interacts with students says a lot about a teacher.

Engaging teachers more actively in the selection process was also cited as important by several study participants, including this comment made by an administrator suggesting use of a hiring team of teachers as a way to sell the benefits of the position to candidates.

…all of my interviews include everybody on the team. If they're going to join a teaching team, I want the teaching team members there to talk about their team, their philosophy, the innovative things they're doing on the team, how they have and how they will work together, and I think that helps to sell the position. It shows what kind of school we are – you're not going to be in a silo but rather working within a community of people who are invested because there they have the same goal, whether that's on a three or four person teaching team or that's across the whole school. If we can sell that in the interview - and we're trying to sell ourselves to them as much as they are to us – it gives us an advantage especially given we have to compete [for talent] with other districts. Although we pay fairly well in this district, we're not the highest paying district. Although we have a good benefits package, we don't have the best benefits package, so we have to sell the other things. And

quality of life and quality of experience for a candidate is really important, so I want them to experience that, in the interview process and that's where I think we can do our best selling.

Regarding new teacher supports, as previously noted, administrators were more favorable than teachers and northern school districts were more favorable than southern school districts on this topic. Similar to participant responses related to HRP, comments regarding new teacher supports varied markedly by district. In some districts, respondents were very critical of the mentoring program currently in place. Whereas in other districts, the response was quite the opposite regarding resources and supports made available to new teachers, a sentiment shared by the following teacher:

Our district does a great job with training, providing materials, the mentors are trained well, and they do a great job at meeting as a team to discuss the new employee.

There were also suggestions made by several study participants for ways in which their district could strengthen new employee support through, for example, clearer job descriptions, a more robust orientation program, and greater consistency and accountability with regard to mentoring new teachers. The job description is an important source of information about the position according to the comments and if written well, could help to communicate more clearly to new hires their role responsibilities and performance expectations.   This sentiment concerning job descriptions is captured in the following comment by an administrator from a southern district:

Recruitment is not the issue as we often have many candidates to choose from. The downfall comes in the communication of what is expected of the new hire. I feel job descriptions could be explained more thoroughly and expectations clearly established.

Many administrators responding to the question about new hire support emphasized the need

for a more "comprehensive and planned orientation experience" for new teachers. Ensuring

consistency across schools in the orientation of new employees was a common theme. To this

point, one administrator offered the following observation:

> *I think in some schools the support is strong, but it is not the same K-12. We need a specific orientation day for new hires and ways to keep them connected throughout the year. They get thrown into the mix and hopefully other teachers or administrators help when they have time.*

Teachers generally agreed with the need for more formal, structured orientation and

mentoring programs in their district. One study participant shared their experience as a new

teacher in their district which reflected an absence of a formal orientation and job descriptions

that were woefully inadequate:

> *One thing that stood out to me when I got hired was that there was no new employee orientation day. Also, looking at the district website, the job description for a specific teaching position is minimal. There are no core competencies listed that I can see.*

Suggestions for how orientation and mentoring programs could be improved were plentiful

across both regions. Regarding orientation, one teacher shared the importance of getting to

know staff and school community members:

> *I think that one support would be to have an orientation meet-and-greet evening with just staff and perhaps school board members that is more than an introduction on the first day of school, which is fleeting at best... I think it is an important benefit to know the names and faces of colleagues before being thrown into teaching. This is important not only to new staff but also existing staff.*

Another teacher echoed this same sentiment regarding the importance of getting to know one

another as a new hire in addition to the importance of learning the district's professional

expectations and culture:

> *[The district should provide] more training and orientation for new teachers, more opportunities for new teachers to meet and collaborate with other teachers, make sure new teachers understand all of the policies and procedures of the school and are integrated into the school culture.*

In terms of items that should be covered in a new teacher orientation, there were several

suggestions that included, for example, the "hidden curricula" – building-based information,

grading protocols, standard operating procedures, evaluation and data tracking expectations,

and professional growth opportunities. There were also suggestions related to having a

mechanism in place for checking-in regularly with new teachers to solicit their feedback on

what is going well and what is needed. In addition, introducing new hires to the community was

cited as an important ingredient to a successful new hire orientation experience. An

administrator described the value their district places on providing new hires with tours of the

district and community:

> *One of the parts I love the most and maybe because it's the part that I contribute the most to is the bus tour of the district. You know it's silly, but I think it's a really nice opportunity for new staff to see just how far reaching our district is with two towns. We're pretty spread out across two beautiful towns and the tour just gives them an opportunity to see how big and expansive we are and to get a visual of both the mansions as well as those homes that are falling apart – it is really representative of the kiddos that come to us from a lot of different backgrounds and it's just sort of a visual for them to see that really is the case.*

Regarding mentoring programs for new teachers, there were several comments across

districts in both regions about how the program is working currently along with aspects which

could be improved. At one end of the spectrum, there were programs being implemented with

reasonable success. At the other end, there were programs being implemented inconsistently at best, insufficient at worst as characterized by one administrator:

> *We don't really have much of a mentoring program, it's very thin. We just don't have enough bodies to really cover the need. And that's a challenge and I hate saying that, I mean it's awful to say, but it is also a reality of where we're at - so that's hard.*

Study participants described ways in which their mentoring program could be improved. Improvement opportunities cited included, for example, formalizing the process used to select and train mentors, communicating mentorship expectations more clearly, and holding mentors accountable for performing the role and meeting expectations with fidelity. One teacher suggested that the choice they make in assigning mentors is "questionable," sometimes based on friendships rather than subject area and/or grade level. Another teacher argued that mentorship assignments should be "outside the grade level" so that more relationships could be built and new hire supports expanded beyond the team. And another suggestion concerned the timing of assigning mentors, advocating for doing so before the school year begins. With respect to expectations and accountability of mentors, several comments zeroed-in on the need for clearer goals and standards and use of a checklist to make sure key items get covered consistently by all mentors. In addition, comments reflected a desire for mentors to be required to meet with their mentee at least weekly. Other suggestions focused on increasing the mentor's responsibilities and removing some teaching responsibilities in order to allow for more in-class observations and follow-on discussions with mentees. With respect to training and support for mentors, suggestions included allowing time during the school day for mentors and mentees to meet and collecting feedback from mentees regularly to inform improvement

opportunities and professional development of mentees and mentors. The issue of time was a

common theme across all districts, as described by one teacher:

It's hard because they put a lot of restrictions on you like if you're going to get paid to do it, it has to be after school - you can't meet during your prep time if you want to get paid for it. And they require you to do observations, but then expect you to use your prep time to do it which is kind of a deterrent to being a mentor. There's not a lot of perks to being the mentor because the district. doesn't want to pay you for your time if you've used any during the school day.

Employment related activities are being performed with varying degrees of effectiveness

depending on the district. It appeared from the interviews and focus group sessions that districts which

are more effective at human resource planning are the same districts with more formalized processes in

place for recruitment, selection, and new hire support. Regardless, study participants from all four

districts shared ideas on ways in which their district could improve employment functions. These

included, for example, strengthening ties with colleges and universities and marketing the

district's place-based advantages such as small class sizes, collegiality, and community feel.

Establishing a strong recruiting base for teaching positions by providing aspiring teachers (e.g.,

education technicians, pre-service teachers, etc.) with clinically-rich training was another area

of opportunity to strengthen recruitment efforts.

With respect to selection, formalizing the hiring process, making it more inclusive,

training participants on the selection process, and introducing candidate exercises were ideas

aimed at improving hiring decisions. With regard to improving support to new teachers,

suggestions included providing more clear and comprehensive job descriptions, more helpful

and robust orientation programs, and uniform expectations and accountability for mentors and

mentees.

Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth – Program Design, Measurement,

Professional Learning and Growth

As noted earlier, administrators were more favorable than teachers in their response to

questions related to their district's performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG)

program. Further, northern school districts were more favorable than southern school districts

on this same topic. Participants from across the state had much to share regarding what is

going well and/or could be improved with regard to PEPG. A majority of comments centered

around program design and administration, performance measurement, program training and

calibration, and supports for professional learning. Like any major human capital management

program, PEPG could benefit from regular, ongoing review to continually refine its many

program components, a sentiment shared by this administrator:

> *The PEPG system in our district is well designed and, when implemented appropriately,*
> *provides an opportunity for reflection and access to professional development and growth. I*
> *do think that a comprehensive review of the system at the Steering Committee level could be*
> *productive.*

The need for continual review and refinement of the program was a view shared by several

teachers as well, this one suggesting that their PEPG program had been overbuilt and as a result

is ineffectual in meeting its intended objectives:

> *Our process is cumbersome and doesn't align to any school-wide rubric that helps us as*
> *teachers assess whether we are meeting the goals needed for our specific schools. We also*
> *engage in this huge process yearly, with new goals each year and hours and hours of goal*
> *setting, writing up how we will collect data, etc. None of it is standardized from one teacher*
> *to the next. I think if we redesigned the process (teachers and administrators together) and*
> *made it more manageable, measurable and connected to the mission and vision of our*
> *school(s) it would be a more valuable tool.*

There is so many insights and ideas packed into this single comment – lack of alignment, excessive time required to create and monitor goals, inconsistency in implementation, etc. - much of which was reflected in feedback from other study participants. Teachers also remarked on the use of "cookie cutter" like checklists in their PEPG program and how this requirement stands in the way of authentic practice improvement conversations and meaningful goal-setting discussions. Another common complaint cited by both teachers and administrators concerned competing priorities and insufficient time to carry-out the many components of the PEPG program, i.e., conducting observations, conferencing and coaching with teachers, and measuring and monitoring data. This concern was reflected in the following remark from an administrator:

> *We need to make the TEPG [teacher evaluation and professional growth program] process more sustainable. Effective teachers should be on a two- to three-year cycle for evaluation, freeing administrators and those effective teachers up to be supports for the probationary teachers or those on plans.*

Another administrator offered a related point regarding the volume of evaluations required each year and inadequate time to get them done well:

> *Teachers are really, really, really busy people and principals are very busy people too. Oftentimes, what will happen with very busy people is, 'Oh, it's March, and I still have six evaluations to do, which means six pre-visits with the teachers, six visits to the classroom, six post visits. So, it becomes a rushed, compliance-driven process without room for real reflection. I encourage my administrators, especially those in the larger schools, to begin their evaluations earlier in August, September, or November… if you've got 10 teachers on your roster this year for the evaluation process do one a month and schedule it now and make it sacrosanct.*

Notwithstanding the challenges associated with time needed to administer the program, several administrators from the northern region cited the advantage of being small -

allowing them to get into the classrooms more often and have more time for thoughtful

conversations with teachers. This sentiment was shared by an administrator from northern

school:

> *Just about every day, I will go down and pop in and see how my teachers are doing...*
> *because we're small I can pop in for five minutes here and there. You know we're really big*
> *on relationships here.*

Regarding performance measurement, teachers more than administrators had the most

to share on this topic. Comments ranged from "teacher performance should never be tied to

student performance" to those who advocated broadening the scope of the student learning

objectives (SLO) measure used in the evaluation in order to minimize teachers "teaching to the

NWEA." Other suggestions for strengthening performance measurement in the evaluation

program included collecting surveys from students (including exiting seniors) to gauge the

quality and effectiveness of teaching and conducting more "informal, non-evaluative"

observations. The topic of targets was also raised, for example, the way in which goal level

performance is defined and calculated as offered by one teacher:

> *I think the district puts pressure on teachers to have all their students meet their growth*
> *goal. Some students come so close to meeting their growth goals missing it by 1 or 2 points,*
> *and this accomplishment counts against the teacher as (not met).   To me, this is still*
> *successful.*

Regarding PEPG program training and calibration, there were several comments related

to the need for more of both of these – training of all participants on the evaluation process

and calibration of raters - to ensure fidelity with program implementation. Teachers in

particular cited a need for regular training and material on the program that would help to

ensure that everyone in the district is on the same page with regard to program goals, standards, and expectations.

Regarding the professional development component of PEPG, administrators and teachers were in agreement that professional learning opportunities could be strengthened. Respondents shared that professional development should be informed by district priorities and also align with teacher needs and interests. This sentiment was shared by the following administrator who advocated for granting teachers more autonomy in determining their professional learning and growth needs:

> As an administrator it is hard to decide what each teacher or groups of teachers need. Teachers should have the freedom to choose what they need and to attend the training that they need the most. We are all in different places and need to be respected for this.

Utilizing in-house talents (e.g., long-term teachers) more effectively and planning professional development more thoughtfully and further in advance rather than rushing to "fill time" was a common theme raised by teachers. Also, as it relates to professional development, several teachers suggested not only that more time be dedicated to training but also a greater investment by the district in content area coaches and/or strategists to help strengthen instructional practice.

Similar to human resource planning and employment, performance evaluation and professional growth-related activities are being implemented with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the district. Overall, however, PEPG more than all human capital management domains except for recognition and reward, was perceived to be underperforming with respect to achieving its intended objective to support educator

professional growth and development. Many ideas for strengthening PEPG were shared by teachers and administrators across all four districts.

Among the key takeaways from discussions regarding evaluation and professional learning include the primary need for districts to reflect on and take steps to improve the technical and behavioral soundness (and do-ability) of their current PEPG program. This includes a careful, comprehensive, and collaborative review and refinement of data and measurements which underpin the quality and effectiveness of the program. Providing adequate training to all teachers covered by PEPG is essential, as is regular calibration training for all administrators. Training is also needed for teachers and administrators in how to give and receive feedback. All educators need to be held accountable for implementing their piece of PEPG with fidelity. Finally, every standard on the professional practice rubric against which teachers are being held accountable needs to be accompanied by relevant and meaningful professional learning resources and supports. The quality and effectiveness of these professional learning resources must be assessed regularly.

Recognition and Reward – Alignment, Competitiveness, Contingency Pay

As noted earlier, administrators were significantly more favorable than teachers with respect to their district's recognition and reward (i.e., compensation) program. Further, northern districts were more favorable than southern school districts on this same topic. Participants from across all four districts had much to share regarding what is going well and/or could be improved with regard to recognition and reward.

The topic of compensation came up earlier in this chapter regarding discussion of recruitment and selection of teachers. Many of the same sentiments were captured here under recognition and reward, including suggestions by administrators to engage in research on more modern methods for improving how and how well to pay teachers, and to collaborate more with teachers to strengthen collective bargaining agreements in ways that would attract more highly qualified individuals to their rural district. Teachers also had thoughts on this topic including the following suggestion by one teacher to be more intentional about aligning contracts more closely with the district's strategic intent:

Restructure the contracts with a business model that does not just copy those of surrounding towns. Focus on what the district's mission statement and values are and align with those.

Many teachers chimed in on the importance of becoming more competitive with compensation packages. Comments cited greater vulnerability of those smaller districts which are situated near larger and/or more affluent communities with pay and benefits that are much higher. The challenge and costs associated with teachers being lured away by these higher paying districts has been real and costly, as shared by one administrator:

Our pay scale is one of the lowest in the area and maybe throughout the state so we've been working hard on this and last year we made really good gains on elevating pay to be at least equal to the schools in our immediate area. What we were seeing was we were getting some really good young teachers and then after four or five years they would go to a neighboring school district, where they could make five to seven thousand more in salary. With a young family, you cannot blame them - we lost some good people that way.

A teacher shared a similar concern regarding low base pay and insufficient means within the district to fairly recognize and reward performance:

Our district salary is one of the lowest in our county. It is not a draw to the school and it keeps us from attracting decent staff. We have no recognition or reward system.

There were also comments offered by both administrators and teachers who favored increasing incentive opportunities for teaching performance. One teacher felt their district should offer monetary awards for overall school achievement and also personal achievement when teaching in difficult or academically [disadvantaged or failing] populations. There were many teachers in favor of expanding leadership opportunities for teachers granting not only stipends for this work but also a voice at the table when making decisions regarding teaching and learning at the district. Not all teachers voiced agreement with incentive pay - one shared a preference to reallocate current incentive funds to the professional development line item in the budget:

This is not a popular opinion, but I do not think giving a monetary award for student performance on SLOs [student learning objectives] is appropriate, for a variety of reasons. (And this is coming from someone who has benefited from this award.) I would prefer to see that money used in a different way. Perhaps the rate at which college courses are reimbursed could be increased, for example. Using that money to truly invest in teachers through professional growth, is a better way to ensure a workforce of highly effective teachers.

There was also feedback from teachers regarding the unintended consequences that could result from attaching money to performance. For example, focusing just on the money could result in teachers asking "how much?" before doing anything other than what is spelled out in their job description. Use of non-monetary alternatives to recognizing and rewarding performance was cited as a common practice by most districts, mostly because of budget constraints. Recognizing and celebrating successes of teachers to the rest of the staff and community was common strategy used by all districts, as shared by one teacher:

In a small district, I think it is hard to have many monetary incentives, but there are many ways that excellence can be recognized, celebrated and rewarded so that all staff are aware of the good work of their colleagues.

Recognition and reward programs are being implemented with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the district. Overall, however, this domain more than any other human capital management domain, is underperforming from the perspective of both administrators and teachers, mostly the latter. This domain received among the lowest ratings in the survey, especially as it relates to recognizing and rewarding teamwork and collaboration, rewarding teachers for performance, attracting and retaining effective teachers, and being competitive with the local market. Aligning compensation programs with the district's vision and mission, bolstering the competitiveness of total compensation, and exploring culturally compatible and financially sustainable alternative approaches to supplementing base salary with performance pay and/or stipends for taking on leadership roles – all are ways in which districts could strengthen the strategic orientation of its recognition and reward programs.

Community Engagement – Parents, Families, and Community

As previously noted, administrators were more favorable than teachers in response to questions related to their district's community engagement efforts. Further, northern districts were more favorable than southern school districts on this same topic. Overall, participants from across all four districts were positive about the state of community engagement, this despite the COVID-19 pandemic which was a formidable deterrent to volunteerism during the time of this study. Many respondents made a point of prefacing their remarks with the

disclaimer that their comments would reference pre-pandemic community engagement at the district.

Teachers and administrators agreed on the value of engaging parents, families, and community members in the work of the school. Several teachers and administrators suggested use of surveys to elicit community input and support. One teacher suggested that the district continue with parent surveys, invitations to district events, and use of traditional and electronic/social media to publicize district and school news. Others suggested the district take steps to engage a wider circle of community members given that it has been typically the same group of parents and a few community members that have participated in school discussions, decisions, and provided feedback. Engaging community members in the curriculum was another idea shared by teachers. Having volunteers be a more expected and invited part of the school day would helpful. And, utilizing families who have resources to share that connect to content (i.e., guest speakers, demonstrations, etc.) would be another meaningful way to engage the community in the mission of the school. This sentiment was shared by the following teacher:

> *It is disappointing that with so many local resources and farms…, that we don't have more of a food connection or community tie to our school through food programs or other learning opportunities. The community is also not part of the hiring process typically, and have no say on the staff in the buildings. Involving both families of students through volunteer and learning opportunities and the actual community organizations would dramatically increase the connectedness we're missing from the community, even though we have many ways the community can interact presently.*

Partnering with local organizations and businesses to demonstrate to students the importance and career-relevance of their education is something that should be prioritized, according to this teacher.

Community engagement could be strengthened in several ways based on input from study participants. This could include increased use of data and evidence to monitor school-community relations and be able to pinpoint those things that are going well and also could be improved at the district. Also, districts should be deliberate and proactive in fostering a collaborative school community where the school and staff and community interact regularly. This would afford community members an opportunity to better understand district-wide happenings, get involved in the work, and take an active role in the success of their schools.

School Environment – Data, Diversity, and Accountability

As stated earlier, administrators were significantly more favorable than teachers in their response to questions related to school environment. Further, northern districts were more favorable than southern school districts on this same topic. Greater access to and use of data and feedback to strengthen school culture and climate was reflected in comments made by several teachers and administrators, as shared by this teacher:

> *Regularly scheduling time throughout the school year to gather feedback on the culture of all the schools, from all the parties involved. Analyzing that feedback and making changes based on the information gathered is important.*

In addition to data use and feedback, diversity, school safety, and accountability for performance were also suggestions offered for improving climate and culture within districts. With regard to diversity, one administrator suggested they should strive to ensure that all staff

and students feel that school is a safe space to work and learn. In addition, one teacher

acknowledged the need in the district to continue their work on being inclusive, and also

warned of the dangers of labeling and tracking students at a young age:

> *With our town being so rural, there is a lot of room for improvement with inclusivity.*
> *Particularly with students of various races and ethnicities, but also with students who*
> *struggle with learning. It feels like students are often 'tracked' at an early grade and this*
> *impacts their opportunities to move ahead in their education when they've been labeled*
> *behind.*

Administrators raised the issue of safety in school, specifically bullying and the importance of

reviewing building and district-level policies to ensure they reflect district values and core

beliefs. Comments made by teachers echoed the sentiment around bullying, specifically, the

need to train educators on how to monitor and manage bullying and other civil rights violations

that occur in schools.

With respect to accountability, several teachers raised the importance of holding all

staff accountable for a positive and productive school environment. Comments from teachers

on this topic ranged from making sure all staff recognize and respect the excellence in each of

their colleagues to a need to "get rid" of those who do not want to improve or work positively

and collaboratively with colleagues, a sentiment reflected by this teacher:

> *Staff members that belittle, marginalize, put down or disregard other staff members*
> *demoralize a staff or an individual faster than just about anything. Expecting students to*
> *show respect for all of their teachers, their buildings and their peers is an equally important*
> *aspect to foster a positive school environment.*

School environment could be strengthened in several ways based on input from study

participants. At a minimum, this should include regular use of data and feedback to monitor

school climate and culture and be able to pinpoint aspects of the environment that are going well and also could be improved. The importance of ensuring equity and inclusion across the district was a common theme, including creating opportunities to engage staff regularly in discussions about how to create and maintain a fair, equitable, and inclusive environment that is free of bias. Additionally, districts should regularly assess their policies related to, for example, affirmative action, discrimination, workplace bullying, harassment, etc. to make sure they are consistent with the district's vision and core values. Further, reliable mechanisms are needed to ensure all staff are aware of and held accountable for adhering to organizational expectations as set out in their policies.

Summary

Overall findings generated from the mixed-methods approach and presented in this chapter helped to inform responses to each of the three research questions that frame the current study. With respect to research questions' one and two, the survey instrument administered to teachers and administrators was helpful in addressing both the efficacy of the eight HCM constructs in each district and also districts' ability to attract, develop, engage, and retain effective teachers. Summary statistics and analysis generated from the survey revealed favorable ratings across most of these constructs as well as significant opportunity for improvement across all of them. Qualitative data generated from interviews and focus groups corroborated survey findings and generated numerous ideas from teachers and administrators concerning those things that are going well currently and what could be improved with regard to strategic management of human capital in their districts.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Strategic management of human capital in schools is about integrating and aligning

every aspect of human resource policy and programing with district mission for purposes of

attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining a workforce of high-performing educators. It is a

crucial underutilized approach to helping districts deliver on their vision of equitable access

(Odden et al., 2011; Tran, 2015). A strategic process can help to ensure that organizations have

people in place at the right time to operate at optimal levels (Jacobson & Sowa, 2015). By

implementing HCM effectively, school districts can cultivate a high-quality workforce with the

core competencies required to be successful learning organizations (Bal, Bozkurt, & Ertemsir,

2014).   According to Tran (2015), however, human resource practices within the education

industry have not kept pace with advances in the human resource profession.

Guided by the conceptual framework below, the study sought answers to the following

three research questions:

1. To what degree is HCM in four rural districts in Maine being optimized?

2. How are these districts performing with regard to attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining classroom teachers?
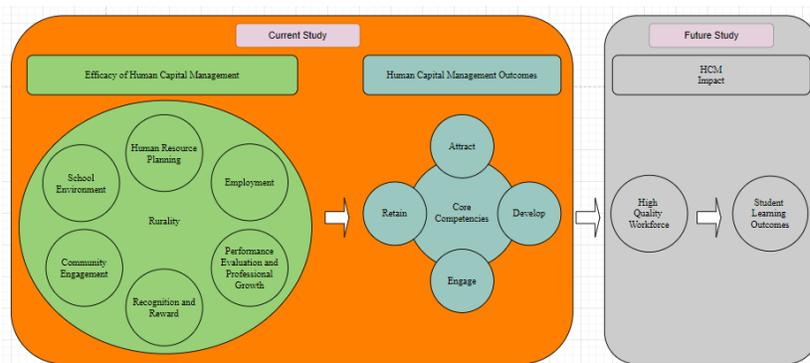
3. What are the implications of these findings for rural districts in this northern state and
    what opportunities exist to strengthen local HCM policy and programming and state-
    and regional-level support to districts?

Based on results presented in the previous chapter, three key themes emerged from the study. First, administrators across the four participating districts had significantly more positive views about HCM practices than did teachers. The second theme is that spatially, rural remote areas in northern Maine were significantly more positive about HCM practices in their school buildings. Third, there were many opportunities borne out by the data and corroborated through interviews, focus groups, and responses to open-ended survey items for strengthening HCM across districts that could inform new and/or more supportive policy and support. These three themes are discussed in further detail below.

Perceptions Differed by Position

Administrators were overall more favorable than teachers in their ratings on the state of human capital management in their respective district. This difference held true across all eight constructs, including human resource planning, recruitment, selection, new hire support, performance evaluation and professional growth, recognition and reward, community engagement, and school environment. These inter-positional differences in perception on matters related to HCM is a phenomenon also revealed in a prior MEPRI study (Mette, et al, 2019). This MEPRI study uncovered gaps in the way principals and teachers viewed their district's performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG) program, with principals having a significantly more positive view of PEPG than teachers.

Among the constructs in the current study which showed significant perception gaps between administrators and teachers included: human resource planning, recognition and reward, and school environment. Perception gaps related to PEPG were also noteworthy and are discussed below.

With regard to human resource planning, the gap was widest in two areas: 1) engaging in formal planning and budgeting processes; and 2) the district's effectiveness at prioritizing sources of high-quality teacher candidates. It is plausible that the root cause of each of these gaps comes from lack of awareness on the part of teachers (due to division of duties at the district) as to what is happening in this area. Among the potential strategies for closing this gap include improved communication, transparency, and involvement of teachers in the HRP process – all suggestions that surfaced from the qualitative analysis. Closing the perception gap on HRP through these and other strategies could result not only in building common understanding, awareness, and teamwork as it relates to advancing this crucial function, but ultimately result in a more sufficient and reliable pipeline of high-quality talent for all teaching positions in the district.

Concerning recognition and reward, the perception gap between administrators and teachers was widest in two areas: 1) the effectiveness of the district's compensation program at attracting and retaining effective teachers; and 2) the competitiveness of the district's compensation program (base pay, variable pay, and benefits) with the local market. These two items are inextricably linked, that is, in the absence of competitive pay, it is difficult for compensation to be viewed as an ally in attracting and retaining top talent. Further, regardless of how administrators view the competitiveness of teacher pay, if teachers feel as though their

compensation program does not attract and retain top talent, then it is that sentiment which should serve as a red flag and baseline for improvement.   The Maine legislature recently responded to this issue by raising the required minimum salary for classroom teaching positions to $40,000. This is a positive step, though it is too soon to know the effect that this change will have on teacher recruitment and retention in rural school districts. Other potential strategies for closing this gap could include exploring novel compensation strategies. As described in a white paper proposal to MDOE Commissioner Robert Hasson, Ed.D., (Milanowski & Harrison, 2017) strategies could include increasing teacher pay and moving teachers more quickly to pay rates competitive with comparable occupations and with the average teacher salary in the northern New England states; recognizing effective teaching by making performance a factor in base salary progression; establishing career levels to recognize and reward development of expertise, assuming leadership responsibilities, and consistent levels of highly effective performance; and providing variable pay opportunities for high-performing groups and individuals based on contributions to student achievement and collaborating to meet school or district goals (Milanowski & Harrison, 2017).

On the topic of school environment, there were significant gaps in four areas over which the district has influence: 1) fostering a collaborative culture in which teachers and leaders share ownership of a common instructional vision and student learning and growth; 2) creating a culture that reflects and values free and open expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs; 3) creating a physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe environment that promotes effective adult practice and student learning; and 4) existence of a culture in which students, adults, and the larger community demonstrate respect for diversity and equity. Arguably more important

than improving human resource planning or providing competitive compensation, taking immediate steps toward cultivating a positive and productive student- and staff-centered school environment is crucial to employee wellbeing and district success and should be a top priority. The large divide in perceptions that have been uncovered in this study on topics such as collaborative culture; shared vision of instruction; free and open expression of ideas; physical, emotional, and intellectual safety; and diversity and equity should be an area of further exploration in a future study.

Though the perception gap between administrators and teachers on the topic of PEPG was not statistically significant, it did reveal several weak points in a HCM program that should be serving as a powerful lever for communicating performance expectations and driving continual learning and growth. With regard to PEPG, the gap was widest in three areas: 1) the PEPG program's ability to fairly and accurately differentiate levels of instructional effectiveness in improving student learning outcomes; 2) the degree to which teachers receive regular, timely, and specific feedback on their instructional performance; and 3) regular training to all employees on the PEPG program and rubric. One could point to the latter (insufficient training in PEPG) as contributing to the former downstream issues related to rater reliability and feedback. A strategy aimed at strengthening performance measurement, feedback, program communication, and training as it relates to PEPG could be sufficient for closing the gap in each of these three crucial areas.

Whose perceptions are more important as it relates to HCM, those held by teachers or administrators? When it comes to human resource management, understanding employee perceptions of program efficacy are crucial to successful program implementation and

sustainability and will almost always trump program design. For example, district leaders could introduce a new compensation or evaluation or professional development program that is designed based on sound, research-based principles, but until the critical mass of teachers for whom it is intended to benefit truly understand and embrace the program, it will likely never be fully optimized. In the context of the current study, if the intent of the school district is to attract, develop, engage, and retain effective teachers by reorienting human capital management policy and programming to be more integrated, aligned, and effectual, then the perceptions held by teachers should be continually monitored to gauge the impact of every strategy (e.g., improvements to communication, collaboration, transparency, and program design) aimed at optimizing HCM.

Perceptions Differed by Region

Study participants from Region 1 (northern districts) were overall more favorable than Region 2 (southern districts) in their ratings on the state of human capital management in their respective districts. This difference held true across all but one of the eight constructs. (The only exception to this was with the Selection construct. In this case average ratings in Region 2 were slightly higher than Region 1.) The construct in the current study which showed significant perception gaps between the two regions was human resource planning. The HRP gap was widest on two items, including: 1) policies and practices that require or encourage current teachers to provide early notification of their intent to resign or retire; and 2) partnering with local higher education institutions to ensure a pipeline of high-quality teacher candidates. As discussed earlier, size of district appears to matter when it comes to ease of implementing HRP practices. The advantage of being a small district as it relates to HRP was borne out in survey

results and corroborated through interviews. Overall, Region 1 districts are much smaller than Region 2 in terms of staffing. The largest district in Region 1 has half the number of teachers (30) as that of the smallest district in Region 2 (67). Thus, it would stand to reason that with fewer teachers working together in a smaller space, Region 1 would have an easier time anticipating turnover and forecasting future staffing needs. Regarding partnerships with higher education, is Region 1's significantly higher ratings relative to Region 2 due to the fact that Region 1 is situated in an area of the state with just a single option (University of Maine at Presque Isle) for students seeking in-person post-secondary education preparation programs? Region 2 offers several four-year programs in education. This is an intriguing finding and worthy of further exploration in a future study.

These inter-regional differences in perception on matters related to HCM is a phenomenon revealed in a prior MEPRI study. This MEPRI study uncovered gaps in the way principals and teachers viewed their district's performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG) program, with "educators in smaller, more rural schools tending to be more positive about professional supports and feedback related to PEPG than in larger districts" (Mette, et al, 2019).

Widespread Opportunity for Improvement

Study results described in Chapter 4 reveal extensive opportunity to improve the strategic orientation of all eight human capital management constructs – a finding that holds true across both regions of the state. This finding is consistent with research that suggests the education industry has not kept pace with advances in the human resource profession (Tran,

2015). As such, there is not a lot of empirical research documenting the efficacy of strategic

human resources in education. There is, however, a study of recruitment strategies in New

York City that discovered a positive connection between these strategies, the quality of

teachers, and student achievement (Boyd, et al., 2008). And, as stated earlier, private sector

organizations have long benefited from strategic management of human capital (Lawler, 2008a,

2008b) - there is abundant evidence over the past 20 years not only of human resource

management making its way onto the strategic agendas of private sector organizations, but

also empirical connections between strategic HCM practices and organizational performance in

private sector organizations. (e.g., Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Ulrich, 2001;

Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, & Allen, 2005). Also, there is a growing body of research

conducted by MEPRI that creates a compelling case for modernizing and making more effectual

the management of human resources in Maine districts. This research focuses on, for example,

staffing patterns in Maine's schools, recruitment and retention challenges across rural districts,

and stakeholder perceptions of key HCM components such as performance evaluation and

professional growth programs (Morris & Johnson, 2018; Fairman, et al, 2019; Mette, et al,

2019; Johnson, et al, 2020). The current study and envisioned future studies by this investigator

aim to build on and extend this research in an effort to strengthen support to rural districts that

elect to invest in a more strategic approach to human capital policy and programming.

For these school districts that seek to more successfully attract, develop, engage, and

retain effective teachers, they will need to continually monitor and strive to reach the upper

limit of effectiveness with regard to strategic HCM policy and programming across all six

domains. For this current study, the upper limit of effectiveness represents 'strongly agree'

(level 4.0) on the 4-point survey rating scale. Strategic HCM improvement opportunity is measured by taking the difference between this upper limit (optimal level) and the current average actual rating for each of the 46 surveyed items. In this study, improvement opportunity (or gap) ranged from a low of .664 under the new teacher support construct (the effectiveness with which the district matches beginning teachers with an experienced mentor) to a high of 1.82 under the selection construct (final candidates at the district provide writing samples, sample lesson plans, and demonstrate teaching ability). Seventy-eight percent (78%) or 36 of the 46 HCM survey items had a gap of greater than 1.0, representing substantial improvement opportunity. Examples of HCM optimization strategies for narrowing gaps in each domain include: partnering with local higher education institutions to ensure a pipeline of high-quality teacher candidates (HRP); establishing a strong recruiting base for teaching positions by providing aspiring teachers (e.g., education technicians, pre-service teachers, etc.) with clinically-rich training (recruitment); requiring final candidates for teaching positions to provide writing samples, sample lesson plans and demonstrate teaching ability (selection); matching each beginning teacher with a veteran mentor teacher for on-going, regular support (new hire support); providing instructional coaching to meet the individual needs of teachers (PEPG); ensuring the district's compensation program recognizes and rewards teamwork and collaboration (recognition and reward); monitoring school-community relations with evidence and data (community engagement); and gathering and analyzing data on culture, climate, and/or working conditions in tandem with effectiveness data to inform school improvement efforts (school environment). Investing in these and other strategies aimed at closing the HCM optimization gaps represent an opportunity for rural districts to compete with larger, more

affluent communities and more effectively plan for and attract, develop, engage, and retain a high-quality workforce capable of delivering consistently high-quality instruction and whole child support to all students.

In summary, the study revealed three key themes: 1) District and building administrators were more favorable in their ratings of HCM practices in their district than were teachers; 2) Educators from northern Maine districts were more favorable in their ratings of HCM than their colleagues in the southern part of the state; and 3) Across all HCM constructs, there is widespread opportunity for improving HCM policy and programming to strengthen the district's ability to attract, develop, engage, and retain effective teachers. Each of these themes was supported by survey data and corroborated by feedback generated through interviews, focus groups and responses to open ended questions on the survey. These findings along with the study methodology itself have implications for scholarly practitioner practice, policy, and research.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the efficacy of human capital management in a rural northern state. Specifically, to build-on current and emerging research in the field of human resources and uncover ways in which rural districts could better leverage their unique advantages (e.g., smaller classroom sizes, more favorable student-teacher ratios, more manageable span of control, tight-knit community, supportive school environment, etc.) and minimize their place-based challenges (e.g., inadequate facilities, increased (or severely reduced) class sizes, lack of quality learning materials, lack of community amenities, geographic and professional isolation, higher poverty rates, etc.) by investing in a more modern and strategic approach to managing their most valuable asset, human resources.   This intent is reflected in the conceptual framework and theory of action underpinning the study. That is, if rural districts could design and implement their human capital management programs with strategic intent and sufficient proficiency where programs are aligned to clearly defined standards for students and core competencies for teachers that are based on student learning outcomes, then they will be in the strongest position possible to attract, develop, engage, and retain a workforce of high performing teachers who are connected in purpose, teamed in their efforts, and motivated to advance and excel in achieving highest quality instruction and whole-child support for all students, all the time (adapted from *Maine Schools for Excellence* vision, 2011).

The study gauged the ability of rural districts to attract, develop, engage, and retain effective teachers. Results on these measures were largely favorable across both regions of the

state. The study also uncovered the degree to which teachers and administrators across both regions perceive that HCM in their district is happening with strategic intent and sufficient proficiency. Findings from this second strand were also overall favorable and three key themes emerged. First, administrators across participating districts had significantly more positive views about HCM practices than did teachers. This finding highlights a need to improve communication, transparency, and engagement with regard to HCM programs. The second finding was that spatially, small rural districts in remote areas of the state were significantly more positive about HCM practices in their school buildings. For a rural state like Maine, this has important implications for future research that can likely be best answered with quantitative and qualitative studies to analyze this phenomenon more broadly. Third, despite 'statistically favorable' ratings across most of the HCM constructs, the study revealed significant opportunity for improvement across *all* eight constructs. Further, responses generated by study participants regarding specific ways in which HCM could be improved were abundant. These improvement ideas together with broader study findings have implications for scholarly practitioner practice, policy, and future research.

Implications for Scholarly Practitioner Practice – Modernize, Educate, Engage

For scholarly practitioners working in education, there is nothing more important than hiring the right people and providing them with working conditions that enable them to reach their highest potential. Like any organization, schools are populated with a variety of people and personalities, each equipped with a bundle of knowledge, skills, abilities, backgrounds, and dispositions. They come to work each day accompanied by their unique perspectives and motivations.   Success in achieving school goals hinges largely on the quality of systems in place

throughout the district to effectively align dissimilar interests and motivations with the school's

mission – signaling the right messages, reinforcing the right behaviors, recognizing the right

outcomes – all in an effort to synergize and supercharge individual and school performance.

Based on research in the area of human capital management together with findings from the

current study, rural schools could benefit from modernizing their HCM policy and programs to

ensure greater internal consistency (horizontal fit) and congruence with school vision, mission,

strategies, and goals (vertical fit). Specific strategies for aligning and optimizing HCM were

discussed in the previous chapter. Under the right conditions and supported with sufficient

funding and outside expertise, districts could be better able to deliver on these strategies and

reap the benefits of a well-orchestrated and aligned configuration of HCM policies and

programs.

Higher education will need to play an important role in this effort, helping to build and

maintain awareness of what strategic HCM means and its value proposition for schools.

Introducing and/or expanding coursework and curricula into educator preparation programs

that incorporates a stronger and more strategic managerial focus will be an important step. The

education of current and future teachers and administrators on the importance of strategic

human capital management and what it looks like when implemented with fidelity will provide

the needed know-how and capacity for districts to begin transforming their current compliance-

oriented HCM policies and practices into something more supportive of strategic intent.

Awareness and capacity building is but a first step and must be accompanied by a genuine

willingness and commitment by the district to change. HCM change can be difficult and time-

consuming and require widespread ownership, involvement, and accountability to be

successful. Teachers and administrators are busy professionals with little extra time for non-instructional work or added responsibilities, especially when that work is perceived as non-value added. The fact that educators have been bombarded over the past two decades with several new and time-consuming initiatives, many of which have come and gone with perceived questionable residual value, has contributed to a sense of cynicism and reluctance to embrace and fully commit the time and mindshare needed to implement complex change well. Success with modernizing HCM will require not only educator time and attention, but also trust. In Maine's highly unionized school environment, involvement by the Maine Education Association (and other associations) and their buy-in with this work will be crucial to its critical mass acceptance and ultimate institutionalization. Equally important will be a willingness among district leaders to break through the common mindset of "if it's not broken, no need to fix it" and allocate the necessary time, resources, and expectations to continually reflect and improve in the service of students, staff, and the district. Another challenge that could stand in the way of progress in making HCM more strategic within districts, is the role and unchecked influence that school law firms *may* have in collective bargaining and policy-making as it relates to human capital management. Strategic human capital management thinking and sound behaviorally based programming can unintentionally take a back seat or be altogether missed when the lens for assessing organizational effectiveness needs and priorities is solely a legal one.

In summary, the implications of this current study to scholarly practitioner practice include, for example:

- Modernizing human resource management. Scholarly practitioners need to take an active role in the transformation of their HCM policy and programs. This work

begins by assessing the degree to which current human resource management policy and programs are integrated and aligned. Do individual components that make up the district's bundle of HCM practices reinforce the right behaviors and results, and create a healthy dose of tension? Are each of these components in sync with one another and anchored by the instructional vision of the district? How is HCM effectiveness being measured and monitored?

- Educating current and prospective teachers and leaders. Scholarly practitioners in partnership with teacher and school leadership preparation programs need to take an active role in updating program curricula with case-study rich coursework covering all areas of strategic human capital management in private and public enterprises – human resource planning, employment (recruitment, selection, onboarding, mentoring), performance evaluation, professional growth, recognition and reward, community engagement, and school environment.

- Engaging all stakeholders in the success of the district. Scholarly practitioners need to prioritize making and maintaining positive connections with all key stakeholders (i.e., district staff, school board, teacher association, principal association, superintendent association, board association, parents and families, local business, higher education, state agencies and departments, school law firms, legislators, regional educational laboratories, etc.) for purposes of building awareness of strategic HCM, aligning interests among stakeholder groups, and working together to advance HCM work and working conditions within the district.

Implications for Policy – People, Performance, Support

Outdated, ill-conceived, and/or non-existent policies related to people, performance, and support can also hinder efforts toward becoming more strategic with HCM. At the local level, examples of restrictive policies include requiring forced placement of staff, internal transfer policies that limit recruitment strategies aimed at diversifying the workforce, delayed hiring timelines, and/or budget or data cycles that do not line up well with human resource planning. Also, teachers may not be equitably placed across the district in part due to insufficient incentives to teach in high need schools. Further, incentive programs and other equity- and behaviorally-based programming designed to reinforce district mission and goals can sometimes be at odds with egalitarian principles – equality for all – that are espoused by unions and underpin their terms of engagement.

Data and measurement are a cornerstone of any high performing school district. In the absence of valid and reliable measures, schools can neither fully understand nor make informed improvements to organizational performance and/or student learning strategies and outcomes. State and local policy is needed that not only shines bright light on the importance of data and measurement, but also establishes uniform systems, standards, and procedures regarding its use in decision-making. Though there is no paucity of data in most school districts, what is oftentimes lacking is timely access to relevant and meaningful data and measures, along with clear guidelines about what data are most important and which measures lead to student achievement. Further, as it relates to data, rural schools are often faced with small data sets which can restrict district access to important information and negatively affect reliability of

results. In this case, a workaround is needed to ensure districts have equal access to all relevant data needed to manage and continually improve school operations.

State level policy is needed that holds districts accountable for implementing strategic HCM across all its domains and more importantly provides targeted resourcing and support to ensure the HCM work is happening with fidelity. Neither teachers, administrators, nor schools are equipped with the expert knowledge, resources, or time to make this happen on their own, which is what makes accessing legal counsel for human resource related problem solving so alluring. It allows district boards and educators to characterize problems in ways that call for straightforward, consistent, timely, and practical solutions. Though legal solutions can be convenient, competent, and efficient - which has most often been this researcher's experience - they can also be costly and a quick fix to a problem with deeper, more systemic roots. Not all human resource management issues are straightforward, nor do they always lend themselves to universal, one-size-fits-all solutions. Nor should districts immediately look to imitate their competition out of convenience, rather they might be better served considering ways in which they could benefit from nuanced HCM policy and programming that draws on their unique place-based advantages, an approach which could yield competitive advantage with staffing and performance.

Moving toward a more strategic HCM orientation will require time and effort and seeing things not only through a legal lens, but also from an equity and organizational effectiveness perspective.   The legislature should consider introducing and/or modifying HCM related educational policy in ways that level the playing field for districts across the state as well as make it more doable for MDOE to support the success of policy implementation. For example,

the legislature should revisit the idea of a statewide teacher contract which was proposed in

2017 with a goal to implement statewide collective bargaining for teachers in a way that

requires: a) the plan be designed to permit school administrative units to maintain local control

and direction of teacher employment; b) to include for all public school teachers a uniform

compensation system that is based upon performance results that are competitive and fair

throughout the State; and c) to maximize opportunities for certain economies of scale through

the statewide negotiation of teachers' benefits, including, but not limited to, health insurance.

(LD 864, An Act to Provide a Statewide Contract for School Teachers, 2017). A statewide

contract would enable rural districts to compete more fairly with wealthier districts in the state

for top teaching talent.

Another state policy that should be revisited by the legislature is LD1858, *Act to Ensure*

Effective Teaching and School Leadership (Title 20-A: Education, Chapter 508: Educator

Effectiveness, 2012) which gives flexibility and choice to districts with regard to certain features

within their PEPG programs. Currently, districts can choose from among a list of professional

practice standards against which teachers and principals are observed and held accountable

(e.g., National Board from Professional Teaching Standards, Charlotte Danielson's Framework

for Teaching, The Marzano Art and Science of Teaching Framework, Kim Marshall Teaching

Evaluation Rubrics, etc.). In addition to having discretion over which professional practice

standards will be used, districts can also select whatever additional measures they would like to

use for assessing teacher and principal effectiveness along with the priority weight attached to

each. Districts are also given choice as to how they train staff on the system and how they train

raters on the rubric to minimize rater drift and ensure interrater reliability across the district.

Despite the appeal of local choice on this topic, it is simply not working. Findings from the

current study along with anecdotal evidence from this investigator's work with several rural

districts in Maine since 2012, suggest that most district evaluation programs are currently

overbuilt, unrealistic in terms of process and expectations, and as a result ineffectual in

delivering on their intended benefit to staff and students. As an alternative, the State should

consider selecting a single framework for use by all districts and then commit to providing

timely and meaningful technical support and training on all aspects of the evaluation program

(e.g., assessment, observation, training, etc.) This support could be delivered, for example,

through regional service centers equipped to administer HCM needs assessments and on-

demand human capital management expertise. This state sponsored evaluation program

support could extend to all HCM programming. Using results from the current study, the State

could assist districts with, for example, strengthening recruitment strategies, forging stronger

ties with higher education, building more robust hiring protocols, training administrators (and

others) on candidate selection processes, improving new hire supports, streamlining evaluation

program training, providing master scored videos for use in ongoing evaluator calibration and

training, developing learning modules linked to professional practice standards, providing more

competitive compensation strategies, creating teacher leadership roles that support teaching

and learning, and providing outsourced administration of climate, culture, and/or community

engagement surveys. The State could further leverage their investment in this work by

developing and maintaining a clearinghouse of HCM best practices for use by districts in their

continual improvement efforts. The opportunities available to the State for supporting the

success of this work are endless, as is the return to all stakeholders. Districts would benefit

from HCM policy and programs that are integrated, aligned, and coherent. The State would benefit from serving as a reliable, go-to source for human capital management expertise and solutions – providing a hope giving framework to rural districts that directly support everyone's goal of ensuring equitable access to excellent instruction for all students.   In addition to providing technical support and solutions, the State should require and fund through the Essential Programs and Services formula, dedicated human resource management personnel in each district (based on industry ratios) accompanied by automated systems to support the full spectrum of human capital management.

In summary, the implications of this current study to local and state policy include, for example:

- People related policy. In light of the core competencies needed to meet the near- and longer-term goals of school districts, local and state policymakers should reimagine ways in which policy could be developed and/or enhanced to accelerate the success of school staff and students. At the local level, this work would require inventorying and assessing current human resource related policy (e.g., Section G: Personnel), programs, and procedures to ensure alignment with district goals (e.g., transfer policies, hiring rules, budget timelines, incentive programs). At the state level, this work could begin by identifying current educational policy related to identified high-leverage HCM programs such as teacher recruitment and selection, mentoring, evaluation, professional learning, compensation, and school environment and then making enhancements to those policies in ways that create a

level playing field across all districts (rural and urban) and allow for uniform HCM

resources and technical support.

- Performance data and feedback. Data, measurement, and regular feedback are

  essential ingredients to any high performing organization. Maine should resist the

  temptation to switch to a new and different measurement system every few years

  and commit to staying the course with NWEA (or other assessment deemed more

  appropriate). Maine should also require and support multiple administrations of

  this state assessment (spring, winter, fall) for use by all districts to inform continual

  learning and growth of students. The State should develop a clearinghouse of valid

  and reliable assessments for content areas not covered by the state assessment. The

  State should also encourage districts to make the most of this investment in data to

  inform and support educator effectiveness. In addition to content-area

  assessments, the state should adapt or adopt a uniform school climate and culture

  assessment (reflecting input from students, staff, parents and families) and for the

  same reasons cited above, require districts to administer the assessment regularly

  for purposes of informing, norming, and supporting continual organizational

  effectiveness and student learning.

- Supports for rural districts. In addition to supporting consistent use of data,

  measurement, and feedback by all districts, the State should assess the degree to

  which all HCM related policy (e.g., related to planning, employment, performance

  evaluation, professional learning, compensation, school environment) can be made

  more uniform in order for MDOE to support districts more effectively with technical

assistance and training. Funding for dedicated human resource management expertise and automated systems to support the work should be included in the Essential Programs and Services formula.

Implications for Future Research – Methodology, MEPRI, Clearinghouse

The current study set out to benefit rural districts in several ways: 1) by defining what is meant by strategic management of human capital in the context of rurality, how it differs from traditional compliance-oriented human resource practices, and offering a framework that shows the crucial connections between and among HCM domains, outcomes, and impact; 2) by providing a means for rural districts to assess the degree to which their own HCM practices are strategically oriented; 3) using current study results as comparison data to help inform a path forward for staging improvements to human capital management policy and programming; and 4) by highlighting the important role that local and state policymakers will need to play in supporting this work on behalf of rural school staff, students, and community.

There are several opportunities to build-on and improve this initial study of strategic HCM in rural education. These include, for example, engaging experts in the field, including psychometricians, to strengthen SMHC study methodology, survey design, and interview protocols. The 46 construct-related survey items need further vetting to ensure a parallel structure while also minimizing unnecessary redundancy that may exist currently within and across constructs. The survey instrument should also be reviewed and refined as needed to ensure that each item reflects a valid standard of 'strategic HCM orientation' for each construct and all essential standards are represented. Additional survey items should be included to

supplement and strengthen HCM outcome measures. The interview protocol should be reviewed and refined as needed to ensure the right balance between formality for consistency and flexibility for probing more deeply into constructs as needed.

The State could benefit from engaging MEPRI and/or other researchers in improving the methodology as well as extending the current study to uncover and more fully understand the strength of connections and interaction effects between and among the eight HCM constructs, four HCM outcomes, educator effectiveness, and student learning – all in the context of rurality. The study scope should be expanded to include a more representative sampling of rural (and non-rural) districts in and outside of Maine to test generalizability of the methodology and results.

Finally, the State could benefit from a single clearinghouse of research related to strategic human capital management. A go-to repository for researchers, scholarly practitioners, policymakers, district staff, and others interested in learning about and contributing to enhancing educator effectiveness and equitable access to excellent education for all students in Maine.

In summary, the implications of this current study to future research include, for example:

- Improve Methodology. Review and strengthen the HCM Rural Schools Survey instrument and interview protocol and add it to the State's central clearinghouse of HCM research and tools.

- Engage MEPRI. Tap into the expertise of Maine's team of talented educational researchers to build-on and improve the conceptual framework, study methodology, and extend the work to all rural districts across the state.

- Central Clearinghouse. The MDOE should create on their website a central repository of research, tools, and lessons learned related to strategic HCM and make it accessible to all.

Conclusions

Every child regardless of where in Maine they live deserves consistent access to excellent educators, and every educator regardless of place deserves consistent access to the resources, supports, and working conditions needed to deliver excellent instruction and social-emotional support to every child. Strategic management of human capital in schools is about integrating and aligning every aspect of human resource policy and programing with district vision and values for the purpose of attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining a workforce of high-performing educators. It is not a solution for all challenges associated with rurality, yet, it is a crucial underutilized way to help districts minimize staffing challenges and realize the greatest return on investment in human resources for the benefit of students, staff, and community. This study sought to draw attention not only to current and emerging research related to strategic human capital management but more importantly to shine light on the opportunity that exists in rural districts to improve the efficacy of their people-related policy and programs. Only when human capital management is happening with strategic intent, sufficient resourcing, and fidelity should the public be satisfied that our educational leaders and policymakers are doing everything possible within their spheres of influence people-wise to

ensure excellent instruction and whole-child support for all students. For rural districts,

strategic management of human capital should sit alongside educational leaders, classroom

teachers, and education preparation programs as rural praxis – each through their own means

"acknowledging the inherent value of rural places while simultaneously striving to 'improve'

them" (Azano, Biddle, 2019).

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APPENDIX A: HCM RURAL SCHOOLS SURVEY
[Survey Items Adapted from Colorado DOE Healthy Human Capital Survey]

Thank you for taking time to participate in this survey. Your responses will be held in strict confidence. Only the researcher who is computing the summary information will see your survey. The survey is part of a research study aimed at assessing human capital management practices in rural school districts. Aggregate results from this study will be shared (without attribution) with your district.

A few important items before you begin:

- The survey will close on Friday, March xx, 5 pm ET
- The survey contains 17 item categories and should take 15+/- minutes to complete.
- Since Qualtrics automatically saves your responses, you do not need to complete the entire survey in a single session, however, you must return to the same computer.

Thank you again for participating in this study. As a benefit for taking the survey, your name will be included with others from your district in a **random drawing for a $25 Amazon gift card**. Three (3) winners from your district will be chosen at the conclusion of the study.

Please feel free to contact me should you have questions.

Sincerely,

Scott A. Harrison
Doctoral Candidate
Education Leadership Program
University of Main

Part A: Demographic Information

Q1	What is your current job title?
	- District Administrator - Building Administrator - Classroom Teacher
Q2	What grade level do you teach? Please select all that apply.
	- Early childhood (pre-K/K) - Early elementary (grades 1-2) - Upper elementary (grades 3-5) - Middle school (grades 6-8) - High school (grades 9-12) - Adult education
Q3	How many years have you worked at your present school district in the position identified in question above?
	5 or less 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36 years or more
Q4	Including the current school year, how many years of TOTAL experience do you have in the position identified above?
	5 or less 6-10 11-15

	• 16-20 • 21-25 • 26-30 • 31-35 • 36 years or more
Q5	Which of the following best describes your plans after the end of this school year? (Please select one.) • Continue working at this school. • Continue working in this district but not at this school. • Continue working in education but in a different position. • Leave the field of education. • Other: _____
Q6	How important are each of the following factors in your decision about whether to continue working at this district/school? [not at all important, somewhat important, very important, extremely important] • Geographic location • Facilities and resources • Professional culture • Staff collegiality and collaboration • Instructional support to improve my practice • Ability to have a positive impact on student outcomes • Parent and family support and engagement • School leadership • District leadership • Opportunity for advancement or career progression • Work schedule • Recognition and respect • Salary • Health insurance • Retirement benefits • Other: _____

Q7	Which of the following is the MOST IMPORTANT factor influencing your decision to continue working at this district/school? (Please select one.) ● Geographic location ● Facilities and resources ● Professional culture ● Staff collegiality and collaboration ● Instructional support to improve my practice ● Ability to have a positive impact on student outcomes ● Parent and family support and engagement ● School leadership ● District leadership ● Opportunity for advancement or career progression ● Work schedule ● Recognition and respect ● Salary ● Health insurance ● Retirement benefits ● Other: _____

PART B: Overall Reflection [CLASSROOM TEACHERS ONLY]

		Rating				
Q8	Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly Agree	Do Not Know
	A. I would recommend this district/school as a good place to work.					

B. I feel satisfied with the resources and support I receive to continually improve my practice.						
C. I come to work each day feeling motivated and engaged to support the success of students and fellow staff.						

PART C: Demonstrated importance of HCM

Rate your level of agreement with each of the statements below.

	Human Capital Management Construct	Survey Item	Rating				
			1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly Agree	Do Not Know
Q9		Human Resource Planning (HRP) refers to the process of identifying the core competencies – knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors – needed to accomplish school goals, and budgeting for those core competencies to ensure a sufficient pipeline of highly effective teachers. --- Regarding HRP in your district…					
	HRP *Forecasting*	HRP 1: Our district designs and assigns teacher roles and responsibilities in a way that matches current core competencies with school and district needs.					
	HRP *Forecasting*	HRP 2: Our district engages in formal planning and budgeting processes that include both assessing current human resource capacity and forecasting core competencies needed to accomplish school goals.					

	HRP *Forecasting*	HRP 3: Our district maintains policies and practices that require or encourage current teachers to provide early notification of their intent to resign or retire.					
	HRP *Forecasting*	HRP 4: Our district identifies and prioritizes the sources of high-quality teacher candidates.					
	HRP *Forecasting*	HRP 5: Our district partners with local higher education institutions to ensure a pipeline of high-quality teacher candidates.					
	HRP	What could your district do to strengthen Human Resource Planning practices to ensure a pipeline of highly effective teachers?					
Q10	Recruitment and selection refer to the process of finding and attracting qualified teacher candidates and choosing the most appropriate person from the applicant pool. --- Regarding recruitment and selection in your district…						
	Employment *Recruitment*	R1: Our district recruits a sufficient number of high-quality teacher applicants.					
	Employment *Recruitment*	R2: Our district tailors its job postings and recruitment campaigns to highlight the district's unique characteristics or brand.					
	Employment / *Recruitment*	R3: Our district tailors its job postings and recruitment campaigns to highlight the core competencies (knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions) required by the position.					
	Employment *Recruitment*	R4: The core competencies used in job postings and recruitment campaigns are the same ones that appear on the district's teacher evaluation rubric.					
	Employment *Recruitment*	R5: Our district establishes a strong recruiting base for teaching positions by providing aspiring teachers (e.g., education technicians, pre-service teachers, etc.) with clinically-rich training.					

	Employment *Selection*	S1: Our district utilizes standardized tools and rubrics to differentiate candidates.					
	Employment *Selection*	S2: Our district utilizes interview questions and hiring criteria that are aligned with the core competencies required of the position.					
	Employment *Selection*	S3: Our district provides sufficient training to administrators on candidate selection processes (e.g., effective interviewing, selection bias, etc.)					
	Employment *Selection*	S4: Final candidates for teaching positions are required to provide writing samples, sample lesson plans and demonstrate teaching ability.					
	Employment *Selection*	S5: Our district analyzes new teacher performance data annually to validate selection outcomes.					
Q11	Support for new teachers includes access to formal induction and mentoring programs. --- Regarding new teacher supports…						
	Employment *New Teacher Supports*	NTS 1: Our district provides beginning teachers with a formal orientation to the community, district, curriculum, and school.					
	Employment *New Teacher Supports*	NTS 2: Our district matches each beginning teacher with a veteran mentor teacher for on-going, regular support.					
	Employment *New Teacher Supports*	NTS 3: Our district requires mentors to attend formal training on effective mentorship responsibilities.					
	Employment *New Teacher Supports*	NTS 4: Our district allows regular release time for mentors to provide support to new teachers.					

	Employment *New Teacher Supports*	NTS 5: Our district provides a stipend to mentors.					
	Employment	What could your district do to strengthen its RECRUITMENT, SELECTION, and NEW EMPLOYEE SUPPORT policies and/or practices to ensure a workforce of highly effective teachers?					
Q12		PEPG refers to continuously improving and/or maintaining job performance through use of e.g., performance assessment tools, coaching, counseling, collaboration, professional learning, and regular feedback. --- Regarding your district's teacher evaluation and professional growth program…					
	PEPG *Teacher Evaluation*	PEPG 1: Our district's PEPG program fairly and accurately differentiates levels of instructional effectiveness in improving student learning outcomes.					
	PEPG *Teacher Evaluation*	PEPG 2: Our district provides training to all employees on the PEPG program and rubric.					
	PEPG *Teacher Evaluation*	PEPG 3: Our district provides regular training and ongoing calibration support to evaluators and instructional coaches to ensure a common understanding and application of the PEPG program and rubric.					
	PEPG *Teacher Evaluation*	PEPG 4: Teachers receive regular, timely, and specific feedback on their instructional performance including individual strengths and weaknesses.					
	PEPG *Teacher Evaluation*	PEPG 5: Teachers and administrators are trained in how to give and receive feedback – and held accountable for doing it well.					
	PEPG *Professional Development*	PEPG 6: Our district uses PEPG results to make key human resources management decisions such as compensation, professional development, non-probationary status, and promotions.					
	PEPG	PEPG 7: Our district utilizes student performance and educator evaluation data to inform district-wide professional development priorities.					

	Professional Development						
	PEPG *Professional Development*	PEPG 8: Our district ensures that all educators have professional growth plans linked to their individual needs based on PEPG data.					
	PEPG *Professional Development*	PEPG 9: Our district provides instructional coaching to meet the individual needs of teachers.					
	PEPG *Professional Development*	PEPG 10: Our district provides sufficient professional development opportunities to continually improve one's instructional practice.					
	PEPG *Professional Development*	PEPG 11: The quality and effectiveness of professional development is assessed regularly.					
	PEPG	What could your district do to strengthen its PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND PROFESSION GROWTH policies and/or practices to help ensure a workforce of highly effective teachers?					
Q13	R&R refers to the use of monetary and non-monetary means for reinforcing desirable performance and results. --- Regarding your district's reward and recognition programs…						
	R&R	RR 1: Our district's compensation program (base pay, variable pay, and benefits) is competitive with the local market.					
	R&R	RR 2: Our district's compensation program helps us attract and retain effective teachers.					
	R&R	RR 3: Our district's compensation program recognizes and rewards various forms of teacher leadership (e.g., mentor teacher, master teacher, PLC leader, PEPG coordinator, data coach, peer observer, etc.)					
	R&R	RR 4: Our district's compensation program recognizes and rewards teamwork and collaboration.					
	R&R	RR 5: Our district's compensation program rewards teachers for performance, including e.g., instructional effectiveness, student learning growth, achieving school or district goals, etc.					

	R&R	What could your district do to strengthen its RECOGNITION AND REWARD policies and/or practices to help ensure a workforce of highly effective teachers?					
Q14		CE refers to the intentional process of involving parents, families, and community organizations in education. --- Regarding your district's community engagement activities…					
	CE	CE 1: Our district actively and effectively engages community-based organizations and resources to help us achieve our school mission.					
	CE	CE 2: Our district actively and effectively engages parents and families to support the success of our students and school.					
	CE	CE 3: Our district fosters a collaborative school community where the school staff and community interact regularly and share ownership in the success of the school.					
	CE	CE 4: Our district includes parents and community members in reflection on how well the school is meeting its mission.					
	CE	CE 5: Our district monitors school-community relations with evidence and data.					
	CE	What could your district do to strengthen its COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT related policies and/or practices to help ensure a workforce of highly effective teachers?					
Q15		SE refers to intentional strategies for ensuring a safe, caring, respectful, and productive school and classroom climate and professional culture. --- Regarding school environment in your district…					
	SE	SE 1: Our district fosters a collaborative culture in which teachers and leaders share ownership of a common instructional vision and student learning and growth.					
	SE	SE 2: The culture in our school is one which reflects and values free and open expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs.					
	SE	SE 3: Our district gathers and analyzes data on culture, climate, and/or working conditions in tandem with effectiveness data to inform school improvement efforts.					
	SE	SE 4: Our district honors the culture of students, adults, and the larger community, demonstrating respect for diversity and ensuring equity.					

	SE	SE 5: Our district creates and maintains a physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe environment that promotes effective adult practice and student learning.					
	SE	What could your district do to strengthen its SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT to help ensure a workforce of highly effective teachers?					
Q16	Is there anything more you would like to share with regard to ways in which your district could strengthen its human resource management policies and programs?						

Thank you for completing our survey. If you are interested in participating in a random drawing for a $25 Amazon gift card, please provide your contact information by clicking here. By entering your name in a separate form, it ensures anonymity for the survey responses. Three (3) winners from each school district will be selected.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank you for participating in today's session, which should take approximately 60+/- minutes.

The session will be recorded using Zoom technology. Cloud recordings of this Zoom session will allow the research to utilize Zoom's "Audio Transcript" feature.

- Zoom Cloud recordings will be removed at the conclusion of the research by June 30, 2022.
- Recordings are subject to the Zoom's privacy policy

Pseudonyms will be used when transcribing the session in an effort to protect participants' identities. Given the group nature of this session, however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. We ask that group members refrain from sharing any information discussed in this session outside the group.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Instructions

The degree to which school districts succeed in attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining highly effective teachers in each of their schools hinges largely on the quality of the district's human capital management system and functions – human resource planning, employment (recruitment, selection, orientation/induction, mentoring), performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG), recognition and reward (monetary and non-monetary compensation), community engagement, and school environment. This session explores each of these six (6) functions, which are the same functions you responded to in the *HCM in Rural Schools Survey*

I will begin by defining each function and then ask a few probing questions about each to more clearly understand current HR practices in your district. I am most interested in gathering your input and ideas on what could be done more of and/or differently within each of these functions to strengthen human resource management in your district.

It is important to note that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions your openness and candor will be the most helpful and appreciated.

Key Definitions

- Core competencies = essential knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors.
- Human resources (HR) = people

Interview Questions

1. **Human Resource Planning (HRP).** HRP refers to the process of *identifying core competencies* (knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors) needed to accomplish school goals, and budgeting for those core competencies to ensure a sufficient pipeline of highly effective teachers.

   Open-ended questions:

   - *In what ways does the district determine the core competencies needed by schools in the NEAR-TERM (1-2 years)?*
   - *In what ways does the district determine the core competencies needed by schools in the LONGER-TERM (3+ years)?*
   - *What aspects of HR forecasting / budgeting are being done WELL by your district?*
   - *What aspects of HR forecasting / budgeting could be IMPROVED by your district to ensure a sufficient pipeline of highly effective teachers?*

2. **Employment.** Employment refers to the process of finding and attracting qualified teacher candidates, making the choice of the most appropriate person from the applicant pool, and supporting new hires through a formal induction and mentoring program.

   Open-ended questions:
   - *What aspects of working in this district are most appealing and should be highlighted in job postings, interviews, etc.?*
   - *What aspects of working in this district are least appealing and could be a barrier to attracting highly qualified candidates?*
   - *What aspects of new teacher orientation/induction work well? Could be improved?*
   - *What aspects of new teacher mentoring work well? Could be improved?*

3. **Performance Management and Professional Growth (PM&PG).** PM&PG refers to the process of continuously improving and/or maintaining job performance through use of performance assessment tools, coaching, counseling, professional learning, in addition to continuous feedback.

   Open-ended questions:

   - *What aspects of performance data and measurement are working well in your district? What could be improved?*

- *What aspects of performance feedback and coaching/counseling are working well in your district? What could be improved?*
- *What forms of teamwork and collaboration are most effective in your district? In what ways could this be improved?*
- *What aspects of professional learning and development are working well in your district? What could be improved?*
- *What other aspects of your district's PEPG program are going well? What could be improved?*
- *In what ways are teachers in this district afforded leadership opportunities?*

4. **Recognition and Reward (R&R). R&R** refers to monetary and non-monetary approaches utilized by the district to reinforce positive performance through non-monetary means (e.g., praise) and monetary means (e.g., compensation based on qualifications (education and experience), roles and responsibilities, and performance.

    Open-ended questions:
    - *What aspects of your district's R&R programs (monetary and monetary) are working well to reinforce school goals and student success?*
    - *What aspects of your district's R&R (monetary and non-monetary) programs could be improved to more effectively reinforce school goals and student success?*

5. **Community Engagement (CE).** CE refers to the intentional and proactive process of involving parents, families, and community organizations in education.

    Open-ended questions:
    - *What aspects of your district's community outreach and engagement are working well to reinforce school goals and student success?*
    - *What aspects of your district's community outreach and engagement could be improved to more effectively reinforce school goals and student success?*

6. **School Environment (SE).** SE refers to strategies utilized by the district for ensuring a safe, caring, respectful, and productive school and classroom climate and professional culture.

    Open-ended comments:

    - *What aspects of your school environment (climate and culture) are working well to reinforce school goals and student success?*

- *What aspects of your school environment (climate and culture) program could be improved to more effectively reinforce school goals and student success?*

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear [Superintendent Name],

Thanks for your interest in learning more about my doctoral studies to see if it might be a good fit for your school district. The focus of my research is on strategic human capital management in rural education.

The study seeks to uncover human capital management strengths and improvement opportunities at four (4) participating rural districts in Maine. Aggregate results from the study will be shared with you in a capstone meeting at the conclusion of the project. In terms of commitment, all teachers and building administrators will be invited to complete a survey and also participate in an interview or focus group.

> **Administrator and teacher survey.** The 17-item survey (see Attachment A) is based on the Colorado Department of Education's *Healthy Human Capital Survey (2012)* and has been adapted to meet the needs of this study. The survey will be administered to superintendents, building principals, and certified teachers using Qualtrics, a web-based survey tool. The survey is expected to take 15+/- minutes to complete. All participants will be emailed an invitation to participate in the survey. Reminders will also be sent periodically during the 3-week survey window to encourage a high response.

> **Interview and focus groups.** Once the survey window has closed and results have been tabulated, the researcher will schedule an interview with the superintendent along with two (2) focus group sessions, one with building administrators and the other with a representative sampling of teachers. An invitation to participate in the focus group will be extended to all teachers who participated in the survey. See Appendix B for a sample interview / focus group protocol. The interview and focus group sessions will be scheduled for 60+/- minutes and held via Zoom. Sessions will be recorded and participant names will be blinded in the reporting of results.

To encourage participation in the survey (which is voluntary), a random drawing from the pool of survey participants will be conducted for a $25 Amazon gift card. Three (3) winners from your district will be selected.

Thanks again for the opportunity to share this information and invitation to participate in this exciting research project. I am hoping to secure commitment from the four (4) districts this month and be prepared to launch the study in March. If you have questions or need additional information, please let me know. Otherwise, I very much look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

Scott A. Harrison
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership Program, University of Maine

APPENDIX D: CONSENT LETTER

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Scott A. Harrison, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education Leadership at the University of Maine. Dr. Ian Mette, Educational Leadership Program Coordinator, is the faculty sponsor for this study. The purpose of the research is to uncover human capital management strengths and improvement opportunities in rural districts in Maine. The results of the study may help to inform improvements to human capital management policy and programming at the local and state level.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take an anonymous survey. It should take you 15+/- minutes to complete.

Risks	Except for your time and inconvenience, there are no risks to you from participating in this study.
Benefits	While this study will have no direct benefit to you, this research may help us learn more about the degree to which rural districts are investing sufficient time and resources in their human resource management programs.
Compensation	By completing the survey, you may enter a raffle to win *one of three $25 Amazon gift cards*.
Confidentiality	This study is anonymous. Please do not write your name on the survey. There will be no records linking you to the data. Data will be kept on a password-protected computer indefinitely. Information for the raffle/compensation/extra credit is not connected to survey responses.
Voluntary	Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. *While you may skip the occasional question, you must complete the survey to be eligible for compensation.* Submission of the survey implies consent to participate.
Contact information	If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (*207) 592.0223 or scott.harrison@maine.edu*. You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study at (*207) 581-2733 or ian.mette@maine.edu*. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207/581-2657 (or e-mail umric@maine.edu).

BIOGRAPHY

Scott Harrison grew up in Maine and attended University of Maryland (UMD) to study Human Resources and Labor Relations. Following graduation from UMD in 1987, he worked for Human Technology, Inc. an HR consulting firm in McLean, VA, before returning to his home state. He spent the next few years at a large financial services company in Portland, leading human resource related projects and supporting company expansion across Maine and New England. During this time, he earned an MBA degree from University of Southern Maine and launched a small, part-time human resource consulting firm, The Harrison Group, LLC. THG is still in business with a record of success designing innovative human capital systems and supports and leading complex and sustainable change in organizations of different sizes and types. A partial list of THG clients include Kresge Foundation, Ford Foundation, Assurant, KForce, DRK Foundation, The Henry Ford, Maine Coast Memorial Hospital, Midcoast Hospital, FAME, Downeast Energy and Building Supply, and AAA Northern New England. In addition to his work with corporate organizations, Mr. Harrison has led several strategic human capital management projects in education focused on supporting the work of teachers and building administrators.

Between 2011-2017, Mr. Harrison led a team charged with creating and managing *Maine Schools for Excellence*, a bold, comprehensive $40 million federally-funded school improvement initiative representing one of the most complex and dynamic change efforts ever attempted in Maine schools. At the heart of the MSFE project was improving student learning and educator effectiveness, which involved grassroots development and implementation of human capital programs and resources that addressed school culture and climate, educator

preparation and employment, evaluation and professional growth, recognition and reward. The work of the 10 MSFE districts attracted national attention and garnered accolades from other states, educational organizations including the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the US Department of Education. In 2018, after the federal grant ended, Mr. Harrison joined University of Maine at Presque Isle as Executive Director of Central Aroostook Council on Education. In this role, he worked with 10 local school districts and the University to strengthen connections across PK-16 programs and people, collaborating to create professional learning opportunities in every school that supported the success of educators and students.

In 2021, Mr. Harrison joined Regional School Unit 21 in Arundel, Kennebunk, and Kennebunkport to create the district's first-ever human resources department.

In summary, over the past 12 years and beginning with his work with MDOE, Mr. Harrison has teamed with top educators, community, and business leaders from around the state and across the country to lead important and impactful work covering over 20 school districts in Maine.