

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL CONTEXTS

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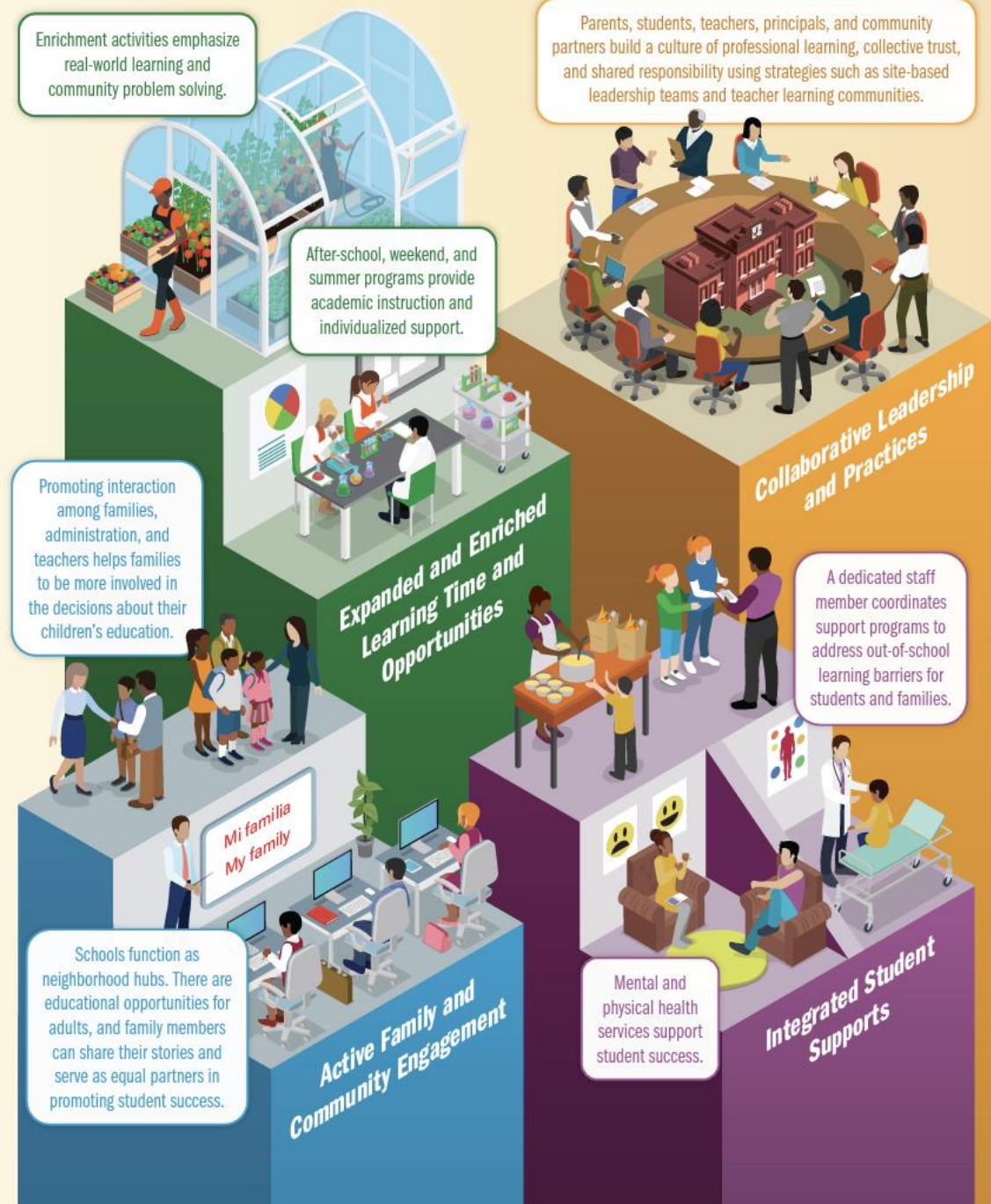
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Background

Community Schools

- Not just a program!
 - A fundamental rethinking of how to deliver public education
- “How do we do school?”
- Centering equity and addressing gaps in support, services

What the Four Pillars of Community Schools Look Like in Action

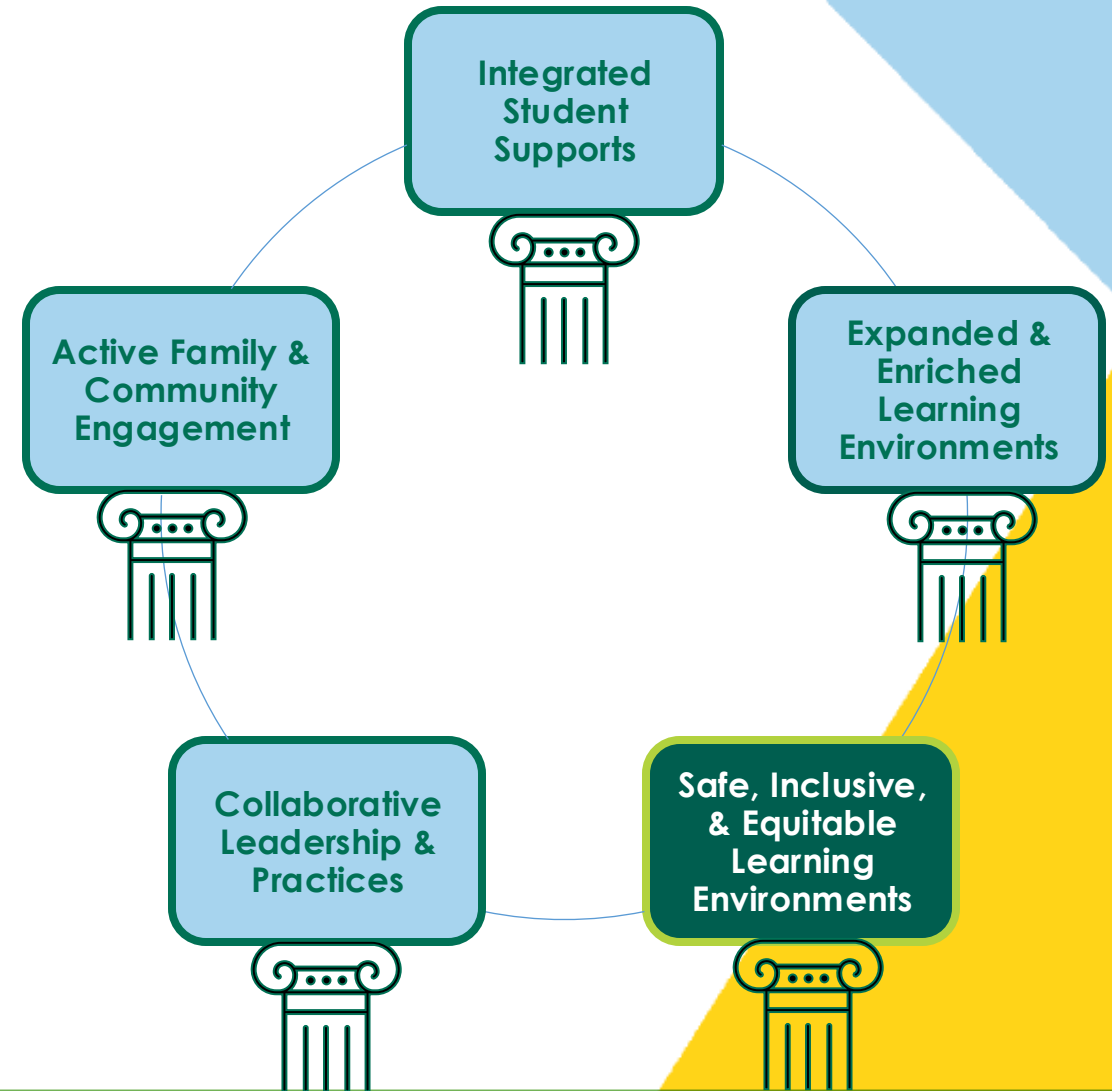


Vermont's Value Statement

Every child should be provided with an equitable education and should be able to grow up with the opportunity to achieve their dreams and contribute to the well-being of society.

The VT AOE defines equitable education as “...**access to the resources, opportunities, and educational rigor needed at the right moment in their education, whatever their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, language, disability, family background, or family income may be.**”

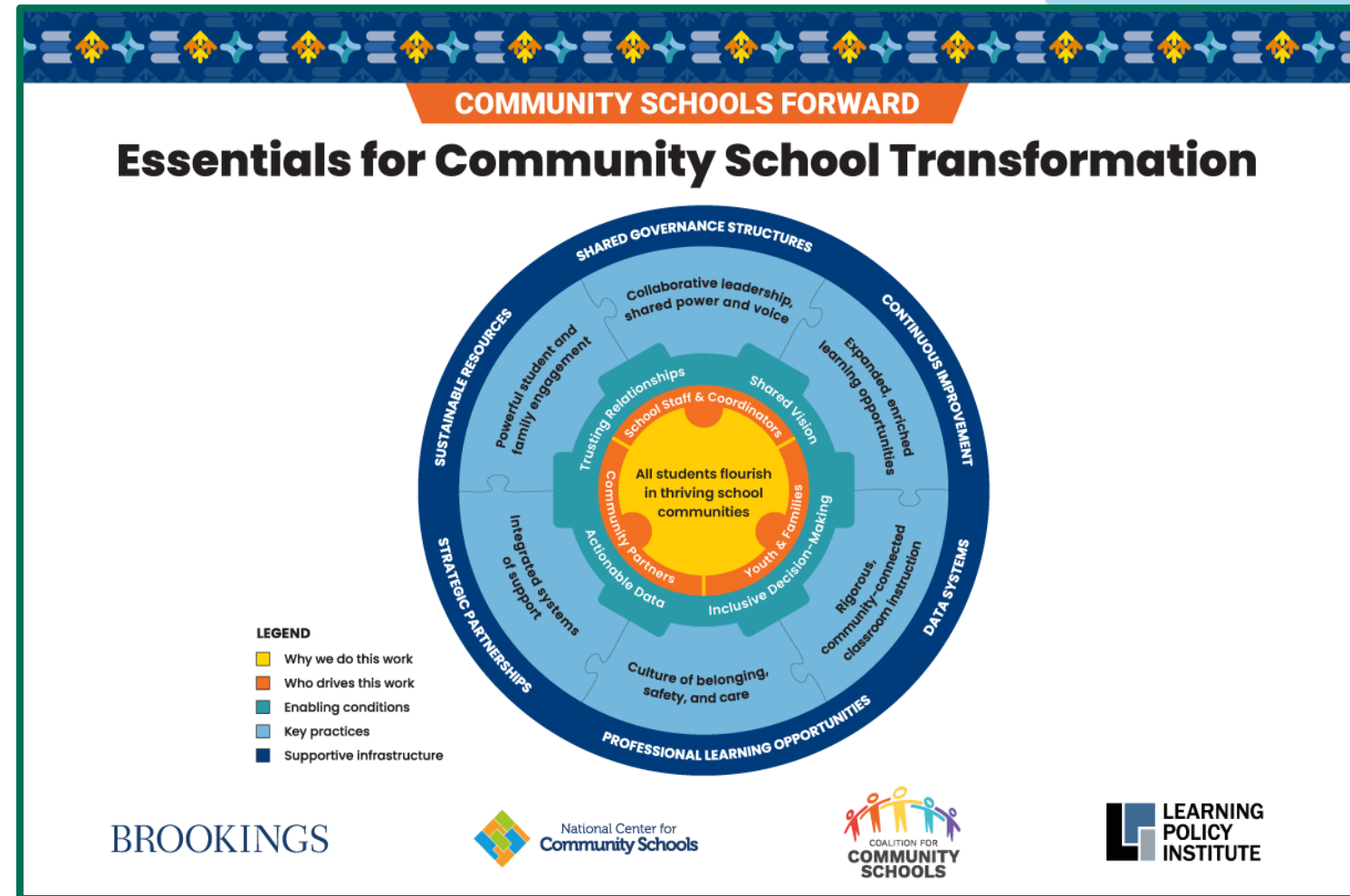
Our public schools must be designed and equipped to fully deliver on that promise.



Community schools have gained considerable attention in urban settings; **Implementation in rural environments remains underexplored.**

Community schools offer a potential solution to pervasive challenges often faced by rural schools:

- **leveraging community assets**
- **rural social structures and sense of community**
- **engaging local stakeholders**

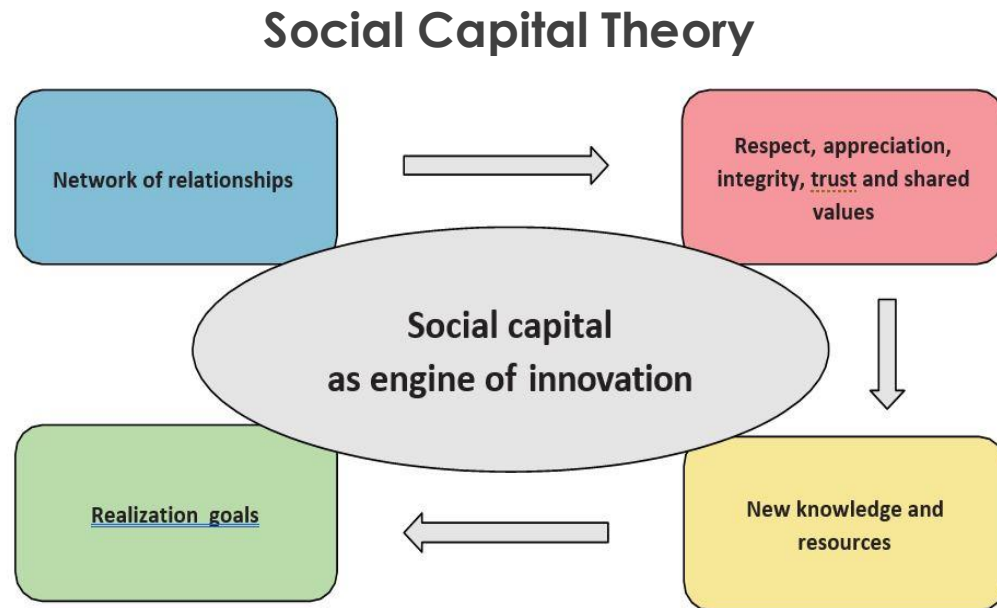


Study Aims

1. How do rural schools and educators conceptualize the community school approach?
2. What facets of rural schools may be instrumental to their successful transition to the Community School approach?
3. How does the integration of community schools impact new thinking, student supports, and community engagement among rural schools and communities?

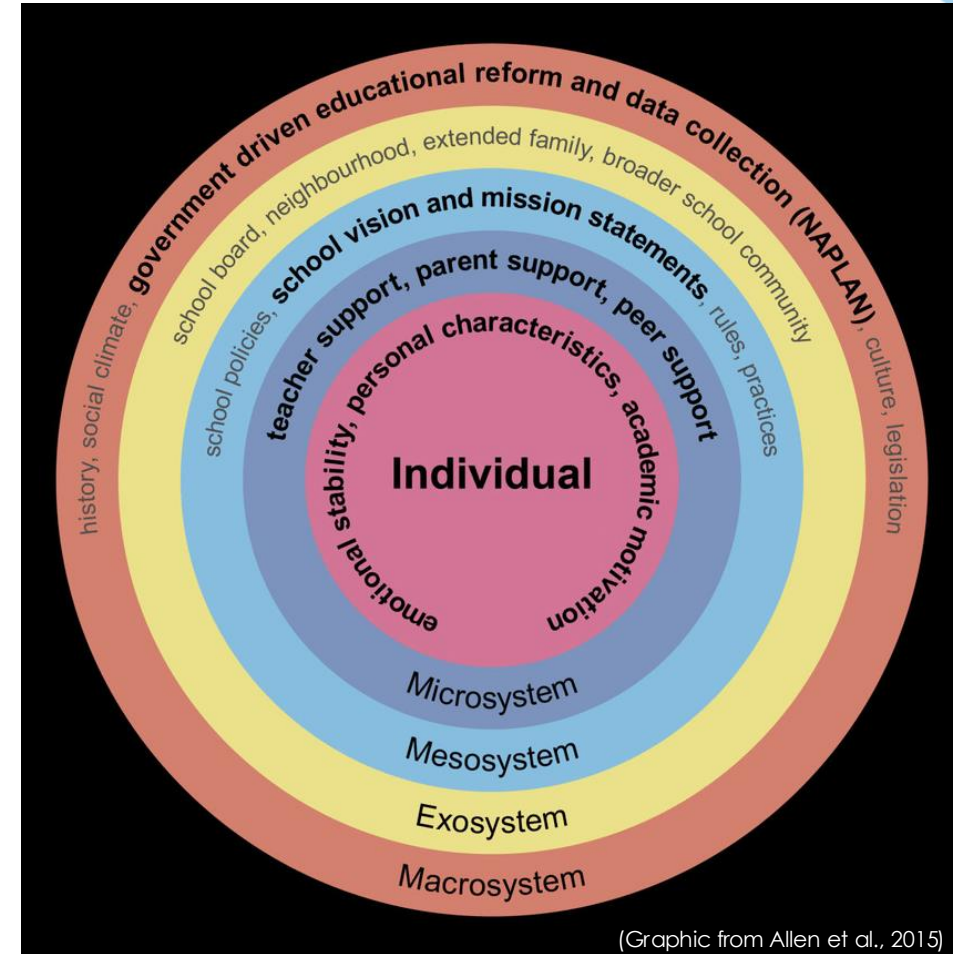


Guiding Frameworks



(Graphic from Ehlen et al., 2014)

Socio-Ecological Systems Theory



(Graphic from Allen et al., 2015)



Methods

Primary data consisted of **five semi-structured interviews** with varying combinations of **community school coordinators, school principals, and district superintendents** from state-funded community school sites, conducted during Year 2 of a three-year state grant program for Community Schools implementation.

Various report documents, check-in tools, and logic models were reviewed and contributed added context to the emerging implementation climate within rural community schools.

Collaborative coding processes and **thematic analysis** were conducted, and poignant themes were drawn across all study participants.

First check-in Free Form

Successes?

New Insights?

Three-Year Smart Goals

CS PILLAR	THREE-YEAR SMART GOAL
#1 INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS	
#2 EXPANDED AND ENRICHED LEARNING TIME AND OPPORTUNITIES	
#3 ACTIVE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	
#4 COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICES	

- 7. **Community Characteristics**
Economic development (barriers and supports); Dominant industries; Demographics; Community size (population); Parent/caregiver employment; Frequency of family engagement; Communication style/frequency
- 8. **Cohort Leadership Characteristics**
Unique characteristics of VT Act 67 grantees that surface unrelated to other codes; Qualities, circumstances of individuals implementing CS model in schools (e.g., educators with kids in schools); Long-game perspective/equitably sustainable/empathy; "Pillar talk"
- 9. **Community Partner Characteristics**
Type and number of CBO; Services offered by CBO; Geographic proximity; CBO size (i.e., is it local? National org? Public or private?); Formal vs. Informal (i.e., is this an individual? Is this an informal group? Is this an established business?)
 - A. Potential
 - B. Developing
 - C. Sustaining
- 10. **Community School Characteristics**
Community-based services offered; Comm. Orgs in school; Coordinator duties/responsibilities; Three-year goals/expectations; Training/facilitation; CS messaging/advocacy
- 11. **Student Characteristics**
Demographics (i.e., Age, Race, IEPs, FRL); Interaction with legal/justice systems; Lived experiences of student populations; Mental and physical health profiles
- 12. **Educator Qualities/Features**
Demographics; Turnover rates; Staffing; Staff buy-in; Workforce experience/longevity; Staff involvement (content areas/school level/etc.)
- 13. **Implementation Readiness**
Alignment with key goals/initiative at school or district; CS coordinator in place;
- 14. **Act 67**
 - Supports: Funding; Technical assistance; Communication with AOE; Expansion of programming;
 - Concerns: application timeline; timeframe for writing; employee bandwidth; funding sustainability
- 15. **Integration and Coherence**
Overlap and integration between CS pillar; Integration with existing school practices and policies



VT Act 67 Community Schools

Caledonia Central Supervisory Union (5-districts)
(Cabot School, PK-12, N=159)

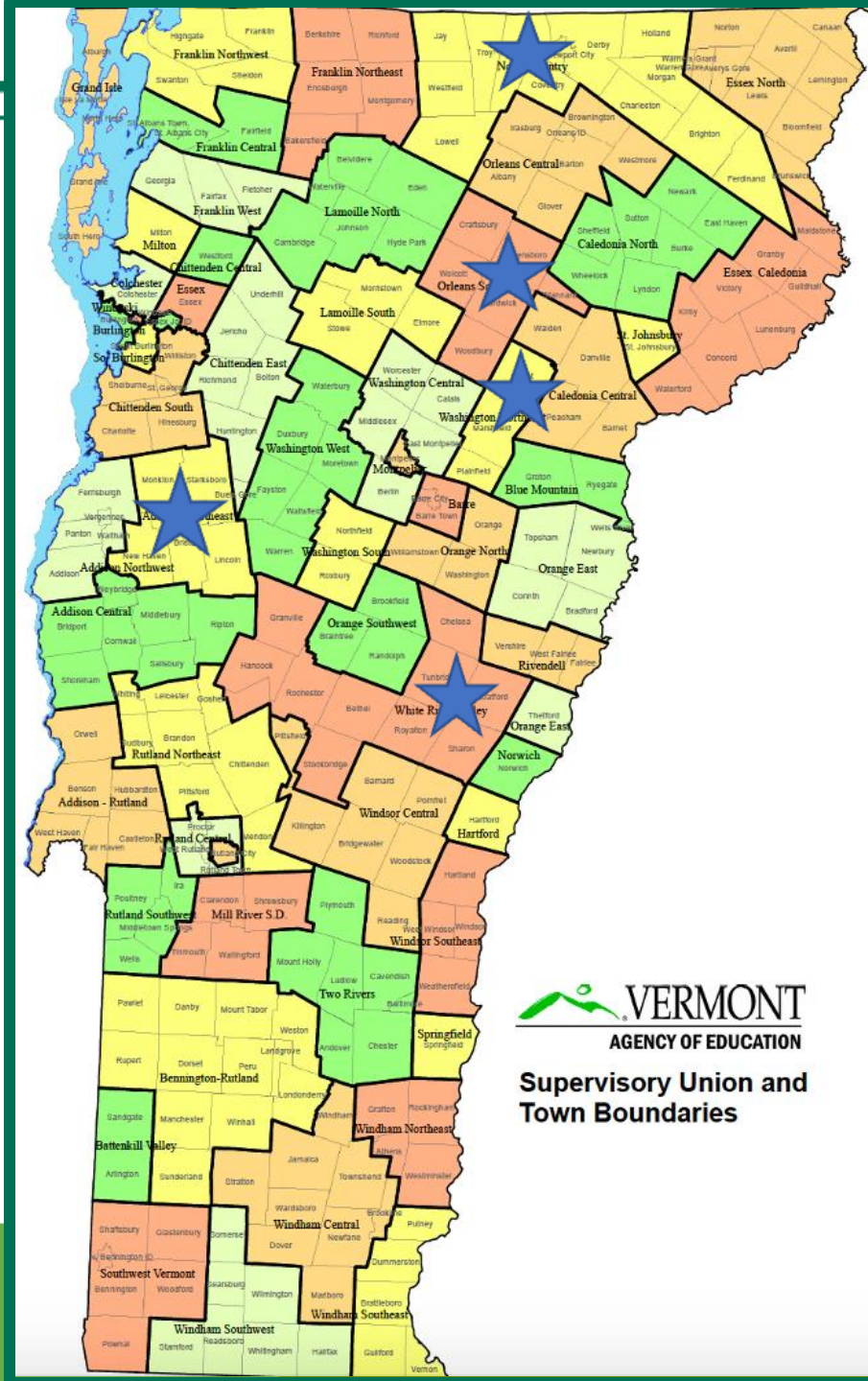
Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union (5-districts)
(Hazen Union School, Grades 7-12, N=290)

North Country Supervisory Union (10-districts)
(PK-12, 12 schools, N=2,684)

Addison Northwest Supervisory District
Vergennes Union Elementary School (K-6, N=295)

White River Valley Supervisory Union (5-districts)
White River Valley Middle School, (6-8, N=132)

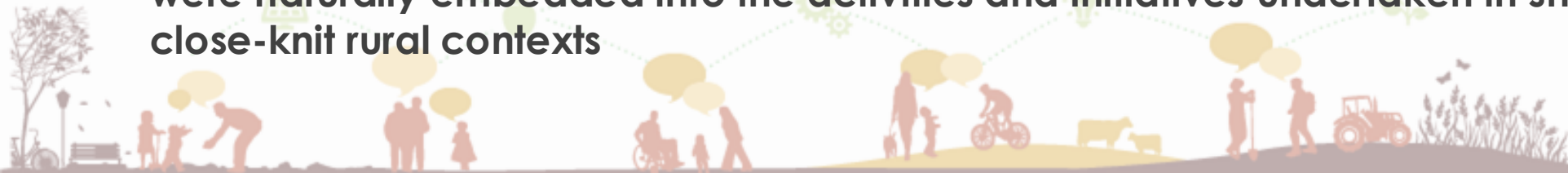
Across our Act 67 community schools, we are supporting over 3,560 PreK-12 students, their families, and communities.



Emergent Findings

Community Schools Provide Language for What Rural Schools 'Already Are'

- rural schools have a natural identification or familiarity with the community school ethos
- frequent recognition of efforts and social structures related to Community Schools that already existed
- community partners, families, and local school stakeholder perspectives and ideas were naturally embedded into the activities and initiatives undertaken in small, close-knit rural contexts



*“You know, I think there are schools that are Community Schools **because they have leaders and membership in their school communities that already embody the disposition to provide the pillars to their students, because that is a solution to the problems that schools face in helping students access learning** and in some schools, those things are still developing and we are in, through the Community Schools model, we are in schools that are already fully Community Schools because of that disposition in the leadership that supports it...”*

*“Like, that's not, **this is who we are and this is who our Community expects us to be, even if we're not ready for it yet, right? Because, I mean, I think our community see us as Community Schools and they expect us to be Community Schools**, we just may not have been resourced, funded, or designed that way.”*



Rural Community School Implementation Necessitates Braided, Interdependent Pillar Prioritization

- needs of students, families, and the general community necessitated a blended approach to community school pillar implementation
- rural school and community needs are complex and multifaceted, requiring an integrated approach to policy or programming
- leaders struggled to disaggregate priority areas, as they all required buy-in, effort, and engagement from the entire school community



“...I saw just like leaps and bounds grow in teacher planning and teacher understanding in what kids were producing...So just on that, that piece, which is like **our first pillar work, around integrated student supports**, I think right, just **the deep dive and deep commitment to project-based learning** ... we've really focused there. And then the second area of **focus has been around school culture, which sort of bridges lots of things**... And that that work really has shifted. Like we began that work with the idea that it was gonna be around **restorative practices and particularly Tier 2** [interventions] and like helping people understand...”

“So **I really see the Community Schools program, philosophy, approach, grant as the thing that helped unify how [our school] would rebuild itself better from the pandemic**. As everything needed to fit with a pillar or under a pillar and it became the way we could envision ourselves even at the board level.”



Communicating the Rural Community School Story is Critical

- the issue of sustainability was on many school leaders' minds
- support for and focus on the needs and barriers of rural schools seeking to implement this model is required



*"I think **the way that we do our work in this office, which came before Community Schools and is embedded in who, you know, we are as practitioners and our disposition and the disposition of our leaders**...that's what makes families want to come to mobile arts or the playgroup and or you know talk about hard stuff around truancy. So **we are seeing that shift in the community that we work with, whether they're recipients of supports or you know people involved in doing the work or providing the space or whatever.**"*

*"And **I think that's where the how tight how loose comes in and that's probably going to be an individualized discussion, but in order to have that, we have to plan with fidelity and have the structure to do it.** Like we need to, we were just talking about the role of leadership team here at the school yesterday, like that needs to shift to embrace this sort of new, flexible, more inclusive school. Guidance and pathways needed to coordinate."*



Discussion

RQ1: How do rural schools and educators conceptualize the community school approach?

- **Community Schools Mindsets / Leader Mentality**
 - Centering relationships and connections with students and their families;
 - Focus on access and equity in services and opportunities above specific learning outcomes or academic metrics
 - Values-based approach by community school leaders toward implementing, discussing, and supporting school staff in thinking about community schools



RQ2: What facets of rural schools may be instrumental to their successful transition to the Community School approach?

- **Contextualized, Locally-Informed Methods**

- Rural community school leaders demonstrate an aptitude for community engagement and collaboration with relevant stakeholders to align or acquire new resources and services that are contextualized and appropriate for their students and families
- Redefining who or what constitutes a ‘partner’ in family-school-community relationships
- Creating and disseminating a shared vision, not just about school but about the whole community



RQ3: How does the integration of community schools impact new thinking, student supports, and community engagement among rural schools and communities?

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Implications

- Redefining what a 'school-community partnership' looks like.
- Evolution of agency/state system support for rural schools and districts.
- Framework for communicating the importance of a rural school, beyond “normal” strategies (e.g., literacy rates, learning outcomes); Approachable, absorbable messaging.
- Purposeful flattening of traditional, hierarchical structures can facilitate the adoption of the community school approach and cultural shifts within a school.



Next Steps

- Rural Community Schools Implementation –
What does implementation fidelity look like?
- Community Schools ROI
 - Coordinators / Community Partners
- Rural UACS-SEA Research Practice
Partnership Structures
- Community Schools Mindset Tools



THANK YOU!

Questions? Comments?

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- X: PNKnox



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