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Small Rural School Districts in Nebraska: A Case Study of Challenges and Solutions

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by

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The purpose of this study was to determine the problems faced by small, rural Nebraska school districts. For this study, 15 possible challenges were identified (a) student enrollment, (b) instructional programs, (c) instructional support services, (d) extra curricular activities, (e) hiring and retaining administrative staff, (f) hiring and retaining teaching staff, (g) hiring and retaining non-certified staff, (h) building and grounds, (i) transportation services, (j) food services, (k) school finances, (l) student assessment, (m) accountability school performance, (n) family support, and (o) community support. There were no data on this topic for the state of Nebraska. The case for this study involved all 28 school districts identified as "very sparse" according to the Nebraska state aid statute as of 2007-08. The participants in this study were the superintendents of these school districts.

The survey instrument used to collect data included the 15 challenges facing small, rural Nebraska school districts. A five point Likert-scale was used for each challenge from 1—a minor/no challenge to 5—a major challenge. Participants in the study were asked to respond to each of the challenge items from the perspective of their own school district by circling the number in their view that described their school district challenge. After the return of the survey, the author contacted each

superintendent by telephone and conducted interviews using open-ended questions to further perspectives on the survey items.

The results indicated the top challenges for small, rural Nebraska schools were school finance, student enrollment, hiring and retaining teaching staff, student assessment, and accountability school performance. Although each challenge was difficult on its own, the challenges overlapped each other and superintendents were not able to manage one challenge without addressing others. Small rural school districts face many challenges that require careful consideration and cooperation involving every community member and were impacted by some factors that they have no control over. Small, rural, school district superintendents must think ahead with finances, stay in contact with legislative actions, and keep an open mind to changing technology that can impact the education of students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

Throughout the Nebraska settlement era of the late 1800's, the population of school age children in Nebraska increased rapidly. Farmers and their families moved into the Midwest territory in large numbers. Towns were built to provide services and schools were vital to the process of building a town. Families chose which town or rural area to move to, in part, based on the existence and quality of the school.

Gradually, as the rural population decreased and transportation systems improved the number of school districts in the state declined. This decrease in school districts left some districts in isolation from their neighbors.

Research Problem

Small, low-enrollment, rural school districts face unique educational challenges. There is a need for school districts in rural areas to serve students, even though the student enrollments in some may be quite small. Nebraska has many small, low-enrollment rural school districts that can be found all across the state. No study has been done to explore the special challenges that these school districts face. This research study will seek to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by these school districts in the state of Nebraska from the point of view of the superintendents who serve those schools. The purpose is to identify the challenges faced by these school districts and learn how the school district superintendents have addressed these challenges.

The “very sparse” designation of the 28 school districts that make up the case for study is no longer used by the Nebraska Department of Education. The formula used to calculate state aid to school districts was changed in 2008, and with that change the “very sparse” designation was dropped. These school districts still had the characteristics that make them appropriate subjects for study. The superintendents of these districts were able to provide pertinent information.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to identify both the challenges faced by small, low-enrollment rural school districts in Nebraska and the possible solutions to those challenges. To accomplish the purpose of this study, superintendents of 28 small school districts were surveyed and their responses were compiled and analyzed. Concentrating on several small school districts located in rural Nebraska allowed the researcher to discover the different challenges facing these school districts. Specifically, the research discovered how these challenges impacted the districts in either a positive or negative manner. Superintendents in small school districts should be able to use this knowledge in the future as a guide to how challenges may be managed.

Research Questions

The study addressed four basic questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by small rural Nebraska school districts?
2. How are these challenges being solved?
3. What are the challenges likely to be faced in the future by small rural Nebraska school districts?
4. How might these challenges be solved?

Research Methods

To answer the research questions, data were obtained from superintendents of "very sparse" Nebraska school districts first by a mail survey and then by follow-up telephone interviews. The data were summarized and analyzed to identify common themes.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, a definition of key terminology follows:

Rural superintendent: the head administrator of a very sparse rural school district in Nebraska.

Sparsity: a term used in the Nebraska state aid formula to indicate the financial need criteria of a public school district. School districts were categorized as "standard," "sparse," or "very sparse." The terms were removed by LB 988 in 2008 (see Appendix A).

Standard: was a description applied to standard school districts that did not qualify for the sparse or very sparse cost groupings.

Sparse: sparse school districts were determined by four criteria, number of students per square mile in the county, number of students per square mile in the local system, distance in miles between each high school attendance center, size in square miles in the local system, and size of system when compared to square miles in the county in which the system was located.

Very Sparse: school districts were determined by six criteria in two categories that were used to define districts and were based on number of census students per square mile in the local system, number of formula students per square mile in the local system,

distance in miles between high school attendance centers, and size in square miles in the local system.

Delimitations

Delimitations have to do with any restrictions or confinements in the content or scope of the study, methodology utilized, or statistical analysis, that were necessary to undertake the study. The participants for this study were superintendents of very sparse, rural school districts in Nebraska. The 28 "very sparse" Nebraska school districts selected for the study were taken from Statistics and Facts About Nebraska Schools 2007-2008, which was released in August of 2008 by the Education Support Services of the Nebraska Department of Education. These school districts were selected because of their designation as "very sparse" and the possibility that they face issues that are different than those faced by other school districts in Nebraska.

Limitations

For the sake of the readers, a limitation exists in the study in that the researcher of this study presently and previously has worked in small, low-enrollment rural Nebraska school districts. While all survey information and data are perceived to be as objective as possible, a potential bias may exist. The study was limited to the practices and procedures associated with survey research and the use of a survey feedback form as well as the influence of the participant's point of view and experiences at the time the survey was completed. The study was limited to the practices and procedures associated with telephone interview research and the point of view of the participants.

Significance of the Study

There were no data on this topic for the state of Nebraska. The information generated from this study was intended to contribute to the knowledge base that currently exists regarding the challenges of small, low-enrollment rural school districts. Data from this study could be useful to school boards, administration in small rural schools and institutions of higher education that provide academic training for administrators who desire to become superintendents.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Small Rural School Districts in America

Odden and Picus (2004) stated that education is an enormous enterprise in our country. Education makes up the largest portion of most state and local government budgets; education engages more than 100,000 local school board members, employs millions of individuals as teachers, administrators, and support staff, and educates tens of millions of children.

D'Amico (1995) noted that many rural communities were shrinking – and in some cases shrinking out of existence. The exodus of family farmers brought on by the farm crisis of the 1980's is one well-reported reason for this phenomenon. Farms became larger and with improved technology fewer farmers were needed to farm more acres of land. Recent floods and other natural disasters have added to the movement away from rural areas, along with the long-standing tendency of rural youngsters to seek their fortunes in the big cities. Yet, at the same time, some rural regions of the upper Midwest have been growing. New farming, manufacturing, and service market opportunities have opened up; high-tech businesses have relocated; baby-boomers with their own children to raise have moved to rural locations seeking to live a safer simpler life; and highways have lessened the time needed to travel from many rural communities to cities or regional centers.

Lasley, Leistritz, Lobao, and Meyer (1995) found that rural economic decline during the decade of 1970-1980 created more migration toward jobs in urban areas. As a result, rural public school enrollment declined and the cost of educating rural students

started to rise. Declining enrollments and increased costs resulted in a financial crisis for many rural school districts. The farm crisis of the 1980's led to the loss of family farms, as modern farming techniques depended increasingly upon profits possible only through large-scale operations. The economic decline in agriculture created a ripple effect on non-farm economies in rural communities, again resulting in declining school enrollments and the loss of more rural graduates to urban areas where work was more plentiful.

Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) and Stern (1994) noted that it has long been recognized that education is key for the health of rural America. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) and DeYoung (1987) saw that school consolidations, school closures, and a declining economic base for some rural communities have created hardships for rural families and schools. Rural schools also faced serious issues in providing a full range of qualified teachers and the supportive resources to ensure success. Complicating this research, studies relevant to rural education and its particular context and challenges have always been sparse. Barley and Beesley (2007) stated that rural educators are also experiencing increased pressure to achieve 100% student proficiency in core subject areas by the year 2014 as a result of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), even though many of them perceive this expectation to be inadequately funded. Therefore, the press for all students to achieve suggested the value school-level factors associated with student success to supplement the portfolio of evidence-based instructional practices for high-needs student populations.

Small rural school districts. Beeson and Strange (2003) stated that almost 43% of our nation's public schools are located in rural areas. Rural school facilities tend to be

older than their urban counterparts and years of inadequate funding have resulted in more than half with inadequate structural or mechanical features. Also, according to McColl and Malhoit (2004), rural schools were often small and had community-centered attributes that a wealth of research had shown were associated with improved academic achievement, higher graduation rates, fewer disciplinary problems, and even economic efficiency. While many urban schools seek to mirror small schools with all of their benefits, small rural schools are regrettably often at risk of being closed and consolidated into larger schools on the false assumption that bigger is better and cheaper. Rural schools serve one in three of America's K-12 students and can be found in every state, from the Texas-Mexican border to northeast Maine, from the poorest parish in Louisiana to the California coast, and from the Navajo Nation to the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. The Rural School Community Trust (2000) found that rural and urban schools face many similar challenges, including students living in poverty. But, contrary to popular belief, the depth of poverty is often more severe in rural communities. For example, of the 250 poorest counties in the United States, 244 were rural. And, while urban schools frequently have high numbers of minority students, increasingly, many rural schools have far higher concentrations of African-American, Native American, and Hispanic children.

Nachtigal (1994) stated that rural schools and rural communities are tightly linked. Traditionally, the school is very much the center of small town activities. It is a source of community identity as school patrons rally around athletic events, plays, musical events, and sports represent a major source of the community's entertainment. School news, for better or for worse, provides the basis for much of the social dialog. For many rural communities, the school represented the single largest economic enterprise. It

had the largest budget and often the best physical facilities and the school staff may be the largest cadre of well-educated individuals in town. In the United States, where education is a state and local responsibility, maintaining and operating public schools represents the major investment of the community's local tax dollars. In countries where education is a national responsibility it may be the largest governmental expenditure in the local infrastructure.

Lyson (2002) found that schools in rural communities play many roles. In addition to providing for basic education, they serve as social and cultural centers. Schools are places for sports, theater, music, and other civic activities. He also observed how vital a school is to the survival of rural communities. He noted that schools serve as symbols of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control and community tradition, and personal and community identity.

Student transportation. Howley and Howley (2001) reported that even before the 1800s, families in small rural towns began to establish schools so that their children could learn to read and write. For much of the 1800s, these schools were organized informally, provided with little support or supervision from states, and positioned to address community interests and needs. The school year was short and attendance poor. Children, of course, walked to these schools, and many children who lived in the countryside were unable to attend. For many rural children therefore, instruction—mostly practical in nature—came from parents, nearby relatives, or neighbors. These circumstances did not, however, mesh well with states' interests in compelling student attendance. Policymakers and education leaders saw considerable value in using the system of common schools to accomplish national political and economic aims. To do

so, they were willing to structure schooling in ways that would affect the routines of family life and farm production, at time when most Americans farmed or lived in the country. As early as the 1880s, policymakers began to call for school consolidation as a way to improve the conditions of rural schools. Without innovations in the mechanics and infrastructure of transportation, however, these proposals had comparatively little impact.

Snyder and Hoffman (2001) found that by the 1930s, transportation technologies had caught up with proposals to create new consolidated schools, and the smallest rural schools began to close. Since that time, rural students have been bused to increasingly larger schools, located at greater and greater distances from their homes. In fact, since about 1930 consolidation cut the number of U.S. school districts by 91%, and the number of schools by 67%, while the number of students had simultaneously increased by 83%.

Killeen and Sipple (2000) revealed that the effect on rural school transportation budgets is seldom appreciated. Today, school districts in rural areas spend more than twice per pupil on transportation than what urban districts spend.

Howley and Howley (2001) noted that despite the fact that more than half a century generations of rural children had been riding school buses, educators knew very little about that experience from the perspective of communities, families, or students. Important questions, however, concern the length of rides experienced by rural students, the effects of those rides on school participation and academic achievement, and the impact of widespread school busing on rural ways of life.

Killeen and Sipple (2000) noted that rural educators, of course, knew that many of their students boarded buses early in the morning and arrived home in the very late

afternoon. Still, on the national level no data or statistics exist that accounted for the bus ride time for children. Howley, Howley, and Shamblen (2001) provided some rudimentary comparisons between ride times for elementary students in rural and suburban schools. Overall, the study showed that rural school children were more likely than their suburban counterparts to have bus rides of 30 minutes or longer. Their rides also tended to be more arduous, traversing poorer roads and more hilly or mountainous terrain than those experienced by suburban students. In addition—for good or ill—rural elementary children were quite likely to be double-routed, which meant that they rode the distance of two routes as an efficiency measure that placed them on buses with middle and high school students.

These transportation circumstances seemed to some educators a fair price for rural children to pay in order to derive benefits from larger, more centralized schools. But were there hidden costs? Certainly costs in academic terms offered serious cause for concern. Lu and Tweeten (1973) conducted one of the best studies in the literature, now quite dated, and confirmed a negative effect of duration of bus rides in Oklahoma on student achievement. Howley et al. (2001) found that in the absence of more recent studies on achievement impacts, the most reasonable basis for evaluating the costs and benefits of long bus rides came indirectly from research addressing the effects of large scale schools on the achievement of low-socioeconomic-status (SES) students. Findings from this research were relevant because shorter bus rides had been found to be positively associated with smaller school size. The U.S. Department of Commerce (1998) revealed that attention to the achievement of low-SES students made particular sense in rural locales, where so many families' incomes fell below the national median.

Bickel and Howley (2000) and Howley and Bickel (1999) reported extensive literature on the size of schools and districts, including those in rural communities, and spoke quite clearly to the issue of achievement. As this literature showed, smaller size tends to improve the overall achievement of schools and districts serving large proportions of impoverished students. Although these studies use school-and-district-level data, they did provide a reasonable basis for making inferences about how well low-income students who attended large, remote schools were likely to perform. And this reasoning lead to the conclusion that such students' academic achievement was likely to suffer. Whether rural students' long bus rides directly contributed to this deleterious outcome, of course, has yet to be shown.

Fox (1996) found that long bus rides also take students away from their homes and communities for many hours during each school day. In an investigation of rural Quebec families, Fox found that long rides reduced the number and variety of household activities and reduced students' sleep time, recreational time, academic attentiveness, and extracurricular participation. Moreover, Fox found that rural farm families were the ones most seriously inconvenienced, because their schedules were the least adaptable. Fox's assertions, though rare, were not unique. Beaumont and Pianca (2000) reported that school busing is part of a set of institutionalized school practices that contribute to the erosion of neighborhood cohesion. School sprawl deprived rural and small-town neighborhoods of children and their activities, but the possible harm done to social capital and community cohesion by this removal has not been studied.

Howley (2001) provided a preliminary picture of the rural school bus ride. Based on a five-state survey of elementary school principals, Howley discovered that most rural

children experience rides of excessive length. Whereas almost all such children (85%) experience one-way bus rides of more than 30 minutes, approximately one quarter of them experienced one-way rides of more than 60 minutes. Not only do long bus rides extend the length of the school day for many rural children, so too do long wait times at school (i.e., before the start of and after the conclusion of the instructional day). On average, the morning wait time for rural students in the responding schools was an estimated 14 minutes. Their average afternoon wait time was 13 minutes. Rural students also traveled to school over relatively rough roads. Although there was considerable variation by state, approximately 36% of rural bus routes traverse paved major roads, about 43% paved minor roads, and about 20% unpaved minor roads. Moreover, in many rural locales, sizable proportions of the roads used to transport children was across hilly and even mountainous terrain.

School buildings and sites. The U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that historically, school facilities have been built and maintained using local funds most often raised through local property taxes, bonds, or both. Depressed economies, lower property values, and an insufficient tax base were common to rural areas, and these factors had converged to prevent new construction as well as the regular upkeep required by older structures. Decades of deferred maintenance have left many rural schools in great need of repair. In a 1999 survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. Dept of Education, 1999), 78% of rural schools reported the need to spend money on repairs, renovation, or modernization to achieve a good overall condition for their facilities. Even more disturbing, only 36% of those schools reported plans to perform

essential maintenance. Unless steps are taken to combat the deterioration of existing rural school facilities, these problems will only be compounded.

School finance. Pritchard (2007) noted that in political debates over school facilities funding, rural communities are often overlooked because they are small, sparsely populated, and widely dispersed. Provisions in each state constitution guarantee all children an education. However, many state funding formulas favor property-rich school districts while viewing rural schools as an economic burden on wealthier areas of the state. In fact, 11 states, including Nebraska, require local communities to pay the entire cost of school facilities – a policy approach that is unfair to students who live and attend school in poor and rural communities. Some rural schools and parents have resorted to lawsuits as a way to address state funding formulas that rely heavily on local property to support school facilities. For example, lawsuits have been filed in many states across the nation: Arkansas, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Pritchard (2007) noted that legal challenges have been filed in 45 states. While parents and school districts have been the victors in these and other cases, systemic school facility problems persist.

Pritchard (2007) found winning in court has also come at a price for rural schools in states like West Virginia and Arkansas. In Arkansas, after 12 years of litigation, Lake View, a small, rural school district, successfully challenged Arkansas' school funding system in the state supreme court. However, the state Legislature, under court order to reform Arkansas' school funding system, decided to consolidate smaller districts including Lake View. Though they were able to successfully challenge the funding system in court the citizens of Lake View had lost their community school, while

students had lost the opportunity to be educated close to home. The experience in West Virginia paralleled that of Arkansas. Since winning in court, over 25% of West Virginia's rural schools have been shut down and consolidated.

McColl and Malhoit (2004) stated school facility policies are often written with mushrooming suburban areas in mind, neglecting the unique and important needs of small, rural communities. Often these policies support consolidation of rural community schools by requiring them to have a minimum student population. Other policies, such as minimum acreage requirements, have the practical effect of forcing small schools to be relocated to distant places far from centers of rural activity. Consolidation has been looked to as a cheap alternative to providing quality, local education. When states rely significantly on local funds to build and maintain school facilities, economic disparities between localities are echoed in the quality of the buildings in which children attend school. As researchers have found and the courts have affirmed, it is difficult for teachers to effectively teach and children to learn in schools that lack heat and air conditioning, have falling roofs and deteriorating floors, have unsafe electrical systems, contain toxic asbestos in ceilings or are not wired for computers and the Internet.

Lawrence (2002) reported that while conventional wisdom may suggest that larger schools are cheaper, research has proven the economies of scale promised by large school proponents are mostly fictitious. Larger schools have a greater percentage of their operating expenses tied up in added tiers of administration and higher transportation costs rather than programs and strategies that improved student learning. Eyre (2002) noted that even promises of a wider-ranging curriculum in larger schools have proven to be false. Forced to travel long distance on a bus to a larger school—sometimes as long as

two hours each way—students lose precious time that would otherwise be spent studying, participating in extra-curricular activities, or being with family and friends. There are cost-effective alternatives that can offer rural students the educational advantages often associated with wealthy suburban schools. In the new era of electronic communications, distance learning offers a cheaper and viable method to deliver an enriched curriculum to students in small and remote settings.

Lawrence (2002) stated that not only are small schools beneficial for students, in rural areas they are an essential part of the communities they serve. Rural communities often see their school as the glue of the community, providing cohesion and identity to a dispersed citizenry. Small schools not only provide a common gathering space, but reasons to congregate as a community. Furthermore, local schools provide local economic benefits. Studies have shown that closing rural schools can strangle the fragile economy of rural communities.

Lasley et al. (1995) observed that rural economic decline during the decade of 1970-1980 created more migration toward jobs in urban areas. As a result, rural public school enrollment declined and the cost of educating rural students started to rise. Declining enrollments and increased costs resulted in a financial crisis for many rural school districts. The farm crisis of the 1980s led to the loss of family farms, as modern farming techniques depended increasingly upon profits possible only through large-scale operations. The economic decline in agriculture created a ripple effect on non-farm economies in rural communities, again resulting in declining school enrollments and the loss of more rural graduates to urban areas where work was more plentiful.

Small rural school academic performance. Gibbs (2000) found that a rural renaissance in the 1990s refocused attention on schools and other institutions that shape economic and social outcomes. Perceptions of rural schools and the quality of rural education had moved away from the condescension of an earlier era. Where rural schools were once viewed as out of touch with modern society, suffering from geographic isolation and the inefficiencies of small enrollments and lack of specialization, they are often now praised for some of those same attributes. Mounting statistical and anecdotal evident of the benefits of small school size and close ties with the local community have led to favorable comparisons of rural schools with their often oversized urban counterparts. The picture that emerges from the most recent research is that rural schools are generally performing as well as urban schools. A key measure of performance—standardized test scores—demonstrates that rural students in the 1990s could easily hold their own. The past decade has emerged as a critical moment of many rural labor markets. Computer use in the workplace has accelerated, and rural firms appeared to be adopting high-tech production and management methods at about the same rate as urban firms. Rural labor markets are also becoming more like urban ones in the education requirements for local jobs. A key challenge for the rural education system then is to preserve its competitive advantages—small scale and close community ties—while it better prepares its students for the higher skill jobs that are coming to rural America.

Gibbs, Swaim, and Teixeira (1998) looked at a recent assessment of the rural education and training system conducted by federal and university researchers. These federal and university researchers examined rural workforce preparation and readiness,

comparing it against urban conditions and the changing needs of rural employers. The following discussion is based on the findings of that report.

Greenberg and Teixeira (1998) found that rural schools overall score nearly as well as urban schools in a variety of areas, though rural schools occasionally had fewer financial resources. Convergence in standardized test scores—based on a comparison of the performances of rural and urban 17-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science using the National Assessment of Educational Progress—is an excellent indicator that rural schools had caught up

Ballou and Podgursky (1998) noted that since the 1970s, the National Assessment of Educational Progress had been administered to students at various age levels. It was a rich source of information for education research because it linked test scores with information on students and schools, including location. In 1994, the latest year analyzed in the report, there was no statistical difference nationwide in the test scores of rural and urban students in math or reading, while rural students led slightly in the science component. This represented a rise in rural scores and a resulting convergence with urban scores since 1975, when rural scores were slightly below urban scores in science and reading and were significantly lower in math. The reasons for convergence are only partly understood. In their demographic and economic attributes, rural students had become more similar to their urban counterparts, as had the rural communities that support local school systems. And too, federal and state governments in the last few decades had committed to equal financial support for rural and urban schools.

School staff. Ballou and Podgursky (1998) found that higher rural student achievement is also due to improvement in rural schools themselves. In fact, the report

found little evidence to support the lingering images of outmoded organizational structures and inadequate curricula. Nevertheless, some gaps remained. For example, differences in teachers' salaries and qualifications persisted. Urban salaries were about 21% higher for starting teachers and 35% higher for teachers with masters' degrees and 20 or more years of experience. Since experience is typically rewarded more in urban labor markets than in rural markets, the increasing salary disparity with age was unsurprising. What surprised some was that rural teachers expressed as much satisfaction with their pay as urban teachers, which may reflect compensating factors, such as greater autonomy and influence that rural schools offer. Lower pay for experienced teachers in rural schools may play a role in rural teacher quality, which lags by some measures. Teachers in rural schools, for example, are younger on average and have less experience. Compensating factors that can allow rural schools to retain teachers at age 25 or 30 are less effective for 45-year-olds in the face of large urban-rural salary differences or opportunities in better-paying professions. About a third of rural teachers have graduate degrees, while nearly half of urban teachers do. Furthermore, rural teachers were only about half as likely to have graduated from top-ranked colleges or universities. This last fact was troubling, given the established links between the quality of a teacher's education and his or her classroom performance. A closer inspection, however, showed that this statistic applies to a small share of teachers – 7% of rural teachers and 15% of urban teachers graduated from more-selective colleges. These differences seemed less important when weighted against the positive news coming out of rural schools. Rural teachers were often more satisfied with their work environments and were more active in their local communities. Both of these traits improved a teacher's ability to motivate and

relate to students and to feel invested in their school's performance. Due in part to smaller school size—which is typically about half that of a large central-city school—rural teachers also had a greater degree of autonomy and more direct influence over school policy than do urban teachers. Finally, rural students may benefit directly from both smaller average school size and lower student-teacher ratios, although the latter remains a source of continuing debate.

McRel (2006) revealed that the town of Julesburg, Colorado, had a relatively high poverty rate and a small tax base. Because the area had few employers, people who grew up in Julesburg often moved away to find jobs, said the principal and teachers. As a result, the student enrollment at Julesburg had steadily declined over the past several years and with it, the funding available to the school and the number of teachers. At this point, the staff was at a bare minimum and programs such as art and music were threatened. Nevertheless, teachers started retiring over the next several years, and the school staff was concerned about how to attract new teachers to a community whose historically high teacher retention was linked to former agricultural or generational ties.

McRel (2006) found that longevity of the teaching staff was repeatedly identified by teachers as a strength and contributor to high student achievement, because it made it easy for them to work together for the success of the students. An administrator said that the retention of teachers led to a feeling of continuity and community across grades K-12. When asked why teacher retention is so high, the principal responded that there is a culture within the school that allowed teachers to feel important, valued, and a part of something special that provided rewards beyond monetary compensation. The teaching

staff believed they were all on the same page striving for exactly the same thing and that this made a difference in working in a small school.

Another teacher commented that her reason for staying was the strength of the community and the idea of allowing her children to enjoy the benefits of a small town. Another teacher noted that the majority of teachers had agricultural roots in their family background, which helps in a small rural town.

McRel (2006) discovered that both teachers and the principals said that teacher retention is a key factor in the success of the school because it led to consistency and stability, which helped with school improvement. Teachers tended to stay to raise families in the community because they liked the students, they grew up there, and they liked the location, with its impressive scenery and opportunities for outdoor activities. The principal also said that teachers had input into hiring, and they hired those with whom they could work easily. He also noted that nearby colleges were sources of new teachers and master's degrees for current teachers. That the school was near another state that paid lower teacher salaries prevented many from leaving strictly because of money. Parents said that they supported the teachers and wanted them to stay at the school, so they reinforced teachers' high expectations at home. Teachers and the principal said that teachers supported one another when they went through difficult times, so that they became a stronger faculty family. They also described a good working relationship with the administration, for example, being included in decisions about school policies such as block scheduling and graduation requirements. Overall, teachers said that the school environment empowered them and created a sense of ownership, which encouraged them to stay.

Teaching staff issues. Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, and Salgado (2005) found that because rural-specific research on the topic of teacher recruitment and retention efforts was sparse, the majority of information consisted of surveys, statistical reports, and policy briefings from state and national organizations. Much of this literature emphasized difficulties in urban retention and recruitment. Rural difficulties were often mentioned in passing, but rural-specific literature on the topic had not kept pace with other literature on the topic.

Also, a number of sources Ingersoll (2001), Murphy and DeArmond (2003),Voke (2002) and the National Association of State Boards of Education (1998) found that recent non-rural-specific studies showed that the problem of teacher shortages varies across geography, demography, and subject area, leading a number or researchers to conclude that the problem is largely one of distribution. Murphy, DeArmond, and Guin (2003) and the NASBE (1998) stated that the challenge centers on identifying teachers who were both qualified and willing to teacher in "hard-to-staff" schools. Typically, hard-to-staff schools included those in highly urban and rural areas, especially those schools serving minority or low-income students. Shortages also existed in certain geographic regions in the country (the Southeast, the Southwest, and the West) and in particular specialties such as special education, bilingual education, and math and science education.

Ingersoll (2001) and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) argued that teacher shortages were not so much the result of too few people entering the field, but of too many teachers leaving the profession. According to Ingersoll's (2001) analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics,

almost a third of America's teachers left the field sometime during their first three years of teaching. Almost half leave after five years. In many low-income communities and rural areas, the rates of attrition were even higher.

Collins (1999), Jimerson (2004), McClure, Redfield, and Hammer (2003), and Reeves (2003) found that the rural-specific literature identified four primary challenges faced by rural schools and districts: low pay, geographic and social isolation, difficult working conditions, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements for highly qualified teachers.

According to the Educational Research Service (2004), staff in rural schools earned lower-than-average pay in every employment category. In 2003-2004, rural teacher salaries averaged $41,131 compared to $43,460 for small towns and $50,844 for suburban areas (the biggest competitors for rural teaching talent). Beeson and Strange (2003) pointed out that the Rural School and Community Trust reported that the four lowest average salaries were all in Northern Plains states and, in general, the highest rural salaries were in large urban states. Jimerson (2003) found rural states tended to pay less than more populated/industrialized states and, within states, rural schools and districts tended to pay less than their urban and suburban counterparts. A 2004 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that rural superintendents see their districts' inability to provide competitive salaries for highly qualified teachers as a major obstacle to fulfilling the requirements of NCLB legislation.

Hammer et al. (2005) stated that geography also plays an important role in rural schools' ability to attract and retain teachers. Geographically isolated communities tend to have greater problems in attracting teachers, while rural schools and districts located

on the outskirts of suburban areas have greater difficulty in retaining teachers. Collins (1999) and Murphy and Angelski (1996/1997) found in a review of literature on rural teacher retention, that a survey of teacher mobility in one rural district indicated four main reasons why teachers leave communities: (a) geographic isolation, (b) climate/weather, (c) distance from larger communities and family, and (d) inadequate shopping. Proffit, Sale, Alexander, and Andrews (2002) stated that isolation is particularly unappealing to young, beginning teachers. On the other hand, rural schools located close to suburban areas were often able to attract teachers, but tended to lose them after only a few years. It may be that new teachers viewed these rural areas as attractive places to begin their teaching careers, but soon moved to higher paying positions in the nearby suburban schools. Collins (1999) and Harris (2001) theorized that teachers who stayed in rural areas were more likely to have grown up in small communities or to be committed to living in the region. Bornfield, Hall, Hall, and Hoover (1997) conducted a study that surveyed 86 special education teachers in rural states and concluded that staying seemed to be a matter of having roots in the community.

Charlotte Advocates for Education (2004) and Luekens, Lyter, Fox, and Chandler (2004) determined that other non-rural-specific studies have found that poor working conditions are frequently cited as primary reasons why teachers leave the field. Charlotte Advocates for Education (2004) found that working conditions cited by teachers as contributing to their decisions to leave include lack of basic resources and materials, lack of a strong professional community, ineffective leadership, and discipline issues. Teachers reported that large class sizes and the physical conditions of schools impaired teaching. Teachers also reported feeling overwhelmed by paperwork and the limited time

to plan and prepare for instruction. One study demonstrated that principals played a role in whether teachers stay. Principals created stress for new teachers when they were ineffective managers, lacked organization and planning skills, and provided little or no support.

Jimerson (2004) noted that while it was true that some of these issues were not as prevalent in rural schools as elsewhere (e.g., schools and class sizes are often smaller, and discipline was less of a problem), rural schools, and particularly small rural high schools, faced a unique problem in terms of working conditions. Teachers in many schools must teach multiple disciplines due to low student enrollment, and teaching "out of field" was common in small rural high schools, which could not afford to hire teachers to cover, for example, one class each of higher-level math and science courses. Having more classes to prepare for meant greater workloads for rural teachers, often for less pay than their suburban and urban counterparts.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, all teachers had to be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-2006 school year (some rural schools had until 2006-2007). A highly qualified teacher was one with full state certification, a bachelor's degree, and demonstrated competence in all subjects they taught. Jimerson (2003) and the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (2004) said that given the common practice of out-of-field teaching, rural schools and districts faced a difficult challenge in meeting this requirement. Researchers and advocates for rural schools argued that this requirement increased the existing competitive disadvantage for rural hard-to-staff and low-resource schools. Jimerson (2004) and Reeves (2003) both found that combined with the lower salaries, more

stringent certification requirements added another disincentive for teachers to take positions in rural schools. Teachers needed to pass multiple tests, unlike teachers in urban or suburban schools, who needed to pass only one test.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2004) stated it would be difficult for many rural teachers to obtain the required certifications for all subject areas they taught because they were often separated by long distances from colleges and training facilities. Rural district officials reported that the limited availability of professional development opportunities posed challenges to recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. Even when professional development opportunities were found, the limited availability of substitute teachers in small districts made it difficult to release teachers to attend training.

Hammer et al. (2005) summarized that collectively, lower salaries, social and professional isolation, difficult working conditions, and NCLB requirements for highly qualified teachers could place rural schools and districts at a competitive disadvantage in attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers.

Gibbs (1998) reported that rural schools and students had made enormous strides in the last half of the 20th century and deserved a good report card. On many indicators they compared favorably with their urban and international counterparts. Even so, there was little room for complacency. Policymakers should take a close look at the entire cycle of educational attainment, labor force development, and reinvestment in the community's educational infrastructure—or lack of it. Just as the education-labor market link was the tie that hindered advancements in many rural systems, it could also be the mechanism for historical change; as regional and local economies became more alike, so did their education needs. Remedies to remaining problems would need to take into

account the requirements of the high-skill workforce development track touted at all levels of government and the private sector as well as the uneven educational attainments of the rural population. The challenge ahead was to lift the average to the level of today's best. Success in meeting this challenge would mark one of our finest achievements.

Small Rural School Districts in Nebraska

In a 1988 paper titled "Class Dismissed: Examining Nebraska's Rural Education Debate" prepared for the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association, Sher (1988) reported the following information.

Nebraska school students. Viewed from afar, Nebraska seemed like a state that had solved the educational riddles baffling the rest of the nation. The Office of Planning, Budget, and Evaluation (1987) noted that Nebraska had a better record of retaining students through high school graduation than 48 other states. And, even given a far broader spectrum of students taking these national exams, the high scores of Nebraska's graduates ranked them among the top five states in America. In their words, Nebraska seemed to have unlocked the secret of how to motivate students to stay in school through graduation, to aspire to continue their education after high school, and to perform very well on the national academic achievement and aptitude tests.

The Center for Education Statistics (1987) stated that this was only the beginning of Nebraska's "educational magic." Consider the fact that these good results were attained in a state having teachers who were dramatically less well credentialed than their counterparts elsewhere. Then, consider that Nebraska was far from a wealthy state; in fact, it ranked below the national average in terms of per capita income and income supporting each pupil. Next, consider that the Nebraska state legislature spent fewer

dollars per pupil and paid a smaller proportion of the total schooling bill than all but a handful of states. And finally, consider that Nebraska's fine educational outcomes occurred in a state ranking 35th on overall per pupil expenditures – spending 14% below the national average!

Nebraska school finance. Lucas (2007) found that in 2002-03, Nebraska had the fourth lowest percentage of general fund revenue coming from state sources. Only Illinois, South Dakota, and Nevada received less from their respective states. In 1998-99, Nebraska had the sixth lowest percentage from state sources. As expected, Nebraska's 56.7% of revenue from local sources in 2002-03 was well above the national average of just 42.8%. This was an increase of 2% over the 54.7% from local sources during the 1998-99 year. As a percentage of receipts from local sources, Nebraska had the fourth highest total in 2002-03. Only Connecticut, Illinois, and Nevada relied more on their local sources than did Nebraska. Back in 1998-99, Nebraska had the seventh highest total of revenue coming from local sources.

Lucas (2007) noted that "annual cost per pupil" was a common measure of comparison between districts as it allows readers to see how much money is allotted per student. One arrives at the annual cost per pupil by dividing the total annual cost by the average daily membership. Uerling (1994) found that over a 15 year period the annual cost per pupil increased each year, from $1,596.87 in 1977-78 to $4,487.66 in 1991-92, with the dollar amounts not being adjusted for inflation. This was an overall increase of 181% and an average annual increase of 12.9%. It was important to note that the basic components of public school systems needed to be kept in place from year to year and that fluctuations in student enrollments would not necessarily be mirrored by

corresponding disparities in total annual costs. For example, a school with 32 students per grade level was likely to have two teachers at every K-6 level, just as a school of 48 students per grade level might also have just two teachers despite having 50% more students.

Lucas (2007) noted that disbursements for salaries have increased over time. It was important to note, however, that disbursements for fixed costs and fringe benefits had increased at an even greater rate. For instance, the school district contribution to the cost of health insurance rose from 2.4% of total annual cost in 1977-78 to 6.0% of total annual cost in 1991-92. The dollar amount for this item during this same time span rose from $11,500,801 to $73,669,562, which was an astounding increase of 540.6%.

Small school curriculum. Sher (1988) stated that any common sense division of the state's K-12 school districts along the urban-rural spectrum, or along the large-small continuum, was going to reveal the same basic reality. Nebraska's education system had, and always would have, far more small rural districts and schools than large urban ones. One of the often-overlooked aspects of this debate was that the state's small rural schools received a good deal of valuable curricular/teaching support from the network of Educational Service Units (ESUs). The instructional services provided through these units, and other cooperative sharing arrangements, were not counted in the tally of each school's array of learning resources and educational opportunities available to students. When the contributions of the Educational Service Units were considered, it made the case for the educational integrity of small rural schools even stronger.

Sher (1988) pointed out the goal ought to be to enable students everywhere in Nebraska to receive high quality instruction in a core group of courses deemed to be an

essential part of any student's education. There was widespread support in Nebraska, and nationwide, for the idea of core courses that every high school should offer, although there continue to be disagreements about exactly which courses should be included and excluded. The emerging national consensus was on the need for a leaner, stronger curriculum had important implications for the rural education debate in Nebraska. It meant that small rural high schools, in particular, could no longer be complacent about the "gaps" in their ability to provide students with first-rate instruction in all essential areas. Most important, however, this trend in educational reform gave small rural schools a new lease on life and a renewed sense of their own capacity for educational excellence. In an era when people really believed that a high school with 80 courses must be at least twice as good as one with "only" 40 courses, the small rural schools seemed tremendously handicapped by their size and resources. They could never "keep up with the Jones" in terms of the number, or diversity, or the courses offered. Now, however, the jumbo size curriculum had begun to look like a White Elephant and more like a liability than an asset in the quest for quality. Small, rural schools had thrived in an era that honored a limited, focused, well-rounded curriculum. When a premium was placed on doing a few things well, rather than trying to be all things to all people, small rural schools were in a position to compete successfully with larger systems and to excel.

Small school quality. Sher (1988) declared that the bottom line on the relationship between educational inputs and educational quality in Nebraska was that the state's small rural K-12 systems came out looking much better than the conventional wisdom would lead one to expect. While most small rural schools could not match the physical facilities and material resources of larger, more urban institutions, the research

indicated that (beyond the minimum health, safety, and comfort requirements) all this "stuff" had no discernible impact on the quality of education received by students, or on their later academic achievement. Teachers were important, but there was every reason to believe that small rural systems had been able to attract and retain their fair share of the state's good teachers. There certainly was no evidence revealing that rural schools were bereft of teaching talent. By national standards, Nebraska was in the enviable position of simultaneously outperforming and under spending nearly every other state. Its small rural K-12 schools were anything but a drag on Nebraska's success. Bigger urban schools were not demonstrably better, educationally, than smaller rural ones state—nor were they demonstrably more frugal or more efficient. Rather, both sets of schools remained net contributors to Nebraska's education magic.

State Legislative impact. Funk (2000) found Nebraska's small schools had been shortchanged by enacted school finance policies, LB 1114, which limited property tax levy rates, and LB 806, which changed the state aid distribution formula, that were first implemented for the 1998-99 school year. These measures were intended to force school expenditure cuts, especially among smaller, higher-cost schools and bring about property tax relief. To some extent, these policies succeeded in the dual goals of property tax relief and school revenue reductions. But a high level of school finance inequity for small schools had accompanied this limited success.

Funk (2000) noted the dual hammers of LB 1114 for property tax levy limits and LB 806 for the distribution of state aid to education had indeed cut small school expenditures and forced some consolidations. However, the property tax levy lid had failed to bring average levies for the smallest school districts down to the level of larger

ones, putting a relatively higher burden on rural property owners. Furthermore, larger school systems had received both property tax relief and large enough increases in state aid to maintain or increase total revenues.

Bailey and Preston (2000) stated that it was clear from the results of past studies regarding LB 806 and LB 1114 that rural districts had been hurt by the school finance formula. The public policy bias appeared to work against those small school systems located near other similar systems, generally in areas of relatively dense populations. This policy impact and the direct consolidation incentives contained in the school finance formula, created a powerful economic incentive for school systems to consider alternative structures such as consolidation or unification. This economic incentive became more powerful when considering the effects of the LB 1114 property tax lids. Despite the lids enacted pursuant to LB 1114 and the additional state aid to education appropriated by the Legislature, recent data showed property taxes in Nebraska—especially on agricultural land—remained among the highest in the nation. The continued heavy reliance upon property taxes for school financing in rural areas was particularly distressing in times such as when commodity prices and farm income were low.

An article in Rural Policy Matters (Rural school and Community Trust, 2008) outlined information concerning legislation in Nebraska. The Nebraska Unicameral passed a new school funding formula in April 2008 that made sweeping changes in the way $839 million in state aid was distributed. The new law, LB 988, went into effect for the 2008-09 school year. It was prompted in part by the reality that the funding formula in place for the 2007 year would have made schools eligible for an increase in state aid of over $131 million to $900 million, a 17% increase over the $769 million they received in

2007. The new formula not only cut the increase by nearly half—from $131 million to $70 million. It also substantially redistributed funding among school districts. Forty-one percent of the funding increase went to four large districts that sued the state over the funding formula. Omaha Public Schools alone would receive $21.3 million more than the 2007 school year and over one-third of all additional state funds. The lawsuit was withdrawn within 20 minutes of the signing of the bill into law. In 2007, the court had thrown out a school finance lawsuit filed by rural Nebraska districts.

Rural Policy Matters (2008) provided a background on Nebraska funding. In Nebraska, the state was responsible for providing funding to cover the difference between a district's "needs" (calculations for determining costs) and its "resources" (calculations for determining local tax revenues). Costs were calculated based on the number of students in the district and the assumed cost per pupil for that district. "Resources" were calculated by applying a statewide minimum tax rate to the district's taxable property valuation. The difference between the needs and the resources equaled state aid. When the computer did the math in February 2008, it came up with a state financial obligation to schools of $900 million, a number that was a little too high for the Legislature's taste. LB 988 (2008) raised the required local tax levy and changed the calculations for needs and resources, all to reduce the state's obligation. Under the new formula, the per pupil cost was based on the average per pupil cost of the 10 districts closest to it in enrollment size. The new formula also changed the way a local district's "resources" were calculated. It did this mainly by increasing the minimum local property tax levy a district must impose in order to qualify for state aid, from $0.95 per $100 of assessed valuation

of property to $1.00. That increase coupled with a rise in property valuations statewide would boost property tax revenue for schools as much as $94.3 million.

Rural Policy Matters (2008) pointed out how LB988 (2008) caused a redistribution of aid from rural to urban. LB 988 also changed the way the money was distributed among districts, primarily through several new cost "allowances" that sent extra money to some districts but not others. A few changes were beneficial to rural districts. For example, the formula provided additional funding for remote elementary sites. But many other more powerful changes shifted funding from rural to urban districts. One new provision sent more money to districts based on the level of education of its teachers. The more highly educated the faculty, the more funding per pupil. That approach helped districts that could afford to pay the higher teacher salaries commanded by teachers with advanced degrees. It harmed many rural districts, which typically had a lower percentage of teachers with master's degrees, due largely to the fact that rural teachers had less access to graduate programs they could complete while teaching. Almost half of this pot, about $11 million of the total $24 million, went to just five districts, including three suburban Omaha districts. Overall, 75 districts received funding through this provision, and 191, mostly small and rural districts received none of it. As a result, those who already had the better educated teachers were able to bid yet more for them, while those who could not afford them got no help. Another provision sent more money to districts that offered summer school. Omaha got more than half of the $6.6 million allocated, and 165 mostly small and rural districts got nothing.

Rural Policy Matters (2008) discussed how the new formula also boosted the money going to help districts serve low-income students. The higher the poverty rate, the

higher the amount of aid per low-income student. That was a good thing. But the boost did not help any rural poor districts. In 2006, Nebraska made poverty weights a "categorical" program, meaning that a district had to apply for the funds, develop a plan for providing separate help to students living in poverty, keep track of the funds separately, and report annually. Most small school districts lacked the staff to manage these administrative tasks and segregation of instructional services and many did not apply. Omaha received almost half of the state's $63 million in poverty funds, and seven other districts together took in another $14 million. According to the formula, 73 mostly small and rural districts got no extra funding for poor students. One of these, Minatare, a small, high-poverty community in western Nebraska, had a Title 1 eligibility rate that was a third higher than Omaha's.

Rural Policy Matters (2008) made the final point that the most anti-rural provision required districts with fewer than 390 students that were not located in areas designed as sparse (some rural areas are considered "sparse" or "very sparse" under the law, but many others are not) to sacrifice half of the per pupil funding it received above the per pupil funding received by a district with 390 students. The state called this provision, which it imposed on rural districts that chose to be small, the "local choice adjustment" and euphemistically referred to the penalty as "cost sharing."

Importance of school to community. Sher (1988) found in both urban and rural areas there were shared values (if not a consensus) about the need to strongly inculcate basic academic skills. Still, there continued to be differing beliefs about the role of the school. Urban people tended to believe that schools served the fairly narrow, technical function of equipping students with the requisite set of competencies. Any roles they

played above and beyond that might be appreciated, but they still were regarded essentially as "icing on the cake." The same was not true in rural Nebraska. In the countryside, there was an abiding faith in the ability—and necessity—of schools playing a broader role as vital community institutions. In part, this was a legitimate expression of the need of rural people in a democratic society to believe that they had a measure of influence over something in their world (since they are only too aware of their inability to effect the weather, international agricultural markets, governmental policies, urban-based institutions, and the other forces that shape their individual and collective lives). It also was the consequence of the rural tendency to see the inter-connectedness of all the components of their local community.

Sher (1988) saw that Nebraska already had the foundation upon which to build the finest rural schools in the nation. However, if this potential was discarded, and rural schools were forced into becoming pale imitations of metropolitan ones, then Nebraska would end up as a state in which "geography is destiny." And yet, if the inherent strengths of rural schools were embraced and extended, then Nebraska would end up as a state in which educational equity and rural rejuvenation became more than mere rhetoric. In either case, it was certain that Nebraska would reap precisely what it sowed.

Summary

The literature provided an overview of basic research about challenges facing small rural school districts, including those in Nebraska. The literature did not provide information about how those school districts were dealing with those challenges. Superintendents of such school districts were able to provide information about specific challenges their districts faced and how those challenges were being addressed. This

study would add to the existing literature concerning small rural Nebraska school district challenges and the solutions found by superintendents of those school districts.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify both challenges faced by small, rural, Nebraska school districts and possible solutions to those challenges. The researcher chose a case study methodology for this research project because the purpose of the study fit well with the bounded system that was synonymous with case studies. The case being studied was the challenges faced by 28 "very sparse" rural schools in Nebraska that were identified from Statistics and Facts About Nebraska Schools 2007-2008. Table 1 shows the 28 school districts studied, along with the enrollment, county, and system square miles for each. This researcher categorizes small rural school districts as those with an enrollment of less than 800 and listed as "very sparse" by the Nebraska Department of Education (n.d.). According to Yin (1989), case studies are best utilized when the focus of the research was on contemporary events and there was no need to control behavioral events. Hatch (2002) stated that data gathered from interviews within the constructivist paradigm was most often presented in a case study formation. The research data in this case identified well with these case study parameters.

Research Questions

This case study sought to achieve its purpose through a mail survey of the selected participants, document analysis to achieve triangulation, and telephone interviews of the small rural school district superintendents. Four basic questions were asked: what are the challenges faced by small, rural Nebraska school districts, how

Table 1

Very Sparse Schools as Identified on the Nebraska Department of Education Website from Statistics and Facts about Nebraska Schools 2007-2008

School	Enrollment	County	System Square Miles
McPherson County	73	McPherson	836.90
Arthur County	94	Arthur	746.10
Keya Paha County	102	Keya Paha	818.40
Sioux County	110	Sioux	1,963.40
Sandhills Public	120	Blaine	903.80
Wheeler Central	122	Wheeler	594.10
Thedford Public	126	Thomas	642.30
Hyannis Public	129	Grant	1,574.40
Arnold Public	151	Custer	462.80
Cody Kilgore Public	152	Cherry	553.00
Hayes Center Public	159	Hayes	625.10
Wallace Public	171	Lincoln	483.00
Banner County	173	Banner	802.30
Hay Springs Public	187	Sheridan	251.50
Mullen Public	192	Hooker	1,383.80
Rock County	195	Rock	1,004.70
Wauneta Palisade Public	203	Chase	453.10
Stapleton Public	204	Logan	601.50
Potter Dix Public	209	Cheyenne	512.50
Leyton Public	249	Cheyenne	559.40
Creek Valley	261	Deuel	566.60
Garden County	277	Garden	1,836.00
Hemingford Public	367	Box Butte	986.50
Perkins County	390	Perkins	825.00
Dundy County	411	Dundy	1,051.00
Ainsworth Public	500	Brown	1,186.70
Valentine Public	693	Cherry	3,434.30
Gordon/Rushville Public	770	Sheridan	2,186.60

are these challenges being solved, what challenges are likely to be faced in the future by small rural Nebraska school districts, and how might these challenges be solved? A panel of six non-participating superintendents reviewed the survey and concluded that the survey was asking appropriate questions about key topics to determine the challenges being faced.

Data Collection

Survey. The superintendents participating in the study were first contacted by mail with a letter that outlined how they were selected, the topic of the study, steps to be taken to ensure confidentiality of responses, and a copy of the survey. The method of data collection was a survey instrument using questions asked of the selected superintendents using the United States mail service as the conductor of the survey instrument that can be found in Appendix B. The survey was sent by mail to the superintendents with the contact letter and a stamped envelope with the author's address to increase response time. Participants were given two weeks to respond to the survey, which was mailed out on April 16, 2010. Telephone contacts were made with superintendents who did not respond to the survey within the two weeks and another copy of the survey was provided if needed (see Appendix C).

Interviews. Follow up telephone calls were made to interview the superintendents to clarify responses in greater depth. The telephone interviews were begun on June 15, 2010 and were completed on June 25, 2010. The superintendents were asked open-ended questions that allowed them to share their experiences and perspectives on the challenges faced by small rural school districts in Nebraska. The data were summarized and analyzed to identify common themes.

Delimitations

The membership of this study was confined to 28 very sparse school districts in Nebraska. These schools were selected because of their designation as "very sparse" formerly defined by the Nebraska Department of Education for state aid purposes. Due to this designation, these school districts face issues that are different than those faced by other school districts in Nebraska.

Limitations

For the sake of the readers, a limitation exists in the study in that the researcher of this study presently and previously has worked in small rural school districts in Nebraska. While all survey information and data were perceived to be as objective as possible, a potential bias may have existed.

Verification

Creswell (1998) and Hatch (2002) suggested numerous methods to ensure validity in qualitative research. However, Creswell (1998) suggested using the term "verification" instead of validity because verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct research approach.

Erlanderson, Harris, Shipper, and Allen (1993), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Merriam (1988) reminded the researcher to use rich, thick description allowing the reader to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer described the setting under study. Erlandson et al. (1993), stated that with such description, the researcher enabled readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings could be transferred "because of shared characteristics."

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, which was focused on the challenges of small rural school districts in Nebraska, it was assumed that all superintendents had observed and experienced various challenges in the small rural school district setting. As this study employed the use of a mail survey and telephone interview, it was further assumed that all interviewees would be as honest and objective as possible.

Significance of the Study

No study has been done to explore the special challenges that small rural Nebraska school districts face. The information generated from this study was intended to contribute to the knowledge base that currently existed regarding the challenges of such school districts.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to identify both challenges faced by small rural Nebraska school districts and possible solutions to those challenges. For this study, 15 areas of possible challenges were identified (a) student enrollment, (b) instructional programs, (c) instructional support services, (d) extra curricular activities, (e) hiring and retaining administrative staff, (f) hiring and retaining teaching staff, (g) hiring and retaining non-certified staff, (h) building and grounds, (i) transportation services, (j) food services, (k) school finances, (l) student assessment, (m) accountability school performance, (n) family support, and (o) community support. These items were selected through the research and suggestions from the supervisory committee and adviser. There were no data on this topic for the state of Nebraska. The information generated from this study will contribute to the knowledge base concerning small, rural school districts in Nebraska.

There were four basic research questions for this study:

1. What are the challenges faced by small rural Nebraska school districts?
2. How are these challenges being solved?
3. What are the challenges likely to be faced in the future by small rural Nebraska school districts?
4. How might these challenges be solved?

The instrument used to collect data contained 15 areas of possible challenges facing small rural Nebraska schools. Participants in the study were asked to respond to

each of the challenge items from the perspective of their own school district by circling a number from 1 to 5 that indicated 1-a minor/ no challenging or 5-major challenging. A 5-point Likert-Scale was used from 1-a minor/no challenge to 5-a major challenge. Figure 1 shows the Likert Scale scores from the most challenging to the least challenging according to the survey responses from the school district superintendents.

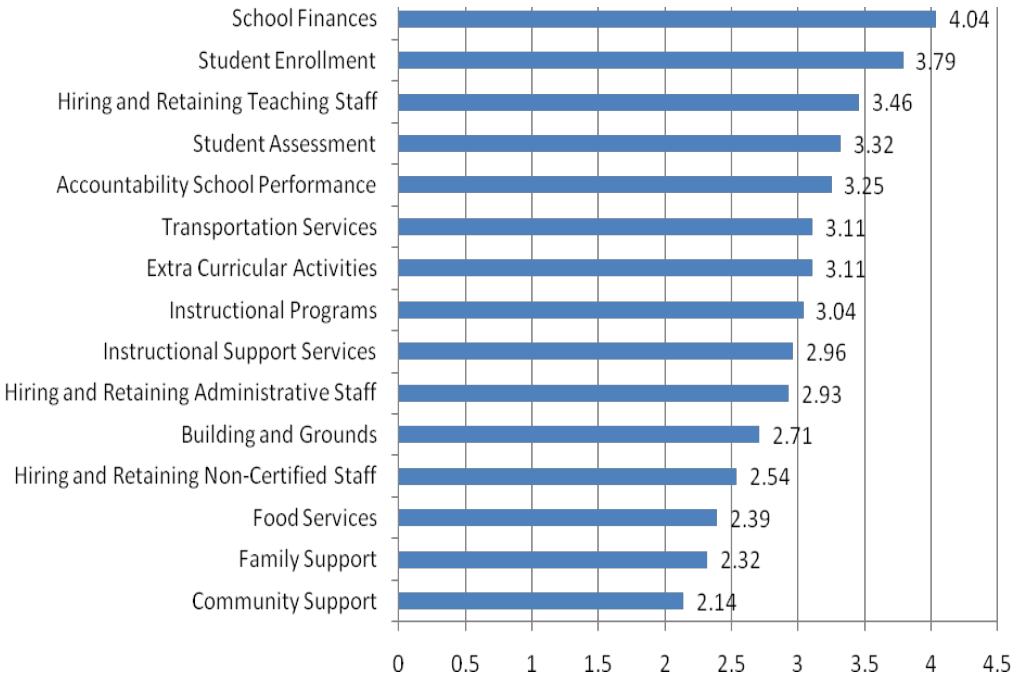

Figure 1. Survey challenges from most challenging to least challenging

The survey population for this study consisted of the superintendents of the 28 school districts that were designated as “very sparse” by the Nebraska Department of Education in a state aide formula that was used through the 2007-2008 school year. A total of 27 superintendents were participants in the study, with one superintendent filling out the survey for two schools due to being the superintendent of both. There were five

female superintendents and twenty-two male superintendents participating in the study. Only one superintendent did not return the initial survey, but did respond after a telephone contact and second mailing of the survey. The response rate for the survey was 100% of the 28 small, rural, Nebraska school districts.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics analyzed from the results of the survey completed by the school district superintendents.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics Analyzed from the Results of the Survey Completed by the School District Superintendents

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviations
Student Enrollment	28	1	5	3.79	1.134
Instructional Programs	28	2	5	3.04	.962
Instructional Support Services	28	1	5	2.96	1.071
Extra Curricular Activities	28	1	5	3.11	1.197
Hiring and Retaining Administrative Staff	28	1	5	2.93	1.303
Hiring and Retaining Teaching Staff	28	1	5	3.46	1.170
Hiring and Retaining Non-Certified Staff	28	1	5	2.54	1.105
Building and Grounds	28	1	4	2.71	1.049
Transportation Services	28	1	4	3.11	1.100
Food Services	28	1	5	2.39	1.100
School Finances	28	2	5	4.04	.962
Student Assessment	28	1	5	3.32	1.362
Accountability School Performance	28	1	5	3.25	1.266
Family Support	28	1	5	2.32	1.278
Community Support	28	1	5	2.14	1.177
Valid N (listwise)	28				

Figure 2 shows the range of the Likert Scale scores on each item of the survey.

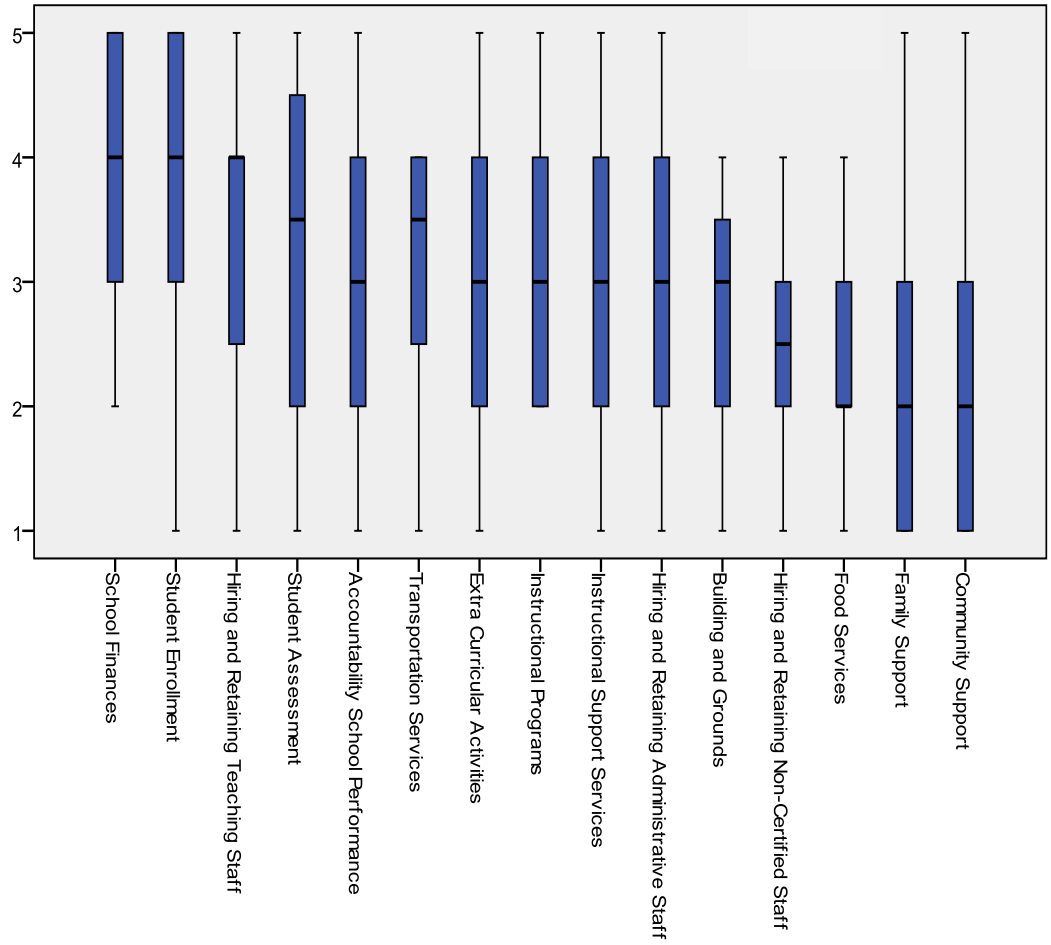

Figure 2. Range of responses for survey challenges from 5-being the most challenging to 1 – being the least challenging.

Survey and Interview Results

School finance. The number 1 challenge was school finance. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for school finance was 4.04. The decrease in state aid had caused financial challenges for most of the schools in the study, with superintendents believing that the only reason for

the decrease was a change in the state aid formula. The concern for many was that their budgets must be covered with local dollars and the present state aid formula hurt the schools. Educational costs for rural school students are high. Some superintendents expressed the loss in state aid as a percentage that ran from 25% to 30%, while one stated that his district "had lost almost one million dollars." It was stated that, "the state distribution of funds was unequal and that everyone needed to take a cut to resolve the education finance problem." One participant believed that state aid served the larger school districts in the state and he did not know if there was an answer for small school districts since the Legislature was run by Omaha, Lincoln, and communities that are within five miles of Interstate 80. Another said that "the state government was interested in educating students in Lincoln and Omaha not outstate Nebraska." He had to cut 14 positions last year and his district tax levy was at $1.00 and patrons would not stand for an increase. One superintendent pointed out that his school had an enrollment of 88 students and relied heavily on state aid, so if it dropped much more it would create a real serious problem. Another superintendent stated that, "the tax levy for schools would need to go up to offset the decrease in state aid, but this was an issue that was a difficult topic to discuss in rural areas where patrons already believe that taxes were too high." Some superintendents expressed frustration that they did not receive state aid, but still had to follow state standards.

The solutions to the financial challenge were very wide ranging. One superintendent stated that his district was in pretty good shape and he had worked to have a safety net in place, but could go through that money in a hurry. Cash reserve would be used to make up the difference in the short term, but a long-term solution must be sought

for some districts. Several superintendents have been cutting people by attrition and not using reduction in force to off set state aid lost. One said that his "district state aid was down to $69,000 so he had not replaced elementary and media staff." He had not cut programs, but cash flow was difficult. Another superintendent expressed frustration that due to being limited by state statute, he could bring in more money than he could spend, so was presently doing a reduction in force of an administrator, a business teacher, reduced library staff to half-time, and was down-sizing custodial and cooking staff. He was also looking at a change in class offerings. Making cuts in personnel was a solution expressed by many superintendents as well as cuts in transportation and refinancing bonds to free up money for other areas. One superintendent said that his district must "spend money wisely because they did not receive any state aid." They had to rely on themselves and had saved six months of cash reserve to help meet the financial challenge. One district was putting money into personnel and not materials so not buying buses or books, but investing money into keeping teaching staff. One superintendent expressed that funding was a big deal and no help was coming and the state aid cut had really hit hard. He was of the opinion that expectations for Lincoln and other schools should be higher than for small schools. Small schools should not have to have the same hoops to jump through; for example, accreditation should be less and teachers should not have to be endorsed in all areas. One superintendent indicated that his board of education liked what he had done so far in his time with the district, but the school budget is at bare bones and the levy has gone from .95 cents to .90 cents. He had to explain to the board the negative impact this has had on the district. Strong land valuations are helping offset the decrease in state aid for schools, however, some superintendents believed that the

valuations cannot keep going up and just cannot be sustained. Federal stimulus money was ending, so hard days are ahead for some districts. One superintendent commented that land valuation was up and her district does not receive state aid, so was not afraid of aid decrease, but she has board members who look at other districts and wonder why their district does not get more aid. Another superintendent said that the only state aid her school receives was from option enrollment students coming to her district.

Student enrollment. The number 2 challenge was student enrollment. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for student enrollment was 3.79. Rural areas had seen a decrease in population due to many reasons, and this has had a big impact on rural Nebraska schools. Home schooling and option enrollment were also stated as educational issues that have had an impact on rural school enrollment. To offset home schooling, superintendents were trying to encourage home school students to participate in public school activities whenever possible. Working to prevent students from optioning away and trying to encourage students to option into the district from a larger school district had seen some success. Letters were sent to parents and students who had optioned out trying to bring them back to their home district. Many districts relied on option enrollment for additional state aid money, which placed additional emphasis on this issue.

Superintendents were using many solutions to the enrollment challenge. Pushing transportation routes to the boundaries of districts are being used to bring in students that might attend another district due to distance. Some districts worked to find student boarding in town to offset transportation problems faced by parents and students. One superintendent closed the local district country school and transported the students to the

town site. Another district had no buses or transportation vehicles, so purchased three buses and now are transporting students from the border of the county, from nearby counties, and from other communities.

Some superintendents were promoting their school by advertising on radio, television, and newspapers, focusing on curriculum offerings, academics, and extracurricular activities. School consolidation had helped address the student enrollment for some districts, but this had come to an end due to the distances between school districts. Co-oping of school activities has helped some districts by increasing the number of students involved. However, some districts had a problem with option students not being able to participate in after school activities due to school transportation not being available when practice was concluded.

Superintendents were working with community leaders to try and get economic growth to come to the area. Lack of area and local housing was expressed as a problem with little new building being started in the district. The district had to work with local patrons to find available housing. Superintendents and community leaders were also looking for ways to bring in businesses and jobs for young people, thus giving people a reason to move to the rural area to raise children.

Many districts are using technology to offer more classes at the high school level. Several had begun to offer duel credit classes for high school and college credit, which had helped their students get started on college careers. Some districts had begun one to one programs where students are supplied with laptop computers to enhance their learning. Distance learning was being used to increase class offerings for students, which also allowed for the offering of duel level classes.

Hiring and retaining teaching staff. The number 3 challenge was hiring and retaining teaching staff. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for hiring and retaining teaching staff was 3.46. The location of the schools was a big factor in this challenge that was noted by several of the superintendents in the study. Location was also a factor in getting applicants for positions that were open. Attracting single teachers to the schools was hard due to there not being other single people in the area. Distance from colleges and businesses were also issues that impacted hiring. Some positions were hard to fill, but all are difficult. One district had openings in special education, K-12 music, and Spanish with one applicant for each position. Another district had an opening for music and only one applicant submitted all the application information so he was hired. One superintendent had been using a foreign teacher for his Spanish program, but the teacher was only able to stay for three years and then had to return home, so the position was open again. Money was a problem for some districts, but a more pressing problem was that teachers came for one to three years and then moved away. Another superintendent was trying to replace retiring teachers who had been with the district for a long tenure and now was only getting three to five applications.

Superintendents were trying many things to find a solution for this challenge. While some candidates like the rural areas, many candidates were graduates of the local school districts and have come home to work. With teacher reductions taking place in other parts of the United States school districts have received applications from candidates from as far away as the west coast, but superintendents found it hard to interview these candidates. Therefore, superintendents were trying to advertise on a

national basis, which they had found to cost more, but results had been positive. One superintendent hired a Spanish teacher from Mexico. Another superintendent commented that he had heard of some small schools offering signing bonuses or offering to pay off school loans as ways to attract applicants. The transition to teaching program offered at the University of Nebraska at Kearney was mentioned by other superintendents as a program that had helped them fill science and music positions. This program was designed to help people with degrees in learning areas to attain their teaching certificates by taking classes online while working in the schools as a teacher.

Student assessment. The number 4 challenge was student assessment. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for student assessment was 3.32. The challenges facing small rural schools included travel distance for training, low student numbers, poverty, special education students, student attitudes concerning the testing, and use of test results were found in the student assessment area. The distances to be traveled to train staff in the administration of the tests was a factor for many schools in trying to get their teachers prepared to proctor the tests. It was also mentioned that teacher training helped inform the teachers of just how much time must be committed to preparing for and administering the tests. Teacher training was important also from the standpoint that many small schools do not have a testing coordinator so with limited staff size it was important for each teacher to have the testing training. Some superintendents felt that teachers must teach to the test before the test was given. Several superintendents mentioned low student numbers as a problem with the testing and the difficulty of getting positive results on the tests. The low student numbers made it difficult to score and the aggregated data were hard to use in

making decisions relative to improvement plans. One superintendent said that he had one class with two special education students and one low functioning student so even with one student scoring a 32 on the ACT their scores came out low. Another superintendent said she had a class where "four students moved out of the district and there were six special education students remained in the class." Student motivation to do well on the tests was mentioned by several superintendents as a challenge. It was felt that the culture of some communities was not to see the importance of education and the attitude was carried over to the students who then did not put in the effort to do well on tests. One superintendent said that he thought the "STARS assessment system was much better than the present system and that it was his belief that the system now was not helpful and we were now running a Gotcha curriculum with no guidance." It was said that the publishing of low achieving schools and the changes from the Federal government were not helping. Opposition to the firing of principals was also expressed as a negative aspect of the present system of assessment.

To meet these challenges small rural schools looked to the Educational Service Units for teacher and principal training on student assessment. A superintendent said his students were not scoring well on tests so they were looking at tutoring and working on more research based learning in classes. One superintendent stated that his students did well overall and did not have a lot of diversity. He looked to continue to get teachers to training and hoped to continue to attain good data from the assessments

Accountability school performance. The number 5 challenge was accountability school performance. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for accountability school performance

was 3.25. The challenges facing small, school superintendents in this area were low student numbers, low-test scores, distance, minority students, and student/parent attitudes. One superintendent said, "that low student numbers really limited statistical data and low scores were hard to improve." Large percentage changes took place when working with small sample numbers that often had a negative impact even with some better test scores. Another superintendent stated that his "district had been placed on the "must improve" list put out by the state and accountability was further focused on the classroom. His concern was with low numbers combined with 25% of his enrollment made up of minority students that continued poor scoring was a major worry." Another concern for small, school superintendents was the belief that the people in charge in Lincoln do not understand the rural school district situation, but they needed to let them know what is wanted.

Superintendents sensed that it was important to turn around the attitudes of students to get them to see the importance of test taking and learning. Coupled with that thought was the importance of getting parents to require their students to take responsibility for their own education. It was also stated that teachers must monitor getting assignments done and increase their focus on state standards.

Extra curricular activities. The number 6 challenge was extra-curricular activities. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for extra-curricular activities was 3.11. There were many challenges in this area, beginning with finding sponsors for the activities, parental expectations, and student participation. Finding coaches was tough and especially trying to get young teachers who wanted to coach and assigning coaching duties was not a good

experience. Many superintendents had hired local community people to sponsor activities, but because they were not in school during the day with students, they did not know school procedures. For example, local community sponsors did not know about purchase orders. Parents and patrons were unaware of the talent level of the team and low participation numbers were negative factors thus high expectations were unwarranted. Some students did not participate in any activities, which made extra-curricular circumstances even more difficult for these small, rural schools.

One superintendent stated that he was "able to hire a retired teacher as a head basketball coach." Another superintendent stated that, "students must be passing or cannot play, which keeps the focus on academics and not on athletics." Superintendents had worked to cooperate with other districts in order to increase the number of students able to participate in activities. One school district had eight boys out for six-man football and could have done a cooperative program with a neighboring district, but the Board of Education did not wish to participate. This same school district had only five boys out for basketball so practiced with the girl's team in order to scrimmage. It was important for coaches to promote the activity and stay positive.

Transportation services. The number 7 challenge was transportation services. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for transportation services was 3.11. Distance, money, and drivers were problems with no evident solution. Superintendents spent a great deal of time on this challenge, which took away from other issues and planning. According to one superintendent, the cost of transportation vs. the number of students being transported was a big challenge. Expenses were going up and purchasing a new bus was difficult in

these economic times. One superintendent stated that his "district was paying $26.00 per route and having a tough time finding drivers." Fifteen-passenger vans can no longer be used as student transportation vehicles, so districts had gone to using SUV's, small buses, or 41 passenger buses. Some routes are over country roads and conditions are hard on vehicles and in some cases buses cannot get to student homes to pick them up. One district territory was so large that the school district was unable to cover the whole district with school transportation. Some parents were unhappy that the school was unable to transport students, so mileage was being paid to parents to transport them. Another district had two attendance sites and many miles to cover, so the district superintendent was working to eliminate shuttling students, however, the district was still using 12 passenger vans and trying to keep new vehicles on the road. Several superintendents expressed that it was getting tougher to get drivers licensed due to the distances drivers must travel to be tested and the Department of Motor Vehicles and Department of Education did not seem to be in agreement concerning licensing.

A superintendent stated that to offset transportation costs he was "co-oping with a neighboring district and sharing bus routes," while his district is in the process of purchasing another bus. Another superintendent mentioned that he had been putting money in his district sinking fund for the purchase of other transportation vehicles. One superintendent said that he has a bus route that is 48 miles one way and radios are not much help so had been using the satellite On Star program for trouble.

Instructional programs. The number 8 challenge was instructional programs. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for instructional programs was 3.04. Superintendents found that Rule 10

requirements concerning classes were harder to due to low student enrollment. Districts could only afford so many teachers and some had more teachers and classes than students to take the classes. Some small, rural school districts had limited class offerings with few electives, but core classes were covered. Some learning areas were hard to fill with qualified candidates and some school districts had not had candidates for some positions. Lack of local control was also mentioned as an issue in this area.

Several small school districts relied on distance learning to fill the gaps in high school class offerings, especially in areas of foreign language and duel credit classes. Educational Service Units were providing valuable service to the rural schools in meeting instructional program issues. Reading was the focus in many schools and one district had older proficient high school students coming down to work with elementary students who were below average in reading proficiency. One district had lengthened the school day to add reading time for students and had increased language arts for seventh and eighth grades to 90 minutes.

Instructional support services. The number 9 challenge was instructional support services. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for instructional support services was 2.96. The challenges in this area come from distance and money. Superintendents stated that the distance school staff or ESU staff must travel for staff development is a major problem in getting support services. Money was also a factor, so superintendents had cut para-educators and limited workshops, and several superintendents mentioned that any workshops provided must come to the school because staff travel was long and time consuming. One superintendent stated that due to distance his students did not have access to field trip

sites and this limit kept students from seeing things. Another challenge in the support services area was the lack of substitute teachers to cover staff members when they were gone for staff development.

Solutions to these challenges required that the superintendent plan for what was best for the district and align resources for staff development. Money had to be spent wisely and many services would not come to the district so superintendents must select carefully, which ones to spend money on. Small staff numbers meant that staff members were being asked to do more and cover a wide array of learning areas. Educating Board of Education members was very important to help them understand, what issues must be addressed by the teachers and the school. Superintendents were looking for multiple day workshops or conferences to send staff members to in order to justify the cost and distance traveled. One superintendent had adjusted his school calendar to allow for one Friday per month as an early dismissal to focus on student data.

Hiring and retaining administrative staff. The number 10 challenge was hiring and retaining administrative staff. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for hiring and retaining administrative staff was 2.93. Location was a big challenge for the small, rural Nebraska school districts. It was difficult to find applicants who wanted to locate in western Nebraska and the rural areas. Single candidates found it hard to live in the rural districts because there were few if any other single people living in the area. Lack of shopping and entertainment were also mentioned as drawbacks to attracting candidates. Getting candidates to interview, take the position, and stay were real challenges for these rural superintendents. It was stated that administrators come for one to three years and then leave. Some local districts

did not have the money to increase salaries. Housing was a challenge due to few houses being available for rent or purchase and new home construction was not a strong option. Locally many staff members do not go back to school and are not getting back for administrative degrees. The local college did not offer a superintendent degree so area educators had to travel further to attain a specialist degree.

For solutions to the challenges presented superintendents were looking for answers close to home. One district hired a local retired administrator to come back into the educational field. The elementary principal in one district married a local rancher, which gave the superintendent some assurance that the position would be filled for quite some time. Salary was not an issue for most districts and cost of living is not high in the rural communities. The belief shared was that most applicants came from the local area or grew up out in western Nebraska. Superintendents stated that with location being a problem, some candidates from South Dakota were being approached. It was mentioned in several telephone interviews that it was important to attract candidates who enjoyed the fishing and hunting that could be found in rural areas. One district shared a superintendent with another district and had found this to work over the short term. The main solution to the challenge was to grow your own administrators, so superintendents tried to promote the administrative field and encourage staff members to work toward the degree.

Building and grounds. The number 11 challenge was building and grounds. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for building and grounds was 2.71. The challenge with buildings and grounds was focused on distance, money, and older facilities. It was difficult to get

vendors to come and work on projects due to distance and paying mileage increased the cost of the project. The statement was made that it was hard to be competitive with bids because distance was a problem and it was hard to get vendors to come and do the work. Some projects were delayed due to having to wait a long time to get vendors to do the work. Costs to cover expenses and staffing were a problem so when considering this challenge superintendents must prioritize very carefully. Money concerns to keep up buildings and grounds was such a problem that projects were moved to a later date. One district that had consolidated found that the middle school in one community was not in good shape. Older elementary and secondary buildings have issues especially HVAC roof units from the 1970's needed to be replaced soon. Aging facilities with air conditioning and heating issues were a problem.

Not all districts reported facilities problems, but cautioned that needs always have to be noted and addressed. Some districts are looking at putting people together for system improvements and possible new construction projects to handle enrollment needs. Program needs have changed, for example, the demand for technology has increased the need for better electricity. One superintendent said that his teachers are never turned down on purchase orders, and he had pride in his facilities because his custodial staff kept the buildings clean and neat.

Hiring and retaining non-certified staff. The number 12 challenge was hiring and retaining non-certified staff. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for building and grounds was 2.54. The challenge here centered on finding people for the positions available. The non-certified positions mentioned as difficult to fill were bus driver and custodian. Some schools had

the same people doing both driving and cleaning so were running into some labor wage problems due to overtime. Finding substitute bus drivers was hard, one superintendent stated that he had been looking for over a year and a half for substitute drivers and had been unable to find anyone. People were looking for good salaries and benefits, which limited the number of candidates for the positions, because some non-certified positions do not have benefits and people were going where they could receive them.

To meet this challenge superintendents were looking at their teaching staffs as possible fill-ins for driving. Some schools were having coaches get their bus drivers licenses so they could drive for activities and field trips. The position of para-educator was strong in many schools and superintendents felt that they had good people in these positions to work with students.

Food services. The number 13 challenge was food services. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for food services was 2.39. Distance, cost, food quality, and staff were challenges in this area. Distance was a factor for several districts due to having more than one attendance site and only one kitchen at which to prepare food. Several districts transported students to another site for meals or delivered the meals to the site that had no kitchen. One superintendent stated that he did not like having to deliver meals, but could not afford to put in another kitchen and usually found himself subsidizing the lunch fund with $15,000 even after charging high prices for lunches. Another superintendent wanted his hot lunch program to be more self-supporting so had been transferring funds to off-set expenses. The cost to deliver food to schools was a challenge due to the distance that must be traveled. It was mentioned that fresh fruit was hard to receive. More than one

superintendent mentioned as a challenge the difficulty of keeping a cooking staff because as cooks retired or moved away finding a replacement was difficult. One superintendent stated that his district had no lunch program and students brought their own lunch or there were two places in town where students could eat. The majority of his families wanted to have a hot lunch program, but the Board of Education would not consider developing one. This had caused some other problems because the district was not eligible for Title I or other grants because they had no free or reduced lunch applications, which play a part in the grant application process.

One superintendent said that his district had set up a wellness group to work with the cooks to improve the food quality and variety. Assistant cooks were being trained and counted on to replace head cooks when the need occurred for many districts in the study.

Family support. The number 14 challenge was family support. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for family support was 2.32. Parental involvement, demographics, and parental attitudes were mentioned as challenges for superintendents in this area. Parents needed to be more involved in school and students required more help and encouragement to learn from their parents. One comment from a superintendent was the family needed to be accountable because it was not fair to only have teachers and the school being held accountable for student learning. The demographics of student homes had changed and more families now were single parent homes or lower income or both, which could result in students not having support and no rules at home. These homes usually have lowered expectations for students and parents are not involved with the school. A rural

superintendent said that a vocal minority group in her district did not like that the school was pushing academics. These parents believed that the school was having students work too hard in school. These parents expect their children to work at home on the farm or ranch after getting out of school and had a lower academic expectation for boys.

To meet the family support challenge, one superintendent planned to have a data retreat with parents so they could understand more about school and she wanted to set goals for the next two to five years for academics. She would then select four to five parents to take part in the data retreat in the future. Her goal was to also create an environment where patrons felt welcome in the school. Another superintendent planned to work with the students in his elementary school to try and get them to believe in doing better and have them to look ahead to finding a career.

Community support. The number 15 challenge was community support. On the Likert Scale of 1-being the least challenging to 5-being the most challenging, the mean score for community support was 2.14. The challenge in this area was mainly that the drop in enrollment had seen fewer people supporting the school especially if they had no children or grandchildren attending. Many of these patrons were paying taxes and that was the extent of their school involvement. A superintendent commented that five families ran his booster club and parents came to Parent Teacher Conferences and ball games and that was limit of their involvement with the school.

Small numbers had helped one rural school district because one local patron came to graduation and awarded $500 to $700 for each graduate and there were many local

scholarships awarded. Most of this district's graduates went on to the next level of education, and this was viewed as a big advantage for the district.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations, Observations, and Future Research

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify both challenges faced by small, rural Nebraska school districts and possible solutions to those challenges. No data was available on this topic for the state of Nebraska regarding the challenges facing small, rural Nebraska school superintendents. The information generated from this study will contribute to the knowledge base concerning small, rural schools in Nebraska.

There were four basic research questions for this study:

1. What are the challenges faced by small rural Nebraska school districts?
2. How are these challenges being solved?
3. What are the challenges likely to be faced in the future by small, rural Nebraska school districts?
4. How might these challenges be solved?

The instrument used to collect data contained 15 challenges facing small, rural Nebraska schools. Participants in the study were asked to respond to each of the challenge items from the perspective of their own school district by circling a number from 1 to 5 that indicated 1-minor/no challenge or 5-major challenge. A five point Likert-scale was used from 1-a minor/no challenge to 5-a major challenge.

The population for this study consisted of the superintendents of the 28 school districts that were designated as “very sparse” by the Nebraska Department of Education in a state aide formula that is no longer in use. A total of 27 superintendents were participants in the study with one superintendent filling out the survey for two schools

due to being the superintendent of both. Only one superintendent did not return the initial survey, but did respond after a telephone contact and second mailing of the survey. The response rate for the survey was 100% of the 28 rural Nebraska school districts.

Follow up telephone calls were made to interview the superintendents to clarify responses in greater depth. The telephone interviews were began on June 15, 2010 with the final interview completed on June 25, 2010. The superintendents were asked open-ended questions that allowed them to share their experiences and perspectives on the survey challenges faced by small rural school districts in Nebraska. The data was summarized and analyzed to identify common themes.

For this study, 15 challenges were identified. The challenges ranked in order of most challenging to least challenging were as follows: (a) school finances, (b) student enrollment, (c) hiring and retaining teaching staff, (d) student assessment, (e) accountability school performance, (f) extra-curricular activities, (g) transportation services, (h) instructional programs, (i) instructional support services, (j) hiring and retaining administrative staff, (k) building and grounds, (l) hiring and retaining non-certified staff, (m) food services, (n) family support, and (o) community support.

Conclusions

The 15-challenge areas in the survey can be placed in four main categories. The categories were school finance, enrollment, distance, and people. The categories also overlap so they cannot be examined alone, but must be looked at as to how they are related to each other. For example, school finance issues impacted transportation, building and grounds, extra curricular activities, and instructional support services.

School finance played a role in many of the challenges due to the decrease in state aid and unwillingness of local patrons to increase the school tax levy. The fluctuation of state aid created a problem with planning for buildings and grounds, all staff hiring and retention, transportation, and food services. Advanced planning by superintendents was daunting and each of them was gambling that they were correct because the margin for error is very slim. Many of the small, rural schools in the study were at or just below the $1.05 maximum tax levy allowed by Nebraska law, so if state aid drops or land valuations level off or drop, superintendents will be facing a bigger challenge to balance their budgets. Included in Appendix D is the state aid history by district for each of the schools in the study from the 1990-91 school year to the present, which shows the percent of change from one year to the next of the state aid paid to the districts.

Enrollment is a major factor in most of the challenges being faced by small, rural, schools in Nebraska. Almost every challenge being faced by small, rural school superintendents can be traced back to student enrollment. Enrollment is a factor in school finance, student assessments, school performance accountability, transportation, staffing, instructional and support service, food service, public and family support. The problems with low student numbers was found in state aid funding, federal funding, assessment data, class offerings, and extra-curricular activities to name a few areas that were impacted. Superintendents may find that they are offering more classes than they have students to take them, which results in the district with full time teachers only teaching half time. Low student numbers put a strain on small rural schools across the board and left superintendents with few options available to them to address this challenge.

Distance was a very large challenge for small, rural schools in Nebraska and the impact was felt in many areas. The distances that had to be traveled for student transportation, staff training, supplies, work projects, and extra-curricular activities caused increased time for the staff and increased cost to the district.

Working with and finding people to fill the needs of small, rural schools were an every-day challenge for superintendents. Present employees and patrons were asked to give extra to help in the education process of school students and their activities. These people were expected to give more time and in more areas than those found in other educational systems. The challenge for superintendents was to find these people and work with them to stay in the system for a long period of time in order to have a positive impact on the education of the students found in these schools.

Recommendations

Superintendents in small, rural Nebraska schools must keep up on the financial status of the state as well as the district. Their knowledge of the state aid formula is very important because small changes in district information can have an impact on the state aid that is paid to the district. District financial planning is very important due to the variability of funds from one year to the next and the changing requirements coming from both the state and federal levels.

As a recommendation for the distance challenge facing small, rural Nebraska schools superintendents should look to technology to deliver staff training and curriculum. Many small schools are using distance learning, online classes, and computer-based curriculum to fill in the educational needs that are not available or hard to receive. Educational Service Units have the ability to deliver training and

informational sessions to address staff needs and updates. To do this it is important for superintendents to become knowledgeable about technology and also to become users of technology to gain understanding of how it can help and what the best systems are available to use.

Superintendents must look to hire teachers that are endorsed in more than one area, so even with fewer staff members the school districts could offer a full curriculum of classes for their students. It is also important for the superintendent to work with community leaders to help plan for the community and offer suggestions as to how the educational system can work to be a positive force in bringing people and business to the area. The superintendent in small, rural Nebraska schools must be able to get people to go beyond their normal duties and rely on their experience to resolve challenges. They must also become users of technology to advance their knowledge and expand their networking base in order to keep up with the changing challenges of education.

Observations

The researcher found the superintendents very open to discussing their school district, and they seemed pleased that someone was interested in them. There was a little frustration in their tone and a belief that they were battling foes they could not see or control, but giving up was not their option. I am not so sure that this does not go to the spirit of the western land and the determination to succeed no matter what the challenges.

One superintendent mentioned that his experience was much like the Charles Dickens novel Tale of Two Cities. He is the superintendent of two school districts and they are very different in the challenges that both experience. In the area of finance one struggles and needs every dollar that can be saved and spent, while the other school has

plenty of money. Both struggle with similar challenges, but the answers for each are not the same.

It was not discussed in the telephone conversations with the superintendents, but a financial option that could be used might be the levy override that can be done with the support of the community. Having experience with levy overrides, I know that they can make a difference for a school district and take the pressure off of the up and down cycle of state aid. A levy override vote gives the district the encouraging support that tells the students, teachers, administrators, and board members that the community wants the school to continue and be successful. However, a levy override places a small, rural, school district in a very dangerous position because when the high school enrollment declines below 60 students for two years in a row, landowners can move their property to a neighboring district. This moving of property is termed "freeholding." The landowner whose property is contiguous to a neighboring district can move his property to that other district and any other property owner who is now contiguous to this property can now move his property. A domino effect is created that eats away at the districts borders taking away from the district valuation that is needed to finance the district budget. This creates a situation much like that found in Ernest Hemingway's novel The Old Man and the Sea where the fisherman caught a very large marlin that he straps to the side of his skiff and heads for home. On the way home, sharks begin to eat on the marlin and no matter how hard the fisherman battles, he cannot keep the sharks away. By the time he reaches shore the next morning all that is left of the marlin is a skeleton.

Future Research

Future research is needed on small, rural, school districts to see how superintendents are working to resolve the challenges faced by their districts. The solutions that these superintendent use to resolve the challenges could have important meaning for how schools are managed and the learning and education of students. The knowledge gained from these superintendent's efforts may offer different perspectives in how education and services may be delivered to students in the future.

Specific topics would be those that were found to be the biggest challenges in the study by the Nebraska superintendents. Those topics are school finances, student enrollment, hiring and retaining teaching staff, student assessment, and accountability school performance. Studies of other states with other small, rural school districts in other state similar to Nebraska could provide the basis for comparison on a national level.

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Appendix A

Definition of Sparcity

Definition of Sparsity

Sparsity was a term used in the Nebraska state aid formula for the years 2007-2008. School districts were categorized as "standard," "sparse," or "very sparse."

Standard were districts that did not qualify for the sparse or very sparse cost groupings.

Sparse had four categories that could be used to define districts:

1) Less than 2 census students per square mile in the county in which each high school was located.
2) Less than 1 formula student per square mile in the local system.
3) More than 10 miles between each high school attendance center.

Or

1) Less than 1.5 formula students per square mile in the local system.
2) More than 15 miles between each high school attendance center.

Or

1) Less than 1.5 formula students per square mile in the local system.
2) More than 275 square miles in the local system.

Or

1) Less than 2 formula students per square mile in the local system.
2) The local system included an area equal to 95% or more of the square miles in the largest county in which a high school attendance center was located.

Very Sparse had two categories that could be used to define districts:

1) Less than .5 census students per square mile in the county where the high school was located.

2) Less than 1 formula student per square mile in the local system.

3) More than 15 miles between high school attendance centers.

Or

1) More than 450 square miles in the local system.

2) Less than .5 formula students per square mile in the local system.

3) More than 15 miles between high school attendance centers.

Appendix B

Survey

This is a request for your assistance in completing the research for my dissertation at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, "Small Rural Nebraska School Districts: Challenges and Solutions." The purpose of the study is to explore both (1) the challenges and the (2) solutions to these challenges faced by small rural Nebraska schools.

Please respond to each of the following items from the perspective of your own school district by circling a number from 1-5 that indicates 1 least challenging or 5 most challenging. Return the completed survey instrument to me in the enclosed envelope.

Thank you.

Potential Challenge	Minor/No Challenge				Major Challenge
A. Student Enrollment	1	2	3	4	5
B. Instructional Programs	1	2	3	4	5
C. Instructional Support Services	1	2	3	4	5
D. Extra Curricular Activities	1	2	3	4	5
E. Hiring and Retaining Administrative Staff	1	2	3	4	5
F. Hiring and Retaining Teaching Staff	1	2	3	4	5
G. Hiring and Retaining Non-Certified Staff	1	2	3	4	5
H. Building and Grounds	1	2	3	4	5
I. Transportation Services	1	2	3	4	5
J. Food Services	1	2	3	4	5
K. School Finances	1	2	3	4	5
L. Student Assessment	1	2	3	4	5
M. Accountability School Performance	1	2	3	4	5
N. Family Support	1	2	3	4	5
O. Community Support	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix C

Letter to Participants

Follow-up Message

University of Nebraska Lincoln

IRB# 20100410487 EX
Date Approved: 04/16/2010
Valid Until: 12/31/2010

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Educational Administration

April 16, 2010

Dear

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln and am asking for you assistance. I am currently doing a research study of the challenges past, present, and future facing small rural schools in Nebraska. Before LB 988 amended the Nebraska state aid program in 2008, there were twenty-eight school districts classified as "very sparse." You are superintendent of one those twenty-eight school districts who would have special insights about the topic of this study. I have enclosed a survey of general questions related to the challenges you have experienced in a small rural Nebraska school.

The survey should take no more than 20 minutes to complete. I ask that you complete the survey and return it to me in the enclosed envelope. Upon receiving the survey, I will be contacting you by telephone to interview you concerning the solutions to the challenges. There are no known risks associated with participation in the research. Benefits include the opportunity for you to reflect on the challenges and solutions faced by rural schools in Nebraska. All data will be pooled and reported in aggregate form so no individual names or individual districts will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to ask questions and have them answered before or after filling out the survey. If you do have question about the survey or the study, please call or e-mail me using the information below or contact my doctoral advisor, Dr. Donald Uerling. Your return of the completed survey instrument will be considered as your consent to participate in the study.

I want to thank you in advance for your participation. I look forward to receiving your survey. Your efforts and assistance in this research is greatly appreciated and will add to the knowledge concerning challenges in small rural schools in Nebraska.

If you have any questions about being a research participant or wish to report any concerns, contact the UNL Institutional Review Board (402) 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Montgomery
Superintendent
Leigh Community Schools
Leigh, NE 68643
mmontgomery@esu7.org
Office: 402-487-3301

Dr. Donald Uerling
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
134 TEAC
Lincoln, NE 68588-0360
duerling1@unl.edu
Office: (402) 472-0970

DATE:

Dear Superintendent,

You were recently sent a doctoral survey as part of a research study of the challenges and solutions facing small, rural schools in Nebraska. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, but is vital for the research to be complete. I hope you will be able to take the time soon to complete the survey and return it to me.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Montgomery
Superintendent
Leigh Community Schools

Appendix D

State Aid History

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **21-0089-000**
District Name: **ARNOLD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$223,822.15	N/A
1991/92	$118,996.16	(46.83)%
1992/93	$95,233.70	(19.97)%
1993/94	$95,233.70	0.00%
1994/95	$95,233.70	0.00%
1995/96	$136,732.01	43.58%
1996/97	$182,109.10	33.19%
1997/98	$118,595.26	(34.88)%
1998/99	$186,763.42	57.48%
1999/00	$332,571.09	78.07%
2000/01	$267,332.15	(19.62)%
2001/02	$520,168.52	94.58%
2002/03	$641,562.09	23.34%
2003/04	$559,804.78	(12.74)%
2004/05	$544,839.52	(2.67)%
2005/06	$463,952.79	(14.85)%
2006/07	$442,876.90	(4.54)%
2007/08	$369,223.01	(16.63)%
2008/09	$292,205.50	(20.86)%
2009/10	$285,364.04	(2.34)%
2010/11	$69,441.35	(75.67)%

Search Again

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **09-0010-000**
District Name: **AINSWORTH PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$564,163.67	N/A
1991/92	$740,315.15	31.22%
1992/93	$605,927.73	(18.15)%
1993/94	$689,241.85	13.75%
1994/95	$757,555.13	9.91%
1995/96	$757,555.13	0.00%
1996/97	$696,144.45	(8.11)%
1997/98	$972,733.47	39.73%
1998/99	$1,083,475.22	11.38%
1999/00	$1,475,838.59	36.21%
2000/01	$1,076,568.46	(27.05)%
2001/02	$1,412,936.68	31.24%
2002/03	$1,704,615.65	20.64%
2003/04	$1,696,251.50	(0.49)%
2004/05	$2,061,149.66	21.51%
2005/06	$2,469,922.78	19.83%
2006/07	$2,493,491.38	0.95%
2007/08	$2,417,975.81	(3.03)%
2008/09	$2,233,827.27	(7.62)%
2009/10	$2,136,974.01	(4.34)%
2010/11	$1,573,281.59	(26.38)%

Search Again

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **03-0500-000**
District Name: **ARTHUR COUNTY SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **2**

State Aid History		
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$14,812.13	N/A
1991/92	$14,812.13	0.00%
1992/93	$17,454.88	17.84%
1993/94	$14,812.13	(15.14)%
1994/95	$40,170.42	171.20%
1995/96	$11,564.82	(71.21)%
1996/97	$5,890.77	(49.06)%
1997/98	$83,444.10	1,316.52%
1998/99	($2,454.91)	(102.94)%
1999/00	$176,149.72	(7,275.40)%
2000/01	$38,688.45	(78.04)%
2001/02	$135,836.56	251.10%
2002/03	$175,814.97	29.43%
2003/04	$178,969.83	1.79%
2004/05	$121,785.84	(31.95)%
2005/06	$213,874.86	75.62%
2006/07	$347,027.14	62.26%
2007/08	$463,308.56	33.51%
2008/09	$463,282.18	(0.01)%
2009/10	$421,095.18	(9.11)%
2010/11	$405,903.33	(3.61)%

Search Again

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **04-0001-000**
District Name: **HARRISBURG PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History		
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$79,631.52	N/A
1991/92	$79,631.52	0.00%
1992/93	$79,631.52	0.00%
1993/94	$93,736.44	17.71%
1994/95	$133,705.47	42.64%
1995/96	$189,932.40	42.05%
1996/97	$167,555.77	(11.78)%
1997/98	$311,510.12	85.91%
1998/99	$192,317.63	(38.26)%
1999/00	$373,543.54	94.23%
2000/01	$456,820.85	22.29%
2001/02	$433,731.11	(5.05)%
2002/03	$467,066.74	7.69%
2003/04	$609,795.91	30.56%
2004/05	$528,076.11	(13.40)%
2005/06	$488,527.54	(7.49)%
2006/07	$569,284.95	16.53%
2007/08	$885,957.23	55.63%
2008/09	$844,768.17	(4.65)%
2009/10	$770,835.09	(8.75)%
2010/11	$598,786.95	(22.32)%

Search Again

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **16-0030-000**
District Name: **CODY-KILGORE PUBLIC SCHS**
Class of District: **2**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$179,286.64	N/A
1991/92	$183,889.92	2.57%
1992/93	$205,475.56	11.74%
1993/94	$114,504.47	(44.27)%
1994/95	$289,501.04	152.83%
1995/96	$459,722.93	58.80%
1996/97	$546,097.26	18.79%
1997/98	$554,323.26	1.51%
1998/99	$553,958.75	(0.07)%
1999/00	$804,731.94	45.27%
2000/01	$708,438.57	(11.97)%
2001/02	$762,946.01	7.69%
2002/03	$838,616.46	9.92%
2003/04	$954,315.03	13.80%
2004/05	$846,953.73	(11.25)%
2005/06	$928,340.36	9.61%
2006/07	$978,661.83	5.42%
2007/08	$1,075,223.17	9.87%
2008/09	$1,034,475.89	(3.79)%
2009/10	$981,908.06	(5.08)%
2010/11	$989,385.20	0.76%

Search Again

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **25-0025-000**
District Name: **CREEK VALLEY SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
2004/05	$463,464.43	N/A
2005/06	$423,016.04	(8.73)%
2006/07	$297,007.33	(29.79)%
2007/08	$958,154.19	222.60%
2008/09	$862,099.49	(10.02)%
2009/10	$805,657.25	(6.55)%
2010/11	$680,826.73	(15.49)%

Search Again

Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **29-0117-000**
District Name: **DUNDY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$160,985.13	N/A
1991/92	$160,985.13	0.00%
1992/93	$160,985.13	0.00%
1993/94	$160,985.13	0.00%
1994/95	$173,138.26	7.55%
1995/96	$137,926.59	(20.34)%
1996/97	$177,455.64	28.66%
1997/98	$117,573.06	(33.75)%
1998/99	$386,580.76	228.80%
1999/00	$954,968.56	147.03%
2000/01	$780,310.77	(18.29)%
2001/02	$813,775.67	4.29%
2002/03	$754,893.07	(7.24)%
2003/04	$524,786.42	(30.48)%
2004/05	$697,890.64	32.99%
2005/06	$691,385.38	(0.93)%
2006/07	$854,698.88	23.62%
2007/08	$1,023,979.75	19.81%
2008/09	$1,761,005.63	71.98%
2009/10	$930,923.38	(47.14)%
2010/11	$644,585.24	(30.76)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **35-0001-000**
District Name: **GARDEN COUNTY SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$51,534.93	N/A
1991/92	$51,534.93	0.00%
1992/93	$51,534.93	0.00%
1993/94	$51,534.93	0.00%
1994/95	$56,104.28	8.87%
1995/96	$54,543.42	(2.78)%
1996/97	$24,968.87	(54.22)%
1997/98	$126,581.12	406.96%
1998/99	$142,539.90	12.61%
1999/00	$263,946.27	85.17%
2000/01	$248,300.04	(5.93)%
2001/02	$180,592.45	(27.27)%
2002/03	$429,222.77	137.67%
2003/04	$280,881.67	(34.56)%
2004/05	$165,533.09	(41.07)%
2005/06	$64,023.64	(61.32)%
2006/07	$58,425.92	(8.74)%
2007/08	$48,897.45	(16.31)%
2008/09	$34,879.77	(28.67)%
2009/10	$59,028.98	69.24%
2010/11	$20,942.13	(64.52)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **81-0010-000**
District Name: **GORDON-RUSHVILLE PUBLIC SCHS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
2005/06	$1,006,745.47	N/A
2006/07	$2,961,455.30	194.16%
2007/08	$3,045,520.44	2.84%
2008/09	$3,193,596.91	4.86%
2009/10	$3,263,742.76	2.20%
2010/11	$2,827,438.40	(13.37)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **43-0079-000**
District Name: **HAYES CENTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$68,156.04	N/A
1991/92	$68,156.04	0.00%
1992/93	$68,156.04	0.00%
1993/94	$68,156.04	0.00%
1994/95	$68,156.04	0.00%
1995/96	$44,810.57	(34.25)%
1996/97	$122,623.58	173.65%
1997/98	$95,626.83	(22.02)%
1998/99	$208,700.44	118.24%
1999/00	$428,085.00	105.12%
2000/01	$371,019.26	(13.33)%
2001/02	$521,597.15	40.58%
2002/03	$671,653.42	28.77%
2003/04	$487,422.29	(27.43)%
2004/05	$631,749.99	29.61%
2005/06	$658,047.75	4.16%
2006/07	$898,771.82	36.58%
2007/08	$915,116.11	1.82%
2008/09	$809,159.30	(11.58)%
2009/10	$813,675.60	0.56%
2010/11	$464,324.02	(42.93)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **81-0003-000**
District Name: **HAY SPRINGS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$273,389.18	N/A
1991/92	$308,145.27	12.71%
1992/93	$426,228.02	38.32%
1993/94	$680,942.53	59.76%
1994/95	$638,324.97	(6.26)%
1995/96	$639,953.40	0.26%
1996/97	$681,047.88	6.42%
1997/98	$770,102.83	13.08%
1998/99	$665,501.08	(13.58)%
1999/00	$550,271.13	(17.31)%
2000/01	$817,648.74	48.59%
2001/02	$695,660.67	(14.92)%
2002/03	$644,939.29	(7.29)%
2003/04	$669,357.03	3.79%
2004/05	$552,164.88	(17.51)%
2005/06	$458,090.44	(17.04)%
2006/07	$732,547.81	59.91%
2007/08	$1,264,102.81	72.56%
2008/09	$1,227,732.43	(2.88)%
2009/10	$1,322,858.91	7.75%
2010/11	$1,151,795.35	(12.93)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **07-0010-000**
District Name: **HEMINGFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$451,759.76	N/A
1991/92	$384,433.06	(14.90)%
1992/93	$420,049.46	9.26%
1993/94	$239,259.06	(43.04)%
1994/95	$246,082.99	2.85%
1995/96	$456,076.14	85.33%
1996/97	$482,735.36	5.85%
1997/98	$569,675.70	18.01%
1998/99	$744,212.63	30.64%
1999/00	$891,703.53	19.82%
2000/01	$1,050,726.24	17.83%
2001/02	$1,421,241.26	35.26%
2002/03	$1,406,846.65	(1.01)%
2003/04	$1,257,775.14	(10.60)%
2004/05	$1,002,922.83	(20.26)%
2005/06	$1,024,888.19	2.19%
2006/07	$895,890.31	(12.59)%
2007/08	$1,095,088.02	22.23%
2008/09	$987,968.23	(9.78)%
2009/10	$909,834.83	(7.91)%
2010/11	$671,022.88	(26.25)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **38-0011-000**
District Name: **HYANNIS HIGH SCHOOL**
Class of District: **6**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$38,799.74	N/A
1991/92	$38,799.74	0.00%
1992/93	$47,281.04	21.86%
1993/94	$80,869.03	71.04%
1994/95	$80,852.06	(0.02)%
1995/96	$97,844.96	21.02%
1996/97	$38,579.57	(60.57)%
1997/98	$70,323.69	82.28%
1998/99	$234,342.08	233.23%
1999/00	$90,349.27	(61.45)%
2000/01	$116,846.07	29.33%
2001/02	$57,862.29	(50.48)%
2002/03	$15,218.99	(73.70)%
2003/04	$31,193.54	104.96%
2004/05	$37,631.89	20.64%
2005/06	$44,143.88	17.30%
2006/07	$67,846.87	53.69%
2007/08	$293.93	(99.57)%
2008/09	$0.00	(100.00)%
2009/10	$11,290.61	10,000.00%
2010/11	$20,564.46	82.14%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **52-0100-000**
District Name: **KEYA PAHA COUNTY SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **2**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$76,823.16	N/A
1991/92	$76,823.16	0.00%
1992/93	$76,823.16	0.00%
1993/94	$76,823.16	0.00%
1994/95	$76,823.16	0.00%
1995/96	$33,616.50	(56.24)%
1996/97	$6,758.71	(79.89)%
1997/98	$6,370.33	(5.75)%
1998/99	$0.00	(100.00)%
1999/00	$11,855.31	10,000.00%
2000/01	$6,448.15	(45.61)%
2001/02	$6,868.64	6.52%
2002/03	$5,438.71	(20.82)%
2003/04	$11,766.22	116.34%
2004/05	$6,582.20	(44.06)%
2005/06	$1,681.77	(74.45)%
2006/07	$13,962.99	730.26%
2007/08	$148.83	(98.93)%
2008/09	$0.00	(100.00)%
2009/10	$7,811.65	10,000.00%
2010/11	$7,425.84	(4.94)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **17-0003-000**
District Name: **LEYTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$92,308.70	N/A
1991/92	$92,308.70	0.00%
1992/93	$92,308.70	0.00%
1993/94	$128,319.56	39.01%
1994/95	$178,441.05	39.06%
1995/96	$157,853.30	(11.54)%
1996/97	$92,165.40	(41.61)%
1997/98	$140,046.23	51.95%
1998/99	$91,795.24	(34.45)%
1999/00	$74,380.16	(18.97)%
2000/01	$30,568.69	(58.90)%
2001/02	$415,348.18	1,258.74%
2002/03	$510,299.88	22.86%
2003/04	$585,701.94	14.78%
2004/05	$566,173.28	(3.33)%
2005/06	$659,132.86	16.42%
2006/07	$903,928.71	37.14%
2007/08	$1,021,204.09	12.97%
2008/09	$886,807.99	(13.16)%
2009/10	$878,232.68	(0.97)%
2010/11	$368,102.54	(58.09)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **60-0090-000**
District Name: **MCPHERSON CO HIGH SCHOOL**
Class of District: **6**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$59,890.69	N/A
1991/92	$70,743.80	18.12%
1992/93	$21,062.86	(70.23)%
1993/94	$21,062.86	0.00%
1994/95	$21,062.86	0.00%
1995/96	$27,785.41	31.92%
1996/97	$4,649.39	(83.27)%
1997/98	$35,736.81	668.63%
1998/99	$24,386.72	(31.76)%
1999/00	$29,539.32	21.13%
2000/01	$19,204.97	(34.99)%
2001/02	$50,823.92	164.64%
2002/03	$103,066.21	102.79%
2003/04	$32,052.21	(68.90)%
2004/05	$17,026.33	(46.88)%
2005/06	$58,788.22	245.28%
2006/07	$120,368.15	104.75%
2007/08	$247,558.93	105.67%
2008/09	$208,753.06	(15.68)%
2009/10	$214,577.56	2.79%
2010/11	$53,517.27	(75.06)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **46-0001-000**
District Name: **MULLEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$159,324.38	N/A
1991/92	$154,496.17	(3.03)%
1992/93	$154,496.17	0.00%
1993/94	$154,496.17	0.00%
1994/95	$154,496.17	0.00%
1995/96	$63,667.19	(58.79)%
1996/97	$32,518.14	(48.92)%
1997/98	$25,477.14	(21.65)%
1998/99	$58,931.96	131.31%
1999/00	$209,689.93	255.82%
2000/01	($10,544.15)	(105.03)%
2001/02	$47,779.71	(553.14)%
2002/03	($20,255.82)	(142.39)%
2003/04	($20,535.98)	1.38%
2004/05	($20,535.98)	0.00%
2005/06	$20,022.31	(197.50)%
2006/07	$30,963.26	54.64%
2007/08	$412,393.49	1,231.88%
2008/09	$349,857.90	(15.16)%
2009/10	$302,179.37	(13.63)%
2010/11	$276,446.33	(8.52)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **68-0020-000**
District Name: **PERKINS COUNTY SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
2005/06	$212,500.82	N/A
2006/07	$1,165,755.05	448.59%
2007/08	$1,045,344.74	(10.33)%
2008/09	$1,680,056.07	60.72%
2009/10	$784,925.19	(53.28)%
2010/11	$194,664.39	(75.20)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **17-0009-000**
District Name: **POTTER-DIX PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$92,848.26	N/A
1991/92	$92,848.26	0.00%
1992/93	$92,848.26	0.00%
1993/94	$92,848.26	0.00%
1994/95	$93,306.25	0.49%
1995/96	$94,299.19	1.06%
1996/97	$31,579.81	(66.51)%
1997/98	$122,012.40	286.36%
1998/99	$169,212.15	38.68%
1999/00	$519,573.39	207.05%
2000/01	$541,098.70	4.14%
2001/02	$610,372.27	12.80%
2002/03	$643,992.10	5.51%
2003/04	$531,027.10	(17.54)%
2004/05	$420,627.27	(20.79)%
2005/06	$603,062.05	43.37%
2006/07	$413,296.75	(31.47)%
2007/08	$786,273.00	90.24%
2008/09	$797,204.93	1.39%
2009/10	$669,084.12	(16.07)%
2010/11	$592,116.01	(11.50)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **75-0100-000**
District Name: **ROCK COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$114,695.51	N/A
1991/92	$100,907.33	(12.02)%
1992/93	$79,729.25	(20.99)%
1993/94	$79,729.25	0.00%
1994/95	$79,729.25	0.00%
1995/96	$69,246.88	(13.15)%
1996/97	$61,346.04	(11.41)%
1997/98	$59,751.98	(2.60)%
1998/99	$215,015.87	259.85%
1999/00	$356,866.26	65.97%
2000/01	$116,262.94	(67.42)%
2001/02	$156,438.29	34.56%
2002/03	$70,878.78	(54.69)%
2003/04	$13,526.21	(80.92)%
2004/05	$13,801.28	2.03%
2005/06	$18,287.60	32.51%
2006/07	$0.00	(100.00)%
2007/08	$0.00	0.00%
2008/09	$0.00	0.00%
2009/10	$15,789.68	10,000.00%
2010/11	$15,217.93	(3.62)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **05-0071-000**
District Name: **SANDHILLS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$211,852.68	N/A
1991/92	$211,852.68	0.00%
1992/93	$211,852.68	0.00%
1993/94	$211,852.68	0.00%
1994/95	$211,852.68	0.00%
1995/96	$77,861.05	(63.25)%
1996/97	$56,197.38	(27.82)%
1997/98	$48,169.93	(14.28)%
1998/99	$182,796.12	279.48%
1999/00	$158,730.71	(13.17)%
2000/01	$78,484.76	(50.55)%
2001/02	$95,718.33	21.96%
2002/03	$178,070.79	86.04%
2003/04	$94,354.40	(47.01)%
2004/05	$226,066.59	139.59%
2005/06	$256,455.36	13.44%
2006/07	$477,797.17	86.31%
2007/08	$5,540.54	(98.84)%
2008/09	$49,793.62	798.71%
2009/10	$81,828.65	64.34%
2010/11	$39,005.16	(52.33)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **83-0500-000**
District Name: **SIOUX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

	State Aid History	
Certification Year	**State Aid Paid**	**% Change from Previous Year**
1990/91	$19,332.03	N/A
1991/92	$19,332.03	0.00%
1992/93	$21,971.74	13.65%
1993/94	$19,332.03	(12.01)%
1994/95	$27,245.35	40.93%
1995/96	$25,591.21	(6.07)%
1996/97	$11,121.69	(56.54)%
1997/98	$11,012.37	(0.98)%
1998/99	$0.00	(100.00)%
1999/00	($620.81)	10,000.00%
2000/01	($355.61)	(42.72)%
2001/02	($231.78)	(34.82)%
2002/03	($116.86)	(49.58)%
2003/04	$44.34	(137.94)%
2004/05	($24.22)	(154.62)%
2005/06	($12.48)	(48.47)%
2006/07	$64,251.11	(514,932.61)%
2007/08	$0.00	(100.00)%
2008/09	$0.00	0.00%
2009/10	$11,128.89	10,000.00%
2010/11	$10,688.72	(3.96)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **57-0501-000**
District Name: **STAPLETON PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$352,549.66	N/A
1991/92	$347,771.36	(1.36)%
1992/93	$259,810.43	(25.29)%
1993/94	$231,661.11	(10.83)%
1994/95	$231,661.11	0.00%
1995/96	$189,855.40	(18.05)%
1996/97	$343,514.08	80.93%
1997/98	$494,611.94	43.99%
1998/99	$469,155.26	(5.15)%
1999/00	$669,054.74	42.61%
2000/01	$479,310.61	(28.36)%
2001/02	$690,488.54	44.06%
2002/03	$652,117.58	(5.56)%
2003/04	$543,948.93	(16.59)%
2004/05	$389,261.74	(28.44)%
2005/06	$451,277.14	15.93%
2006/07	$531,343.74	17.74%
2007/08	$865,066.01	62.81%
2008/09	$807,249.45	(6.68)%
2009/10	$764,582.16	(5.29)%
2010/11	$467,153.53	(38.90)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **86-0001-000**
District Name: **THEDFORD RURAL HIGH SCHOOL**
Class of District: **6**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$99,368.23	N/A
1991/92	$72,409.29	(27.13)%
1992/93	$104,959.53	44.95%
1993/94	$89,035.54	(15.17)%
1994/95	$100,650.81	13.05%
1995/96	$96,744.18	(3.88)%
1996/97	$121,815.45	25.92%
1997/98	$135,866.50	11.53%
1998/99	$82,762.90	(39.09)%
1999/00	$142,317.19	71.96%
2000/01	$154,498.12	8.56%
2001/02	$168,690.16	9.19%
2002/03	$244,957.37	45.21%
2003/04	$86,759.89	(64.58)%
2004/05	$179,371.07	106.74%
2005/06	$193,226.38	7.72%
2006/07	$155,390.25	(19.58)%
2007/08	$310,008.29	99.50%
2008/09	$271,078.63	(12.56)%
2009/10	$236,355.52	(12.81)%
2010/11	$129,395.12	(45.25)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **16-0006-000**
District Name: **VALENTINE RURAL HIGH SCHOOL**
Class of District: **6**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$257,773.00	N/A
1991/92	$234,839.51	(8.90)%
1992/93	$234,839.51	0.00%
1993/94	$234,839.51	0.00%
1994/95	$234,839.51	0.00%
1995/96	$121,982.85	(48.06)%
1996/97	$62,917.62	(48.42)%
1997/98	$63,304.63	0.62%
1998/99	$394,457.01	523.11%
1999/00	$666,401.41	68.94%
2000/01	$516,514.22	(22.49)%
2001/02	$448,386.48	(13.19)%
2002/03	$585,238.10	30.52%
2003/04	$616,764.40	5.39%
2004/05	$542,215.92	(12.09)%
2005/06	$827,702.92	52.65%
2006/07	$2,210,141.13	167.02%
2007/08	$1,902,199.30	(13.93)%
2008/09	$1,710,308.09	(10.09)%
2009/10	$1,525,779.40	(10.79)%
2010/11	$553,009.40	(63.76)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **56-0565-000**
District Name: **WALLACE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **2**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$72,375.21	N/A
1991/92	$72,375.21	0.00%
1992/93	$72,375.21	0.00%
1993/94	$72,375.21	0.00%
1994/95	$72,375.21	0.00%
1995/96	$44,638.73	(38.32)%
1996/97	$24,944.46	(44.12)%
1997/98	$24,637.07	(1.23)%
1998/99	$26,104.30	5.96%
1999/00	$22,729.50	(12.93)%
2000/01	$20,466.28	(9.96)%
2001/02	$225,918.41	1,003.86%
2002/03	$195,316.34	(13.55)%
2003/04	$185,707.16	(4.92)%
2004/05	$49,084.33	(73.57)%
2005/06	$198,908.12	305.24%
2006/07	$360,346.06	81.16%
2007/08	$387,030.06	7.41%
2008/09	$251,708.19	(34.96)%
2009/10	$288,173.75	14.49%
2010/11	$270,082.86	(6.28)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **15-0536-000**
District Name: **WAUNETA-PALISADE PUBLIC SCHS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1992/93	$118,646.07	N/A
1993/94	$118,646.07	0.00%
1994/95	$142,647.16	20.23%
1995/96	$213,427.87	49.62%
1996/97	$361,175.85	69.23%
1997/98	$389,834.75	7.93%
1998/99	$679,662.30	74.35%
1999/00	$732,599.56	7.79%
2000/01	$766,080.80	4.57%
2001/02	$612,249.41	(20.08)%
2002/03	$764,015.69	24.79%
2003/04	$577,377.19	(24.43)%
2004/05	$749,103.08	29.74%
2005/06	$675,635.13	(9.81)%
2006/07	$556,730.13	(17.60)%
2007/08	$974,693.09	75.07%
2008/09	$891,966.72	(8.49)%
2009/10	$844,430.93	(5.33)%
2010/11	$565,751.48	(33.00)%

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Nebraska Department of Education

Finance & Organizational Services (FOS)

State Aid History by District

County-District Number: **92-0045-000**
District Name: **WHEELER CENTRAL SCHOOLS**
Class of District: **3**

State Aid History

Certification Year	State Aid Paid	% Change from Previous Year
1990/91	$72,706.89	N/A
1991/92	$72,706.89	0.00%
1992/93	$72,827.11	0.17%
1993/94	$73,234.15	0.56%
1994/95	$72,827.11	(0.56)%
1995/96	$48,334.64	(33.63)%
1996/97	$24,167.32	(50.00)%
1997/98	$21,788.54	(9.84)%
1998/99	$0.00	(100.00)%
1999/00	$0.00	0.00%
2000/01	$0.00	0.00%
2001/02	$0.00	0.00%
2002/03	$0.00	0.00%
2003/04	$0.00	0.00%
2004/05	$0.00	0.00%
2005/06	$0.00	0.00%
2006/07	$0.00	0.00%
2007/08	$0.00	0.00%
2008/09	$0.00	0.00%
2009/10	$9,154.82	10,000.00%
2010/11	$8,958.95	(2.14)%

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