

Evaluation Practice in Rural Areas  
A Vertical Case Study of Evaluation in Three Minnesota Districts

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents,  
who always told me that education is the key to success.

## **Abstract**

The larger purpose of this study was to highlight educational evaluation mandates, practices, and their implementation and impact in a rural context. This was done by examining rural schools that were involved in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) because PLCs are often required to do evaluation activities for accountability purposes and also have evaluation processes central to their functioning. This research aimed to map out evaluation activities and influences through the analysis of PLC initiatives in three Greater MN school districts and schools. A vertical case study design created a rich description of evaluation practices. The researcher spoke with participants at each level of PLC functioning (state, region, local administration, and classroom), which allowed on the unearthing of similarities and differences in understandings of evaluation.

This research illustrated that “evaluation” meant different things to different people. It seems that these differences depended on what level they worked at, their involvement with state initiatives, and how directly they worked with students. Generally speaking, state mandates had a large influence on people’s understandings of evaluation, and evaluation done for accountability purposes was not seen as useful or valued as much as evaluation done for self-identified goals and program improvement. Participants tended to focus more on organizational factors that affected evaluation practice than on individual factors. Organizational factors that impacted evaluation practice included, but were not limited to: (a) the size of the district/school, (b) local leadership, (c) time, and (d) the movement towards standards-based grading.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction and Problem Statement**

### **Background**

Rural student performance and graduation rates can generally be classified as average. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicate that public school students in rural areas on average outperform students in large cities on 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading, math, and science assessment scores, but do worse than students in suburban areas (Provasnik, KewaiRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). This same trend is seen in high school graduation rates (Provasnik et al., 2007). However, as is almost the case, there is room for improvement. For example, students in rural areas don't have equal access to educational opportunities. Although 33% of schools in the United States are classified as rural and about 20% of public school students attend school in rural districts, there is considerable variation from state to state with a low of 6.5% in Massachusetts and a high of 75.3% in Montana (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Rural students also enter into and complete college at lower rates than any other locale (Provasnik et al., 2007; Koricich, 2014), lack access to postsecondary education (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2011), have lower ambitions for higher education (Hektner, 1995; Koricich, 2014), and are less prepared academically to enter college (McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) divides rural areas into three categories including: (a) fringe areas which are “less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that [are] less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster,” (b) distant areas that are “more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster,” and (c) remote areas that are “ more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp>).

In spite of these gaps, rural education has yet to receive adequate attention at the national level (McDonough et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2014; Koricich, 2014). The importance of rural student achievement should not be underestimated. Not only are rural schools distinctly different from urban schools with their smaller often decentralized institutions and geographic isolation, but rural school enrollment has been consistently growing faster than non-rural enrollment over the last decade (Johnson et al., 2014). For example, between the 1999-2000 and the 2008-2009 school years, rural district enrollment experienced a growth rate of more than 22 percent (an increase of more than 1.7 million students) while non-rural enrollment increased by 1.7 percent (673,000 students) (Johnson, Showalter, & Klein 2012). Furthermore, rural schools are seeing increasing rates of poverty, an influx of minority students, and higher rates of students with special needs (Johnson et al., 2014). Between the 2008-2009 and 2010-2011 school year the percentage of rural students qualifying for free and reduced priced meals increased from 41% to 46.6% (~603,000 students) (Johnson et al., 2014). During this same time period the percentage of rural minority students increased by 5.1% (127,151 students) and the percentage of rural students with qualifying for special education services increased from 12.1% to 12.8% (~85,000 students) (Johnson et al., 2014). Clearly, rural education is increasing in complexity. If left unexamined and unattended to, it is likely that rural issues will continue.

One way to improve rural student performance is through the use of evaluation in schools. However, in order to improve school programs and student outcomes, evaluation activities should be focused on building capacity of schools to learn and improve instruction and address specific contextual needs of rural schools. Instead,

evaluation in schools is currently focused almost entirely on accountability. Educational evaluation in the United States has roots in both school accreditation and standardized testing (King, 2003). School accreditation has moved from “bean counting” (e.g., the number of books in the library, teachers’ credentials) to direct measurement of the outcomes of effective schools (e.g., student achievement on standardized measures, improved student attitudes)” (p. 722). King (2003) writes that standardized testing to assess student performance was almost synonymous with educational evaluation for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The passage of ESEA in 1965 provided a huge increase in federal funding for schools, agencies, and universities (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). Along with this funding came the mandate to systematically evaluate their implementation and results. King writes that at that time, “a limited version of evaluation” focused on standardized testing and accountability took precedence over “generating information directly relevant to improving instructional programs and practices” (King, 2003, p. 279). Certainly, under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) during the writing of this study, evaluation within schools continued to focus entirely on student testing and achievement scores on standardized tests (Mills, 2008). This myopic focus on test scores and accountability means that current evaluation practices in schools are not necessarily useful for informing school and classroom level decisions that might improve student outcomes.

The combination of accountability-focused policies and a general lack of research on rural education means that there is almost no research on evaluation in rural school settings beyond standardized testing. Indeed, Coladarci (2007) writes that “rural

education research is a considerably smaller enterprise than many other branches of educational research” (p. 1). Currently, the field of rural education research has three journals that are committed at least partly to the dissemination of rural education research: *The Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and the *Rural Special Education Quarterly*. The most recent systematic review of rural research literature is that of Arnold, Newman, Gady, and Dean (2005). These authors searched “Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and PsycINFO databases for K-12 rural education research studies conducted in the United States and published in journal articles between 1991 and summer 2003” (p. 2). They found 498 abstracts that fit their search criteria and coded them based on topic or area of research.

They identified 40 topics and two ways in which research takes place in rural contexts: 1. Research designed to explicitly study rural education issues, 2. Research that just happened to take place in a rural setting. The top three areas of research explicitly studying a rural education issue include: Programs and strategies for students with special needs, Instruction, and Education Leadership. Evaluation is not listed in the topic list and assessment appears on the list in the 32<sup>nd</sup> spot. It should not be surprising then that we know very little about evaluation capacity and practices in rural areas much less in rural schools beyond student test scores. What we do know is that administrators at rural schools report feeling that they lack the evaluation capacity to use and interpret student data to improve programs and they also feel overwhelmed with expectations for student achievement (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011; Eady & Zepeda, 2007).

One way to potentially improve evaluation capacity and practices in rural school districts beyond testing is to consider ways in which evaluation approaches may enhance

other practices and structures currently in place in schools. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are an example of a popular education practice that involves evaluative activities, but is not always considered as evaluation. PLCs involve opportunities for teachers to improve their practice and student achievement by meeting with and learning from each other. Teachers in PLCs frequently engage in evaluation activities; evaluative thinking is central to the function of PLCs. This is apparent in the common characteristics of PLCs as well as in the alignment of PLC principles and activities with those of evaluation capacity building (ECB). Hord and Sommers (2008) write that PLCs involve both collective and continuous learning through reflective practice as well as the identification of how to best address student learning needs. This aligns nicely with Patton's (2012) notion of organizations learning to "think evaluatively," by which he means infusing evaluation into the culture and everyday functioning of an organization (p. 144).

Furthermore, both PLCs and ECB rest on common assumptions including the notion that knowledge is specific to situations and that continuous individual learning and doing will lead to organizational learning (e.g., Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012). ECB can potentially enhance PLCs in a variety of ways. For example, ECB can help address a lack of skills in identifying and interpreting relevant student data, which has been shown to inhibit organizational learning in schools (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) and also encourage continuous teacher learning, which promotes organizational learning (Vescio et al., 2008).

**Why are PLCs being implemented?** Rural schools are attempting new approaches to meet accountability measures and improve student achievement. This

along with the general push for data-driven decision making (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008; Venables, 2014) and the idea that professional development programs for teachers need to support professional learning that is situated within a supportive community (Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998) has led to the adoption of learning organization principles and techniques in educational systems. Over the last twenty years, several schools, including schools in rural areas, have been asked to adopt these principles and techniques in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs) in an effort to engage staff in accountability practices (Vescio et al., 2008). A learning organization may be defined as an organization that "is skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (Garvin, 1993, p. 80). The concept is popular in business literature as a strategy to help corporations gain a competitive edge (Senge, 1990).

The advantages of looking at schools as learning organizations/PLCs have been gaining ground (Cousins, Goh, Clark, & Lee, 2004; Goh, Cousins, & Elliott, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). In fact, some states, including Minnesota and Delaware, now mandate the implementation of PLCs as conditions of funding. The Minnesota Legislature developed new legislation specifying that teacher development and evaluation teams must provide teachers with the opportunity to participate in professional learning communities (Education Minnesota, 2013). Similarly, the Delaware Department of Education (DE DOE) mandates that all grade or subject area

teachers have 90 minutes every week to engage in PLCs as part of its Race to The Top funds (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014).

PLCs have the potential to improve student learning in rural areas through evaluation, but only if they are successfully implemented. Evaluation theory can help inform the practices of PLCs in rural schools to improve evaluation activities and ultimately improve outcomes for rural students. However, little is known about evaluation practices in rural areas.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In evaluation, context is important. The Program Evaluation Standards Feasibility Standard F3, Contextual Viability, states that “Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups” (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011, p. 93). It affects both how we approach our work and the operations and outcomes of the programs and policies we evaluate (Rog, 2012). Context is central to several evaluation approaches. For example, Stufflebeam’s (1968, 1971) context-input-process-product (CIPP) model highlights the importance of decision-making context (Rog, 2012). Weiss (1972, 1973) writes of the importance of being aware of political context. Patton’s utilization focused evaluation encourages evaluators to do a situational analysis of the internal and external environment (Patton, 2012).

Alkin (2013) also devotes space to “the role of context” (p. 290) in evaluation, writing that evaluators must pay attention to the program context, organizational context, the social context, the political context, and the evaluator context (pp. 290-291). This partitioning of what exactly is meant by context is extremely useful. Program context is

broadly understood as what the program is, what its intentions are, and what stakeholders believe about the program. The organizational context includes such aspects as reporting lines and history of the program. Social context refers to the relationship between the program and the broader community and points to a need to understand the community, people, and their value systems. The political context refers to how the program came to be as well as the evaluation purpose and process. Finally, the evaluator context refers to the beliefs and practices of the evaluator.

In addition to the challenges of implementing and maintaining PLCs, rural schools may face challenges with regards to the evaluation of PLC activities and outcomes as they relate to the above areas of context. For example, with regards to the program context, rural educators who are often the only teachers of a certain subject in their building may feel overwhelmed with yet another demand on their time and not see or be able to make the connection between evaluation activities and their own work (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011; Ostgaard & Haynes, 2014). Additionally, the organizational context within schools is typically hierarchical, which may pose problems for evaluation activities and evaluative thinking as the focus of leadership may not be on organizational learning, but on achieving accountability standards.

The social context of rural schools appears to be that they are highly connected to their communities and often reify community norms and beliefs (e.g., Howley & Howley, 2010). However, they, like their surrounding communities, may struggle with sustainability and funding (Jimerson, 2005; Johnson et al., 2014). This may impede the evaluation of PLCs as many rural communities may not be familiar with evaluation and

schools may not have the funds for an internal evaluator which may then require the hiring an external evaluator ideally over an extended period of time.

Finally, the political context includes the policy around evaluation of PLCs and why PLCs are even being implemented. McDonnell and Elmore (1987) provide a framework for understanding policy instruments which are the mechanisms that translate policy goals (e.g., increased student achievement) into action. They identify four classes of instruments including: mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing. Under this framework mandates are understood as rules intended to produce compliance. Inducements are designed to make organizations and individuals want to comply. Capacity building is an investment designed to increase skills and knowledge and has long-term returns. System-changing instruments transfer authority within a given system. PLCS and the evaluation of PLC activities for accountability purposes can be classified in this system as a mandate. However, the evaluative thinking and learning that are central to PLCs are capacity-building focused, which suggests that evaluation activities and processes would be most effective when implemented and utilized at the local level.

In spite of an awareness of the importance of context in both evaluation and policy literature, the context of rural locations and rural schools in the United States within these fields has yet to be fully appreciated. Rural schools are under increasing pressure to improve student performance and to evaluate their own activities through the use of PLCs. The tension between accountability and improving practice and knowledge through evaluative thinking is well documented (e.g., Patton, 2012). That PLCs are both mandate- and capacity-building focused may pose unique challenges to rural schools.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The larger purpose of this study is to highlight evaluation mandates, practices, and their implementation and impact in a rural context. A promising way to address this is through the examination of PLC evaluation practices and uses in rural areas. Literature highlights the importance of context for the effective implementation of PLCs as well as the implementation and use of findings from evaluation (Cousins & Bourgeois, 2014; Lomos, Hoffman, & Bosker, 2011). Researchers have also consistently called for further study on the various individual and organizational factors that enhance an organization's ability to do and use evaluation (Cousins & Bourgeois, 2014). Not only are PLCs often required to do evaluation for accountability purposes, but they also have evaluation central to their functioning. As a result, this research aims to map out evaluation activities and influences through the analysis of PLC initiatives in three Greater MN school districts.

This research rests on the hypothesis that as a result of the distinct challenges rural schools face as well as the structure of mandated evaluation reporting for PLCs, rural schools may not have the capacity to fully incorporate evaluative thinking into their functioning. They may simply see evaluation as something they need to comply with.

### **Research Questions**

1. “What are people’s understandings of program evaluation in rural school districts engaged in PLCs?”
2. What are the social and political factors that influence the evaluation practices of rural PLC members?
3. What are the individual and organizational factors/characteristics that affect rural schools’ ability to conduct evaluation?

## **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study are significant in several ways. First, it contributes to the literature because it explicitly examined evaluation in rural areas and rural schools specifically, currently an understudied area in the literature. By doing so, it enhances our understanding and appreciation of unique contextual factors that influence the evaluation readiness of organizations and individuals in rural settings, thereby enhancing the utility of evaluation work and theory for diverse settings and populations. Second, it highlights disconnects between evaluation policy and implementation that are not currently fully appreciated from the rural perspective. As a result, this study contributes not only to the literature around evaluation policy and implementation, but also to the literature around rural education, making it even more difficult for policy makers to ignore rural issues and possibly even providing them with some guidance for evaluation policy.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Accountability:** Michael Patton lists accountability as one of the six purposes of evaluation (Patton, 2012). He writes that “the accountability function includes *oversight and compliance*, which typically includes assessing the extent to which a program uses funds appropriately, follows mandated processes and regulations, and meets contract obligations” (p. 119).

**Context:** The Program Evaluation Standards (Yarbrough et al., 2011) provide a definition of context that is broadly useful for this study:

The combination of the factors accompanying the evaluation may have influenced its processes or findings. These factors include the geographic location; its timing, the political, social, cultural, and economic influences in the region at the

time; the other relevant professional activities that were in progress; and/or any other pertinent factors. (p. 285)

When referring to context specifically, Alkin's (2013) conceptual framework will be used. This includes: program context, organizational context, social context, and political context.

**Evaluation:** Michael Scriven is often credited with the original definition of evaluation writing that evaluation is judging the worth or merit of something (as cited in Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004, p. 5). Within this definition, merit is understood as an objects intrinsic value and worth is thought to be an objects value within a particular setting (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation's Program Evaluation Standards writes that evaluation is “the systematic investigation of the value, importance, or significance of something or someone along defined dimensions (e.g., a program, project, or specific program or project component” (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 287). It is this definition of evaluation that is used throughout this dissertation.

**Evaluation Capacity Building (ECB):** Evaluation capacity building (ECB) aims to increase the knowledge and skills of individuals and organizations to do and use evaluation. ECB involves the process of teaching people how to conduct their own evaluations and how to use and share that knowledge to modify their individual as well as organizational practices and culture. Stockdill, Baizerman, and Compton (2002) provide a comprehensive definition of ECB. They write that,

ECB is a context-dependent, intentional action system of guided processes and practices for bringing about and sustaining a state of affairs in which quality

program evaluation and its appropriate uses are ordinary and ongoing practices within and/or between one or more organizations/programs/sites. (p. 8)

Within this definition, ECB is an intentional activity. Others have argued that ECB can be indirect and take place through “process use,” which occurs when people learn from going through the process of an evaluation (Patton, 2012, p. 143). Within this study, both direct and indirect ECB activities were examined.

**Policy:** Fowler (2013) provides a definition of public policy that is useful for this study as it acknowledges various actors. She writes,

Public policy is the dynamic and value-laden process through which a political system handles a public problem. It includes a government’s expressed intentions and official enactments, as well as its consistent patterns of activity and inactivity... government includes elected and appointed public officials at the federal, state, and local levels as well as the bodies or agencies within which these officials work. (Fowler, 2013, p. 5)

Sutton and Levison (2001) provide a sociocultural definition of policy that is widely used within the social sciences and humanities. They write that within “*educational* studies, policy is [often] conceived in terms of multilateral, national, state, or local directives that legislate institutional structures, proper codes of conduct, and academic standards for schools” (p. 5). However, they argue this definition is too narrow and instead push for a conceptualization of policy as “a complex social practice, an ongoing process of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse social and institutional contexts” (p. 1). This “policy as practice” approach encourages scholars to think about how “individuals, and groups, engage in situated behaviors that are both

constrained and enabled by existing structures, but which allow the person to exercise agency in the emerging situation” (p. 3). This definition highlights agency at “all levels of the policy process, making it possible to see policy not only as a mandate but also a contested cultural resource” where individuals can and do appropriate its meaning and elements thereby making it their own. Policy as practice is particularly appropriate for this study looking at evaluation, because evaluation within PLCs is both a mandate and a practice that is meant to be appropriated.

**Professional Learning Communities:** For the purpose of this study the definition given by Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many (2010) will be used. They define a professional learning community as “an ongoing process in which educators’ work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (2010, p. 11). It is important to note the Dufour et al. (2010) maintain that a PLC is a process and not a program, indicating the ongoing-and continuous nature of PLC activities. The PLC process often includes: discussing student performance data with other teachers, developing common goals, and working toward those goals in a self-directed and reflective manner.

**Rural:** The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) currently uses an urban-centric model to divide locales into four major categories: city, suburban, town, and rural. This model is urban-centric in that is based on the distance from an urban area (areas with a population greater than 50,000) or an urban cluster (areas with a population between 2,500 and 50,000). Each of the four categories is further divided into three subcategories. “Rural” is divided into the following categories: (a) fringe areas which are “less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that

[are] less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster,” (b) distant areas that are “more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster,” and (c) remote areas that are “ more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster”(<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp>).

This classification system while useful, was not utilized for this study because in the state of Minnesota, there are commonly only two classifications used: “metropolitan area” and “Greater Minnesota.” Greater Minnesota is generally understood as anything outside of the seven-county metro area as well as the 11-county greater metro area that immediately surround the “Twin Cities” (St. Paul and Minneapolis). This was the definition utilized for this study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study was to examine evaluation in rural areas, but as discussed in Chapter 1, we know very little about evaluation practices based on geographic region in the United States. A promising approach to lifting this veil in the research setting is to examine Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in rural areas as rural districts are often required to do evaluation both for reporting purposes and for their own functioning and improvement. Therefore, this chapter is divided into four sections that examine the disparate, but related literatures relevant to this study:

- The first section provides a brief description of the challenges specific to rural areas and schools and how educators have traditionally approached these challenges. Rural schools and educators have their strengths and this is not meant to represent rural areas as having a deficit. Rather, the purpose is to highlight possible opportunities for improvement.
- The second section then reviews policy analysis, implementation, and process briefly to provide a framework for the eventual research.
- The third section reviews the literature relating to PLCs themselves.
- The fourth section examines why rural schools might struggle with PLCs.

This review of literature focuses on policy PLCs that were the lens through which evaluation was examined in this study. However, it is also necessary to ground this work in an understanding of what is unique about rural areas and how rural schools have traditionally been approached from a reform perspective. This review is not meant as a

deficit approach. Rather, it is meant to highlight the history and context of rural education.

## Rural Challenges

**Rural settings and educational challenges.** The challenges faced by rural communities are the result of many interrelated factors. For the majority of U.S. history most of the population has lived in rural areas. This changed for the first time in 1920 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2016). Since this time, people from rural areas have steadily migrated to urban places. Currently, 46.2 million people (15% of the U.S. population) live in a rural area, which makes up around 72% of the land area in the U.S. (Cromartie, 2013). In 2011, urban households earned approximately 32% more than rural households (\$15, 779) annually (Hawk, 2013). This is an increase from the 1980s when urban households took home 25% more than rural households annually (Gibbs, 1998). This decline is the result of many factors including a changing economy. Rural communities have traditionally been agriculturally based, but the increasing presence of big agricultural corporations, an increasingly global market, and decreased subsidies has resulted in less profit margin (Elder & Conger, 2000).

Not only is the economy changing, but the demographics of rural communities are changing as well. Rural communities are witnessing an influx of minority and new immigrant populations as they seek employment beyond more competitive urban areas (Johnson, 2006). These populations often face even higher rates of poverty than the existing communities they are joining because they frequently occupy the lowest level positions (Swanson & Brown, 2003). The changing demographics of rural areas are not simply the result of new groups moving in, but also stem from the outmigration of

educated people from rural areas. This rural “brain drain” (Sherman & Sage, 2011) is linked to the changing economy and industry as there are fewer and fewer jobs requiring post-secondary education, people with these degrees move to places where higher paying positions are readily available. Not only are educated people leaving rural communities, but youth are also leaving as there is no promise of employment, much less a job with a living wage (Sherman & Sage, 2011). As a result of having fewer educated or young people, corporations are also less likely to thrive in or relocate to rural areas which continues the cycle of decline.

It is within this changing environment that rural schools exist. It is no surprise then that rural schools and districts are smaller than their urban and suburban counterparts (Johnson et al., 2014). It is also not surprising that because funding for schools depends on the federal, state, and local levels rural schools are often underfunded (Johnson et al., 2014). These issues are compounded by the fact that simply by virtue of being rural, these schools are isolated geographically. As discussed in Chapter 1, having a small student population, lower than average funding, and geographic isolation have been shown to have far reaching affects. For example, Eady and Zepada (2007) write that while the rural principals in their study wish to provide staff development to teachers, because school funding is based on attendance and enrollment, they often did not have sufficient funds to send teachers to far flung sites to receive training.

### **Rural reform.**

“‘The greatest educational problem now facing the American people is the Rural School Problem,’ argued Minnesota county superintendent Julius Arp in 1918. ‘...Rural education in the United States has been so far outstripped by the education of our urban centers, that from an educational standpoint, the country child is left far behind in the struggles of life.’” (As cited in Steffes, 2008)

School reformers in the United States have been talking about the rural school “problem” for over one hundred years. In essence, because they were locally controlled, rural schools were seen as inefficient and ill-equipped to prepare students to participate in what was becoming an increasingly industrialized and globalized world (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). School reformers attempted to urbanize rural schools as one solution. That is, they made them, “larger, bureaucratized, run by educational professionals rather than locals, and informed by the latest pedagogical knowledge” (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 2). This one size fits all model has since manifested itself in the form of standardized curriculum, school consolidation, and accountability. We approach educational policy as if all schools were the same. The exception to this seems to be for highly visible urban school issues such as crime and achievement gaps based on race and ethnicity (Johnson et al., 2014).

Perhaps the best example in recent history of the assumption of sameness can be seen in the educational accountability and the standards movement in the United States. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and focuses attention on activities inside of classrooms (Mills, 2008). It required grade level standards for students’ knowledge and skills, which has ultimately led to a focus on accountability (Mills, 2008). NCLB required that states report test scores by subgroups including “economically disadvantaged, major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency” (Reeves, 2003, p. 4) without specific consideration for geographic location.

Not only are rural students ignored in the reporting of subgroups for NCLB, rural schools also face specific challenges when trying to meet the requirements of NCLB and

other standards. Jimerson (2005) writes that NCLB “[was] a misfit in the rural context” (p. 211) because it ignored many of the realities of rural schools. For example, rural schools face geographic isolation and underfunding, which often leads to low teacher recruitment and retention, making it difficult to meet the highly qualified teacher provision of NCLB (Eppley, 2009). In addition, the small student population of many rural schools can make the interpretation of test scores and changes from one year to the next unreliable, leading to misidentification and sanctions for rural schools (Jimerson, 2005; Lee, 2004).

***Rural perceptions of reform.*** Beyond looking at NCLB and its impact on rural districts and schools, researchers have rarely asked those in rural communities about their perceptions of policy mandates and how they attempt to meet them. Two exceptions to this include studies conducted by Eady and Zepeda (2007) and Williams and Nierengarten (2011). Both of these studies are qualitative in nature and not designed to create generalizable knowledge, but they at least help to paint more of the picture of how policy mandates are received and impact rural school districts.

Eady and Zepeda (2007) conducted a case study of three rural middle school principals as they attempted to implement Georgia’s A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000. The A Plus act placed responsibility in the hands of administrators to ensure supervision, staff development, and evaluation of staff performance. Three interviews were conducted with each of the three principals, nine interviews total, over the course of seven months. Eady and Zepeda (2007) specifically focused on the impact A Plus had on the principal’s perceptions of evaluation and evaluative practices. Not surprisingly, they found that these middle school principals struggled to define evaluation beyond

accountability and supervision. As one principal stated, by focusing on student test scores as an indication of student achievement, “administrators will become more concerned with evaluations as judgments of teacher competency as opposed to evaluations as a tool that facilitates teacher growth and subsequently fosters student growth” (p. 6). Rurality specifically came into play for these administrators because “they did not have the necessary staff to consider other measures of student achievement for teacher evaluation” (p. 6). That is, the schools were so understaffed that rather than bring in an expert or add an additional task for a current employee, this principal made a conscious decision to use the easiest, most readily available measure, student test scores. Eady and Zepeda (2007) note that an unintended consequence of this may be that teachers may hesitate even more to move to rural areas where student test scores are already not optimal.

Williams and Nierengarten (2011) conducted surveys and focus groups with rural administrators across the six regions of Minnesota to examine their needs around training, interventions, and policy. Student achievement and fiscal management were found to be common areas of concern. “Within the category of student achievement, administrators identified four areas of need for assistance: testing and adequate yearly progress, achievement for all, staff and professional development, and data analysis” (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011, p. 15). Administrators in this study expressed concern and reservation around both accountability measures and thinking about and using data in meaningful ways to improve school functioning. They feel “overwhelmed with expectations for achievement” (p. 19). At the same time, they are concerned about the interpretation and use of student data to help improve their programs because

“interpretation of large-scale test scores and their role in planning school improvement was not required study for much of the generation of school administrators or teachers who currently practice in rural schools” (p. 20).

The rural school problem is still present although it is no longer named as such in the literature. Rural schools face unique challenges including changing demographics, changing economies, rural brain drain, small attendance, financial strain, and isolation. These challenges influence how rural districts function and how they attempt to meet policy mandates, including policy around evaluation and evaluation practice (Jimerson, 2005; Reeves, 2003). As a result, it is important to have an understanding of policy analysis and implementation. The next section briefly provides this foundation.

### **Accountability, Power, and Policy**

At a foundational level, policy involves the identification of “priorities and procedures for the distributing [of] goods and services to the members of a society” (Sutton & Levison, 2001, p. 5). Educational policy has changed dramatically since the 1980s. Fowler (2013) writes that prior to the Reagan administration, schools were seen as legitimate institutions. Funding for schools varied by state and region, but was thought to be at least adequate, and local school districts were granted decision-making power from the state without having the accountability mandates of today. At the state level, education policy was developed in collaboration among legislatures, the state department of education, and lobbyists. After the 1980s, almost everything about this policy environment changed. Funding for schools has declined, and state government has asserted its power by issuing a variety of new policies including curriculum policy and state standards. Also, educators are no longer seen as being experts about education or

education policy. Rather, schools themselves have been transformed into part of the problem (Fowler, 2013).

Changes in authority and decision-making power are all part of what is known as the policy process. Policy process is “the sequence of events that occurs when a political system considers different approaches to public problems, adopts one of them, tries it out, and evaluates it” (Fowler, 2013). Traditionally, this process has been seen as linear. That process has several sequential stages including: (a) identifying the issue, (b) setting an agenda, (c) formulating a policy, (d) adopting the policy, (e) implementing the policy, and (f) analyzing/evaluating the policy.

Alexander (2013) writes that there are two main types of policy analysis: “*ex post* analysis” and “*ex ante* analysis” (p. 7). *Ex post* analysis is understood as policy analysis that takes place after the policy has been implemented (stages 5 and 6 in the traditional model of the policy process). *Ex ante* analysis is policy analysis that encompasses stages 1 to 4 and takes place before a policy has been implemented. Regardless of when it takes place, the goal of policy analysis is to offer an analysis of social problems as well as viable alternative solutions (Alexander, 2013). Bardach (2012) provides a succinct Eight Fold Path to policy analysis that includes: (a) defining the problem, (b) assembling evidence, (c) constructing alternative paths of action or policies, (d) selecting criteria to make a judgment, (e) projecting the outcomes, (f) examining trade-offs, (g) making a decision, and (h) telling your story.

Not surprisingly, the main critique of the traditional models of both the policy process and policy analysis is that they are very linear and in many ways more rational and neat than what actually happens (Fowler, 2013; Sutton & Levinson, 2001). As a

result of this critique, the focus of policy analysis and approaches to it has been shifting since the 1960s to focus on the implementation of policy. In other words, policy implementation is seen more “as an integral part of the policy process, rather than what happens after policy is made” (Sutton & Levinson, 2001, p. 6). To answer the question of exactly how policy goals get translated into action, McDonnell and Elmore (1987) provide a useful and highly cited framework (e.g., Fowler, 2013). They identify four classes of instruments including mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing. Under this framework mandates are understood as rules intended to produce compliance. Inducements are designed to make organizations and individuals want to comply. Capacity-building is an investment designed to increase skills and knowledge and has long-term returns. System-changing instruments transfer authority within a given system.

Within the field of educational policy, the shift to a focus on implementation is largely associated with the work of Elmore and McLaughlin (1988). In their review of educational reforms (curriculum development in science, math, and social studies; planned variation and experimentation; performance contracting, Titles I, III and IV-C, Elementary and Secondary Education Act; school desegregation), they argue that reform operates on three levels, including policy, administration, and the practice of teachers, and that no matter where the reform is initiated, it “ultimately affects schooling to the degree that it affects organization and practice” (p. 37). Therefore, educational reform must be grounded in understanding “how teachers learn to teach, how school organization affects practice, and how these factors affect children’s performance” (p. 37).

Fowler (2013) notes that policy cannot be separated from power. In fact, “power permeates education systems and policies that shape them” (Fowler, 2013, p. 44). Educational policy actors, including governing bodies, school administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and the general public, all have access to different types of power when it comes to implementing policy. For example, legislatures, school boards, and departments of education have legal authority to adopt laws, rules, and policy while teachers have ultimate control over their classroom and what those laws, rules, and policies will look like. Indeed, Vavrus and Bartlett (2009) write that “... educational outcomes depend largely on how such policies and programs are perceived and received, as well as on political, social, cultural, and economic constraints” (p. 9).

According to Sutton and Levison (2001), policy is a practice within which “individuals, and groups, engage in situated behaviors that are both constrained and enabled by existing structures, but which allow the person to exercise agency in the emerging situation” (p. 3). This definition highlights individual action throughout the policy process and urges an understanding of how policy is appropriated at the local and organizational levels. A broad understanding of the policy process and implementation helps to frame the study. In this research with its focus on evaluation practice, it is important to understand the potential for evaluation to support and inform educational change through policy. The policy through which evaluation is examined in this study is PLCs. The next section provides a summary of the literature around PLCs as well as a brief discussion of why rural schools may struggle to effectively implement them.

## **Professional Learning Communities as a Means to Organizational Learning**

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are one way to transform schools into learning organizations. In short, PLCs are a type of community practice where teachers collaborate with each other both to do their work and to improve it with the shared purpose of student learning (Dufour et al., 2010). Over the last twenty years, PLCs have grown in popularity to the point where they are even being mandated (e.g., Education Minnesota, 2013, Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014).

While there are numerous articles and books about the virtues of PLCs, the literature is less robust in terms of empirical evidence supporting the implementation of PLCs and increase in organizational and student learning. Guskey (2000) provides three main reasons for the lack of empirical evidence supporting the implementation of professional development initiatives such as PLCs. They include the following items: (1) Documenting and not evaluating professional development initiatives; this is akin to having a checklist of what was done to describe activities, but not looking at their larger impacts; (2) Evaluations that are too shallow and focus on participants' satisfaction and not indicators of success such as an increase in knowledge or organizational change; and (3) Evaluation efforts that are too brief and do not extend over the life of the professional development. Professional development is not done in a day, but it is often left up to external evaluators with limited time and funding to provide evidence of their effectiveness or lack thereof (p. 10).

The implementation of PLCs has also not been without difficulty. Dufour et al. (2010) write that part of the difficulty comes from confusion about the term *PLC*. They write, “[T]he term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to

describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (p. 10). This sentiment is echoed by Lomos et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis of the theoretical and empirical studies of PLCs. In spite of the confusion about what PLCs are, PLCs do have common characteristics. Hord and Sommers (2008) provide a summary of characteristics that is regarded as representative of the literature as a whole. They identify five characteristics of PLCs that are interconnected. They include the following: “shared beliefs, values and vision”; shared leadership and decision making between administrators and staff; collective learning and its application through identification of what and how to learn “in order to address students’ learning needs”; and supportive structural and relational factors; as well as shared personal practice where “community members give and receive feedback that supports their individual improvement and that of the organization” (p. 9).

The common characteristics of professional learning communities illustrate that PLCs are grounded in two main assumptions. First, it is assumed that knowledge is situated and best understood through reflection with others who share those experiences (Vescio et al., 2008). Second, it is assumed that increasing professional knowledge around teaching will increase student learning. These assumptions are explored further below. The premises of PLCs, the increasing prevalence of PLCs, as well as the importance of context specific understanding for effective implementation highlight the need to understand the implementation of PLCs in different settings, including rural areas.

**Assumption 1: Knowledge is situated and is best understood through reflection with others who share those experiences.** The first premise undergirding the

implementation of PLCs is that knowledge is situated in the experiences of teachers and administrators and is best understood through reflection with others who share those experiences (Vescio et al., 2008). This understanding is widely reflected in the theoretical literature surrounding PLCs and is illustrated in common characteristics one, two, and four identified by Hord and Sommers (2008). It is also supported by research on situational learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000)

The centrality of collaboration to PLCs cannot be underestimated. Generally speaking, collaboration involves staff working together to solve problems and develop effective strategies to improve student learning which impacts the learning of staff as well as the learning of the community. Dufour et al. (2010) write that “A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable” (p. 11). Dufour et al. (2010) stress the importance of collaborative study of essential learning for students as it promotes clarity, priorities, and ownership around what it is students are expected to learn (p. 73). The common characteristics of shared beliefs, values, vision and decision making of PLCs speak to the importance of collaboration as well (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Roberts and Pruitt (2003) also write that through collaborative interactions, “professional relationships are developed that encourage teachers to share ideas, learn from one another, and help out their colleagues” (p. 8).

Nonetheless, collaboration can not only involve the teachers. It must also involve administration and leadership. The importance of leadership is stressed throughout the literature on PLCs (Dufour et al., 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert,

2006). Leadership must not only be supportive of teachers collaborating, they must also share decision-making power with teachers and staff. Dufour et al. (2010) state, In every instance of effective system wide implementation of the PLC process we have witnessed, central office leaders visibly modeled the commitment to learning for all students, collaboration, collective inquiry, and results orientation they expected to see in other educators through the district (p. 211).

The idea that knowledge is situated also speaks to the notion that teachers and administrators who talk about practice and collaborate can shape knowledge to their context. This is supported by situational learning theory. Putnam and Borko (2000) write that

The physical and social contexts in which an activity takes place are an integral part of the activity, and that the activity is an integral part of the learning that takes place within it. How a person learns a particular set of knowledge and skills, and the situation in which a person learns, become a fundamental part of what is learned. (p. 4)

This speaks to the notion that the implementation of PLCs and what works in one place will not necessarily work in another.

**Assumption 2: Increasing professional knowledge around teaching will increase organizational and student learning.** The second premise of PLCs is that increasing professional knowledge around teaching will increase student learning. This is reflected in characteristic three (collective learning and its application) and five (shared personal practice) identified by Hord and Sommers (2008). Dufour et al. (2010) also write that “The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to

the learning of each student... the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 11).

To illustrate an increase in professional knowledge, it is important to look for changes in teaching practice. In their review of the literature, Vescio et al. (2008) cite five studies in which there were measurable changes in teacher practice. Changes included becoming more focused on the students over time through added flexibility in instruction (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000) and the incorporation of various new techniques such as “visualization techniques” (Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004, p. 259).

A key component to learning effective practice within a PLC is the use of student data. The underlying assumption is that increasing professional knowledge around teaching is characterized by (1) changes in teaching practice and (2) the use of student data to inform this practice. Venables (2014) writes,

...to not review state and CCSS data is to put our students at certain, even measurable, disadvantage. Data aren't everything, to be sure, but they represent the best, most reliable way to see where students currently are in their learning and to identify instructional actions to get them to where we would like them to be. (p. 1)

Venables (2014) proposes a DATA Action Model made up of three recurring steps that include gathering and reviewing data, gap identification, and planning and evaluating action steps (p. 3). Data usage in this model starts large at the state and federal testing level and drills down to the classroom test level. The use of data is so

important that the DE DOE has made data use a central activity (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014) and built it into their theory of change.

A growing body of literature also connects PLCs to improved student learning and achievement. Vescio et al. (2008) cite eight studies that connect PLCs to student learning while Lemos et al. (2011) cite five studies showing measurable positive effects on student learning with “a small, but significant summary effect ( $d = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ )” (p. 121). Of course how student achievement is measured in each of the reported studies varies. Some studies include only a one-time scores on standardized tests, and others look at differences in student scores between years.

### **Why Rural Schools Might Struggle with PLCs**

The main strengths of PLCs include the idea that it is bottom up, context specific, and if successful truly creates a community of professionals who engage in continuous learning and evaluative thinking. However, creating and sustaining a PLC requires both structural and social resources that are considered to be best practices. The structural conditions required for successful and smooth implementation of PLCs include time, proximity to other teachers, shared leadership, and open communication structures (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Dufour et al., 2010). Social resources include such things as support for teachers from leadership and trust in the abilities of members of the learning community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Dufour et al., 2010). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) also note that “efforts to mandate community have failed because this kind of change cannot be commanded into existence” (p. 11). In other words, the mere requirement of implementing PLCs cannot make the norms and practices of these communities a reality.

Teachers in rural schools are increasingly asked to join PLCs as a way of addressing low performance in their schools. However, student performance based on geography remains uneven (Provasnik et al., 2007). Part of the reason for this appears to be that rural schools face specific challenges when attempting to implement and sustain PLCs. For example, teacher turn over and retention is widely accepted as an issue in rural education (Jimerson, 2005; Johnson et al., 2014). However, organizational learning through PLCs requires a commitment and time on the part of leadership and teachers which may be difficult to sustain when individuals stay in a location only temporarily. Additionally, rural schools are geographically isolated which can mean that people do not have easy access to technology and other professionals teaching similar subjects and/or grade levels. Not having access to technology can have a significant impact on looking at and sharing student data as well as for interaction of cross-district team members who may be too far apart to meet face-to-face (Lohman, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I identified a gap in the discussion around educational evaluation and policy which is the omission of rural issues and context. First, I reviewed literature on rural challenges, reform, and perceptions of those reforms; second, I reviewed literature around policy analysis and implementation; third, I examined the PLC literature. This literature review shows that rural schools face unique challenges to improve student performance and suggests that evaluation can help rural schools and students overcome some of the obstacles. In Chapter Three I identify my research questions and the study designed to advance the discussion of evaluation and rural educational issues.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

Chapter 2 examined literature around rural challenges, power and policy, evaluation, and professional learning communities (PLCs). All in all, it is clear that we know very little about the evaluation practices of PLCs in rural areas. Given the importance of context for evaluation as well as the often present requirement of evaluation for PLCs, the following research questions guided this dissertation:

1. What are people's understandings of program evaluation in rural school districts engaged in PLCs?
2. What are the social and political factors that influence the evaluation practices of rural PLC members?
3. What are the individual and organizational factors/characteristics that affect rural schools' ability to conduct evaluation?

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research study was appropriate for answering these questions for several reasons. First, they are descriptive in nature and ask "how" a process happens and "why" it may work in certain contexts (Creswell, 2013). Second, they are examining contemporary events (Creswell, 2013). Third, the researcher had little to no control over the events and behaviors of participants, unlike a controlled experiment (Creswell, 2013). The questions are looking at how meaning in the lives of people was made, trying to capture their perspectives, and trying to describe the contextual forces people live in (Yin, 2011). Under the broad umbrella of a case study approach, this dissertation built specifically on the vertical case study approach laid out by Vavrus and Bartlett (2009).

They define a vertical case study as one that is multisite, qualitative, and that “traces the linkages among local, national, and international forces and institutions that together shape and are shaped by education in a particular locale” (p. 12). While this study did not extend to the national and international levels, it did examine evaluation practices and processes of PLCs at the state, regional (Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence), administrative (superintendent, principal, and coordinators), and school (teacher) levels. It also made comparisons across sites that were located at the same level within the district and school levels. PLCs were considered the major unit of analysis while the embedded pieces (state, regional, administrative, and school) were considered levels of the case.

The vertical case study has its roots in comparative and international education, but it has been applied in at least one study of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Supplemental Educational Services in the United States (Koyama, 2009). It is particularly well suited for analysis of evaluation in rural PLCs because evaluation is state-mandated and regulated, regulated at the administrative level, and applied at the school level. At the administrative and school levels, evaluation impacts the daily routines of teachers, school administrators, and students. More broadly, it connects policy and practice. Vertically studying how different actors had or had not appropriated evaluation highlighted these associations, but did not privilege one story above others. Rather, all were placed on equal footing, which meant that rural voices and experiences with evaluation were heard.

This research took place within the state of Minnesota. The next section provides relevant information about the state, its rural education, PLCs, and their evaluation. This

information is important to understand the design of the study, which is discussed in further detail after the section on Minnesota.

### **Context for PLCs in Minnesota**

When discussing social indicators in Minnesota, most people talk about the metropolitan area, which includes the seven-county metro area and the eleven-county greater metro area immediately surrounding the “Twin Cities” (St. Paul and Minneapolis) in comparison to “Greater Minnesota.” This dichotomy provides a simplified understanding of what Minnesota actually looks like, but to remain consistent with how it is typically discussed, that is how this section will be structured. Nonetheless, Greater Minnesota consists of up to six regions, including Central, Northland/Northeast, Northwest, West Central, Southern (Southwest and South Central), and the South East. Each of these regions is unique with regards to social indicators such as demographics, population size, economy, etc.

According to Minnesota Compass, an online social indicators project led by Wilder Research in Minnesota, the Twin Cities metropolitan area currently has a population of around 2.9 million while “Greater Minnesota” has a population of around 2.4 million (Minnesota Compass, 2016). Like many rural areas across the United States, Greater Minnesota has an older population base than the Twin Cities and a lower median family income (\$51,200 vs. \$66,900). Greater Minnesota is also more homogenous (only 9.4% of people belong to a “minority” group vs. 24.9%) and has a lower percentage of adults over the age of 25 with a bachelor degree (23.7% vs. 41.7%).

**Rural education in Minnesota.** Johnson et al. (2014) provide a summary of the context and conditions of rural education for each state. They frame their report around

five gauges: (1) the importance of rural education, (2) the diversity of rural students and their families, (3) socioeconomic challenges facing rural communities across the nation, (4) the educational policy context surrounding rural schools, and (5) the educational outcomes of students in rural schools in each state. The first four gauges include five equally weighted indicators and the final gauge (Education Outcomes) includes four, for a total of 24 indicators (p. 2).

Johnson et al. (2014) use these gauges to rank each of the states. This report shows that a quarter of the students in Minnesota attend a rural school (95,335 students) and that 11.9% of these students (23,176 students) are “minority” students. Thirteen percent of rural students in Minnesota are eligible for Title 1, and 35.6% are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Additionally, almost a quarter of the state’s education funds go to rural districts. It is interesting to note that Greater Minnesota has a slightly higher percentage of students who graduate high school on time than the Twin Cities (83.1% vs. 79.6%) (MN Compass, 2016).

**Professional learning communities in Minnesota.** Within the state of MN there are various reasons why districts are participating in Professional Learning Communities. These include being labeled as a Focus or Priority School under the Minnesota waiver to No Child Left Behind, as part of the World’s Best Workforce (WBWF) legislation, as well as being part of the Q Comp system, which is a voluntary program that districts can enroll in order to receive extra funding per student. In 2011, the Minnesota Legislature developed new legislation specifying that all public school districts in MN must have a teacher development and evaluation (TDE) plan that must provide teachers with the

opportunity to participate in professional learning communities (Education Minnesota, 2013).

In February 2012, Minnesota received a waiver for various provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) or No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The Minnesota waiver was extended to 2014-2015, and the state submitted a waiver renewal for beyond 2015. While NCLB was repealed in 2015, during the time of this study it was still relevant as states were transitioning and trying to figure out how to move forward. The waiver required that Minnesota meet certain principles for flexibility regarding NCLB laws and mandates:

- Principle 1: Career and College-Ready Expectations for All Students
- Principle 2: State-developed System of Differentiated Recognition, Accountability and Support
- Principle 3: Supporting Effective Instruction and Leadership

The state wrote that the “waiver allowed the state to develop a better, fairer accountability system that moves beyond the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) system under NCLB” and that the most significant improvement for schools and districts in MN are seen in the accountability system and the multiple measures of Principle 2 (MDE, 2016a).

Principle 2 of the NCLB waiver focused on improving the achievement of all students and closing achievement gaps through an accountability and support system that measured schools on multiple indicators. All schools in Minnesota were given an annual Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR) that included student proficiency, student growth, reducing achievement gaps, and graduation rates. Schools receiving Title 1 funds that

were identified as needing improvement (focus and priority schools) received additional support through one of six Regional Centers of Excellence. Additionally, the federal Title 1 School Improvement Grant (SIG) provided funding to schools identified as Persistently Low Achieving. Both the Statewide System of Support for Priority and Focus schools as well as School Improvement Grants included PLCs as one of the structures to improve student achievement.

Many districts in Minnesota were also using PLCs as a means of accountability for The World's Best Workforce legislation, which was passed in 2013 to ensure that schools were increasing student performance. Under this legislation, each district was required to have a plan focusing on getting all children ready for school, career, and college, as well as lessening racial and economic achievement gaps (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016b). School districts that were part of the Q Comp system (enacted in 2005) were also required to address five components, including Career Ladder/Advancement Options, Job-embedded Professional Development, Teacher Evaluation, Performance Pay, and an Alternative Salary Schedule (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016c). Within this system, PLCs were used to meet the requirements of professional development and teacher evaluation. At the time of the study, there were 69 Minnesota school districts and 66 charter schools that had implemented Q Comp or had been approved to implement Q Comp (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016c).

**State level evaluation of professional learning communities in Minnesota.** Not only were rural schools in Minnesota required to have PLCs under the aforementioned mandates, but they were also required to evaluate PLC activities and outcomes for

reporting purposes. What the evaluation process and requirements looked like vary depending on the reason the schools were participating (i.e., Statewide System of Support [SSS], SIG, WBWF, Q Comp). However, the requirements for evaluation were enforced in the same way regardless of location with the hope that schools were using the evaluation for their own purposes. The theory of action and evaluation tools used by the regional team of advocates for SSS and SIG were extensive and identical (MDE, 2016d). Schools involved in WBWF and Q Comp appeared only to be required to submit an annual report (MDE, 2016b; MDE 2016c).

### **Site Selection**

This vertical case study focused on one Service Cooperative, one Regional Center of Excellence that was housed within the Service Cooperative, three rural Minnesota districts engaged in PLCs, and one school within each district. The study examined one vertical case through the Service Cooperative and the Regional Center of Excellence. Three districts within the case allowed for rich description of the case as well as triangulation of findings.

**Service Cooperative selection and recruitment.** The Service Cooperative was identified based on the number of districts under its jurisdiction as well as the prevalence of PLCs within the districts. Districts under the jurisdiction of the Service Cooperative had formed their own initiative that involved participating in PLCs. Therefore, it was known that there was a high likelihood of PLC involvement within the Region. The Service Cooperative was initially contacted via email to participate in the study.

**District selection and recruitment.** There were several criteria used to identify districts. Each of the three districts along with the schools within each district was

identified based on the length of time they were involved in PLCs, whether or not they were members of the Minnesota Rural Education Association, and if they were classified as rural by the state of Minnesota. Given the importance of length of time to the functioning of PLCs (Dufour et al., 2010), the sites had all been involved in PLCS for a minimum of five years. Additionally, in order to gain a broad understanding of the impact of policy on evaluation practices, two of the sites were involved in Q Comp. All district superintendents also signed a letter of commitment to participate in the study (see Appendix A).

**Participant selection and recruitment.** Participants at state, regional, administrative, and teacher levels were recruited via emails sent by the researcher (see Appendix B). Individuals at the state level were identified based on their relationship with the Service Cooperative/Regional Center as well as their involvement with Q Comp and TDE. Beyond the Minnesota Department of Education, recruitment started at the regional level, then went to the administration level, and finally to the teacher level to ensure that the validity of the vertical case study design was maintained. If one level in this hierarchy had declined, the entire branch of the case study would have had to be eliminated, resulting in recruitment of entirely new organizations.

In all three of the schools, there were gatekeepers to setting up interviews with teachers. In two of the schools the gatekeeper was the Q Comp coordinator, and in the third school it was the principal. It was stressed multiple times to the gatekeepers that teacher participation in a group interview was voluntary. This was also stressed in person by the researcher prior to the beginning of the group conversations. To show appreciation of teachers' time and to make them feel more comfortable, the researcher

provided either light snacks or lunch depending on the time of day the interviews were scheduled.

The researcher spoke with two people at the state level (2), two people at the regional level (2), and one administrator at each district level (superintendents) (3), one administrator (principal) at each school (3), two Q Comp coordinators, also referred to as administrators throughout this study (2), and an average of five teachers at each school--seven at site one; five at site two; four at site three (16). The total number of participants was twenty-eight with twelve individual interviews and three group interviews. Table 1 illustrates the number of individuals at each level and site as well as the length of the interviews.

Table 1: *Number of Individuals Interviewed at Each Level and Site Including Length of Interviews*

| <u>Level</u>   | <u>Number of individuals</u>   | <u>Length of interview</u>                        |
|----------------|--|---|
| State          | 2 MDE employees  | 31 and 65 minutes                                 |
| Regional       | 2 employees  | 45 and 54 minutes                                 |
| Administration | 3 superintendents (sites 1, 2, and 3)<br>3 principals (sites 1, 2, and 3)<br>2 Q Comp Coordinators (sites 1 and 2) | 45-54 minutes<br>32-52 minutes<br>56 minutes each |
| Teachers       | 7 at site 1<br>5 at site 2<br>4 at site 3  | 51 minutes<br>56 minutes<br>41 minutes            |

Research participants at each of the levels listed above were required to sign a consent form prior to starting any interview process (see Appendix C).

## **Data Collection**

Prior to any data collection taking place, the researcher submitted an Internal Review Board determination form to the University of Minnesota IRB, which determined that this research did not require IRB approval as it did not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research. Data collection took place during the winter between November, 2015 and February, 2016. All interviews with state employees, regional employees as well as district administrators were one-on-one. In contrast, teachers were interviewed as a group at their individual schools. One principal interview was conducted face-to-face as part of the teacher site visit to accommodate that administrator's scheduling constraints. The teacher group interviews and aforementioned principal interview took place in person. The goal was to create a rich description of evaluation practices in rural PLCs, and speaking with participants at each level of PLC functioning allowed a focus on similarities and differences in understandings of evaluation to see "how systems, structures, or processes play[ed] out] 'on the ground'" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009, p. 8).

This study utilized qualitative data collection methods and focused on presenting an accurate representation of evaluation practices and processes within PLCs. The majority of data presented in this study are qualitative. The researcher collected qualitative data from semi-structured individual interviews, semi-structured group interviews, and existing documents. All interview instruments were piloted with individuals with experience working in the respective roles or organizations. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed using a third party transcription service, Rev.com. The researcher then listened to the

recordings while simultaneously reviewing the transcripts to verify the accuracy of the transcripts, wrote a summary of each interview, and shared it with individual participants to gain their feedback and make sure the summary was accurately representing what they had said.

**Semi-structured individual interviews.** To gather in-depth descriptions about evaluation and PLCs, semi-structured individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) took place with state, regional, and administrative employees (superintendents, principals, and/or Q Comp coordinators). The semi-structured interviews were focused on the research questions, but allowed for a natural flow of conversation and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Regional level employees were interviewed first, followed by superintendents and principals. One site did not have a Q Comp coordinator, in another site the principal was both the principal and the Q Comp coordinator, and for another there was a teacher who was also the Q Comp coordinator. Following the hierarchical order within the PLC case and the individual sites allowed for clearer understanding and for meaningful probes and follow-up questions in subsequent interviews.

The research questions and PLC and evaluation literature informed the development of these protocols for these interviews. I began the interview using an interview guide (See Appendices D, E, F and G). One individual, semi-structured interview took place in person because it was scheduled on the same day as the group interview for teachers at that site; all others took place via phone. The interviews lasted between 31 and 65 minutes and took an average of 47 minutes.

**Semi-structured group interviews.** Group interviews, not individual interviews, took place in person with grade 4-8 teachers at each of the three schools. Group interviews were conducted in order to hear a variety of voices and to be respectful of teacher time. The researcher drove to the schools and provided food and beverages for teacher participants during the group interviews. As with the individual interviews, the group interview questions were developed based on the relevant PLC and evaluation literature. Additionally, because the teacher group interviews were conducted last at all of the schools, the researcher was able to ask site-specific questions, having gained some organizational insights from previous interviews. Seven teachers were interviewed at site 1, five teachers were interviewed at site two, and four teachers were interviewed at site three. These interviews lasted between forty-one and fifty-six minutes and were an average of forty-nine minutes.

**Document review.** Documents for review were selected for each level and site based on whether or not they dealt with PLCs and/or evaluation of and within PLCs themselves. Additionally, various background information documents were reviewed to help provide context and description of the sites themselves. Documents served mainly as a source of contextual information and to fill in gaps in interview information. A review of existing documents provided further understanding of the organizations involved at every level, the history of and motivation for the PLC initiative at the various levels, and the reporting and evaluation activities conducted. Documents reviewed came from school, state, and service cooperative websites. They included documents such as state reporting templates, application requirements, and district score cards/reports and WBF plans. Most of the documents reviewed for the state of Minnesota have been

mentioned in this chapter under the “PLCs in Minnesota” section and dealt with Q Comp and World’s Best Workforce. A full list of documents reviewed is provided in Appendix H. These documents were analyzed for relevance to PLCs and to corroborate or provide rival explanations for the site interviews. A separate matrix was maintained for the document analysis.

### **Data analysis and reporting**

As is recommended by Yin (2011), because this study consisted of more than two cases or sites, the first step in data analysis was to write individual site-level descriptions treating each site as separate studies. The site-level descriptions included information not only about the physical sites, but also write-ups for each interview that had been conducted. As was stated earlier, these write-ups were shared with the participants as a type of member checking. Word tables were then created from these descriptions focusing on processes and outcomes that emerged from the data. These word tables were then used as a basis to create complementary tables from which cross-site comparisons were developed. These final word tables are presented at the end of each section in Chapter 5. This approach allowed the researcher to focus on similarities and differences across sites as well as among the different levels (state, regional, administration, and teacher).

Data from the semi-structured individual interviews and semi-structured group-interviews were coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo version 11. The word tables served as inductive codes. Deductive codes were also developed based on the literature on PLCs and evaluation. However, some of the deductive codes were mentioned in the interviews which complicated the relationship between the two types of

coding. For example, under the research question “What are the individual and organizational factors/characteristics that affect rural schools’ ability to conduct evaluation?” deductive codes that came from the literature that were also echoed in the interviews themselves included “the size of the school, leadership, trust, and time.”

In the reporting, individuals were referred to only by their titles and location in order to protect their confidentiality. The locations were also given pseudonyms. Site 1 is referred to as Lake Wobegon,<sup>2</sup> site 2 is referred to as Frostbite Falls,<sup>3</sup> and site 3 is referred to as Gopher Prairie.<sup>4</sup>

## **Validity**

There were several threats to the validity of the conclusions. These include a possible reluctance to talk with a researcher as well as reactivity to the researcher and a desire among participants to give socially desirable answers (Maxwell, 2013). I utilized the following techniques laid out by Maxwell (2013) to reduce these threats to validity: triangulation, member checking, and rich data. Specifically, to deal with a reluctance to talk to the researcher or wanting to give socially desirable answers, I emphasized my neutrality about findings, ensured confidentiality of statements, and attempted to understand and support individual voices and concerns. Similarly, to address reactivity to the researcher, I collected different types of data and attempted to develop a “thick, rich description” (Patton, 2002, p. 437) of what was unfolding at each of the sites. Collecting different types of data allowed me to triangulate my findings. I also brought my findings back to participants and conducted member-checking as a verification technique, looking

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<sup>2</sup> Lake Wobegon is the name of a fictional town in Minnesota referenced in the radio show, “A Prairie Home Companion” of which Garrison Keillor was the original host.

<sup>3</sup> Frostbite Falls is the name of a fictional town in Minnesota referenced in the children’s television show, “The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show.”

<sup>4</sup> Gopher Prairie is the name of a fictional town in the 1920 Sinclair Lewis novel *Main Street*.

for discrepant evidence both within and across levels as well as across sites. Discrepant evidence was also emphasized during member checks to help alleviate reaction to the researcher and a desire to give socially acceptable answers.

### **Positionality**

This project is both personally and professionally important to me as result of my background. I grew up in Greater Minnesota, my mother is a high school teacher at a Greater Minnesota school, and my nieces and nephews attend the same schools I did when I was younger. For these reasons, I would like to see rural education and student achievement improved. Professionally, I have been working in the field of evaluation and research for over nine years. I have observed that rural voices are often not considered in evaluation literature or policy. I feel this puts rural areas at a disadvantage, especially considering that much of evaluation is used for funding purposes. If there are specific factors that are unique to rural areas that are not being considered when it comes to evaluation and implementation of PLCs, the impact will be acute for rural students and chronic for rural school districts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study. First, the study took place in one state, Minnesota. Minnesota is likely different from other states both in their implementation of PLCs as well as the evaluation of them. Second, it included a relatively small sample. The way districts and schools approached and implemented evaluation and PLCs likely varied widely across sites.. However, having a small sample was necessary for a vertical case study approach in order to fully describe what was happening at the local, district, and state levels. It was also not feasible to speak with a significant amount of individuals

at different levels when the organizations themselves were small and the people involved were few. This was a first step in developing research around evaluation practice in rural areas. The reasons the sites were involved in PLCs colored individual responses to interview questions, and some of the responses may have been negative as a result. The study was presented as an opportunity to have otherwise underrepresented voices heard, which did help to create a more positive feeling in general.

While the group interviews allowed for individuals to build off what the others were saying and provide more detail, there were also drawbacks to doing group interviews. For example, some people might have been reluctant to speak up in groups or groupthink could have occurred and drowned out dissenting voices. The researcher took great care during the group interviews to make everyone comfortable with voicing his or her opinions. The researcher started with group interviews by laying out some ground rules, including the idea that all opinions and voices were valid and welcomed, and also specifically invited quiet individuals to share their opinions throughout the conversation.

This chapter provided an in-depth description of the study's methods. The next chapter describes each of the individual sites in depth and includes descriptive information about the sites, the reasons why they were involved in PLCs, as well as how their PLCs were functioning.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Site Descriptions**

As has been discussed in previous chapters, this study looked at evaluation practices taking place in and around PLCs and staff perceptions of them in rural schools in Minnesota involved in PLCs. This chapter includes site descriptions for each of the vertical case study levels examined. These site descriptions include building level descriptions that are based on visits the researcher made to the sites. They also integrate the content of interviews for each level and provide broader information about why PLCs are being implemented at each level and site as well as how the PLCs are actually functioning. While the site descriptions use multiple sources of data including interviews and documents, they are based mainly on the individual and group interviews data. Other background information comes from document and website review which is cited throughout. However, it should be noted that regional as well as district and school level documents and websites are mentioned only in descriptive terms and not cited directly in order to protect the confidentiality of the individuals who were interviewed.

The site descriptions provide an understanding of how and why PLCs are functioning which then provides an understanding of what evaluation looks like at the different levels and sites included in this study. The following descriptions briefly characterize the structures of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence, School Districts 1-3, and their corresponding administrators and teachers as the structures relate to PLCs. The description of MDE is divided in two parts. While the two employees worked within the same division at MDE, their two different departments related to the Service Cooperatives/Regional Centers of

Excellence, districts, and schools differently. Therefore, there are two department- level descriptions rather than just one division description. Additionally, because the Service Cooperative houses the Regional Center of Excellence and staff work closely together, the description of these two entities is combined.

### **State Description**

The Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) mission is to "lead for education excellence and equity. Every day for every one" (MDE, 2016e). The commissioner of MDE oversees 28 divisions and more than 450 employees who work to improve PreK-12 student achievement and works with the governor of Minnesota to promote PreK-12 policies and initiatives (MDE, 2016e). The MDE building is located in Roseville, Minnesota, a first ring suburb in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. There are two wings and two floors to the building.. When one walks in the main entrance, there is a front desk and sitting area separated from a large atrium area by a glass wall and doors. While the entrance and atrium are impressive and airy, the rest of the building seems more enclosed. Many of the cubicles and meeting rooms are centrally located, which means there is little natural light.

While MDE oversees districts and charters, they have historically had significant local control in most cases (Minnesota Department of Education, 1968). From the perspective of MDE this means that local leaders often have the autonomy to decide how they will meet legislative mandates so that their approach fits with their community and practice (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). However, it depends on the mandate. There are some mandates where it appears that MDE was not sure what the requirements would be when the initiative was rolled out, but where the requirements

have become more solidified. World's Best Workforce is an example of this (MDE, 2016b).

In situations where local control is prioritized, it seems the legislation is written with flexibility, and there are often terms that are not clearly defined in legislation. For example, the Q Comp Requirements and Guiding Principles (MDE, 2016c) outlines unacceptable, required, and best practices for each of the four core components. Under the teacher evaluation component, the first required practice is that “[t]he evaluations are objective and based on multiple, valid and clearly defined criteria” (MDE, 2016c, p. 5). However, there is no guidance provided on what specific criteria should be used. Thus districts and charters, often in partnership and in joint agreement with their teachers' unions, figure out what initiatives such as teacher evaluation will look like locally.

There are six Regional Centers of Excellence that are partnered with MDE, as well as nine Regional Service Cooperatives (MDE, 2016f; Minnesota Service Cooperatives, 2016). The Regional Service Cooperatives are located across the state of Minnesota and provide planning and work to meet the specific needs of their clients and often house and work closely with the Regional Centers of Excellence (Minnesota Service Cooperatives, 2016). The Regional Centers of Excellence work with schools identified as priority, focus, and continuous improvement schools (MDE, 2016f). These rating are based on students' Multiple Measurements Ratings (MMR) as well as the state Focus Ratings (FR). Priority schools are the bottom five percent scoring on the MMR, focus schools are the “ten percent that contribute to the achievement gap the most” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016), and continuous improvement schools are the schools that are performing just above the focus schools. Focus Ratings reflect how much

a school contributes to the state's achievement gap.<sup>5</sup> MDE works with the Service Cooperatives and Regional Centers of Excellence to improve student achievement in these schools.

When MDE goes in to work with schools through a Service Cooperative and/or a Regional Center of Excellence, one of the first things that is done is a needs assessment. To do this, MDE staff walks schools through “all kinds of data... not just academic data” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). Other types of data include attendance and behavioral data, which provide further information about students. The schools are then required to develop a continuous improvement plan that MDE staff monitors throughout the year.

### **MDE Department One**

One employee interviewed for this study worked at MDE in a department that assists districts and charter schools with designing and implementing systems to develop and “evaluate” their teachers and to support Minnesota staff development that districts must report on annually (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). The division this department was located in reported directly to the commissioner. This department was responsible for two state initiatives, which include the Teacher Development and Evaluation (TDE) law and the Q Comp program:

- The TDE law was passed in 2011 and required all districts and charters to have a system to develop and evaluate their teachers by the 2014/2015 school year. The teacher evaluation component required that an administrator or principal summatively evaluate all teachers at least once every three years. In the years

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/justparent/esea/priorityfocusrewardsch/index.html> for details on how these ratings are calculated.

when an administrator is not observing a teacher, an evaluation must take place with a peer reviewer. This peer feedback often comes through PLCs. (MDE, 2016g)

- The Q Comp program, also known as the Alternative Teacher Performance Pay System (ATPPS), is voluntary at the district level and has money tied to it. The TDE and Q Comp initiatives “largely accomplish the same goals. That is, we'll observe and provide feedback to teachers around their instructional practices, and we'll observe the degree to which students learn while they are in the care of these teachers” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). In regards to the staff development report, districts are required to set aside two percent of their general revenue to support the development of all of their staff, including “custodians, bus drivers, teachers, principals, superintendents, etc.” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). Districts are required to annually report on their staff development activities. (MDE, 2016c)

The role of this department was one of “supporting the regions and districts at the school level” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). This department provides “a lot of professional development” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016) and guidance to districts and schools. Daily tasks include fielding phone calls and emails from districts that are struggling. Often, “[t]he district would call and say, ‘We're struggling in this area. What do you think?’ And we brainstorm with them about ideas and practices” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). Department One also offers training around classroom observations and coaching conversations. Depending on whether the observer is a peer or a principal of the teacher being observed, these

conversations may look different, and it is “not something that is really covered in teacher or principal school” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016).

The department also provides support on how to “design these evaluation systems,” including “how will we measure an individual teacher’s impact on student learning?” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). The division then provides “trainings and tools” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016) to help districts decide the extent to which students grew under the care of a certain teacher. Under TDE there is also a requirement that schools look at student engagement because this relates to student achievement (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). As a result, the department provides support around professional development. Another function this department serves is to conduct research for districts on what other states are doing and what “emerging best practices are” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016).

This department works directly with districts and schools, but also works with the Regional Centers of Excellence regarding teacher development and evaluation. However, the general sense by MDE is that teacher development and evaluation work are low on the list of priorities for many Regional Centers of Excellence because their staff is working with focus and priority schools. Often the first things that needs to be done with such schools is “forming a leadership team” that can provide direction within the district or school (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). The second thing is to “study if their curriculum, instruction, and assessments are aligned to the standards” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). Part of the way this work is accomplished is through PLCs.

**Why PLCs?** The work that is done with PLCs in this department is similar to the other professional development work the department does. The division builds tools and works with districts to “brainstorm and problem solve” around how to make PLCs fit within the district and also to figure out what trainings should be offered (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). The professional development this division offers is based on the research they have done, which is based mainly on Dufour’s model (Dufour et al., 2010), according to the employee (February 16, 2016). Under Q Comp, PLCs used to be required to meet for 90 minutes every two weeks. However, this is no longer a requirement. Rather, because of the emphasis on local control in Minnesota, districts can now decide when and for how long PLCs will meet (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). MDE has steadily been moving toward an approach of providing guidance and “nudging [districts] to best practices” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016).

The perspective of this employee was that a functioning PLC should have norms of operation so that meetings are “not a social check-in” (February 16, 2016). A functioning PLC should also have “frequent, long enough” meetings to allow meaningful discussion of student data (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). PLCs should also be looking at some type of data at every meeting. These “data” may be student data or engaging in a protocol to review lesson plans or curriculum.

## **MDE Department Two**

The second person interviewed at MDE worked in the same division as the other employee, but in a department that had direct contact with the Regional Centers of Excellence. This department worked with directors and staff at the Regional Centers of Excellence “to provide support to Regional Center of Excellence staff who are out in the

field so that they can support schools in a way that meets the needs of the schools” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). The role of the Regional Centers of Excellence that was supported by this department was one of partnering with the schools. The employee felt,

We’re not consultants... We go in beside the school and really look at building capacity of the people in the school because... we want them to continue the work after we are gone. We really look at building capacity and developing sustainability in schools. (State employee interview, February 23, 2016).

Part of building capacity was building a “strong leadership team to empower teachers to be involved in the work and because the principal can’t do it all.” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). One of the things that the Regional Centers of Excellence did was to have consistency in the work across the Regional Centers of Excellence and the work they were doing with the districts and schools. The goal was to have the “Regional Centers and MDE coordinating and collaborating, so that there is one plan of consistent work that’s going out to schools from MDE and the RCEs” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016).

**Why PLCs?** In the coming year, the Regional Centers of Excellence were going to work on providing more specific resources on PLCs to the schools. Members of the division, including Department Two, were going to be a part of this work with the Regional Centers of Excellence to help build strong PLCs in schools. The reason for this support to schools was because the department had seen significant improvement in schools that were already implementing PLCs when there was a leadership team that

focused on instruction and PLC leadership (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). These individuals often worked to meet their school goals through their PLC work. One of the things Regional Centers of Excellence focused on was how to look at and understand student data so that they could then bring that knowledge back to their PLCs.

According to the employee, to date, the Regional Centers of Excellence had put together a work group to develop a plan of action for working on PLCs (February 23, 2016). The first step in this work was to set up “common beliefs for the group” for “what we want happening in strong PLCs” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). This document would outline what are “key concepts and critical features for PLCs” based on research, because it was thought that Regional Centers of Excellence often had different understandings of what PLCs were because of their previous experiences (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). One employee stated the document, which was still being developed, was meant to provide a common definition and common understanding of PLCs for when staff from the Regional Centers of Excellence go out to work in the field. The document was going to include a list of common “characteristics, effective outcomes, [and] specific outcomes that lead to effective PLCs and gaps” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). It would also look at what barriers existed for schools implementing PLCs.

One piece of the upcoming work with PLCs includes providing schools with a revised rubric “so they can see where they are and where they want to move to improve” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). The reason for the revision is because the current rubric was designed earlier in the process by only two people and “it’s not

really what we'd like it to be" (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). Another piece will be to provide training in the summer for Regional Center of Excellence staff and then this staff will do professional development and on-site follow-up coaching with the schools during the year. The Regional Centers of Excellence and MDE staff will continue to collaborate to align the PLC work. The Regional Centers of Excellence will also assist school leadership teams and PLCs in making sure "that everything's aligned in their system, so they're all working towards the same thing" (State employee interview, February 23, 2016).

### **Service Cooperative Description**

The selected Service Cooperative was one of nine located in the state of Minnesota. It was one of eight located in Greater Minnesota. There were several districts that collaborated to participate in PLCs as a way to increase student achievement. The Service Cooperative then worked with this consortium of districts as a central, overseeing and coordinating body. (Regional level employee interview, November 20, 2015). This initiative had been in existence for approximately six years and was based on Dufour's model of train the trainer (Regional level employee interview, November 20, 2015).

The Service Cooperative took its current form in 1995 through legislative action at the state level (see Appendix H; Service Cooperative website, "Our history" section, 2015). It was located in one of the larger towns in the region and was housed in one central building that it shared with other businesses. The Service Cooperative served over 15 counties spanning over 1200 square miles and over 70 schools, including public, non-public, and charter schools (see Appendix H; Regional Center of Excellence website,

“Quick facts about us” section, 2015). The Cooperative had an executive leadership team, was governed by a board of directors elected from their members, and also had a variety of advisory boards (see Appendix H; Service Cooperative website, “Governance” section, 2015). Together, these bodies strove to support and enhance, not direct the work, of their membership, which included counties, cities, schools, and other governmental agencies, by providing trainings and programs that meet their needs (see Appendix H; Service Cooperative website, “Programs and Services” section, 2015).

### **Relationships with districts**

The emphasis on the supportive and non-directive nature of the Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence came across in the interviews conducted with employees. For example, one of the employees stated, “We don't get in and tell them what's working and what's not working” (Regional level employee interview, November 20, 2015). The other Regional level employee, who was fairly new to the organization, also described the role of the Service Cooperative as one of support. According to both employees, district professional development team leaders identified what areas they would like support for from the Service Cooperative. One employee even stated that he . . . work[s] with the professional development team members from each of the districts to identify training needs for PLC leaders and to coordinate those trainings, all the behind the scene work to set up the trainings... I don't work a whole lot on the content pieces of the trainings. I really have the professional development team members to do that because they're the ones that are in the districts. (Regional level employee interview, November 19, 2015)

Interestingly, while being supportive was stressed both in the interviews and in on-line materials, the evaluation tools developed by the Service Cooperative for districts involved in the PLC initiative were compulsory. As one employee bluntly stated, “We just opt them all to do it, and it's not really an option. That's part of what they do for, as their membership” (Regional level employee interview, November 19, 2015).

Districts were also required to use at least some of the information they received from the Service Cooperative for reporting of Q Comp data back to the state. One employee stated,

Districts do need the individual teacher evaluation survey report, but they'll have to send what I gave them back. They look at those PLC individual teacher evaluation surveys and write a short narrative answering these 5 questions or addressing these five areas: success stories, roadblocks, lingering questions, response to the survey report, and then they give an overall rating for each building level. They do use that PLC work continuum or that final rating [of] initiating, implementing, developing, sustaining. (Regional level employee interview, November 19, 2015)

However, the Service Cooperative was not currently required to do any direct reporting on PLCs to the state.

### **Why PLCs?**

Many of the districts were enrolled in the PLC Initiative prior to joining Q Comp. An employee stated,

The idea probably came actually from a couple of individual schools that started them on their own, and then I think the [PLC Initiative] was their first initial

initiative that all schools would be involved in, so they went through the training to train the trainer model, which we were able to sit in on because we're on-site at some of those districts so we want to be hearing the same message that they were hearing if we were going to be able to support them. (Regional level employee interview, November 20, 2015)

Parts of evaluative thinking were stressed as central to the functioning of PLCs as well as a reason in and of themselves for why districts were involved in PLCs to begin with. When asked why schools in her region were initially involved with PLCs, one employee noted that,

I think really it went back to how do we get teachers to collaborate and look at student data and instructional strategies and how it's impacting student achievement, and at that time the answer was PLCs....That's been, like 7 years ago. (Regional level employee interview, November 20, 2015)

One employee touched on key components of evaluation, including input, output, and outcome. The input was teacher collaboration. The output was looking at sources of information, including student data, and the outcome was improving student achievement. Looking at and using student data were also mentioned by the other employee when talking about whether PLCs were actually working. The employee said,

There's been a lot of talk about whether they're [PLCs] working or whether they aren't working and how effective they are, and I think trying to figure that out is really challenging. I'll share with principals whose professional team members say, "I've some high flyer groups who are really looking at their data and using it to write assessments" and that sort of thing, and they know there are some other

groups who just aren't doing it. I think there's a real struggle in that. (Regional level employee interview, November 19, 2016).

### **Lake Wobegon District and School Description**

Lake Wobegon was one of the larger districts under the Service Cooperative with two elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and one alternative school (see Appendix H; Lake Wobegon Public Schools website, “About us,” 2015). As with the other districts, it was a member of the Minnesota Rural Education Association and did not have a history of consolidation. The district offices were located in the middle school, which was a large brick building built in the 1980s that housed grades 5-8 in one building, with a split between a grades 5/6 wing and a grades 7/8 wing in the building. However, the school board was currently asking voters to consider an approximately \$40 million building bond referendum that would renovate, expand, or demolish all the school buildings in the district (see Appendix H; Lake Wobegon Public Schools website, “Operating Referendum,” 2015). At the time of this study, the referendum had not occurred. The proposal for the middle school was to add approximately 7,000 square feet, remodel 14,000 square feet, and add “security features” at the entrances and exits (see Appendix H; Lake Wobegon Public Schools website, “Operating Referendum,” 2015). The new building would accommodate around 750 students. The district itself had a strong academic and athletic reputation.

According to the MN Report Card (2016), the Lake Wobegon middle school had not been designated as priority, focus, continuous improvement, celebration eligible, or a reward school. The middle school was located in a town of over 13,000 people, which is large for the county. The economic base of the surrounding community was farming,

although there was also a state university located in the town (see Appendix H; Lake Wobegon city webpage, 2015).

Lake Wobegon Middle School had a total of 637 students enrolled across grades 5-8 and about 49 licensed teachers (Minnesota Report Card, 2016). The district had 2,440 students and employed 170 licensed teachers. The ethnic and “special population” breakdown of the school was not much different from the district as a whole. This information is presented in Table 2 (Minnesota Report Card, 2016).

*Table 2: Lake Wobegon District and Middles School Demographics and Special Populations*

| <u>Location</u> | <u>White</u> | <u>Hispanic</u> | <u>Black</u> | <u>Asian</u> | <u>Free and Reduced Lunch</u> | <u>English Learners</u> | <u>Special Education</u> | <u>Homeless</u> |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| District        | 67%          | 14%             | 12%          | 7%           | 42.5%                         | 13.9%                   | 15.2%                    | 1.1%            |
| Middle School   | 68%          | 13%             | 13%          | 6%           | 43.2%                         | 9.6%                    | 15.1%                    | 1.9%            |

### **Why PLCs?**

Lake Wobegon had been involved with PLCs for over 10 years (Lake Wobegon superintendent interview, November 9, 2015). The administration, including the superintendent, the principal, and the Q Comp coordinator at Lake Wobegon, all seemed to be on the same page as to why their district and school were involved in PLCs. In addition to improving student achieving through teacher collaboration and development, all three administrators mentioned Q Comp legislation, and the superintendent and the Q Comp coordinator mentioned the cross-district PLC initiative as well. Interestingly, there was very little mention in the interviews of World’s Best Workforce or TDE even though PLCs appeared in both the districts “World’s Best Workforce Plan Summary for the

2013-2014 school year” and the “2013-2014 Teacher Development, Evaluation, and Peer Support Handbook” (see Appendix H).

The superintendent at Lake Wobegon stated that while they were part of Q Comp and the cross district initiative, these were not the impetus for them to implement PLCs. Rather, the district started implementing PLCs as a way for teachers to “learn and share with each other” different strategies they were implementing in their classrooms (Lake Wobegon superintendent interview, November 9, 2015). Similarly, the principal commented that the school was involved with PLCs because “it's about student achievement ultimately. It's about ensuring that all students have opportunity to learn and ensure that all students learn. So it's about the collaborative nature of staff and ultimately student achievement” (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015). She further stated that PLCs are being implemented because they are

. . . best practices, pedagogical practices, knowledge of students, and what works best for which kids, I think. Those staff do know their kids best, and they know the environment best, and they can make those things happen most efficiently for kids. (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015)

The principal also mentioned the PLCs were meeting criteria for Q Comp, stating, “I think for us it's helpful in that we can address some of the criteria from Q Comp with our PLCs. So we feel like we're killing two birds with one stone” (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015).

The Q Comp Coordinator also said that the school was currently involved with PLCs as a way to provide staff development and, as a result, to improve student learning and achievement. She stated that they were involved in PLCs to “improve the practice of

teaching and hopefully the achievement of our students” (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). The Q Comp Coordinator noted that the school was a Q Comp school and that part of the money they received from Q Comp was to go toward staff development to prepare “our teachers to teach to increase achievement in students” (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). However, unlike the superintendent and the principal, she felt that the school and the district did not have much choice in becoming a Q Comp school. Rather the decision “was a district top down” decision that she felt was not the best way to enter into Q Comp (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015).

While the district was also involved in the cross district initiative, it would not be continuing with the initiative the upcoming year. Rather, the district was looking to partner with neighboring districts that were of similar size and had similar demographics. The partnerships would involve combining their staff development funds to pay for experts or “big name” people to come in and train their staff on initiatives such as standards-based grading and PLCs (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015).

**PLC functioning.** At Lake Wobegon, PLC leadership consisted of the superintendent, the principal, the Q Comp coordinator, and a Curriculum Developer/Staff Development coordinator. The superintendent had very little to do with PLCs directly, but sat on the leadership team to provide general feedback and direction. However, the superintendent also worked closely with other districts and the Service Cooperative to develop their PLCs. Teachers felt that this meant the superintendents determined the direction of the PLCs because the districts were involved in “joint staff development

time” (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015). However, the district was no longer going to be part of the cross district initiative, and as a result it was unclear what direction the PLCs would take in the following year.

In contrast to the superintendent, the principal actually sat in on and observed the PLC meetings. The principal did three different observations of two different PLCs a year, and the PLCs were notified when she would be conducting the observations so that they could prepare. Oftentimes she would check in with the Q Comp coordinator as well as the Curriculum Developer/Staff Development coordinator for “alignment within all of our buildings before I speak from my personal perspective rather than from a district one” (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015).

The Q Comp coordinator sat on a district-wide staff development committee that also had a separate coordinator and representatives from each building. The committee surveyed staff to see what type of training and development they would like and tried to align those needs and training with annual district initiatives. The district initiatives, which were referred to as a “five-year plan,” were identified by the school board and superintendent (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). The district was in year five of the five-year plan, and the idea was that goals set by PLCs and individual teachers should all align with the goals set forth in the five-year plan. The PLCs and teachers set their own goals that needed to be approved by the Q Comp Coordinator, but beyond that administration was not involved in goal setting. To align their goals with the last five-year strategic plan, teachers focused on “power standards” where they would identify the top standards or “I can” statements that students should be able to do after completion of their class (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview,

December 14, 2015). Power standards involved both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments were meant to help teachers identify what they needed to focus on and summative assessments were meant to grade students.

The principal believed that PLCs functioned best when they . . . look at data where we have student success and when we can separate that out and really pinpoint a classroom, or a classroom teacher, or a section of students who do better than others, that we need to take the characteristics and criteria that are located within that group and bleed it to other areas. (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015).

While she acknowledged the importance of teacher collaboration, she felt that PLCs needed to focus more on student data during PLC meetings, which happened for one hour every week. She indicated that oftentimes what the PLCs focused on and devoted the most time to was not what administration felt was the most important or the most productive use of time. That is, she felt that the PLCs focused on what happened during the school day and “pedagogy of the classroom or what worked for you, but didn’t work for me and common formative assessments, or any of our assessment pieces” before looking at student data, by which she meant MCA and NWEA data (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015).

The result was that “the essential conversation is on the back burner. They get to it last, and then they don’t have as much time to, to address it adequately” (Lake Wobegon principal interview, December 9, 2015). She did acknowledge that she had seen some changes to agendas where student data were put to the front of the agenda. However, she suspected that the changes occurred only when she did an observation and

not at every meeting. The teachers did acknowledge that during a typical PLC meeting, they often had snacks and did some “complaining” before getting down to the business of the PLCs. None of the teachers were involved in cross-district PLCs.

### **Frostbite Falls District and School Description**

Frostbite Falls was an average-sized district under the Service Cooperative with one elementary school, two middle schools, and one high school (see Appendix H; Frostbite Falls Public Schools website, “Home page,” 2015). As with Lake Wobegon, Frostbite Falls was a member of the Minnesota Rural Education Association and did not have a history of consolidation. The district offices were located in the same building as the high school and middle school. The facility itself underwent renovations in 2003 and was originally meant to house grades 5-12, but because of overcrowding in the elementary school, it now housed grades 4-12 (see Appendix H; Frostbite Falls Public Schools website, “Home page,” 2015). There were two principals for the middle school, one for grades 4-6 and one for grades 7-8 (see Appendix H; Frostbite Falls Middles School, “Home page,” 2015).

According to the Minnesota Report Card, this school had not been designated as priority, focus, continuous improvement, celebration eligible, or a reward school (2016). The middle school was located in a small town with a population of a little less than 5,000 people (see Appendix H; Frostbite Falls city webpage, 2015). The surrounding area was mainly farmland, and as a result farming was the main industry in the area.

The district itself employed approximately 80 full-time, licensed teachers and had 1,033 students (MN Report Card, 2016). Frostbite Falls Middle School employed

approximately 25 full-time, licensed teachers and had around 412 students (MN Report Card, 2016). Demographic information is presented in Table 3 (MN Report Card, 2016).

*Table 3: Frostbite Falls District and Middle School Demographics and Special Populations*

| <u>Location</u> | <u>White</u> | <u>Hispanic</u> | <u>Black</u> | <u>Asian/Pacific Islander</u> | <u>American Indian/Alaskan Native</u> | <u>Free and Reduced Lunch</u> | <u>English Learners</u> | <u>Special Education</u> |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| District        | 74.4%        | 16.9%           | 3.9%         | 4.1%                          | .7%                                   | 46.8%                         | 8.4%                    | 16.7%                    |
| Middle School   | 75.5%        | 16.3%           | 4.4%         | 3.4%                          | .5%                                   | 46.8%                         | 4.9%                    | 17.5%                    |

### **Why PLCs?**

Frostbite Falls school district was in its fourth year in Q Comp, but the district had been doing PLCs for at least a year prior to joining Q Comp because they had joined the cross district initiative in the 2010-2011 school year (Frostbite Fall superintendent interview, November 24, 2015). PLCs were also mentioned in the districts “2014-2015 World’s Best Workforce Plan” (see Appendix H). Frostbite Falls joined the cross district initiative when “Three PLC leaders and administration attended training through the cross district initiative and implemented PLCs, so that's where it started” (Frostbite Falls principal interview, December 4, 2015). As with Lake Wobegon, PLCs were initially implemented as a way to improve teacher practice and thereby improve student learning and achievement. “The PLC process is about teachers working with teachers to change their practice from assessment to instruction based on a student learning” (Frostbite Falls superintendent interview, November 24, 2015). Already implementing PLCs made the teacher professional development requirement of Q Comp easy for the district because, as the superintendent stated, “It’s meeting mandates that came after we started that program” (Frostbite Falls superintendent interview, November 24, 2015).

**PLC functioning.** PLCs at Frostbite Falls were governed by two leadership committees, including a PLC leadership team and a Q Comp Committee. However, between the two bodies, the Q Comp committee was seen as having more authority (Frostbite Falls, Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015). The PLC leadership team consisted of a total of six PLC leaders, including three teachers and three principals. Specifically, the PLC leadership was comprised of an elementary teacher, middle school teacher, high school teacher, and three principals, one of whom was a half-time principal who was also the half-time director of teaching and learning (Frostbite Falls, Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015). .

The Q Comp Committee was made up of two representatives from the middle school, high school, and the elementary school. There was also one community representative, two paraprofessionals, and three administrators. All members except for the three administrators were voting members (Frostbite Falls, Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015). The superintendent could also sit in on meetings as needed. The Q Comp Committee met every first and third Thursday of the month. During a typical meeting, the committee went over survey results and figured out what “the next step is going to be in our professional development for our district” (Frostbite Falls Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015). There was also an Executive Sub-Committee that was in charge of budgeting for professional development and for submitting the annual Q Comp report to the state. As was the case with Lake Wobegon, the Q Comp Committee set district goals for student performance, and then the PLCs set their own goals for how they were going to meet the district goals. Often these goals were measured by STAR and MCA scores.

The principal split her time evenly between her two roles of Principal and Director for Teaching and Learning for K12, which was through the Q Comp Committee. She was new to these positions within the last year. Prior to her hiring, the Q Comp Committee was solely in charge of PLCs, but now that she was working as the Director of Teaching Learning for K12, she was “ultimately responsible for that” because she reported to the district what the Q Comp and PLC committees were doing (Frostbite Falls principal interview, December 4, 2015).

The Q Comp coordinator held appointments on both the Q Comp Committee and the PLC Leader Committee because she was also a teacher at Frostbite Falls. She had been in her Q Comp position for five years. According to the Q Comp coordinator, every week the PLC Leaders looked at the minutes of the PLC groups and then met as a group once a month to talk about questions or concerns that came up and provide feedback and direction to the PLC groups (December 2, 2015). The Q Comp coordinator was responsible for setting the agenda for Q Comp meetings and looking into requests for professional development to see if the requests aligned with the district’s goals.

As described by both the Q Comp coordinator and teachers, the PLCS met every Friday for an hour during school time when students were released early. There were both department and grade level PLCs, and these groups also met as a large PLC. The department PLCs met twice a month; the grade level PLCs met once a month; and the large group met once a month (Frostbite Fall teacher group interview, December 1, 2015). According to the “Professional Learning Communities Handbook” PLCs were to focus on four key questions at every meetings, “1. What do we want all students to learn? 2. How will we know if they’ve learned it? 3. What will we do if they do not learn it? and

4. What will we do if they already know it?” (see Appendix H). The PLCs were described as generally teacher driven, but it was noted that administration did occasionally drop in. It was felt that the occasional visits by administrators were done to make sure the teachers were “doing what we’re supposed to be doing” (Frostbite Falls teacher group interview, December 1, 2015). Usually prior to a PLC meeting, the PLC leader or the principal would send out suggested areas for the PLC to work on that were related to the individual and departmental goals. Some teachers who were teaching in specialized areas participated in cross-district PLCs with other districts involved in the cross district initiative.

### **Gopher Prairie District and School Description**

Gopher Prairie was a smaller sized district under the Service Cooperative. It had one elementary school and a high school that were all housed in the same building as the district office (see Appendix H; Gopher Prairie Public Schools website, 2015). As with Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls, the district was a member of the Minnesota Rural Education Association and did not have a history of consolidation. The district offices were located in the one school building in a town of approximately 2,000 people (see Appendix H; Gopher Prairie Public Schools website, 2015). The building itself was an aging brick structure that appeared to have been built sometime in the 1950s or 1960s. The hallways were long and dark and gave the impression that the building was originally at least two separate buildings that were joined by various additions throughout the years.

The middle school grades, 5-8, were split between the elementary school and the high school. The elementary school encompassed grades K-6 while the high school encompassed grades 7-12 (see Appendix H; Gopher Prairie Public Schools, Elementary

and High School “Home” webpages, 2015). The districts itself employed approximately 43 full-time, licensed teachers and had 578 students (MN Report Card, 2016). The elementary school had approximately 21 full-time, licensed teachers and 298 students (MN Report Card, 2016). The high school employed approximately 22 full-time, licensed teachers and had around 280 students (MN Report Card, 2016). Demographic information is presented in Table 4 (MN Report Card, 2016). According to MN Report card (2016), the high school had not been designated as priority, focus, continuous improvement, celebration eligible, or a reward school. However, the elementary school is currently designated a reward school, meaning that based on the four domains of the Multiple Measurements Rating, it is in the top 15 percent of Title 1 schools (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). The elementary school did not receive anything from the state for this status except recognition.

Table 4: *Gopher Prairie and Middle School Demographics and Special Populations*

| <u>Location</u>   | <u>White</u> | <u>Hispanic</u> | <u>Black</u> | <u>Asian/Pacific Islander</u> | <u>Free and Reduced lunch</u> | <u>English Learners</u> | <u>Special Education</u> |
|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| District          | 92%          | 7%              | 1%           | 1%                            | 40.2%                         | .2%                     | 11.7%                    |
| Elementary School | 90%          | 8%              | 0%           | 1%                            | 36.8%                         | 0%                      | 14.5%                    |
| High School       | 94.3%        | 4.6%            | .7%          | .4%                           | 43.9%                         | .4%                     | 8.6%                     |

### Why PLCS?

The superintendent reported that the district was currently not a Q Comp school, which meant the district did not receive money from the state for teacher professional development (November, 23, 2015). However, the district had been involved with PLCs for six years and was initially involved with PLCs through involvement with the cross district initiative, which was prompted because the district wanted “to look at a systematic means of improving students learning and the outcomes” (Gopher Prairie

superintendent interview, November 23, 2015). PLCs were also mentioned in the districts “World’s Best Workforce Strategic Plan” and “World’s Best Workforce 2014-2015 Annual Report” (see Appendix H).

The elementary principal told a slightly different story about why PLCs were being implemented as he felt he was instrumental in having his current school and the district implement PLCs (December 11, 2015). The principal had been at Gopher Prairie for about seven years. Previously, he had worked as a teacher in a district where PLCs were embedded into teachers’ work. As a teacher, he found PLCs to be effective, and, when he became an administrator, he brought PLCs with her. When he started in his current role as principal, he embedded PLCs first into the elementary school and then into the high school. He felt he was also instrumental in the district enrolling in the cross district initiative involving PLCs and saw “great value” and felt the school and district had had “great success” with PLCs (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015).

**PLC functioning.** As noted above, Gopher Prairie was not involved in Q Comp. As a result, the leadership structure for PLCs looked quite different in comparison to Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls. PLC leadership consisted of the superintendent and the principals. The elementary principal was much more involved than the superintendent or the high school principal. The superintendent provided general guidance, and the high school principal appeared not to be involved at all, but the elementary principal was intricately involved with the PLCs because he felt that “the leadership role is a really important part of the process” (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). He influenced the structure for the PLC meetings,

expectations of what would be done, and guidance for teachers. He stated that she “facilitates and sets the agenda” for PLC meetings (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). At every meeting he allowed about 15 minutes for teachers to “get together and break down their data” (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). The data teachers looked at included “common formative assessments that the teachers create… [that are] tied to those specific learning targets that they consider to be essential or power standards” (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015).

When Gopher Prairie first started PLCs, the elementary school teachers were involved in cross-district PLCs with other members of the initiative (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016). The elementary teachers felt that meeting with other districts was beneficial in the beginning, to get ideas, but because of the distance required to meet in person, the different districts having different goals, and the schools functioning differently, they stopped meeting with other districts about two to three years ago. However, they did stay in touch via email.

The PLCs now met once a week on Tuesday mornings for about thirty minutes before school started (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016). In addition to these weekly meetings, the teachers also had a full staff meeting that took place once a month (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016). All the meetings in a month had a different focus that moved through a cycle of identifying success stories and needs, grade level meetings where they identified the next intervention, and finally developed the next formative assessment (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). The elementary principal had a “non-negotiable” expectation that “every month each team creates a common formative

assessment that they then collect data on and act [on]. They will plan interventions, remediation, enrichment based on the results of that common form of assessment” (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). He also “help[s] guide the facilitation of the interventions [and] the communication with parents” (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). While the PLCs did focus on their formative assessments, rubrics, and ratings, they also talked about student interventions and the students. As one teacher put it, they discussed, “what can we do and where are we going. Is it helping, is it not helping?” (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016). In contrast to Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls, there was no formal reporting of the work of PLCs. Rather the only reporting that happened at Gopher Prairie was between the teachers so that they knew “where we’re at” (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016).

## **Summary**

This chapter provided a description of each of the levels involved in the study (state, regional, administrative, and the teacher levels). This description provides an understanding of why Lake Wobegon, Frostbite Falls, and Gopher Prairie were involved in PLCs as well as how their functioning was similar or different. This information is summarized in Table 5. The next chapter will provide an analysis of the interview data.

Table 5: *Different Levels/Sites and Involvement in PLCs*

| <u>Level/Site</u>                                 | <u>Motivation for PLC involvement</u>   | <u>Perceptions related to how PLCs should function</u>  |
|---|---|---|
| MDE Department 1                                  | Q Comp<br><br>TDE   | Department builds tools and works with districts to figure out how to make PLCs fit within the district and figure out what trainings should be offered<br><br>PLCs should have norms of operation, meet often, and look at student data at every meeting |
| MDE Department 2                                  | Currently only if schools were implementing PLCs already<br><br>Next year (2017) all schools working with the state through a Regional Center of Excellence will be required to do PLCs because MDE has seen improvement in schools implementing PLCs | Department will provide a statement of what PLCs are as well as a rubric for districts to measure their own progress<br><br>Department will provide training and work with leadership to make sure everything is aligned                                  |
| Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence | Cross District Initiative<br><br>Getting teachers to collaborate, look at student data, examine instructional strategies and figure out how it impacts student achievement  | PLCs should have leaders who are well trained and whose training should align with the train the trainer model.<br><br>PLCs should have systematic ways to reflect on and report successes and challenges.  |
| Lake Wobegon                                      | Q Comp<br><br>Cross District Initiative- Initially it was about improving student achieving through teacher collaboration and development<br><br>WBWF   | PLC leadership consisted of the superintendent, the principal, the Q Comp coordinator, and a Curriculum Developer/Staff Development coordinator.<br><br>PLCs met for one hour every week  |

| <u>Level/Site</u> | <u>Motivation for PLC involvement</u>  | <u>Perceptions related to how PLCs should function</u>   |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Frostbite Falls   | <p>Q Comp</p> <p>Cross District Initiative</p> <p>Initially implemented as a way to improve teacher practice and thereby improve student learning and achievement.</p> <p>WBWF</p> | <p>Governed by two leadership committees (PLC leadership team and a Q Comp Committee). Q Comp committee was seen as having more authority</p> <p>PLC leadership team consisted of a total of six PLC leaders, including three teachers and three principals. PLC leadership was comprised of an elementary teacher, middle school teacher, high school teacher, and three principals (one half-time principal who was also the half-time director of teaching and learning)</p> <p>Q Comp Committee was made up of two representatives from the middle school, high school, and the elementary school, one community representative, two paraprofessionals, and three administrators</p> <p>PLCs met every Friday for an hour during early release of students</p> |
| Gopher Prairie    | <p>Cross District Initiative</p> <p>Leadership (principal) pushed for PLCs</p> <p>WBWF</p>   | <p>PLC leadership consisted of the superintendent and the high school and elementary school principals</p> <p>PLCs met for 30 minutes once a week on Tuesdays before school</p>  |

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings**

This chapter presents findings of this study's data analysis organized by themes that emerged for each research question. Qualitative analysis and document review were the primary methods utilized. A discussion of the similarities and differences in the themes across and between the different sites is presented, followed by a summary table at the end of each section.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first question this research sought to answer was, "What are people's understandings of program evaluation in rural school districts engaged in PLCs?" People's understandings of evaluation were quite nuanced and depended on their experiences with evaluation. They also appeared to be linked to the value they put on evaluation and evaluation activities. Seven main categories emerged from the interviews as people's understandings of evaluation. These included the following: (a) support/coaching/training, (b) planning how to measure impact, (c) monitoring, (d) collecting data, (e) analyzing data, (f) making a judgment, and (g) making improvements.

Table 6 provides a summary at the end of this section.

**Evaluation experiences/activities.** Individuals at each of the different levels and sites gave examples of the evaluation work they were doing around PLCs. Descriptions of the activities are listed and discussed below. Throughout the course of this study, it became clear that people's understandings of evaluation were highly dependent on how they experienced and defined evaluation. The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation's Program Evaluation Standards defines evaluation as "the

systematic investigation of the value, importance, or significance of something or someone along defined dimensions (e.g., a program, project, or specific program or project component" (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 1994, p. 287).

Individuals at all the different sites and levels touched on different components of this formal definition based on their experiences and work.

***State level.*** At the state level, evaluation work reportedly took many forms, including providing support/coaching/training, designing how to measure impact, monitoring progress, collecting and analyzing data, and making judgments. MDE employees stressed the idea that the state of Minnesota and the Regional Centers of Excellence were attempting to support districts and schools in their evaluation efforts and trying to make the data that were being collected useful at the local level. They also noted that evaluation was often a requirement. As a result, the examples of evaluation activities highlighted the dual role of providing support and monitoring that the state played.

Both MDE employees spoke about assisting district staff to "build tools" and "offer trainings" to help them evaluate their own programs because, as noted previously, Minnesota was a local control state (State employee interviews, February 16 and 23, 2016). Local control was key because while districts were required to do some program evaluation and reporting for Q Comp, they certainly did not have to utilize the tools that the state provided. They could modify the tools or develop their own. This was reflected in the language utilized in the "Q Comp Requirement and Guiding Principles" document (see Appendix H) that referred to unacceptable, required, and recommend/best practices. One state employee stated that the hope was that the reports were also giving districts information they needed in order to make changes to their programs (February 16, 2016).

MDE staff checked to make sure that districts' programs and any changes they would like to implement were in compliance with the statute, but would then have "coaching" conversations with district staff (State employee interview February 16, 2016). Similarly, MDE employee from Department Two noted that her division through the Regional Centers of Excellence really tried to "build capacity" of organizations and individuals to utilize information they were required to collect because districts and schools were expected to implement change even after they had left (State employee interview, February 23, 2016).

Nonetheless, at the state level there was also a focus on designing evaluation studies and monitoring fidelity of implementation as well as the practice of PLCs. For example, the state employee from Department One focused very much on the design components of an evaluation from a state perspective. He commented that a first step to any evaluation was to "know what we want to learn and design our research questions based on what we want to learn" (February 16, 2016). An important second step was to focus on fidelity of implementation because "you can't measure outcomes if you didn't do the program you designed with fidelity" (February 16, 2016). As an example he spoke about teacher observations, noting that it was one thing to show up, do an observation, and check a box and a totally different thing to implement a teacher observation with fidelity, which included having a pre- and post-conversation. Another example was given from the employees' experiences with PLCs as a teacher. He noted that he had worked in three districts as a teacher and was a member of a PLC in each district. However, in none of the districts did he experience PLCs as described by the research. Rather, teachers would use the time to talk about "the naughty kids and field trips" (State

employee interview, February 16, 2016). He felt that “[w]e can't begin to measure whether or not we had an impact on kids by doing this initiative, because we didn't do the initiative right” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016).

The Department Two employee also focused very much on monitoring activities. For example, she stated that she met with MDE staff to go over school performance measures, surveys, and rubrics of progress that were expected quarterly from the Regional Centers of Excellence staff on their schools (February 23, 2016). Additionally, when discussing the leadership teams at each Regional Center of Excellence, she noted that they had a rubric to actually “monitor themselves on and to make changes in practice” (February 23, 2016). As part of the overall program evaluation, Regional Center of Excellence staff then entered these rubrics into a system and “monitor[ed]” them a “couple times during the year to look at growth in schools” (February 23, 2016). She envisioned that a similar process would happen in the division’s upcoming work with PLCs. Interestingly, these rubrics were also used as coaching tools by Regional Center of Excellence staff when working with schools.

The Department Two employee felt that evaluation was taking place at different “levels” within the system, going from her division at the Minnesota Department of Education to the Regional Centers of Excellence to the district level to the school level to the PLC level and then to the individual teacher level (February 23, 2016). She believed that the type of data people should be analyzing to determine change needed changes depended on what level in the system. . She stated,

She stated, “Different types of data informs this system. You have district level data, you have school level information, and then it goes from the school, to the

PLC's to the classrooms... Grade level data would inform grade level programming... When you're looking at the school level you're looking at a higher level in the system...At the district level you shouldn't even be looking at the individual schools or classrooms or grades, you need to look at the district as a whole... Whatever level you're at, you need to look at the comprehensive level there." (State employee interview, February 23, 2016)

She stated that her department worked with the Regional Centers of Excellence that then worked with the individual schools and "talk[ed] to them about those layers" and that "we do the same... We look at our program evaluations [at the] centers as the information all together, but then we break that apart to... the regional level and what do they need to get better at in their region" (February 23, 2016).

***Service Cooperative/Regional Center.*** Similar to the Minnesota Department of Education, staff at the Service Cooperative were involved in supporting and coaching districts and schools, designing evaluation tools, monitoring, and collecting data. However, unlike the state, the regional level staff did not analyze data or make judgments about PLCs. Additionally, the regional employees focused mainly on developing capacity and providing trainings for districts and schools not only to improve their practice, but also to monitor themselves (Regional level employee interviews, November 19 and 20, 2016).

This approach was also reflected on the Service Cooperative "Programs and Services" page that stated the center offered a "wealth of services and support straight to schools" (2016). For example, the cross district consortium contracted with an external firm in 2015 to develop tools to help districts and schools evaluate where they were in

terms of effectiveness (Regional level employee interview, November 20, 2015). Prior to last year the districts filled out a simple rubric that looked at how PLCs were being implemented. Additionally, teachers at each school filled out the rubric as a team. The external firm developed a report, including tools to measure the effectiveness of PLCs, and provided suggestions for administering them to individuals and not to groups. The new tools included a six-question assessment for district leadership that was administered in the middle of the year. One employee stated that this tool was “to help plan for next year and really set what the goals and outcomes are,” and there was a survey for teachers to gauge their perceptions of PLCs at the end of the year (November 19, 2015). She “gets the information and sends it back to the districts, and they’re kind of on their own as to what they do with it,” but she hoped that “the districts are using that information to see what is working and to make adjustments along the way” (November 19, 2015). However, she acknowledged that districts were free to utilize additional tools, but was not aware of what those additional tools might be.

Both regional level employees indicated that the Service Cooperative knew that leadership was very important to the functioning of PLCs, but that all of their trainings had been geared toward PLC leaders who then went out and worked with their PLC teams. One employee commented, “Based on the information that we got from our last survey, we’re instead of planning a PLC training for all of our trainings, we’re having one only for principals” (November 20, 2015).

In spite of these efforts, one employee felt that the regional level entities were “not doing a good job” helping districts and schools evaluate where PLCs were. He stated,

I've looked for tools to kind of evaluate... just a survey that schools could take to kind of see where their PLC's are at, or I think we maybe got a request from a, a district or something, and there's [sic] just not a lot of tools out there, and the ones that are out there, I don't think ... [I]t goes back to I don't know that they're asking the right questions. (November 20, 2016)

He further elaborated that any type of tool might need to be "...customized because I think if you walk into ten different school districts, all ten of those school districts are doing PLC's differently, and they're all interpreting what a PLC should look like and act like differently" (November 20, 2016).

***Administration.*** Administration included superintendents, principals, and Q Comp coordinators from the different schools. Not surprisingly, because of their role as leaders in their organizations, administrators' evaluation activities included support and coaching of staff, monitoring, collecting data, analyzing data, and making judgments.

Support and coaching of staff often took the form of administrators observing PLC activities and/or individual teachers and providing feedback. This took place at all three schools. For example, at Lake Wobegon both the principal and the Q Comp coordinator observed PLC groups throughout the year. The Q Comp coordinator observed PLC groups twice a year as an administrator, and the principal conducted three different observations of two PLC groups twice a year. The PLCs were notified when the observations would be taking place. Both the Q Comp coordinator and the principal stressed that these observations were done in the spirit of supporting, guiding, and training PLC members (Lake Wobegon principal and Q Comp coordinator interviews, December 9 and 14, 2015). The Q Comp coordinator stated that the observations were

not about “who does the good PLC or bad PLC, but it gives the PLC an opportunity to see that administrators were there to support them, not to judge them, to support them” (December 14, 2015). Specifically, she was looking at

. . . if team norms are being followed, have teachers developed a curriculum map, pacing guides, common assessments that are aligned with state standards? Do they discuss their standards? Are they focusing on results, are they focusing on achieving their smart goals, are they reflecting on the assessment to identify areas to modify their instruction, and are they responding to student learning and providing enrichment for students who need it? (December 14, 2015)

The Q Comp coordinator also observed teachers at least once a year. During these observations she went in “as a coach,” and she “is not going to evaluate... that’s not my role.” Rather her role “is to go in there, gather evidence of what they’re doing, and then when we sit down and have a post observation conversation. It’s more about here’s what they wanted me to look for” (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). For these observations the teachers identified areas they wanted to get feedback on prior to the observation.

The principal at Lake Wobegon noted that during her PLC observations, she was looking at the PLC’s agenda for the day and “cross reference[s] their agenda with what they’re actually discussing and collaborating. I am mostly simply observing. I’m not participating in the verbal [conversation]” (December 9, 2015). She indicated that she did not make decisions about what was and was not working for the PLCs, but her role was more one of guidance after a PLC meeting. She also indicated that those types of conversations happened with Peer Coaches of the PLCs and not with the entire PLC

group. The Peer Coaches then made the final decisions about how to move forward in the PLC. Similarly, when the principal at Frostbite Falls attended PLC meetings, she went in with “the mindset that I’m not here to evaluate you as much as I am here to support you” and that she tries to make that part of the “culture” versus going in with a “gotcha” mindset (December 4, 2015). She wanted staff to feel that she was invested and “right here alongside you. I’m going to get dirty and, and dig in with you” (December 4, 2015).

Monitoring and collecting data were most often done for reporting purposes either to the state or to the Service Cooperative. Both Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls were Q Comp schools, and, as a result, administrators spoke about the evaluation type of work that went into meeting the legislative requirements. Administrators at the two Q Comp sites mentioned teacher evaluations when asked about evaluation activities. This was not surprising as teacher evaluation was part of the Q Comp legislation. For example, the principal at Lake Wobegon stated that during the teacher evaluations, classroom observations were conducted where she was broadly looking at the relationship among the students in the class, the relationship between the teacher and the students, and if the lesson plan was clear and understandable by students (December 9, 2015). The superintendent at Frostbite Falls further described the process:

We're a Q Comp school, so every teacher gets at least one administrative evaluation and 2 peer evaluations per year. And then all of our non-tenured teachers get 3 evaluations, and we follow the TDE model that if we have any evaluations scores that are below proficient from administrative point of view, they (administrators) have the right to put them on a plan of improvement before

they (the teachers) end up with their 3-year summary evaluation. (November 24, 2015)

The Q Comp coordinator at Frostbite Falls also discussed teacher evaluation as being tied to the district's development plan because two years ago Q Comp decided to include teacher evaluation as a requirement. This requirement was not a "big deal" to the district because they had already been doing teacher evaluations for several years (Frostbite Falls Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015). She stated that teacher leaders observed teachers three times a year and an administrator observed teachers once a year. The teacher leader observations included a pre-observation meeting, the observation itself, and then a post observation meeting where the teacher leader did some coaching and allowed for the teacher to do some reflection. In contrast, the administrative observation went into teachers' files and felt more "summative" (Frostbite Falls Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015).

All sites were highly invested in evaluating the functioning of the PLCs. Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls districts were both involved in the cross district as well as Q Comp, and as a result administrators indicated that their districts and schools participated in the Service Cooperative annual survey, mid-year survey, and end of year survey as well as a Q Comp survey that was sent out twice a year. At Lake Wobegon the Q Comp coordinator noted that the district got feedback on their PLCs not only from the Service Cooperative survey that was sent out and the observations mentioned above, but also from their own survey that they sent out twice a year (December 14, 2015). The district's survey focused on whether or not teachers "feel like the work of the PLC is valuable" and if they feel "it's making a difference in the classroom" (December 14, 2015). The Q

Comp coordinator at Lake Wobegon also received feedback via a survey once a month from PLC Peer Coaches about what they would like training on (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). She then led a thirty-minute training for these PLC members once a month.

Based on the compilation of all this information, the superintendent at Lake Wobegon along with other leadership had decided not continue in the cross district initiative the following school year because the impact on student achievement was not clear (Lake Wobegon superintendent interview, November 9, 2015). The superintendent at Frostbite Falls also stated that the information gathered from the Service Cooperative survey, the Q Comp survey, as well as other collected information informed him about “what’s working and what we need to tweak, how we collect our data, what’s the expectations of those, and what we need to report” (November 24, 2015). A concrete example of a change that had been made based on these tools was that the PLCs at Frostbite Falls changed from meeting on a two-week rotational basis (grade level and department teachers met every other week) to allowing sixth grade PLCs to meet on a three-week rotational basis (grade level, department level, and meeting with fourth and fifth grade teachers that have a shared curriculum met every three weeks) (Frostbite Falls superintendent interview, November 24, 2015).

Gopher Prairie was unique in being involved in the cross district, but not in Q Comp. Regardless, the administration was very invested in monitoring the progress of PLCs. For example, the superintendent stated that he spent a lot of his time monitoring the process of the PLCs in his school as well as “the quality of the relationships that people maintain throughout that process...How are people getting along? How do they

handle conflict? How do they, how do they resolve differences? How do they celebrate the successes” (Gopher Prairie superintendent interview, November 23, 2015). He felt that once teams acknowledged that they could have conflict and disagree, but still work towards increasing student achievement, PLCs “really take off” (November 23, 2015). While the superintendent stressed stakeholder feedback, he also noted that he and the district leadership needed to make decisions based on what their vision for the district was. He said, “So I think that's the wrong answer, but we do gather information from stakeholders, but also we, we have a vision of where we feel like we need to be or we should be, and we want to move towards that” (November 23, 2015).

Evaluation of PLCs at Gopher Prairie took place throughout the year. The principal stated that one of the very first things PLC teams did during their first workshop day was to set norms and establish roles, including who was going to be their PLC leader (December 11, 2015). The norms document was then used throughout the year to hold each other “accountable” and make sure teachers were meeting their expectations (Gopher Prairie principal interview, December 11, 2015). They set goals for their PLCs and goals for themselves as teachers that they discussed during their PLC meetings.

Additionally,

. . . every fall, after the teams set their goals, we pull together the data from the previous year . . . and we do a data presentation . . . that gives every teacher in the district clear information about where we've been successful and where we need to continue growing. (December 11, 2015)

**Teachers.** When asked about evaluation, teachers at all three sites not surprisingly focused on evaluation of student performance and data. At Lake Wobegon

teachers said that evaluation of students meant "assessing kids to see what their needs are" (December 9, 2015). The teachers at Frostbite Falls also quickly turned to student evaluation. One teacher noted that student evaluation was "how deep of a level can they do the problem at" (Frostbite Falls teacher group interview, December 1, 2015). Another felt that student evaluation took place both at the individual and class levels. Some teachers at Frostbite Falls had been charged with developing a test that would be administered four times a year to students to measure how much they were learning in preparation for the MCAs, and the teachers felt this was evaluative in nature (December 1, 2015). The teachers felt that standards-based grading was "definitely evaluation" because it was attempting to look strictly at student academic performance (December 1, 2015). Teachers at Gopher Prairie also said their formative student assessments would be the best example of evaluation (January 22, 2016). They described the process they went through to create their formative assessments as very collaborative and stressed that they found "the getting together" to "be the best part it" (January 22, 2016). The teachers described the process as follows:

...as a group we meet together, and we talk about the things that are working in the classroom, what we see that our students are having difficulty with. The group is great; they come with ideas on, "Okay, my children are struggling in this area." Also, "This is something I have found, it works fabulous." You know, "You can try it if you want. If it's not something for you, you don't have to..." (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016)

Through this sharing of ideas they "create our assessments off of each other" (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016). The only reporting that happened was

that they “report to each other to know where we’re at” (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2016).

Teachers at Lake Wobegon also felt that improving their teaching practice was evaluation (December 9, 2015). For example, they noted that they spent PLC time looking at the same student tests and comparing how they were grading in order to be more consistent with their grading practices. Another example of evaluation that was given was around determining what “processes or project ideas” could be used “within all different content areas” (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015). The teachers would “try something and then come back and kind of discuss and evaluate how that particular idea works or doesn’t work” (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015). One teacher at Gopher Prairie also commented that she had changed her teaching style to be more interactive and “have the kids moving … and active” as a result of participating in a PLC (January 22, 2016). Another teacher at the same school commented that she started “charting the progress of each student” and providing more individual help and assistance instead of “lump[ing] them all together” and focusing on the same skill (January 22, 2016).

Teachers at Frostbite Falls felt that trying to “figure out how to make it [standards-based grading] work within our system and… trying to make those decisions as to how to make it work best for us” was also evaluation (December 1, 2015). The teachers also noted that many of them sat on committees that did program evaluation. One example that was given was the “Student/Teacher Time Initiative” that was put in place to make sure that students were getting individualized attention and help with projects the last hour of every day (Frostbite Falls teacher group interview, December 1,

2015). What this looked like at each individual grade level was slightly different. Teachers could even send children to other teachers to get the help they needed and to finish assignments because there was a school-wide list of students who were not performing or not completing certain assignments. During PLCs, they looked at student grades and completion of homework assignments to track how successfully this time was being used.

**Definitions/Understandings of evaluation.** There appeared to be distinct differences not only in the evaluation activities taking place at each level, but also in how individuals at the different levels understood what evaluation was and how it could be implemented. Generally speaking there were two understandings of “evaluation” that respondents mentioned. The first was “accountability and judgment,” and the second was “improvement.” Where individuals fell on this spectrum seemed to be dependent on two factors. The first was how close individuals were to actually working with students. The closer they were, the more likely they were to think of evaluation as judgment. The second seemed to be their district and school’s involvement in Q Comp. The people interviewed in the two schools involved in Q Comp associated evaluation with accountability and judgment much more than those at the third school.

Both state and regional level employees incorporated accountability and judgment into their definitions of evaluation, but also stressed making improvements or changes. At the state level the employee working in Department Two felt that evaluation was . . . program evaluation for the Regional Centers of Excellence and as providing support to schools in doing comprehensive needs assessments, root cause analysis, and setting goals based on need. . . [evaluation was] looking at how

overall the system is working to meet whatever is determined are your goals, to look and monitor along the way... [I]t's using a variety of sources of data to really look at the systems level and how well is the system leading and helping you to reach your goals. (February 23, 2016)

When asked what came to mind when they heard the word *evaluation*, the regional level employees both focused on the idea of having a tool or instrument to measure progress or an outcome and to make informed changes. This was aligned with the Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence role being one of support. One employee said evaluation was

. . . measuring effectiveness... To make changes. You know, if the PLC group is not working effectively to know what changes to make and to help make some changes so that it can be a more productive use of time. More focused... Or ... if there is a group that it seems like their PLC's are really helping them through certain engagement, to learn from them and what they're doing and maybe share that with the rest of the district or the rest of the building. (November 19, 2015)

Evaluation would be “a tool for the leadership to see how they’re doing” (Regional level employee interview, November 19, 2015). Similarly, the other Regional level employee stated, “I think there needs to be some sort of evaluation tool that you can collect data with” (November 20, 2015). He also felt there needed to be clarity in evaluation questions that were being asked. He stated, “I think it’s about asking the right questions. Is that data telling us really what we need to know to understand if what we’re doing is effective?” (November 20, 2015).

Beginning at the administrative level at Lake Wobegon district and school, evaluation was understood very much as judgment. For example, the principal responded, “Critique... judgment... numbers” (December 9, 2015). She believed that evaluation had a place in PLCs when it came to ensuring the “fidelity of the process and making sure that we're doing what we should be according to the experts in the field that is an evaluation process, so to speak” (December 9, 2015). She did indicate that she believed the observations of PLCs were a form of evaluation, but that it was “not evaluative in nature with regard to numbers. It's more conversational in observation” (December 9, 2015). Similarly, throughout the conversation the Q Comp coordinator made a distinction between *evaluation* and giving feedback to improve practice. For the Q Comp coordinator, like the principal, evaluation was very much about making a “judgment,” whereas observation and giving feedback were about “supporting” the teachers (December 14, 2015). She felt that these two types of activities were tied to her dual role as an administrator and Q Comp Coordinator. As an administrator she engaged in evaluation of teachers, but not “evaluation” of PLCs (December 14, 2015). As a Q Comp Coordinator she only gave feedback to support the development of individual teacher practice and not evaluation. The distinction between these two types of observations was that as an administrator she was making a judgment, and as a Q Comp Coordinator she was not providing “answers,” but was trying to “bring out their best thinking and problem-solving skills so that they can move towards a better instruction” (December 14, 2015).

Teachers at Lake Wobegon appeared to have taken up their administrators' ideas about evaluation. They consistently referred to evaluation and evaluation activities as

assigning some sort of grade or making some sort of judgment. For this reason, they were unclear if what they did during their PLC meetings was evaluative or not because it was meant for learning and teacher professional development. The teachers felt that the peer observations they did of each other for their PLCs were not technically evaluation because they “made the focus learning” in their PLCs and not giving a “proficient or not proficient” score (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015). In fact, the teachers stated that administration stressed to them that they should not be “evaluative” in their peer coach observations (December 9, 2015). This was because they did not want other teachers, especially younger teachers, to think they were being evaluated because they were all colleagues. Rather, these observations were “informal” in nature and were meant to give teachers information they could use to adjust their teaching practice (December 9, 2015). However, it might be evaluation if the teacher requesting the observation gave the observer a “set of criteria” that the observer could just “mark off” during the observation (December 9, 2015).

Administration at District and Frostbite Falls provided somewhat more nuanced definitions of evaluation that incorporated both judgment and improvement. The Q Comp coordinator provided a reasoning for this, stating that “the majority of us in our district are starting to view those kinds of terms, *evaluation*, as less of a test” because of the move towards standards-based grading that stressed “evaluating students in multiple ways” (December 2, 2015). The superintendent described evaluation as “experience for growth and improvement and benchmarking where you're at and where you can grow from” (November 24, 2015). The principal described evaluation both as “quality assessment... Am I doing well? Am I not doing well? ... and hopefully providing

feedback that will allow for reflection” (December 4, 2015). Interestingly, the principal stated that the PLCs really focused on “instruction and data mining and how to improve instruction, aligning their instruction to the standards, [and] creating quality assessments,” but that “there was never an evaluative component. It was much more collaborative” (December 4, 2015).

The Q Comp Coordinator at Frostbite Falls also provided a multi-pronged definition of evaluation. She felt that evaluation was when something was “going to go in my file” (December 2, 2015). She noted that evaluation was “kind of feedback,” but that it carried more weight for her than “observation,” which was giving feedback and allowing for reflection versus evaluation, which sounded “more final and... like a test” (December 2, 2015). The Q Comp coordinator believed that when PLCs revisited their norms and adjust them, this was a type of evaluation. She also felt that looking at student STAR scores for reading and math and seeing where they were at in relation to the district goals was evaluation that took place within the PLCs (December 2, 2015). The teachers at Frostbite Falls described evaluation as figuring out “how well something is being done... you are usually given a scale” (December 1, 2015). One teacher felt that “you evaluate all the time” (December 1, 2015). Evaluation was thought to be determining “[w]hat’s good and what needs to be improved” as well as “what to do to improve” (December 1, 2015).

Administrators at Gopher Prairie tended to focus much more on the formative nature of evaluation and utilizing information to make improvements. The superintendent stressed that evaluation should provide the opportunity for growth and improvement. He stated that, “I think evaluation equals feedback and an opportunity for

growth in, in no matter what form. I just think that's the healthy and formative process of what we do as professionals, is to seek evaluation..." (November 23, 2015). He believed in the formative nature and power of evaluation so much that she stated evaluation should be more of a

. . . physical versus an autopsy...That way it's formative and you can respond and you also need the autopsy too to understand after the fact. But the more you could do up front, you are in a better position to provide better training opportunities, better information to folks. You're able to understand where they are and, and go from there. (November 23, 2015)

The principal at Gopher Prairie also seemed to put high value in evaluation as a formative tool. He believed that "evaluation and the reflection is [sic] really important. I think it's important to constantly take the pulse take the temperature and understand where you're at," but that evaluation "needs to be done in the least obtrusive manner so the teams have time to do the work" (December 11, 2015). The school engaged in numerous evaluation activities, and she believed that evaluation was about "the effectiveness of the process ...the effectiveness of the work that's being done" (December 11, 2015).

When asked to describe what came to mind when they heard the word *evaluation*, the teachers at Gopher Prairie shared succinct definitions that focused on both student and teacher evaluation. One teacher stated, "Measuring how the students are doing, or if we're evaluated, how we, you know, how we're performing as teachers" (January 22, 2016). The teachers expanded what they meant by student evaluation and focused on formative assessments and figuring out how to best support students in their learning. For example, one teacher stated,

We do the common formative assessments, but along the way, depending on how the classroom works, assessing them daily, you know, in different ways... And seeing what is the best for them because everyone is different. And then when you come to testing, when they do tests, you have some idea of what direction to go in with them. (January 22, 2016)

**Value of evaluation.** Not surprisingly, how people understood and experienced evaluation also influenced the value that evaluation had for them. Regardless of level, when evaluation was required, it tended to carry a negative connotation. The Minnesota Department of Education staff appeared to be aware of this, but because of their role needed to continue to mandate evaluation and balance accountability with support. A Regional level employee understood this very well. He stated that district staff often saw the term *evaluation* as a “loaded” word and that districts felt they were doing something wrong when approached with evaluation requests from an external agency (December 2, 2015). He stated,

I would say probably just the word *evaluation* itself. If we said to the districts that [we] would like to evaluate your PLC's, a barrier would come up right away. It's really a loaded question, and they get very defensive because by asking what that means, they must be doing something wrong would be their feeling. (December 2, 2015)

The Department Two state level employee felt that there was a definite benefit to the work the Regional Centers of Excellence did with schools (as shown by their surveys) and that schools would probably have said there was value in the work as well. One of

the things she believed schools most valued was “helping lead them through processes, the data” (February 23, 2016). She further explained that school personnel

They especially like helping them to analyze their data. We build capacity in using a variety of tools that help them to... look at their benchmark data, proficiency data, growth data, all types of data. We have a very strong process for a comprehensive needs assessment, root cause analysis, and then determining a strategy to meet the determined need. Data is an important area of support for schools (February 23, 2016)

At the administrative and teacher levels at Lake Wobegon, evaluation activities tied to accountability were not valued as much as evaluation activities tied to making improvements. The superintendent at Lake Wobegon valued evaluation, but had the impression it was just another thing for staff to do. He also noted that whenever a progress report was due for MDE, “a lot of times that means... we shake our heads and say, ‘Here we go again.’ The level of accountability everybody has for us continues to increase, and it’s frustrating” (November 9, 2015). The principal also felt that there was value in the observations she did of the PLCs because they were unlike teacher evaluations where there was a number attached to teacher performance that made them feel like a “grade” (December 9, 2015). Rather, the observations were “still conversational. It's about let's just have conversations about what we're doing and are we doing what research says is best for kids? So I think there's a great deal of value in those” (December 9, 2015).

Similarly, the peer coaches who were present at the teacher group interview at Lake Wobegon felt that they were taking away more from the peer observations than the

teachers being observed were (December 9, 2015). The teachers who were being observed noted that they were often just “picking the same on/off task behavior, so our peer coach can kind of just make a general sort of grid and sort of come in,” but the teachers themselves were not “dying to know this” information because they “already kind of kn[ew] it” (December 9, 2015). In contrast, a peer coach stated that she did a peer observation just that day and

. . . got a ton of things off of it. Yeah, like, oh, that's a great idea. I'm writing all this stuff. I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this. Just looking at things in their room, the way they do things, and, when you get out of your grade level, we're more familiar with each other, but when you go to a fifth grade room or a sixth grade room, it's like, oh, that's so cool. (December 9, 2015)

One teacher stated that, “Among the teachers we don’t take them [Peer Coach observations] that seriously” (December 9, 2015). Another teacher added that “the only time observations are official is when the Q Comp Director” does them (December 9, 2015).

Like the superintendent in Lake Wobegon, the superintendent at Frostbite Falls was not a fan of the state reporting process. It was seen as “a hoop” to jump through and something that took away time to be reflective (November 24, 2015). The superintendent stated,

We do our annual report and updating when our Q Comp plan changes. And I'm part of that committee as they come across. Does that really change what we're doing? It hasn't changed what we're doing in the last 3 years other than maybe they asked for different formats, like every single year... But, that's just me being

facetious about how many reports we do, and, you know, I don't know if anybody ever reads them. (November 24, 2015)

In contrast, the Q Comp coordinator reported that Frostbite Falls made changes based on the feedback from the PLC groups (December 2, 2015). This was possible because the PLC leaders also had a say in the revisions for the upcoming year's Q Comp plan. The Q Comp coordinator saw this process of "continually learning what our staff needs and how we would like to teach the plan" as extremely valuable to the success of the PLCs (December 2, 2015). In regard to the required observations, she felt that the teacher leader observations were more beneficial than the administrative observations because the teachers were "still in the classroom on a day to day basis and they certainly even have the same students that they observed in my class" (December 2, 2015). She stated that "evaluation is kind of ongoing" in the feedback PLC leaders gave to PLC groups (December 2, 2015). PLC leaders were assigned to different PLC groups, and as a result they were able to "monitor the minutes" that the groups submitted and provide feedback before their next meeting (Frostbite Falls Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015). Reviewing these minutes and giving feedback were seen by the Q Comp coordinator as a beneficial form of evaluation for the PLCs even though there was a "accountability" piece to the minutes as the groups were asked to make sure to cover certain topics (December 2, 2015).

The teachers at Frostbite Falls felt that evaluation of their work and how they were doing as teachers was valuable, but they saw little value in standards-based grading and "high-stakes testing" of students (December 1, 2015). They reported that they "collected a lot of [student] data," but that they did not really have time to utilize it

because once they had done one STAR test, it was time to do another (December 1, 2015). One teacher reported that she had students taking twenty-eight tests last year. This teacher noted that she had a sheet she sent home with the students so their parents would know how they did, but that the data did not get utilized beyond that. The teachers acknowledged that the student data were meant to help identify areas of improvement for their teacher practice, but sometimes teachers had not even covered the content that was indicated as needing improvement (Frostbite Falls teacher group interview, December 1, 2015). The teachers also reported that because they were a Q Comp school, their student test scores, MCA and STAR scores were tied to their pay. This was seen as “ridiculous” by at least one of the teachers (December 1, 2015).

Gopher Prairie School District engaged in extensive reflective practice and evaluation and included different stakeholders. However, because the district was not involved in Q Comp, a lot of the direction of the PLCs and evaluation work came directly from administration as they did not have reporting requirements to meet to the state. The superintendent felt that “evaluation is the necessary component. And if you don't have that, then I don't know if you have reflection. And if you can't evaluate or understand where you are, I'm not sure how you properly plan or move forward” (November 23, 2015). However, he hoped that the district would move to having evaluation be “more grassroots versus something we're doing as a whole... or district-wide led” (November 23, 2015). He felt that having evaluation be more bottom up rather than top down would make it “a lot more effective” (November 23, 2015). The principal also touched on top-down evaluation versus bottom-up evaluation. He stated that the evaluation of PLCs

. . . provided a structure that people know that there's going to be accountability. They know that there're expectations, and I think people have actually come to like the expectations. They like being pushed. They want to have a feeling that what they're doing is bearing fruit, and so I think all the things that we're putting in place give them the feedback as to whether or not they are bearing fruit. (December 11, 2015)

The teachers in Gopher Prairie did not focus on reporting of any kind when asked about the value of evaluation to their PLCs. Rather, they focused on their internal functioning and had extremely positive comments. One teacher explained, "We've had tremendous growth over the last six years, I believe, and just continue to improve, I think, just because we're getting continuity between groups" (December 1, 2015). Another stated, "Yeah, I think it's made us better teachers, collaborating with others" (December 1, 2015).

**Summary.** In summary, *evaluation* appeared to mean different things at the different levels. State and regional level staff appeared to share a common understanding of evaluation. However, administrators at the different levels seemed to have different understandings of evaluation that then were passed on to their teachers. Generally speaking, at the district and school levels there was reportedly little value seen in evaluation work done for accountability or monitoring purposes. Interestingly, even if it was not referred to as evaluation, activities done for improvement were highly valued. Table 6 summarizes what people described as evaluation based on their experiences with evaluation.

Table 6: *People's Understanding of Program Evaluation for PLC Functioning*

| <u>Site and Level</u>  | <u>Support/<br/>Coaching/<br/>Training</u> | <u>Design<br/>how to<br/>measure<br/>impact</u> | <u>Monitor</u> | <u>Collect data<br/>(e.g.,<br/>observation,<br/>surveys)</u> | <u>Analyze<br/>data</u> | <u>Make a<br/>judgment</u> | <u>Make<br/>improvements</u> |
|------------------------|--|---|----------------|--|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| State                  | x (E1*, E2**)                              | x (E1, E2)                                      | x (E1, E2)     | x (E1, E2)   | x (E1, E2)              | x (E1, E2)                 | x (E1, E2)                   |
| Regional Level         | x  | x   | x              | x  | -                       | -                          | -                            |
| <b>Lake Wobegon</b>    |  |   |                |  |                         |                            |                              |
| Superintendent         | x  | x   | x              | -  | x                       | x                          | -                            |
| Principal              | x  | x   | x              | x  | x                       | x                          | -                            |
| Q Comp Coordinator     | x  | x   | x              | x  | x                       | -                          | x                            |
| Teachers               | -  | x   | -              | x  | x                       | x                          | x                            |
| <b>Frostbite Falls</b> |  |   |                |  |                         |                            |                              |
| Superintendent         | x  | -   | -              | -  | -                       | -                          | -                            |
| Principal              | x  | -   | -              | x  | -                       | -                          | -                            |
| Q Comp Coordinator     | x  | x   | x              | x  | x                       | x                          | x                            |
| Teachers               | -  | -   | -              | x  | x                       | x                          | x                            |
| <b>Gopher Prairie</b>  |  |   |                |  |                         |                            |                              |
| Superintendent         | x  | x   | x              | x  | x                       | x                          | -                            |
| Principal              | x  | x   | x              | x  | x                       | x                          | x                            |
| Teachers               | -  | x   | -              | x  | x                       | x                          | x                            |

\*E1 = Employee in Department One

\*\*E2 = Employee in Department Two

## **Research Question 2**

The second question this research sought to answer was, “What are the social and political factors that influence the evaluation practice of rural PLC members?” There were only four social and political factors that appeared to influence the evaluation practice of rural PLC members. These included: (a) state mandates, (b) Q Comp, (c) experts in the field, and (c) community. Table 7 at the end of this section provides a summary.

**State mandates.** State legislation had a large impact on what evaluation looked like in rural districts engaged in PLCs. For example, all districts were required to participate in World’s Best Workforce as well as Teacher Development Evaluation, and two out of the three districts were enrolled in Q Comp. All of these initiatives had evaluation and reporting requirements that districts and charters had to meet. Interestingly, WBWF was mentioned far less than Q Comp throughout the interviews at all levels even though all three districts had posted some type of WBWF plan and report on their websites (see Appendix H). Teacher Development and Evaluation was only mentioned specifically at the state level and then by only one group of teachers. However, all three administrative bodies spoke of teacher evaluation. This could be a result of World’s Best Workforce and TDE being fairly new initiatives in comparison to Q Comp. It may also result from the two initiatives not being so connected to funding as Q Comp was.

PLCs were an integral part of all of these initiatives, which was not by accident. The state had been moving toward alignment with its initiatives as indicated by the state employee at Department Two who said that the goal of state was to have “Regional

Centers and MDE coordinating and collaborating, so that there is one plan of consistent work that's going out to schools from MDE and the Regional Centers of Excellences" (February 23, 2016). Several administrators also indicated that their districts saw an opportunity to take advantage of this alignment as well as the alignment of PLCs with the cross district initiative. For example, the superintendent at Gopher Prairie communicated that PLCs were meeting a requirement of teacher evaluation, but that that was not the reason why they were implemented. Rather, PLCs just happened to meet a requirement of "provid[ing] staff or peer interaction" (November 23, 2015). He stated,

You need to have peer interaction, and so our PLCs do that, and our staff felt good when we went through that process that, yeah, we do this because we are a PLC school. And so it actually worked out really well for us that the teacher evaluation standard was put into place because it just supported to our staff why we were doing the PLC work. It just became [the] ability to check off that box. Because we, we were a PLC school. (November 23, 2015)

However, not all administrators had such positive comments to make about the alignment. For example, the Q Comp Coordinator at Lake Wobegon felt that oftentimes "education is mandated through legislators" who were not aware "about what education is and what it should be" (December 2, 2015). She believed that often legislators were looking at school districts and schools "to be the problem-solvers of societal problems and so that... that kind of mandates a lot of what we do in school" (December 2, 2015). As a result, school districts took on certain initiatives, and then teachers were left to "catch up" with the new initiatives (December 2, 2015).

The teachers at Gopher Prairie also did not have highly positive things to say about meeting state goals. They stated that they focused on state standards, MCA state standards, and, because of this focus, it could be difficult for some subject areas to create formative assessments that met the state standards (Gopher Prairie teacher group interview, January 22, 2015). For example, it was difficult for math to have common formative assessments “because all of our standards are so much different from each other” (January 22, 2015). Nonetheless, when PLC members did have the same common standards, they could ask, “How did you teach that, so I'm doing the same thing as, in 5th grade as we did in 4th grade or 3rd grade?” (January 22, 2015). The teachers stated that they often gave students an assessment every Friday to see if the students were meeting their learning targets for that week. They also gave a common formative assessment each month consisting of eight to twelve questions that “just hit on the state standards that we need to see how they're doing” (January 22, 2015). Within the classroom, too, teachers felt that a lot of what they taught was “being pushed so much with the standards that some of that creativity was taken out with different things that you can do, just because it takes longer and therefore you push to get what they need” (January 22, 2016). In short, they felt that “the pressure of the MCAs and doing well is always there” (January 22, 2016).

***Q Comp.*** Q Comp legislation was mentioned at the state level and at the administrative and teacher levels at the two districts and schools that were enrolled in the program. The regional employees did not mention Q Comp, nor was it mentioned in any of their online documents. This might be because they were not involved in reporting district information to the state.

Q Comp influenced the evaluation practice of Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls districts beyond the reporting requirements that were discussed under Research Question 1. For example, at Lake Wobegon, Q Comp had influenced the meeting times of the PLCs. The principal stated that the PLCs used to meet once a month for three hours, but that “MDE, Q Comp, advocated for more meetings on a regular basis, and they didn't have to be as lengthy” so the school went to meeting once a week for an hour (December 9, 2015). There had also been changes to the functioning of the PLCs at Lake Wobegon based on Q Comp. Initially, any teacher could observe any other teacher and have that count toward a teacher observation for Q Comp. However, the Minnesota Department of Education changed to “you needed to have very set people [Peer Coaches] who came in and did the observations of each of the teachers so that ... you're having that consistency and inter-rater reliability” (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). The Q Comp coordinator at Lake Wobegon believed that this was “very frustrating for staff” who were not PLC Coaches because they were no longer able to actually see strategies being implemented and to see what was working for individual students who might need a little more assistance or some other type of intervention (December 14, 2015). This frustration was, indeed, echoed by the teachers.

The teachers at Lake Wobegon also reported that because their district was part of Q Comp, they were encouraged to set two personal goals a year (December 9, 2015). These personal goals needed to align with PLC SMART goals, which in turn needed to align with building goals. The building goals needed to align with the district goals, and the district goals needed to align with Q Comp. The teachers set their individual goals at the beginning of the year and got them approved by an administrator. Teachers spent

their PLC time collaborating with their peers and working on their individual and group goals. One teacher gave the following example of how the various goals were meant to align:

A top tier goal would be a certain percent of our kids would be proficient in math, and another goal would be a 70% of our kids would be proficient in reading, so that'd be a district goal. The site goal, and go really specific, we'll say eighth grade for math last year was at 75%. This year we need it to be at 80%. So that's a site goal. And then as a PLC, we might say that even further and say, last year that group, they really struggled with algebra concepts, so we're going to say our goal this year is we're going to raise every kid a certain amount of points in that algebra concept. And then as an individual, I can say, as my goal, I'm going to incorporate this, this, and this strategy within my classroom to try to make that happen. (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015)

When the district became involved in Q Comp, the structure and focus of the PLCs also shifted from topical areas, such as how to increase student engagement, to content or discipline areas as noted above (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015).

Lake Wobegon teachers reported that there was a lot being required of them because they were a Q Comp school that they did not find useful. Teachers initially believed the district became involved in Q Comp because they “would get additional dollars from the state,” but they now “look at it as if that’s kind of binding us to all these things we don’t like” (December 9, 2015). For example, if they taught a subject that “was not tested... and did not have the standardized data,” it was extremely difficult to

develop a “measurable goal” that administration would accept (December 9, 2015). This caused a lot of stress and “heartache” for teachers who felt the process was not “genuine” and did not benefit them (December 9, 2015). Rather it was seen as something they had to do to “check off a list” (December 9, 2015).

Frostbite Falls told a similar story to Lake Wobegon regarding Q Comp. Under the Q Comp plan there were varying levels of goals. There were district goals, building goals, SMART PLC goals, and individual teacher goals. The PLCs were expected to “implement research-based instructional strategies on how to apply them (their goals) to planning and instruction and improve their instructional practices. They are also working on developing, implementing and evaluating formative assessments” (Frostbite Falls principal interview, December 4, 2015). Individual teachers were then expected to “implement the learning from the PLC meetings to help students achieve the SMART goal that they set. The SMART goal is used as protocol and will be used for formative assessments and to locally create some assessments to measure the outcome” (Frostbite Falls principal interview, December 4, 2015). The principal at Frostbite Falls reported that the PLC leadership “is very respectful of the Q Comp leadership” and that the Q Comp leadership was tied to their written Q Comp plan (December 4, 2015). She felt that this did not allow for the PLCs to be flexible in what they were doing and had resulted in some teachers feeling “stuck” and as if they “have only been doing this one thing” (i.e., looking at data) (December 4, 2015). She felt that looking at student data was indeed an important part of what PLCs did, but that it was also important for teachers to learn from each other and to learn about what good teaching practice was. One way she suggested to facilitate this was to have vertical meetings of PLCs so that elementary

teachers who often were “experts in what good instruction looks like” could learn from and teach secondary teachers who often had more content knowledge in their subjects (December 4, 2015).

**Experts in the field.** “Experts in the field of PLCs” were mentioned at the state and regional levels as well as at all of the administrative levels across the three sites. For the two districts involved in Q Comp, this appeared to be tied to their Q Comp plans and the state-required element of the plan being *research based* (MDE, 2016c; see Appendix H). This was also the context in which the state employees mentioned experts in the field. For the PLC models being implemented, the most frequently mentioned outside expert was Dufour et al. (2010), as referenced in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Experts in the field also took the form of having outside consultants come in to do trainings at the regional, district, and school levels. For example, the Q Comp coordinator at Lake Wobegon stated that while the district would not be continuing with the cross district PLC initiative, it would be looking to partner with neighboring districts to combine their staff development funds and pay for experts or “big name” people to come in and train their staff on initiatives such as “standards-based” grading and PLCs (December 14, 2015). The principal at Gopher Prairie stated that his approach of leading was based on research as well. He stated,

One of the things that Solution Tree teaches and that I think most of the leaders in the PLC movement will state [is] that you have to define what you're going to be loose on and what you're going to be tight on. (December 11, 2015)

At Frostbite Falls, even the teachers spoke frequently about having outside experts come in to do staff development work (December 1, 2015). However, the

teachers at Frostbite Falls did not have overly positive perceptions of outside experts. One teacher stated, “You work real hard to get this set up, and then some guru comes out of nowhere and says, ‘No, this is … This is really how it should be’” (December 1, 2015). They felt that every department was different and that sometimes the feedback they got “from the colleges” contradicted what they had been doing, but they felt this did not necessarily mean what they have been doing was wrong (December 1, 2015). The influence of experts in the field was also noted in the readings that were suggested for Frostbite Falls PLCs (Frostbite Falls principal interview, December 4, 2015). Teachers themselves had brought in research articles for discussion around things such as how much homework to assign. As one teacher put it, “There’s opportunity to bring in outside research to help answer some questions or to discuss” (December 1, 2015).

Interestingly, experts took the form of peers for only one administrator. In addition to Dufour et al. (2010), the principal at Lake Wobegon included people such as the Q Comp coordinator, who was also a principal in the district, as well as the Curriculum Developer/Staff Development coordinator as experts (December 9, 2015). She also referred to teacher Peer Coaches as experts because they had done “so much study of Dufour” and had also received training from the PLC Coordinator and the Curriculum Developer that they then took back to their PLCs (December 9, 2015).

**Community.** Community was meant to reflect the influence of individuals outside of the school system that impacted PLC functioning and subsequently evaluation practice. Community was mentioned at all levels and sites included in this study. However, the impact that community had on PLC functioning and evaluation practice reportedly varied. For example, community was mentioned at the state level in reference

to requirements about World's Best Workforce, which mandated that progress towards goals be shared with the larger community (MDE, 2016b; see Appendix H). At the regional level, community buy-in was mentioned in reference to being able to start the initiative (Regional level employee interview, December 2, 2015). Community buy-in was needed in order for PLCs to have time to meet.

The teachers at Lake Wobegon and the Q Comp coordinator at Frostbite Falls also stressed community influence on PLC time to meet. The teachers at Lake Wobegon noted that while the parents and community were now supportive of PLC time being built into their day, there initially was a “fight” to get that time (December 9, 2015). Additionally, some of the teachers would have liked to have a different schedule for the PLC, two hours every other week, but the pushback from administration was that everyone was “used” to the weekly schedule and the school had to work hard to get buy-in from the larger community to have that time (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015). It required parents and other out-of-school time programs to accommodate an early out time. Similarly, the Q Comp coordinator at Frostbite Falls stated that the PLCs were initially meeting on Wednesday, but “that wasn’t very well received” by the community (December 2, 2015). As a result, the PLC meeting time was moved to Fridays fairly early on in the PLC implementation.

Community influence was stressed the most at Gopher Prairie. At Gopher Prairie, community influence was akin to a form of accountability. For example, the superintendent felt that having student scores publicized, which was required by WBFW (MDE 2016b, see Appendix H), was a form of motivation for both the students and teachers to do their best because

. . . when it comes to the state tests they may not be used for total accountability. But if we're a [mascot of the school], you know if we believe the [mascot] pride, the mentality of doing your best work, they [students] better be doing their best work on those exams, too, and we [staff] need to put them in position to do good work. (November 23, 2015)

Not only did he mention school pride, but he also mentioned that because of the small size of the district

. . . there's a name behind those scores. There's a teacher. And I think there already had been evaluation done. Just from how our kids were performing, not even formally, but, you know, just in our school setting... Third grade or fourth grade math, 100%, well, that's Mr. Johnson. Seventh grade math, 50%. Well, that's this person. I think people in our school setting look at that and they identify already, and they were evaluating through those scores the performance of our staff. I salute that that happens. But for us, I think we utilize that as feedback and a part of our process--what we can do to move forward? And I think staff should be at least very supportive of the fact that we're trying to put things and processes into place that improve student learning, including being sensitive to what is accounted for in these state exams. (November 23, 2015)

The teachers also mentioned that the school posted student test scores in comparison to other area districts in the newspaper so that the “community sees where we’re at” (January 22, 2016). This was meant to be motivating for both teachers and students. The principal would even do a “pep talk” to students to help get them motivated to do their best on the tests (January 22, 2016).

The principal at Gopher Prairie mentioned the larger community within which the school and district resided as having an influence on the functioning not only of the PLCs, but also of the schools themselves. He noted that “we have a very strong, supportive, small, rural community here. It’s a pretty well-to-do rural community. That’s given us the money and the freedom and the ability to, uh, do this kind of, uh, progressive work... and success breeds success” (December 11, 2015).

**Summary.** The social and political factors that were seen as influencing varied slightly across the different levels and sites. Nonetheless, state mandates appeared to have a large influence on evaluation practices at the institutions implementing PLCs in terms of reporting practices, functioning and setting goals, and even meeting times. Administrators and teachers seemed to view the influence in a negative light. Experts in the field were also mentioned perhaps as a way to “validate” practices and as a way to illustrate the meeting of state requirements and best practices. Finally, teachers and administrators at Gopher Prairie, the non-Q Comp district and school and also the smallest district and school, appeared to feel more accountable to their larger community than to MDE in comparison to the other two districts and schools. Table 7 summarizes the social and political factors influencing evaluation practice of rural PLCs.

Table 7: *Social and Political Factors that Influence Evaluation Practice*

| <u>Site and Level</u> | <u>State Mandates<br/>(TDE, WBW)</u> | <u>Q Comp</u> | <u>Experts in the<br/>Field</u> | <u>Community</u> |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| State                 | x(E1*, E2**)                         | x (E1)        | x(E1, E2)                       | x (E1)           |
| Regional Level        | x                                    | -             | x                               | x                |
| Lake Wobegon          |                                      |               |                                 |                  |
| Superintendent        | x                                    | x             | -                               | -                |
| Principal             | -                                    | x             | x                               | -                |
| Q Comp Coordinator    | -                                    | x             | -                               | x                |
| Teachers              | x                                    | x             | -                               | x                |
| Frostbite Falls       |                                      |               |                                 |                  |

|                    |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Superintendent     | X | X | X | - |
| Principal          | - | X | X | - |
| Q Comp Coordinator | - | X | - | X |
| Teachers           | - | X | X | - |
| Gopher Prairie     |   |   |   |   |
| Superintendent     | X | - | - | X |
| Principal          | - | - | X | X |
| Teachers           | X | - | - | X |

\*E1 = Employee in Department One

\*E2 = Employee in Department Two

### **Research Question 3**

The third question this research looked at was, “What are the individual and organizational factors/characteristics that affect rural schools’ ability to conduct evaluation?” Participants spoke more about organizational factors/characteristics than about individual characteristics. Nonetheless, there were multiple organizational factors/characteristics mentioned across the different levels and sites. These included: (a) size of schools, (b) standards-based grading, (c) access to training, (d) confusion around initiatives, (e) leadership, (f) initiative fatigue, (g) need for trust, (h) time, (i) lack of access to trainings/distance, (j) tools for evaluation. Often, participants spoke of organizational factors/characteristics that affected their PLC practice and consequently affected their evaluation practice. This was because PLCs were used as the lens to examine evaluation practice. This information is summarized in Table 8 at the end of this section.

**Individual factors.** Participants focused less on individual factors than on organizational factors, which may have been the result of simply not wanting to single people out during an interview. The most common individual factor administrators mentioned was resistance. For example, the Q Comp Coordinator at Frostbite Falls noted that there were people at the school who “don’t take the time” to read over the Q Comp plan because “[t]hey’re so caught up in teaching day to day. They’re not researching what can make them a more effective teacher” (December 2, 2015). She also stated that some individuals were “not fully engaged” in the process of PLCs and will show up to meetings and not contribute to the discussion (December 2, 2015). Also she felt there had been individuals who were resistant to implementing standards-based grading

because it was “quite unculturable,” by which she meant it was a shift in practice from traditional grading (December 2, 2015). Furthermore, she noted that not everyone responded to the two surveys that were sent out every year and that this might mean the leadership groups were not aware of some issues or different perspectives. The superintendent at Frostbite Falls felt this might have been the result of, “... not every teacher... get[ting] what and why we're doing this... They like the time. They think it's productive, but I don't think they connect it completely with how they can improve student achievement using that” (November 24, 2015).

At Gopher Prairie, the superintendent noted that part of TDE, the state teacher evaluation process, was knowing “what you're doing as a staff member [on a] more frequent basis” (November 23, 2015). This was “such a more formative process” than teachers had been used to in the past that “there's gonna be some, some growing pains of that” (November 23, 2015). The principal at Gopher Prairie also commented that there had been some individuals who were resistant to PLCs. When this happened, he “stepp[ed] in” and made it clear that there was a “commitment to the process” and that “the team and the kids are more important” than the individual (December 11, 2015).

**Size of schools.** The size of the schools was noted at almost all levels as impacting rural schools’ ability to conduct evaluation. The two main issues encountered by rural schools related to size included the size of the staff as well as the multiple roles staff often played. At the state and regional levels, individuals acknowledged that they must work differently with smaller districts in Greater Minnesota either directly or through the Service Cooperatives/Regional Centers of Excellence because their limited staff often play multiple roles. This was also reflected in the existence of a “Q Comp

model plan for rural districts” that outlined specific strategies for rural districts to implement Q Comp successfully (MDE, 2016c; see Appendix H). Individuals at the administrative and teacher levels also expressed the need to balance their multiple roles. Finally, being the only teacher of a subject was mentioned at the administrative and teacher levels.

***Multiple roles of staff.*** The Minnesota Department of Education recognized that districts in Greater Minnesota often had less human capital in schools and that, as a result, people were frequently “wearing more hats” (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). The employee in Department Two stated that “the running joke is the superintendent is also the principal is also the basketball coach is also the bus driver” (February 16, 2016) As a result, when working with certain individuals or districts in Greater Minnesota, the department staff felt that “they can't go to somebody in the district office that might be the director of curriculum and instruction and have them lay out a wide and comprehensive game plan to train PLC leaders to lead highly effective PLCs” either because the district might not have a director of curriculum and instruction or because that director was a part-time director who also had other responsibilities (February 16, 2016). However, while the smaller districts might not have the human capital to be able to sit and plan out long-term strategies, the employee felt that smaller districts had an advantage in being able to “move more nimbly and more quickly than a large district can” (February 16, 2016) once they had actually decided on a direction or initiative. Another human capital issue thought to be experienced in Greater Minnesota was the lack of substitute teachers (State employee interview, February 23, 2016). If there were no substitute teachers to fill in when teachers needed to receive training, then

teachers could not leave their classrooms to receive training on how to lead PLCs, which included training on the PLC evaluation components.

According to the interviewees at the regional level, the structure of PLC leadership was different from district to district based on size as well. In larger districts there was often a leadership team, but in smaller districts it might not be possible to have a team. One regional level employee stated, “So [in] some of the bigger districts it would be the principal, the superintendent, the curriculum director... But in a smaller district it may be a superintendent and a principal” (February 23, 2016). Furthermore, the size of district was thought to matter to PLC leadership functioning, including evaluation activities. The employee commented,

You can really see a difference in the district[s] [that] have that deeper staff.

They are just able to do so much more than a teeny district who only have a superintendent and a principal... in that in the really tiny districts they're kind of doing it all. They're doing the leadership survey, but they're also probably leading the group or they may even be teaching and in the group themselves. (Interview with regional level employee, November 19, 2015)

The issues of having staff play multiple roles was illustrated at Lake Wobegon where the Q Comp coordinator was also an assistant principal. She felt that her dual role led to confusion among teachers especially in regards to the observations she did (Lake Wobegon Q Comp coordinator interview, December 14, 2015). As a principal and Q Comp coordinator she engaged in teacher observations. She also engaged in PLC observations as a principal. She viewed her teacher observations done as a principal as evaluation in the sense of passing judgment, but did not view the teacher observations she

did as a Q Comp coordinator as passing judgment. To complicate things further, she did not view the PLC observations she did as a principal as evaluation in terms of judgment either. From the teacher end, this was indeed confusing, but they also stated that sometimes it would be a “third way through the school year” before they would get their goals approved by the Q Comp coordinator, and they believed that this was because of her half-time status (December 9, 2015).

The superintendent at Gopher Prairie mentioned that the smaller size of the district and school was definitely a barrier to implementing evaluation, not because of staff playing multiple roles, but because of a sheer lack of staff capacity. He noted,

I would say that our biggest thing in small schools is that we don't really have a great check and balance for our program evaluation. We're so focused that we don't tend to evaluate stuff enough to be honest . . . [W]hat takes place is you're so close to the ground usually that you tend to have a feeling that things are going well, but you don't really have the data to support it. We're trying to get that data to support it, but we really don't have people. (November 23, 2015)

This was actually the reason why the district added another administrative position because it meant there would be “more time to look at what we're actually doing” (November 23, 2015).

***Singleton teachers.*** Being the only teacher in a school or even district was mentioned in the literature as being a barrier to having a functioning PLC (Lohman, 2000; Dufour et al., 2010). It was not surprising then that while singleton teachers were mentioned by administration and teachers at the other districts and schools, the smallest district and school in this study, Gopher Prairie, elaborated on the issues related to having

singleton teachers at all levels. The superintendent at Gopher Prairie believed that PLCs were more difficult for high school than elementary teachers because of singleton teachers (November 23, 2015). He felt that it was often more difficult for teachers who were the only person teaching a subject in the school because they were missing “the collaborative piece of a PLC” (November 23, 2015). This idea was echoed by both the principal and the teachers as well. The principal expressed the idea that having only a couple of staff who were teaching a subject or at a grade level within the school limited the work that could be done with PLCs because it became more difficult to develop common goals and “bounce ideas off of” each other (December 11, 2015). To remedy this, the school engaged in cross-district PLCs with other schools involved in the cross district initiative early on implementing PLCs. One teacher even noted that being the only 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher of a subject

. . . gets a little frustrating once in a while because I would like to bounce some ideas off another 6th grade teacher and see where they're at and how they're teaching certain concepts. But we don't have that luxury being a larger school... And so we, that's where we have to communicate with the 5th and 4th grade and ask them, ‘Hey, how'd you ... Why'd you do this?’ (January 22, 2016)

**Standards-based grading.** All three districts and schools were attempting to implement standards-based grading. Standards-based grading was described by the principal at Frostbite Falls as “taking things that aren't learning pieces and...reporting on behaviors and responsibility and all of those, reporting that in a different way” (December 4, 2015). She said that standards-based grading was grading students “only on their performances, their expected, in order to meet proficiency on the standards, state

standards, local standards, common core..." (December 4, 2015). This means that teachers were not supposed to grade based on things like handing in an assignment late because this did not reflect whether or not the student had learned the material.

Standards-based grading is a change in student assessment (evaluation) and the process of making that switch is an evaluative act.

Lake Wobegon district and school started moving toward standards-based grading with a pilot in two classrooms in 2015. During the 2015-2016 school year, all schools were implementing standards-based grading. The Q Comp coordinator stated that the district was looking at power-standards, the most important for student to learn, and identifying benchmarks, which then "naturally" moved them toward standards-based grading from utilizing the power standards (December 14, 2015). The principal felt that the move to standards-based grading had been helpful to her in gauging how students were doing because "previously I would say that I really didn't look at classroom grades, very significantly, because there was so much involved in a grade that I didn't know what all was in it" (December 9, 2015). She felt that since beginning the move towards standards-based grading, she was "much more comfortable in looking at a teacher's grade book when it's the standards-based, and we can actually see the essential standards that they're meeting or not meeting or that they've accomplished or not accomplished" (December 9, 2015).

Standards-based grading also influenced individual teachers and how they were implementing PLCs. For example, one teacher noted that her "professional development goal was based on standards based creating and learning" and that she "had a goal last year and then this year it's still based on that" even though "it's a different goal... and

then next year it'll still be about the standards-based" (Lake Wobegon teacher group interview, December 9, 2015).

At Frostbite Falls the principal stated that the Q Comp committee was currently focused on standards-based grading (December 4, 2015). As a result, the school and district had been putting a lot of time and energy into "gain[ing] some expertise in that area" (December 4, 2015). She stated they were using the Charlotte Danielson model and were even bringing in an outside consultant. Furthermore, she had given the PLC groups different articles about standards-based grading to read and discuss and was going to be starting a book group on standards-based grading in the elementary, middle, and high schools. The Q Comp coordinator elaborated on the impact standards-based grading was having on PLCs (December 2, 2015). She noted that PLC leaders sent out an agenda to their groups every week and lately the focus had been on articles and discussion around what proficiency meant in relation to standards-based grading.

She indicated that the PLCs spent a lot of time talking about standards-based grading, what this means, and how to implement it. She noted that the standards-based movement hinged on "making sure that everything is aligned to our standards" and that this was a large shift for the district and for the PLCs (December 2, 2015). However, she felt that there was definitely "movement from one week to the next" in terms of the discussion teachers were having (December 2, 2015). She further commented that this move impacted how evaluation was viewed in the district, moving it way from being associated with a test. She stated, "[M]oving away from the traditional model [of] grading... I think that has impacted the thinking about what evaluation means even for us, for ourselves" (Frostbite Falls Q Comp coordinator interview, December 2, 2015).

She believed that while there was some confusion around standards-based grading, there would eventually be some clarity.

Teachers at Frostbite Falls also stated that there had been a lot of discussion and focus on how standards-based grading would work and what the point system would look like (December 1, 2015). One teacher noted that “standards-based grading is fueling a lot of discussion in our PLCs” (December 1, 2015). Another teacher felt “it’s going to be tough,” while another felt this was because “nobody’s on the same page” with standards-based grading (December 1, 2015). They clarified that the school was currently trying to figure out what the standard numbering scale would be and that currently there was no consensus. They noted that the school even had a different district come in to talk about how they were attempting to implement standards-based grading.

As with the other two districts, Gopher Prairie was also moving towards standards-based grading. As a result, PLCs were also spending time trying to figure out how to make this shift from traditional ways of grading. The superintendent commented that the district had piloted standards-based learning/grading in their science and social studies programs (November 23, 2015). He noted,

We're kind of in that infancy state with learning more about what standards-based learning is going to become. So I think a lot of it is not only listening to what our staff might need or they say they need through the surveys. It's also pushing forward where you want your district to be. You know, you want to give folks support as much as you can, but you just have to have a peace of mind that you need to do, and that's really the true way of learning, is to do it... We do get acquainted with the stakeholder information. But I do think we also need to push

forward [and] provide support, but also have benchmarks and targets. (Gopher Prairie superintendent interview, November 23, 2015)

The principal at Gopher Prairie felt that the district and school were moving towards standards-based grading because “research shows” that having alignment vertically and horizontally in terms of curriculum and standards increased student achievement, and standards-based grading was the next “logical” step (December 11, 2015). He felt that standards-based grading “provides kids and families and future colleagues with a lot better feedback and the feedback is what moves learning forward” (December 11, 2015). The teachers also commented that standards-based grading had influenced their formative assessments and what they focused on in their PLCs. One teacher noted that it “has turned into a whole new twist and everything. So now we're creating more rubrics to go along with them” (January 22, 2016). The teachers noted that “outside speakers” had even come in to talk about standards-based grading (January 22, 2016).

**Lack of access to trainings.** The physical distance that people had to travel to actually receive training of any kind was noted as a barrier by one of the state staff. The employee working in Department One stated that even though MDE would travel to the different Regional Centers of Excellence, oftentimes the distance that different schools needed to travel to get to the Regional Center of Excellence could be more than two hours. This was especially an issue as most people did not want to come in on weekends, after hours, or over the summer to receive training. The state had tried to bridge this gap by providing online training, but the employee felt that “you learn more deeply when it's face-to-face” (February 16, 2016).

**Confusion around initiatives.** The MDE employees acknowledged that there was a lot of confusion around what was required and what was not required of PLCs and teacher evaluation. The employee working in Department Two stated, “I speak about this [work] for my job, and I could say things a hundred times in a hundred different ways, and still there's going to be confusion out there...” (February 23, 2016). She also felt that a main barrier to PLC functioning was that there was not a common understanding of what PLCs actually were or even how they should be functioning. She felt that “[o]ur schools out there call everything they do PLC's, from doing a book study at the PLC to actually really looking at data and the substance and things like that, so there's a wide variety of things out there” (February 23, 2016).

**Leadership.** Strong leadership was also seen as important to the functioning of PLCs and was also mentioned throughout the literature on PLCs (Dufour et al., 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). This was mentioned at the state, regional, and at the administrative and teacher levels at Lake Wobegon, Frostbite Falls, and Gopher Prairie. MDE recognized leadership as extremely important not just to PLCs, but also to district and school functioning as a whole. As the state employee at Department One put it, “[T]hat's one of the, the infrastructures that we really build with schools, is having a really strong functioning leadership team that focuses on instruction” (February 23, 2016). At the regional level, one employee mentioned leadership as having the potential to impact the functioning of PLCs in smaller districts. He commented that,

If you had a principal who didn't necessarily think PLC's were helpful or ... who didn't do them the way that they were supposed to be done, that would have a huge effect in a really small district where there was only one principal versus

where there's a team and whether you believe in them or not you are accountable to the district. (November 19, 2015)

At Frostbite Falls it was noted that “[w]e [’ve had a change] of leadership on our Q Comp and PLC’s and making sure everybody understands where we’re going and where we came from” had been challenging (Frostbite Fall superintendent interview, November 24, 2015). The principal was new, but felt that the district and Q Comp had tried to implement a “one-size fits all model” where each PLC meeting was “bring some data, go over the data, talk about the data, do the data” (December 4, 2015). She had been trying to roll out a slightly different approach and brought in some literature and article readings into PLC meetings. This was met with reluctance because of her role as an administrator.

However, she said that the PLCs had gradually been willing to “let go of a little bit of that independent power and open it up to some suggestions from my position” (December 4, 2015). The teachers noted that this was the seventh new principal the school had had in fifteen years. They felt that each new principal came in with his or her “pet programs” that teachers needed to attend to, but these were quickly lost once leadership left (December 1, 2015). They felt that they were often “playing the game” of trying to make administration happy, but then also trying to do what worked for them and what they had “done in the past” (December 1, 2015). The teachers also noted that new administrators had different management styles and that some “listen to all ideas” while others “don’t like it if you argue their decision” (December 1, 2015). The teachers reported that a lot of times they put work and effort into something during their PLC meetings only to be told by administration that they could not do what it was they set out

to do. As one teacher put it, “Sometimes we spend a lot of time and effort on researching and getting things ready, and then they, as in administration, they come in and go, ‘Nope, this is how you’re going to do it’” (December 1, 2015).

The teachers at Lake Wobegon noted similar frustrations with leadership as the teachers at Frostbite Falls. They commented that the type of response they would receive to their requests about what they would like to do in their PLCs depended on which administrator they were working with (December 9, 2015). Some administrators were seen as being more supportive than others. Other times, administrators were thought to contradict each other. Additionally, teachers at Lake Wobegon stated that sometimes their Peer Coaches would convey information to the PLC group that was not accurate. The inconsistency across leadership was a big frustration for teachers. Several of the teachers also felt that the PLC teams were often told by administration that they needed to do “something,” but the administration was not clear on what that “something” was (December 9, 2015). The PLC teams would then ask for clarification, and, if they did not get clarification, they would make decisions on their own only to be told they were wrong.

One teacher at Lake Wobegon explained that “it [what the PLC team decided would be beneficial to them] doesn’t exactly fit how they [administrators] want it on that day with that person. Then we have to change it and we end of changing it to something that really we don’t feel that great about, but we do it because they check it off...” (December 9, 2015). Another teacher gave the example that her PLC group wanted to read a certain book because they felt it would “really help us,” but administration said no because the focus had to be on “looking at [student] data” (December 9, 2015).

Similarly, teachers felt they were not able to set goals that they would actually like to achieve. One teacher reported that she could not even remember what her goals were for the year because she was not invested in them. She stated, “You just kind of jump through the hoops” (December 9, 2015).

The principal at Gopher Prairie was also highly involved with PLCs at his school. He stated,

I'm very tight on the structure and the focus of the PLCs, but within those meetings, I give teams more flexibility to decide, "What are we going to teach? How are we going to teach it? How are we going to assess it?" I want there to be some autonomy there as well. (December 11, 2015)

The shift to PLCs had not been totally easy for the school. In fact, “it has been a huge jump culturally in our school,” but the principal believed that teachers now felt as if “my [i.e., their] team members were so valuable. They're so important to the work I do, that I couldn't function in another way. I couldn't go back to the old, traditional way of doing things in isolation” (December 11, 2015).

**Initiative fatigue.** Teachers reportedly had experienced initiative fatigue in the schools. Some of these initiatives were the result of state and federal legislation. The most recent example of a district initiative present at all sites was standards-based grading, which was mentioned above and was related to leadership in that it was being dictated by administration. At the state level, it was noted that often schools were trying to implement multiple initiatives and might not really have a focus on improvement. The state employee in Department Two felt that “if you're focusing on everything, you're really not focusing on anything well” (February 23, 2016).

The superintendent at Lake Wobegon put it this way:

As many great things as we have going on, at times I think we've implemented them just to implement them. And sometimes maybe that was because it was the so-called flavor of the day or what was really being talked about either statewide or nationwide... and sometimes I think we just implemented it to implement it and put it on our tri-fold brochure that... communicates all the great things that we have going on in our district. (November 9, 2015)

The Q Comp coordinator at Lake Wobegon believed that because of this approach, staff were overloaded with new initiatives, and, if the evaluation was negative, then it just meant another new initiative would be coming down the pipeline (December 14, 2015). She felt that the main barrier to effective PLC implementation and knowing whether or not PLCs were actually being effective was that the state of Minnesota “is always trying to be the best,” and in trying to be the best there were too many initiatives (December 14, 2015). She felt that her district in particular had so many initiatives going on that PLCs “fe[lt] like one more thing instead of a way of thinking” (December 14, 2015). As a result, PLCs and professional development were just another “meeting people need to go to rather than a way of teaching and learning and being at school” (December 14, 2015).

**Trust.** Trust was noted in the literature on PLCs as being central to their functioning (e.g., Dufour, 2010). Interestingly, trust was not often mentioned in interviews directly. The two levels where it was mentioned included the state level and at the administrative level. However, it ran throughout several of the other themes, including the individual factor of resistance to change, leadership, and even initiative fatigue.

At the state level, the employee in Department Two felt that a few schools were reluctant to work with Regional Centers of Excellence (February 23, 2016).. She felt that was often because “they're letting us in to see all their data that may not look like they want it to look” (February 23, 2016). This reluctance required “building trust in relationships with schools” and providing support to demonstrate that the RCEs were there to “help them through this process.” (February 23, 2016). Similarly, the principal at Gopher Prairie felt that having a culture of trust was essential to the functioning and evaluation practices of PLCs. He stated,

There needs to be a level of trust, and the trust is established through successful experiences. If teams are knocking it out of the park, and they're doing everything, there's a lot less accountability in place for that team because I know I'm getting results. They've taken ownership of it at that point. It's transferred from me to them. (December 11, 2015)

He also felt that sometimes teachers did not want to share with their PLC group how their students were doing because of fear of judgment or of fear of coming across as arrogant and boasting.

**Time.** The literature mentions the importance of having time built in to the day to participate in PLCs (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Dufour et al., 2010). While they might not have referenced the literature or outside experts when discussing time, time was mentioned by all teacher groups included in this study. For example, one of the teachers at Lake Wobegon wanted to have more time between PLC meetings because she felt that she would identify an area to improve and a strategy, but sometimes it would

take her several weeks to figure out if the new strategy was working (December 9, 2015).

The teachers at Frostbite Falls commented,

We try as much as we can to just share strategies that are working and all kind of share some examples of student work, but things like sometimes, especially at the beginning and the end [when] we were trying to get the goals going, get them approved, that time gets pinched. (December 1, 2015)

The teachers at Gopher Prairie felt that having thirty minutes every Tuesday was not enough time to cover everything they wanted to cover during their PLC meeting. One teacher commented that “[t]here's not enough hours in the day. I mean, you could really stay here all day and night and still not be where you want to be” (January 22, 2016). As a result of not having enough time during PLC meetings, the teachers often finished their PLC work “on their own time” (January 22, 2016).

At the regional level one employee believed that time was a large barrier to participating in PLCs for many districts. He noted,

PLC's are supposed to be job-embedded. That means it needs to be during the school days in our contract hours, and how in the world are we going to make that happen? ...We still have a lot of schools that aren't doing them just because of that very fact. Where do we carve out the time and what does that look like and how do we convince the community that this is the right work? And that you will see results? (November 20, 2015)

This sentiment was also echoed by the state employee working in Department One (February 16, 2016).

At Frostbite Falls administrators also mentioned time. Here, the teachers were meeting once a week for an hour at the end of the day on Fridays. The superintendent mentioned a lack of time not only to review data, but also to train individuals on how to interpret and use data effectively (November 2015). The principal was not sure if this was the most productive time for teachers to meet (December 4, 2015). The Q Comp coordinator noted that she would like to have more time to reflect on the open-ended comments that were received in the two surveys about PLCs and to address larger questions around standards-based grading and proficiency (December 2, 2015). She indicated that it was not until February that this type of reflection time was actually allowed for in the Q Comp and PLC leader meetings.

**Lack of an evaluation tool.** At both the state and the regional levels, there was a belief that schools and districts needed *tools* in order to have productive PLCs and to effectively engage in evaluation. This was reflected in the interviews with administrators who were frustrated with the MDE reporting requirements and templates. Department One at MDE built “tools and offer trainings to help local districts evaluate their own program” (State employee interview, February 16, 2016). There was also an emphasis on creating rubrics at Department Two. The MDE employee in Department Two noted,

We do a lot with rubrics, and, in fact, that's one of the pieces we'll be doing with PLC's, is we have a PLC rubric, however, it's not what we want it to be. So we will be, um, reevaluating and revising that rubric to use with schools as well, so they can see where they are and where they want to move. (February 23, 2016)

Similarly, one regional level employee felt that a large barrier to evaluation of PLCs was the lack of a simple, direct tool to measure the effectiveness of PLCs. He

stated,

I'm going to go back to having a tool that's available to them and then being able to analyze and actually do some action planning with results... I think if we said to them, 'If you're interested and you kind of want to see how your PLC's are going, here's a tool for you to use. It's easy for you to use. It'll aggregate the data for you and we can look it over and kind of see what areas of strengths you have and maybe some areas of improvement and then based on those areas of improvement here's one or two strategies that you might want to try moving forward.' Then I think there would be buy-in. (November 20, 2015)

**Summary.** In summary, individual factors were mentioned less than organizational factors in terms of affecting evaluation practice. Perhaps not surprisingly, state-level employees appeared to have a broader conceptualization of potential factors/characteristics that affected evaluation practice than employees at other levels and uniquely mentioned access to training and confusion around initiatives. Individuals at all sites spoke of the importance of leadership, the size of the school. Two themes--time for evaluation practice and standards-based grading—appeared to have a large influence at all three districts and schools. Trust was also mentioned at the state and regional levels. Table 8 summarizes the organizational factors/characteristics that were reported to affect evaluation practice.

**Conclusion.** This chapter provided an analysis of the data collected, including both interviews and documents from the different levels and sites. The findings were organized by themes that emerged for each research question and presented a picture of the nuanced differences and similarities that emerged across levels. Table 9 provides a

summary of the findings. Chapter 6 will present conclusions as well as implications of this research.

Table 8: *Reported Individual and Organizational Factors that Affect Evaluation Practice*

| <u>Site and Level</u>  | <u>Size of Schools</u> | <u>Standards-based grading</u> | <u>Access to training</u> | <u>Confusion around initiatives</u> | <u>Leadership</u> | <u>Initiative fatigue</u> | <u>Trust</u> | <u>Time</u> | <u>Tools</u> |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| State                  | x(E1*)                 | -                              | x(E1)                     | x(E1,E2)                            | x(E2)             | x(E2)                     | x(E2)        | x (E1)      | x (E2)       |
| Regional Level         | x                      | -                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | x            | x           | x            |
| <b>Lake Wobegon</b>    |                        |                                |                           |                                     |                   |                           |              |             |              |
| Super...               | x                      | -                              | -                         | -                                   | -                 | x                         | -            | x           | -            |
| Principal              | -                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | -                 | -                         | -            | -           | -            |
| Q Comp Coord           | x                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | -                 | x                         | -            | -           | -            |
| Teachers               | x                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | -            | x           | -            |
| <b>Frostbite Falls</b> |                        |                                |                           |                                     |                   |                           |              |             |              |
| Super...               | x                      | -                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | -            | x           | -            |
| Principal              | x                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | -            | x           | -            |
| Q Comp Coordinator     | x                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | -            | x           | -            |
| Teachers               | x                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | x                         | -            | x           | -            |
| <b>Gopher Prairie</b>  |                        |                                |                           |                                     |                   |                           |              |             |              |
| Super...               | x                      | -                              | -                         | -                                   | -                 | -                         | -            | -           | -            |
| Principal              | x                      | x                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | x            | -           | -            |
| Teachers               | x                      | -                              | -                         | -                                   | x                 | -                         | -            | x           | -            |

\*E1 = Employee in Department One

\*\*E2 = Employee in Department Two

Table 9: *Summary of Findings*

| <u>Level</u> | <u>Understandings of Evaluation</u>  | <u>Social and Political Factors that Affect Practice</u>  | <u>Individual and Organizational Factors that Affect Practice</u>  |
|--------------|--|---|--|
| State (MDE)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation both as accountability and judgment as well as making improvements and changes to a program</li> <li>This definition seemed tied to the role of the division of the state as an overseeing body as well as attempting to assist districts and schools with their evaluation needs and in helping them meet state requirements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State mandates and Q Comp influenced the reporting practices of districts and schools, but employees were also hopeful that their work assisted in making improvements</li> <li>Frequently mentioned “experts” in the field in relation to the mandates</li> <li>Community mentioned in relation to WBFW requirements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple roles of staff in small districts were seen as limiting the evaluation capacity of small districts and schools</li> <li>Singleton teachers were seen as limiting the evaluation capacity of small districts and schools</li> <li>Access to trainings (distance) was seen as a barrier to Greater MN districts</li> <li>Confusion around what was required for PLCs and teacher evaluation</li> <li>Leadership buy-in for PLCs and evaluation was important from the MDE perspective</li> <li>Initiative fatigue was mentioned as influencing PLCs and evaluation in districts and schools</li> <li>Trust was mentioned as integral to work with</li> </ul> |

| <u>Level</u>   | <u>Understandings of Evaluation</u>   | <u>Social and Political Factors that Affect Practice</u>  | <u>Individual and Organizational Factors that Affect Practice</u>  |
|--|---|---|--|
|  |   |   | <p>districts and schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having tools for Regional Centers of Excellence, districts, and schools to use to measure their own progress</li> <li>• Physical distance and access to trainings was seen as a barrier for rural districts and schools</li> <li>• Time to participate in PLCs and evaluation during the school day was seen as important</li> </ul>                   |
| Regional Level   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation was both accountability and judgement as well as making improvements and changes to a program</li> <li>• Stressed the idea of having a tool for evaluation so districts and schools could monitor and measure their own progress.</li> <li>• This definition seemed tied to the role of the Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence as one mainly of support</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentioned TDE as it required PLCs</li> <li>• Their own reporting requirements were seen as a way to help districts and schools monitor themselves and make improvements</li> <li>• Community mentioned because of the need for buy-in for time for PLCs to meet</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple roles of staff were seen as influencing PLC leadership and as a result evaluation practice</li> <li>• Leadership buy-in for PLCs and evaluation was important from the MDE perspective</li> <li>• Having tools for districts and schools to use to measure their own progress</li> <li>• Time during the school day was noted as being needed to implement PLCs</li> </ul> |
| Administration<br>(Superintendents,<br>Principals, Q Comp) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lake Wobegon administration consistently saw evaluation as making a judgment based on some type of data.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls administration said state mandates as well as Q Comp</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frostbite Falls and Gopher Prairie administration mentioned individual</li> </ul>   |

| <u>Level</u>  | <u>Understandings of Evaluation</u>  | <u>Social and Political Factors that Affect Practice</u>   | <u>Individual and Organizational Factors that Affect Practice</u>  |
|---------------|--|--|--|
| coordinators) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frostbite Falls administration saw evaluation as making a judgment as well as being reflective and making improvements.</li> <li>• Gopher Prairie administration viewed evaluation mainly as a formative process and utilizing information to make improvements.</li> </ul> | <p>influenced their evaluation practices as well as functioning of PLCs (goals, times of meetings). They also mentioned experts in the field in relation to Q Comp.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gopher Prairie administration mentioned WBF as influencing reporting, community influencing meeting times, and experts in the field.</li> <li>• Community was an important “accountability influence” at Gopher Prairie.</li> </ul> | <p>resistance to change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gopher Prairie administration related singleton teachers as a barrier to goal setting and collaboration in PLCs and the small staff size as a barrier to staff capacity to conduct evaluation.</li> <li>• Lake Wobegon, Frostbite Falls, and Gopher Prairie administration all mentioned standards-based grading as influencing the way teachers evaluate student knowledge.</li> <li>• Frostbite Falls administration recognized leadership transitions as impacting PLC and evaluation practice. They also expressed concerns around the meeting times of the PLCs as well as the amount of time they themselves had to look at where the PLCs were at and respond to feedback.</li> <li>• Gopher Prairie leadership was highly involved with PLCs and evaluation</li> </ul> |

| <u>Level</u> | <u>Understandings of Evaluation</u>   | <u>Social and Political Factors that Affect Practice</u>  | <u>Individual and Organizational Factors that Affect Practice</u>  |
|--------------|---|---|--|
|              |   |   | <p>practice and mentioned trust as integral to the process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lake Wobegon administration was concerned about initiative fatigue influencing PLCs and evaluation.</li> </ul>  |
| Teachers     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lake Wobegon teachers saw evaluation as assigning a grade or making a judgment.</li> <li>• Frostbite Falls teachers saw evaluation as making a judgment as well as figuring out what can be done to make improvements.</li> <li>• Gopher Prairie teachers thought of evaluation as making judgments, but also as making improvements.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls teachers reported Q Comp influenced PLCs in terms of goal setting.</li> <li>• State mandates had an influence at Lake Wobegon and Gopher Prairie.</li> <li>• Community influenced PLC meeting time at Lake Wobegon.</li> <li>• Community was an important “accountability” factor at Gopher Prairie.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls teachers expressed frustrations with leadership (inconsistent messages, too much control, and turnover) influencing their PLC and evaluation practice whereas Gopher Prairie teachers expressed no such complaints. For Frostbite Falls this also meant teachers expressed initiative fatigue.</li> <li>• Teachers at all three schools expressed the importance of having time for PLCs and evaluation as well as the size of their schools.</li> </ul> |

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Research**

The larger purpose of this study was to examine program evaluation mandates, practices, and their implementation and impact in three rural school districts, which was accomplished by examining PLC evaluation practices and uses in three Greater Minnesota districts. PLCs are often required to do evaluation for accountability reasons, and evaluation is integral to their functioning. As a result, this research mapped out evaluation activities and influences through the systematic analysis of PLC initiatives utilizing a vertical case study approach. The following research questions guided this dissertation:

1. What are people's understandings of program evaluation in rural school districts engaged in PLCs?
2. What are the social and political factors that influence the evaluation practices of rural PLC members?
3. What are the individual and organizational factors/characteristics that affect rural schools' ability to conduct evaluation?

The results of this study answered these questions and contributed to the body of knowledge about the importance of context for evaluation practice. This chapter will summarize the findings by level, discuss their implications, and make recommendations for evaluation practice and additional research based on the findings and literature discussed in Chapter 2. The findings, detailed in Chapter 5, are briefly summarized in Table 10.

Table 10: *Summary of Findings by Research Question*

| <u>Research Question</u>   | <u>What This Study Showed</u>  |
|--|--|
| What are people's understandings of program evaluation in rural school districts engaged in PLCs?                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Evaluation” meant different things to different people depending on what level they worked at as well as their involvement with state initiatives and how closely they worked with students.</li> <li>State and regional level staff had similar understandings of evaluation.</li> <li>Administrators at the different schools had different understandings of evaluation from one another that were then taken up at least to some extent by their staff.</li> <li>Across sites, teachers consistently reported judgment as part of evaluation.</li> </ul>   |
| What are the social and political factors that influence the evaluation practices of rural PLC members?                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The social and political factors that were seen as influencing evaluation were slightly different across the different levels and sites.</li> <li>State mandates had a large influence on evaluation practice at the district and school levels.</li> <li>Q Comp administrators and teachers tended to view evaluation more negatively than the non-Q Comp administration and teachers.</li> <li>Teachers and administrators at the one non-Q Comp district and school, which was also the smallest district and school, seemed to feel more accountability to their larger community than the other two districts and schools.</li> </ul>  |
| What are the individual and organizational factors/characteristics that affect rural schools' ability to conduct evaluation? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State level employees appeared to have a broader conceptualization of potential factors/characteristics that affected evaluation practice than did employees at other levels.</li> <li>Respondents mentioned individual factors less frequently than organizational factors.</li> <li>At all sites and levels people mentioned leadership, the size of the school, and time as challenges to program evaluation.</li> <li>Standards-based grading reportedly had a large influence at all three districts and schools, but was not mentioned by staff at the state or regional level.</li> <li>Trust was seen as a necessary component by the state and the regional level staff..</li> </ul> |

## **Summary of Findings**

**Understandings of program evaluation.** This study examined understandings of program evaluation at four different levels of the educational system in Minnesota (state, Regional Center of Excellence, administration, and teachers). As was discussed in Chapter 5, “evaluation” meant different things to different people depending on what “level” they worked at as well as their involvement with state initiatives and how directly they worked with students. I posit that these differences in perception relate partly to the history of accountability in education and partly because state legislation incorporated both monitoring and evaluation into its mandates.

At the state and regional levels people described evaluation as related to making judgments and improvements. However, administration at the different districts and schools provided slightly different definitions of evaluation as well as views of MDE and state legislation. Administration at Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls, the two districts and schools involved in Q Comp, tended to associate evaluation more with judgment than with making improvements than did Gopher Prairie, the one district and school not involved with Q Comp.

Additionally, staff tended to echo administrative understandings of and value given to program evaluation, which illustrated the importance of organizational leadership. Generally speaking, the more that evaluation was seen as tied to accountability to the state, the less it appeared to be valued as a tool for making changes and improvements at the district and school levels. This may help to explain why teachers at Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls, where administrators were judging their work, often in the form of observations, seemed to put little value on evaluation work.

**Social and political factors that affected evaluation practice.** Not surprisingly, state mandates had a large influence not only on understandings of evaluation as discussed above, but also on evaluation practice. The World’s Best Workforce, Teacher Development Evaluation, and Q Comp were all at least mentioned in interviews with administrators and teachers. However, accountability to the community appeared to have a larger influence on evaluation practice at Gopher Prairie than at either Lake Wobegon or Frostbite Falls.

Most often, administrators highlighted reporting or “accountability” requirements. This was especially the case at Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls, the two Q Comp districts and schools. One of the requirements of Q Comp was that the professional development provided to teachers be research-based, which might help explain why administration mentioned “outside experts” as well. Here, the administration and teachers had little autonomy in the operation of their PLCs and evaluation activities, and the accountability to MDE reportedly seemed like an aggravation. While all teacher groups spoke about the need to align their personal goals with their PLC goals, Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls teachers reportedly felt this requirement had a negative impact on their teaching practice and experience. It also seemed to color their perceptions and understandings of program evaluation negatively.

In contrast, individuals at Gopher Prairie, the one non-Q Comp district and school, appeared to feel more accountable to the community rather than to MDE. It seemed that in a small, rural community, where everyone shopped at the same grocery store and knew everyone else, this type of accountability might actually be more difficult than accountability to a perceived nameless, faceless overseeing body. This group of

teachers appeared to have felt the most pressure to improve their students' test scores from year to year. This pressure related to the small size of the school and resulted in a lack of anonymity for the teachers, as well as having a leadership and school culture focused on performance that resulted in accountability that was almost a type of shaming. Interestingly, in spite of the perceived pressure from the community, Gopher Prairie teachers reported having a generally positive experience with PLCs. The positive experience may have been the result of goal setting not being directly tied to funding.

**Individual and organizational factors that affected evaluation practice.**

Participants focused more on organizational factors that affected evaluation practice than on individual factors. This might have meant that individual factors were indeed seen as less important than organizational factors when it came to evaluation practice, or it might be a research artifact, i.e., the result of people not wanting to single out others during an interview. Administrators mentioned the individual factor of resistance that seemed to take the form of not fully participating in PLCs and evaluation activities. They offered reasons for this, including simply not being engaged in the process as well as not connecting evaluation activities with an increase in student achievement.

State-level employees appeared to have a broader conceptualization of factors/characteristics that affected evaluation practice than employees at other levels did. It was only at the state level that employees mentioned the distance teachers had to travel to receive training as a possible barrier. However, it should be noted that two of the schools had participated in cross-district PLCs when they first started the initiative, but stopped engaging teachers in other districts at least partially because of the distance required to meet. State employees also mentioned confusion around the different initiatives and

what was and was not required for each in terms of evaluation, reporting, and PLCs. This might be the result of state mandates changing reporting requirements from year to year, the state operating as both a monitoring and capacity-building agency, and/or offering guidelines that included both practices required by the statute as well as recommended best practices as were present in the Q Comp Requirement and Guiding Principles (MDE, 2016c; See Appendix H).

Leadership was mentioned at all sites and levels as impacting the functioning of PLCs, including the internal ability to conduct evaluation. The state and regional levels worked directly with district leadership, which helped explain why it was mentioned at these levels. At the individual districts and schools, both administrators and teachers also brought up leadership. From the administrative standpoint, it made sense that leadership was seen as part of their roles. However, from the teacher perspective, leadership was often seen as being too directive. It also appeared that part of leadership was the phenomenon of initiative fatigue, which was mentioned at the state and regional levels, but also particularly at the two districts and schools that had recently experienced a change in leadership. The general pattern was that leadership would decide to implement a new strategy, program, or initiative, and teachers in turn felt these were fads that would go out of style either with new leadership or if evaluation results were less than positive.

The size of the schools was also brought up at all levels and districts. The two issues encountered by the districts and schools related to size included the size of the staff and the multiple roles staff had to play. State and regional level employees acknowledged that they must work differently with smaller districts in Greater Minnesota either directly or through the Service Cooperatives/Regional Centers of Excellence

because the limited staff in these districts often plays multiple roles. The need to work differently with Greater Minnesota districts and schools was reflected in the fact that MDE had a “Q Comp Model Plan for Rural Districts” that was posted online at the time this dissertation was being written (MDE, Q Comp, 2016). This plan “provide[d] rural districts with examples of how other rural districts have structured their Q Comp plans with similar population and structural characteristics” and focused on aligning Q Comp with pre-existing roles and strategies already in place at the district and school level. Some individuals at the administrative and teacher levels also expressed the need either for themselves to balance their multiple roles or for others to balance multiple roles. Concern was expressed at both levels about confusion around how people with multiple roles fit into the evaluation process. Finally, being the only teacher of a subject was mentioned at the administrative and teacher levels and made goal setting especially difficult.

Not surprisingly, a lack of time was mentioned at all levels and sites as well. However, it was mentioned in slightly different ways as impacting evaluation practice. From the state and regional perspective, time was about building time in the educators’ day to participate in PLCs and the subsequent evaluation activities. From the perspective of administrators, it appeared to be about meeting at the “right” time in order for teachers to be most productive and use the time “effectively” as seen by the administration. From the teacher perspective, not surprisingly, time was about not having enough of it to complete everything they were required to do as well as what they actually thought would be beneficial.

Standards-based grading had a large influence on evaluation practice at all three districts and schools, but was not mentioned at the state or regional levels. This may be because standards-based grading was a district initiative at all three sites and was not currently a part of any state initiative. Standards-based grading was a shift away from traditional ways of grading for all of the schools. As a result, all the PLCs had been spending time trying to figure out this new way of evaluating student performance. In other words, the work of figuring out standards-based grading through the PLC process was taking place at the district and school levels, but the people at the state and regional levels were focused mainly on the PLC process and not the specific content. For administrators and especially teachers, it was about the content and improvement..

Trust was mentioned explicitly at the state and regional levels. It appeared that trust of governing bodies was tied to program evaluation. Trust was about allowing an external agency into a district and school to see areas that might need improvement. The state and regional level employees felt there was often a fear of being evaluated and that evaluation was tied to judgement. This was indeed echoed by some administrators and teachers. One administrator also mentioned that there needed to be trust in order for there to be sharing of student data as well as collaboration in the PLCs themselves. Lack of trust may also have been present in individual cases of resistance as was discussed above.

## **Discussion**

In this research, with its focus on evaluation practice, it is important to understand the potential for program evaluation to support and inform educational change through policy. In addition, it is important to understand how evaluation can actually help solve the problem of rural school student performance at the organizational level. This

research aligns with previous research done on evaluation and PLCs in several ways and reveals implications for evaluation practice, specifically for evaluation capacity building (ECB). Areas of alignment with previous research and implications for evaluation practice are outlined below.

Previous scholars have illustrated not only the prevalence of accountability and standardized testing in educational evaluation (King, 2003), but also the idea that rural administrators wrestle with negotiating accountability and using data in meaningful ways to improve school functioning and student achievement (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011) and that they feel “overwhelmed with expectations for achievement” (Eady & Zepeda, 2007). This study highlighted both of these key findings.

Literature also points to the importance of context for evaluation (Rog, 2012; Weiss, 1972, 1973; Yarbrough et al., 2011) as well as the implementation and use of findings from evaluation capacity building (Cousins & Bourgeois, 2014; Lomos et al., 2011). For the last decade, ECB has been growing in popularity among evaluators who are interested in increasing stakeholder involvement, stakeholder understanding of evaluation, and in building a culture of evaluation in organizations (Labin et al., 2012). Stockdill, Baizerman, and Compton (2002) frame evaluation capacity building as the ability to do evaluation as well as to use evaluation findings within organizations. They write that “ECB is the intentional work to continuously create and sustain overall organizational processes that make quality evaluation and its uses routine” (p. 14). Preskill and Boyle’s multidisciplinary model of ECB (2008) also suggests that the goal of ECB is “sustainable evaluation practice” (p. 444) and that evaluation knowledge, skills, and attitudes affect this practice through the transfer of learning. Within this model,

organizational learning capacity is mitigated by the extent to which the “leadership values learning and evaluation, creates a culture of inquiry, has the necessary systems and structures for engaging in evaluation practice, and provides...communication channels to access evaluation information” (p. 445).

Cousins, Goh, Clark, and Lee (2004) provide a framework that is useful for understanding how evaluative inquiry enhances organizational learning specifically within schools. In this model, evaluative inquiry must become a norm before organizational learning can be expected. This depends on organizational support structures such as the perceived importance and usefulness of evaluation as well as leadership, both of which are shown as areas for improvement in this study. Goh, Cousins, and Elliott (2006) write,

Evaluative inquiry can contribute to organizational learning in several ways: first, the *results* of an evaluation can help measure the success of a particular project or program, provide feedback from which the school staff can learn, and create knowledge for decision making; second the *process* of conducting the evaluation can in itself act as a learning system. (p. 291)

Goh et al. (2006, p. 315) also suggest that in order to become learning organizations, schools need to increase teacher participation in program evaluation, encourage discussions around mistakes, openly discuss innovations and solutions, and reward working together and trying new things. Mindfully attending to these suggestions at the district and school levels could help to further embed evaluation within PLCs.

In spite of the efforts of MDE to be grounded in “best practices,” to have alignment across its different initiatives, and to support and be responsive to districts and

schools in helping them to determine how they meet legislative requirements, it cannot go un-noted that the legislations themselves were often seen as mandates produced without input from the teachers who were actually meant to implement them. These same mandates were then offered to teachers as a form of professional development. Lake Wobegon and Frostbite Falls staff shared this perception of the district goals at the administrative and teacher levels. This approach contrasted sharply with recommended best practices for PLCs which emphasize the importance of shared decision making power (Dufour et al., 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) and that caution against mandating PLCs as mandates cannot magically make PLC norms and practices appear (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006). Even though the state and regional level employees interviewed for this study could only assist in helping districts and schools meet legislative requirements, this may have contributed to the misalignment between how state and regional level staff saw their roles and how they were perceived by administrators and teachers.

### **Implications for Program Evaluation Practice in Rural Schools**

This study, along with the literature on evaluation, ECB, and policy analysis provides guidance for how MDE and the Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence could act more authentically as capacity-building organizations and promote program evaluation in PLCs in rural areas. For example, while both the state and the Service Cooperative/Regional Center of Excellence appeared to be moving toward a model of having districts and schools monitor their own practice, both organizations might consider how they could more fully involve Greater MN districts and schools in the “policy process” (Fowler, 2013). One way to do this might be to shift away from the

utilizing mandates to focusing more on inducements, capacity building, and perhaps even systems-changing instruments as discussed by McDonnell and Elmore (1987). That is, the state and regional organizations could consider what might make districts and schools want to conduct evaluation, utilize evaluation findings, and ask for evaluation and evaluation assistance as opposed to having evaluation in the form of accountability imposed on them. Additionally, both levels could more fully consider the unique characteristics of Greater Minnesota districts and schools such as the importance of community in at least some Greater Minnesota districts and schools by allowing for more bottom-up direction when creating legislation and mandates, which might involve transferring some authority in the “policy process” (Fowler, 2013) which was beyond the control of the individuals interviewed in this study

Both state and regional staff could also begin to think more intentionally building the evaluation capacity of districts and schools in terms of organizational support structures as well as individual skills and knowledge (Cousins et al., 2004; King, 2002; Labin et al., 2012; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Stockdill et al., 2002). For example, both the levels appear to be combatting the structural issue of limited staffing in Greater Minnesota by moving toward alignment with initiatives in order to reduce the burden of meeting multiple mandates. However, the ECB literature tells us of the importance of having a long-term relationship between an evaluator and an organization, which simply may not be possible in many rural districts and schools (King, 2002; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Stockdill et al., 2002). For this reason, it might be beneficial for to consider employing evaluation consultants to work with rural districts and schools over the course

of several years to build individual and organizational capacity to do and use evaluation or to provide funds for evaluator positions within smaller districts and schools.

As noted above, individual knowledge of evaluation as well as skills also affect the sustainability of evaluation. With this in mind, the two overseeing bodies could intentionally offer more trainings specifically around evaluation skills such as data usage and how to utilize findings to make improvements to both organizational functioning and teacher practice. Because of the importance of leadership for organizational evaluation capacity (e.g., Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Cousins et al., 2004), these trainings could be done solely at the administrative level or at both the teacher and administrative levels.

The literature on evaluation, ECB, and PLCs all consistently speaks to the importance of leadership for mainstreaming norms and practices, which is why the administrative level in schools is critical (e.g., Cousins et al., 2004; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Dufour et al., 2010; Labin et al., 2012). To foster and maintain evaluation practice, a first step is to recognize the importance of leadership on people's understandings and values of evaluation. As was illustrated in this study, staff tended to take up the views and values of their leadership. Second, it is important for leadership to make evaluation part of what staff do and what they want to do even outside of PLCs. This requires shared leadership--a balancing act of both top-down and bottom-up efforts. Allowing space and time for teachers in particular to have a voice in at least some part of the direction of evaluation activities and evaluative questions may promote buy-in and promote both individual and organizational change.

Teachers, of course, are tasked with actually implementing initiatives. It is generally accepted in the literature that individual outcomes are framed by and dependent

on organizational level structures and outcomes (Labin et al., 2012). This was reflected in the findings of this research as well. Within today's school system, teachers do not appear to have a lot of power. Rather, PLCs are a mechanism for teachers to engage in evaluative thinking, but the leadership for ECB needs to come from the other levels, especially the administrative level as discussed above. Nonetheless, there does appear to be at least some type of reciprocal relationship between individual and organizational learning (Cousins et al., 2014). Therefore, to the extent possible, it is recommended that teachers continue to ask questions they find useful to their practice.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This study highlights several implications for future research. First, researchers have consistently called for further study on the individual and organizational factors that enhance an organization's ability to do and use evaluation (Cousins & Bourgeois, 2014). Future studies with a similar design could look at larger social and political factors that influence evaluation understanding and practice all the way up to the federal level. Additionally, Cousins, Swee, Elliott, and Bourgeois (2014) observe, "We need to know more about the multidimensional nature of evaluation capacity and to use this as a foundation for the design and development of ECB initiatives" (p. 9), noting that little attention has been paid to the *demand* or *use* side of evaluation. Examining other legislative mandates utilizing the vertical case study design could shed further light on the demand and use of evaluation.

Second, from a methodological point of view the vertical case study approach proved useful in highlighting areas of alignment and misalignment in understandings of program evaluation as well as the contextual factors that influenced evaluation practice

across state, regional, administrative, and teacher levels in Minnesota. This method allowed for a view of leadership and how it related to evaluation capacity building or more limited evaluation practices and provided a model for how to understand leadership levels within the bounds of context.

However, data collection and analysis across organizations were not without difficulty. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, individuals at all levels needed to agree to participate in the study in order to maintain the fidelity of the design. For this reason, it was fruitful to start at a “higher” level within the system than at a lower level. Data analysis also proved challenging because of the desire to build a rich description of each site and level, maintain the unique characteristics of each site and level, while simultaneously attempting to locate common themes. Utilizing word tables as described by Yin (2011) proved useful in this regard. Future research using the vertical case study design may benefit from these strategies.

Third, given the dearth of research on program evaluation in rural schools, it is hoped that at least some of the findings from this study will provide guidance to researchers and evaluators doing work in rural areas. For example, this study illustrated the importance of the social context of rural schools potentially being highly connected to their communities, which was also found by Howley and Howley (2010). Further research could dig deeper into this phenomenon and how the different spheres influence evaluation practice in rural districts and schools. Further research could also move beyond qualitative analysis to larger, quantitatively-based research. This would expand the generalizability of the study and might also unearth additional contextual factors that did not emerge from this study.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion, it seems that in attempting to be tight on goals and loose on means, the state has created an environment in which districts and schools need to balance state mandates with what they actually have the capacity to do. The capacity they have is clearly influenced by social, political, individual, and organizational factors. The resulting balancing act that takes place at each level of implementation is slightly different, but ultimately the burden lies with individual teachers who tell us how the sometimes conflicting demands of state policy, school initiatives, and student needs can negatively influence their PLC and program evaluation activities.

The legacy of a “limited version of evaluation” is alive and well (King, 2003, p. 279). While a demanding focus on standardized testing may be going by the wayside with the dissolution of No Child Left Behind, the remaining remnants and accountability appear to be very much alive. The evaluation education industry has trained educators and administrators to think about evaluation in the quantitative terms of increasing student achievement and stresses monitoring and accountability of this progress. This was evident throughout the interviews at all of the different levels and played out in various ways. However, which entity educators felt accountable to varied with at least one rural district feeling more accountable to its community than to any government agency. Additional research could examine the validity of this claim.

Finally, this research strengthened the hypothesis that because of the distinct challenges rural schools face, as well as the structure of mandated evaluation reporting for PLCs, rural schools may not have the capacity to easily incorporate program evaluation activities and evaluative thinking into their functioning. Rather, staff seemed

to view evaluation as something they needed to comply with. While the challenges differed slightly from those initially hypothesized, this study ultimately illustrated how context can be important to evaluation understanding and practice and that rural districts and schools are unique. The “rural school problem” (Arp as cited in Steffes, 2008) still exists and the promise of evaluation to improve social programs including education is currently falling short. However, it seems that evaluation could live up to its promise if accountability followed program improvement instead of leading it in purpose.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Letter of Commitment**

(On school district letterhead)

To whom it may concern:

On behalf of the xx District, I am providing this letter of commitment for the PLCs in Rural Areas dissertation project conducted by Gayra Ostgaard. The project focuses on conducting an exploratory study that will examine evaluation mandates, practices, and their implementation and impact in a rural context through the examination of PLC evaluation practices and uses. Participants will provide information about their PLC activities via individual and group interviews. Specifically, those people with knowledge of how the PLCs work at the district and school level will participate in one-on-one interviews (1-4 participants) while teachers involved in PLCs will participate in group interviews (at least 7-8 teachers). A final report will be shared with the district, and, if desired, the results will also be presented orally.

In support of this project xxx School District will 1) identify a contact person, 2) permit administrators and teachers to volunteer in the study, and 3) provide the researcher with other relevant information including annual reports as well as other materials related to PLC functioning and reporting.

We look forward to participating in work that will help move Professional Learning Communities in our district forward.

Sincerely,

## **Appendix B: Contact Email Template**

Hello xx,

I hope you are doing well and have enjoyed the summer! I'm writing to inquire about the possibility of xx participating in what will become my dissertation.

The larger purpose of my dissertation study is to highlight evaluation mandates, practices, and their implementation and impact in a rural context. A promising way to address this is through the examination of PLC evaluation practices and uses in rural areas. Not only are PLCs often required to do evaluation for accountability purposes, but they also have evaluation central to their functioning. As a result, my research will aim to map out evaluation activities and outcomes through the systematic observation and analysis of PLC initiatives in three rural, MN school districts as well as at the state level offices. Specifically, I would like to talk with people at the state, district, and local levels. This means that I'm looking to talk with individuals involved at these various levels. At the district level, I'm looking to talk with three schools from three different districts.

In return for your participation, I am willing to provide a one day consultation or assist with evaluation related activities. I am also willing to provide a presentation of my results once the study is finished. Please let me know if this is something you would be interested in. I am more than happy to talk about this via phone as well if that would be helpful. I look forward to hearing from you.

Cheers,

Gayra Ostgaard  
OLPD Doctoral Candidate, Research Assistant, Consultant

## **Appendix C: Consent to Participate in Research**

Dear Participant,

You are being asked to participate in a research study.

Gayra Ostgaard is conducting a study to investigate what evaluation looks like in rural schools engaged in professional learning communities. This includes what factors participants perceive as influencing their ability to engage in evaluation as well as what participants see as the perceived value and outcomes of evaluation. This study is to fulfill the requirements for her dissertation studies.

As a participant, you are asked to participate in a telephone or in-person interview with Ms. Ostgaard. Phone interviews will be conducted by telephone or skype. The interview would take about one hour of your time.

You were asked to participate because your district has agreed to participate in the study and because of your role in your district.

No compensation is provided for participation. Other than your time commitment for the interview, no additional costs are being asked of you.

In order to record what is said during the interview, Ms. Ostgaard will audio record the interview. The audio recording and any notes taken during the interview will be kept on a password protected computer or locked file cabinet and will be used only for research purposes. The material from the study will serve as a basis for scholarly work, publications, and professional presentations.

When individual quotes are used to illustrate important points, your name or any identifiable information related to you will not be included. Ms. Ostgaard will keep names in a separate password protected folder. Your name and participation in the interview will not be shared. Ms. Ostgaard will aggregate all responses and will assign identifiers to each piece of data so that no personally identifiable information is available. Ostgaard will review responses to ensure anonymity, in particular, to ensure your comments do not provide identifiable information. There are no foreseeable risks in your participation. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and you may decline to participate at any time.

If you have questions about this research, please contact Gayra Ostgaard, PhD Candidate, Phone: 651-303-6397. Email: [ostga010@umn.edu](mailto:ostga010@umn.edu). You may also contact Ms. Ostgaard's Adviser: Dr. Jean King, Phone: 612-626-1614. Email: [kingx004@umn.edu](mailto:kingx004@umn.edu).

You may also contact the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board, Phone: 612-626-5654, Email: [irb@umn.edu](mailto:irb@umn.edu)  
You will be given a copy of this consent to keep for your records.

Thank you,

Gayra Ostgaard  
Ph.D. Candidate, Evaluation Studies, University of Minnesota

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**Authorization for the Release of Interview**

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

As part of this research, an audio recording of this interview will be made. I would like you to consent to the use of this recording and any notes for research purposes. The material will be used as a basis for scholarly work, publications and professional presentations. In any use of the materials, your name will not be disclosed. You are under no obligation to give your consent.

I agree to participate in an interview and state that I am 18 years of age or older, as of today's date.

---

Signature

---

Date

## **Appendix D: State and Regional Level Interview Guide**

### **Interview Introduction**

*Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my study. Before we begin, I would like you to sign a consent form. This form states that your information will remain confidential and that your name and region will not be tied to anything that is written about my study. It also says that your participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you would like to stop at any point during our conversation, you are free to do so. You can also choose to skip certain questions if you would like.*

*I would like to audio record this conversation as it will allow me to use your exact words, and I will not have to rely solely on my notes later. May I start the recorder?*

*Do you have any questions for me before we get started?  
Every time I say evaluation I'm talking about program evaluation.*

### **Interview Questions**

**First I would like to know about the work you do with PLCs in your district in your region.**

1. Speaking broadly how would you describe your roles and responsibilities?
2. Please tell me about why your region is involved in teacher professional learning communities? (e.g. World's Best Workforce?, other mandates, school board)  
Probe: Where did the idea to implement come from? What do you think is the philosophy behind PLCs?
3. Please describe how you are involved with teacher professional learning communities (PLCs)?
4. In general, how do you make decisions about what is and is not working for teacher PLCs your region?

Probes: What sources of information do you use to make these decisions? What processes?

**Now I'd like to talk about program evaluation.**

1. What comes to mind when you think of evaluation?
2. How do you handle evaluation in your region? (Note: Possibly look for org. charts and present to them during the conversation)
3. How have you been involved with evaluation in your current role?
  - a. 3a. If yes, can you talk a little more about that?

[Probes: Did you help identify goals for a program or activity? Did you help create evaluation questions? Did you collect feedback about a program? How did you analyze and synthesize the data? Did you write reports about data? Did you use data to change a program or activity?]

4. What evaluation work has been done with PLCs in your region?
  - a. Probe: If there has not been evaluation work, what role do you think evaluation should play in the implementation of PLCs?
5. How do you approach the topic of evaluation when working with the state (MDE)?
6. How do you approach the topic of evaluation when working with districts in your region?
  - a. Probe: Who do you usually work with from a district?
7. What influences how you use evaluation?
8. What if any barriers have you encountered when trying to integrate evaluation as a part of your work with the districts?
  - a. Probe: To what extent are these barriers unique to rural settings?
9. Can you think of anything specific that influences rural school districts' evaluation practice? If yes, what?
10. How do you feel about the evaluation activities your region is involved in?
11. How have you used evaluation findings?

Probe: Beyond reporting purposes, how have you used evaluation findings?

12. To what extent do you think evaluation is valued by districts in your region as a tool for improvement and learning?

Probe: How, if at all, have you seen evaluation outcomes used in rural schools?

13. If I am to truly understand how program evaluation functions in rural PLCs, what have I forgotten to ask? Do you have any additional thoughts?  
*Those are all the questions I have. Do you have anything else you would like to add?*

*Thank you for your time. Please feel free to call or email me if you have any further questions or concerns. I will be sending out my preliminary findings for your review and look forward to hearing your thoughts about those as well.*

## **Appendix E: District-Level Interview Guide: Superintendent**

### **Interview Introduction**

*Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my study. Before we begin, I would like you to sign a consent form. This form states that your information will remain confidential and that your name and district will not be tied to anything that is written about my study. It also says that your participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you would like to stop at any point during our conversation, you are free to do so. You can also choose to skip certain questions if you would like.*

*Do you have any questions for me before we get started?*

*I would like to audio record this conversation as it will allow me to make sure your comments are accurately captured and so that I will not have to rely solely on my notes later. May I start the recorder?*

### **Interview Questions**

#### **First I would like to know about teacher PLCs in your district.**

5. Please tell me about why your district is involved in teacher professional learning communities? (e.g. World's Best Workforce?, other mandates, school board)  
Probe: When did your district first start PLCs? Where did the idea to implement come from? What do you think is the philosophy behind PLCs?
  
6. Please describe how you are involved with teacher professional learning communities (PLCs)?  
Probe: Have you delegated work? Who does what? What does the supervision look like?

7. In general, how do you make decisions about what is and is not working for teacher PLCs in your district?  
Probes: What sources of information do you use to make these decisions? What processes?

#### **Now I'd like to talk about program evaluation.**

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word "evaluation?"
  
2. How do you manage evaluation in your district? (Note: Possibly look for org. charts and present to them during the conversation)
  
3. How have you been involved with evaluation in your current role?

- 3a. Can you talk a little more about that?
4. What, if any, PLC activities does your district engage in that you would consider to be evaluative?
5. How do you approach the topic of evaluation when working with the state (MDE)?
6. How do you approach the topic of evaluation when working with your staff?
7. What influences how your district uses evaluation?
8. What, if any, barriers have you encountered when trying to integrate evaluation as a part of your work of the district?
9. How do you feel about the evaluation activities your district is involved in?
10. How have you used evaluation findings?
- a. Probe: Beyond reporting purposes, how have you used evaluation findings?
11. How would you like to see evaluation findings used?
- a. Probe: What could be done to make that happen?

*Those are all the questions I have. Do you have anything else you would like to add?*

*Thank you for your time. Please feel free to call or email me if you have any further questions or concerns. I will be sending out my preliminary findings for your review and look forward to hearing your thoughts about those as well.*

## **Appendix F: Principal and Coordinator Interview Guide**

### **Interview Introduction**

*Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my study. Before we begin, I would like you to sign a consent form. This form states that your information will remain confidential and that your name and school will not be tied to anything that is written about my study. It also says that your participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you would like to stop at any point during our conversation, you are free to do so. You can also choose to skip certain questions if you would like.*

*I would like to audio record this conversation as it will allow me to make sure your comments are accurately captured and so that I will not have to rely solely on my notes later. May I start the recorder?*

*Do you have any questions for me before we get started?*

### **Interview Questions**

#### **First I'd like to talk about teacher professional learning communities.**

1. Please tell me about why your school is involved in teacher professional learning communities? (e.g. World's Best Workforce?, other mandates, school board)
  
2. Please describe how you are involved with teacher professional learning communities (PLCs)?  
Probe: Have you delegated work? Who does what? What does the supervision look like; do you sit in on PLCs on a regular basis?

3. In general, how do you make decisions about what is and is not working for teacher PLCs your school?  
Probes: What sources of information do you use to make these decisions? What processes? Who is involved in those decisions?

#### **Now I'd like to talk about PLCs and evaluation of PLCs.**

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word "evaluation?"
  
2. How do you manage evaluation at your school? (Note: Possibly look for org. charts and present to them during the conversation)
  
3. How have you been involved with evaluation in your current role?  
3a. Can you talk a little more about that?

Probes: Have you worked with evaluators? Whom have you worked with? Did you help identify goals for a program or activity? Did you help create evaluation questions or

perhaps a rubric? Did you collect feedback about a program or activity? How did you analyze and synthesize the data you collected? Did you write reports about data? Did you use data to change a program or activity?

4. What, if any, PLC activities does your school engage in that you would consider to be evaluative?

5. How do you approach the topic of evaluation when working with your staff?

5a. How do you respond to your staff's feedback about PLC?

6. What influences how your school implements and uses evaluation findings?

Probe: What are the organizational structures that influence your use of information?

7. What, if any, barriers have you encountered when trying to integrate evaluation as a part of your work of the school?

8. Beyond the walls of your school, what larger factors or structures, if any, influence your evaluation practice?

9. What do you think is working and not working about your PLCs?

10. What would be good measures/indicators of what is and is not working?/What sources of information do you use to make these decision?

11. How do you feel about the evaluation activities you do?

12. How have you used evaluation findings?

Probe: Beyond reporting purposes how have you used evaluation findings?

13. Should there be more/less?

14. Do you see any value in evaluation for your work?

15. How would you like to see evaluation findings used?

Probe: What could be done to make that happen?

*Those are all the questions I have. Do you have anything else you would like to add?*

*Thank you for your time. This was really helpful for me. Please feel free to call or email me if you have any further questions or concerns. I will be sending out my preliminary findings for your review and look forward to hearing your thoughts about those as well.*

## **Appendix G: Teacher Interview Guide**

### **Interview Introduction**

*Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my study. Before we begin, I would like you to sign a consent form. This form states that your information will remain confidential and that your name and school will not be tied to anything that is written about my study. It also says that your participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you would like to stop at any point during our conversation, you are free to do so. You can also choose to skip certain questions if you would like.*

*I would like to audio record this conversation as it will allow me to make sure your comments are accurately captured and so that I will not have to rely solely on my notes later. May I start the recorder?*

*Do you have any questions for me before we get started?*

### **Interview Questions**

#### **First I'd like to talk about evaluation.**

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “evaluation?”  
(Redirect them so they don’t just talk about teacher evaluation)
  
2. How have you been involved with program and initiative evaluation? Tell me a little more about how you were involved in that work.  
For example, evaluating a new technology, new curriculum, etc.  
[If they have been involved in evaluation]  
[For example: Did you help identify goals for a program or activity? Did you help create evaluation questions? Did you collect feedback about a program or activity? Did you analyze data? Do you look at data? (what types of data) Did you use data to change a program or activity?] Probes (Can you talk a little more about that? Have you worked with evaluators? Who have you worked with? Have you done evaluation yourself?)
  
3. Who else in your school has been involved with evaluation of programs and initiatives?

Probe: Have external people come in? Who have you worked with?

#### **Now I'd like to talk about PLCs and evaluation of PLCs.**

4. Tell me about a typical PLC meeting. What happens?
  
5. What do you think is working and not working about your PLC?

6. What would be good measures/indicators of what is and is not working?/What sources of information do you use to make these decision?

7. How do school leaders respond to your feedback about the PLC?

8. What, if any, PLC activities do you engage in that you would consider to be evaluation?

9. Beyond the walls of your school, what larger factors or structures, if any, influence your evaluation practice?

10. What are the organizational structures that influence your use of information?

Probe: What are challenges and barriers.

11. How do you feel about the evaluation activities you do?

12. How have you used evaluation findings?

Probe: Beyond reporting purposes how have you used evaluation findings?

13. Should there be more/less?

14. Do you see any value in evaluation for your work?

15. How would you like to see evaluation findings used?

Probe: What could be done to make that happen?

*Those are all the questions I have. Do you have anything else you would like to add?*

*Thank you for your time. This was really helpful for me. Please feel free to call or email me if you have any further questions or concerns. I will be sending out my preliminary findings for your review and look forward to hearing your thoughts about those as well.*

## Appendix H: Documents Reviewed

| <u>Site</u>                       | <u>Document</u>  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Minnesota Department of Education | World's Best Workforce<br>Rubric for 2014-2015 World's Best Workforce Report Summary<br>World's Best Workforce Summary Template<br>World's Best Workforce Presentation for Districts<br>What is the World's Best Workforce?<br>Planning Tool for Districts<br>Q Comp<br>Deadlines and Trainings for Districts Interested in Applying for Q Comp<br>Q Comp Application Guidelines<br>Q Comp Application Form<br>What is Job-Embedded Professional Development?<br>2015-16 District Letter of Intent<br>Q Comp Model Plan for Rural Districts<br>2015-16 Charter School Letter of Intent<br>Q Comp Program Update Form 2016-17<br>Q Comp Program Annual Timeline<br>Goals and Data: Other Standardized Assessments<br>Q Comp Requirements and Guiding Principles<br>Q Comp Activity Funds<br>2015-16 Q Comp Review and Report Guidelines<br>TDE<br>Lessons Learned from the State Model Pilot and Recommendations<br><b>STATE TEACHER MODEL IMPLEMENTATION HANDBOOK</b><br><b>STATE TEACHER MODEL PERFORMANCE STANDARDS OF TEACHER PRACTICE RUBRIC</b><br><b>STATE TEACHER MODEL STUDENT LEARNING GOALS HANDBOOK</b> |
| Service Cooperative               | Service Cooperative website, "Our history" section, 2015<br>Service Cooperative website, "Quick facts about us" section, 2015<br>Service Cooperative website, "Governance" section, 2015<br>Service Cooperative website, "Programs and Services" section, 2015<br>Service Cooperative "2014-2015 Annual Report"  |
| Lake Wobegon District and School  | Lake Wobegon Public Schools website, "About us," 2015<br>Lake Wobegon Public Schools website, "Operating Referendum," 2015<br>Lake Wobegon city webpage, 2015  |

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|                                     | <p>Lake Wobegon Public Schools, “District scorecard”, 2015</p> <p>Lake Wobegon Public Schools, “Strategic Plan 2011-212 – 2015-16”</p> <p>Lake Wobegon Public Schools, “World’s Best Workforce Plan Summary for the 2013-2014 school year”</p> <p>Lake Wobegon Public Schools, “Local Literacy Plan” 2015-2016</p> <p>Lake Wobegon Public Schools, “Teacher Development, Evaluation, and Peer Support Handbook,” 2013-2014 Development Committee</p> |
| <u>Site</u>                         | <u>Document</u>  |
| Frostbite Falls District and School | <p>Frostbite Falls Public Schools website, “Home page,” 2015</p> <p>Frostbite Falls Middles School, “Home page,” 2015</p> <p>Frostbite Falls city webpage, 2015</p> <p>Frostbite Falls Area School Professional Learning Communities Handbook</p> <p>Frostbite Falls “World’s Best Workforce Plan 2014-2015”</p>   |
| Gopher Prairie District and School  | <p>Gopher Prairie Public Schools website, 2015</p> <p>Gopher Prairie Public Schools, Elementary and High School “Home” webpages, 2015</p> <p>2016 World’s Best Workforce Strategic Plan</p> <p>Gopher Prairie “World’s Best Workforce Annual Report 2014-2015”</p>   |