

# Making Sense of Place: A Case Study of Sensemaking in a Rural School-Community Partnership

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*Cross-sector, place-based, school-community partnerships seeking to improve educational and other outcomes at scale have experienced a resurgence in the United States. Rather than isolated efforts, this new generation relies on scaling up models in networks, such as Strive Together. However, many of these models evolved in urban contexts, creating challenges for scaling up in rural areas with fewer organizations, limited resources, and lower population density. Using conceptions of sensemaking as precursor for collective action, this case study examines the strategies used by partnership leaders in a rural county to make sense of Strive and the local community. By iteratively bringing together knowledge from outside and from within the community, leaders were able to shape the partnership in a way that supported action while continuing to build a shared understanding of needs on a regional level and the development of a regional identity across eight component school districts.*

In the United States, cross-sector, place-based, school-community partnerships have experienced a resurgence (Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016). These partnerships provide opportunities for cooperation, coordination, and collaboration to support community level educational outcomes by bringing together organizations that serve children, including early childhood, K-12 education, postsecondary education, health and human services agencies, non-profit and community organizations, business leaders, and philanthropic foundations (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2012, 2014; Henig, et al., 2016). These efforts seek to overcome the fragmentation along the educational pathway from birth through workforce entry, as well as the fragmentation between education, medicine, and other youth- and family-serving fields and the lack of alignment in public and private investment (Henig et al., 2016).

One aspect that sets the current partnerships apart from previous efforts is the scaling up of models in branded networks (Henig et al., 2016). For this analysis, Strive

Together (Strive), developed in an urban area, serves as an example of a branded approach to partnerships development resulting from codified design elements and strategies used successfully in one context and thought to be able to be implemented in a variety of settings, including rural areas, under local leadership. Rural places have different strengths and needs than the urban areas, making the translation of partnership models to rural communities potentially problematic (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Zuckerman, 2016a). For example, the Strive model emphasizes postsecondary education for individual human capital creation (Lawson, 2013). Without attention to local strengths and needs, such partnerships may contribute to the education of rural young people for jobs in urban areas, rather than for life in their own communities (Casto, McGrath, Sipple, & Todd, 2016; Zuckerman, 2016a). Questions remain if such partnerships can be adapted to rural communities in ways that support community vitality.

This case study, primarily based on interviews and focus groups with 39 members of a Strive-affiliated partnership, examined the processes used to adapt the Strive model to a rural county in the Midwest. Using a theoretical framework of sensemaking, this study is guided by the research question: How do partnership members make sense of local needs and a national model for school-community partnership development in a rural community?

## Literature Review

The literature review locates Strive as a branded approach to school-community partnerships within

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a renewed interest in place-based efforts to support community-level educational outcomes and provides a description of the model.<sup>1</sup>

### The Next Generation of Place-Based School-Community Partnerships

In the United States, and elsewhere, the first decades of the 2000s have witnessed a renewed interest in school-community partnerships. This new generation of partnerships seeks to overcome the challenges of contemporary governance by bringing together partners from multiple private and public sectors in formalized collaborations to make decisions in a specific geographic area (Goodwin, 1998; Henig, Riehl, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015; Kerr, Dyson, & Raffo, 2014; Shortall, 2004). The most recent iteration of these partnerships leverage local leadership to make the best use of resources for local need and have the potential to avoid the short-termism of shifting national priorities and resultant policy churn that plague educational reform (Kerr et al., 2014; Stone, Henig, Jones & Pierannunzi, 2001). Compared to previous efforts, they are broader in their membership, but narrower in their educational focus (Henig et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2014).

For rural schools, place-based education (e.g., Gruenewald & Smith, 2008) has long been seen as an antidote to policy reforms created by “distant experts” (see Jennings, 1999). Through the process of bringing community members into schools, and youth into communities, place-based educational strategies have the potential to reverse outmigration and contribute to community sustainability (Gallay, Marckini-Polk, Schroeder, & Flanagan, 2016; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Howley, 1991; Schafft, 2016). Place-based education frequently focuses on specific curricular areas, such conservation projects (e.g., Gallay et al., 2016); literacy (e.g., Azano, 2011; Waller & Barrentine, 2015); mathematics (e.g., Showalter, 2013); and local history and culture, science, or workforce development programs (Smith, 2002).

However, the new generation of partnerships takes a more comprehensive approach by addressing factors that contribute to low school achievement, including access to early childhood education and out-of-school learning, preventative physical and mental healthcare, and family engagement and support. These partnerships reflect reactions against “no excuses” educational policy, as well as renewed interest in addressing spatially concentrated disadvantage that impacts student outcomes in complex and interdependent ways that cannot be overcome by a single sector or organization (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone,

2006; Henig et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2014; Reardon, 2011; Rothstein, 2004). These partnership models operate under the assumption that moving the needle on educational outcomes requires overcoming systematic and social fragmentation through formal cross-sector collaboration (Bryson et al., 2006; Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014).

Henig and colleagues (2015) report that while some of these place-based school-community partnerships result from homegrown efforts by local leaders over time, increasingly these efforts are linked into national networks centering on specific partnership models, such as Strive Together, Ready by 21, Say Yes, and the Promise Neighborhood model. These models primarily evolved in urban areas but have since spread to rural communities. However, for such initiatives to be effective, they must be conceptualized as “locally developed interventions that engage with an ecological understanding of place” (Kerr et al., 2014, p. 131). Similarly, Lawson (2013) argued that to be effective, partnerships must be “*fit for purpose, in this place, at this time*” (p. 614, emphasis original). To do so, partnership leaders must consider local demographics, organizational ecologies, and social geography (Lawson, Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, Briar-Lawson, & Wilcox, 2014). Likewise, bringing the right mix of the right stakeholders to the table, those with vested interests to drive engagement and resource commitment, requires knowledge of assets and needs in the community (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Lawson, 2004; Zuckerman, 2016a). Scaling up of partnership models in new geographies raises questions as to how members make sense of their knowledge of place and knowledge presented by the purveyors of branded models like Strive.

In particular, questions have been raised about whether such models serve neoliberal interests of workforce development by taking a “thin” approach to human needs (Casto et al., 2016). Casto and colleagues (2016) criticized the Promise Neighborhood model’s scale up in rural areas as taking a “thin” approach to human needs. These thin approaches address human capital outcomes for individuals but fail to address other aspects of education and community well-being. Casto and colleagues (2016) argue that when such a thin conception of human need drives educational policy, neither the individual nor the community is well served. These critiques can be extended to Strive. In particular, Strive’s college and career readiness rhetoric may contribute to programs and policies that encourage disembodied, placeless, youth (Castro et al., 2016; Corbett, 2007; Schafft & Biddle, 2013).

Casto and colleagues (2016) caution that to meet the needs of rural communities, place-based partnerships must be “thick” in their consideration for human development, including relationships and identity development that contribute to community vitality. They emphasize the need

<sup>1</sup>For a deeper description of the original Strive Partnership and its spread through the StriveTogether Network see Edmondson and Zimpher (2014).

to bring together individual and community well-being in these efforts and to ensure that they are centered in a particular context (Casto et al., 2016). This study seeks to understand how leaders of place-based initiatives use local knowledge to create such thick approaches tailored to local needs while using models, such as Strive. The remainder of this section provides an overview of Strive.

### **Strive: From Place-Based Initiative to a Network**

The original Strive Partnership in the Cincinnati metropolitan area is the most prominent example of the new generation of place-based school-community partnerships (Henig et al., 2015). The Strive Partnership developed between 2003 and 2006 as community leaders engaged in conversations about linking the public schools and local universities. According to founders, a town hall in 2006 led to the realization that isolated programs would continue to be insufficient to create an internationally competitive workforce (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). Similarly, leaders realized workforce development depended not only on high school and college completion, but also on children's developmental and educational paths, starting in early childhood (Henig et al., 2015).

Additionally, dramatic framing of issues in the community created a sense of urgency. Edmondson and Zimpher (2014) relayed this framing from the county coroner, who stated that business as usual would continue to not only create poor educational outcomes, but that he would continue to "see dead kids on my table" (p. 1). As they report, stating the issue in this blunt way sparked a shared understanding and created urgency for action to create innovative solutions for systemic, regional challenges (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). These realizations led to broadening an existing workforce collaboration in a wide-ranging cross-sector partnership, which had grown by 2015 to approximately 300 members located in the Cincinnati Public Schools District and two neighboring districts (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). Partners also include three local universities, major employers, charitable foundations, early childhood leaders, social agencies, and civic groups (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014).

In 2011, two key leaders of the Cincinnati group formed the Strive Together Cradle to Career Network to provide processes and tools adaptable to local communities (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Henig, 2015). Part of this work has been codifying, packaging, and disseminating strategies used in Cincinnati, organized around four "pillars." These pillars are: (1) a common vision of student success; (2) goals, metrics, and indicators aligned with that vision; (3) data systems to allow for student-level data to be collected and analyzed across organizations; (4) strong and sustained civic leadership supported by a backbone organization. These pillars are further described in two key

documents, the Student Success Roadmap and the Theory of Action (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Strive Together, 2019).

The Student Success Roadmap outlines the five educationally focused, research-based indicators identified by the Strive Partnership. They include kindergarten readiness; student support inside and outside school; academic support, particularly for fourth grade literacy and eighth grade algebra; boosting high school completion; college enrollment; and college completion (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Strive Together, 2013). This document served as the "mental model" for how Strive members viewed the world (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014, p.24), suggesting it both as the product of sensemaking and as a tool for future collective understanding to drive action. As a mental model, the Roadmap reflects similar goals to No Child Left Behind and the Every Child Succeeds Act, particularly in its focus on college and career readiness. Rather than an alternative to top-down reforms, the Roadmap rhetoric suggests Strive as another means of standardizing education for workforce development.

The Strive Theory of Action outlines developmental stages across four pillars, providing measurable process benchmarks from "emerging" to "systems change" (Strive Together, 2019). For example, in the emerging stage, the Theory of Action calls for the development of a leadership team with a clear accountability structure; calls to action to mobilize partners; developing locally defined, evidence-based priorities; the collection and public release of baseline data; commitment to continuous improvement; mapping of community assets; and selection of a backbone organization and communication strategies (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Strive Together, 2019).

Additional stages require developing a partnership agreement that defines roles and responsibilities of leaders, partners, and the backbone organization. It also requires the sharing of data; the development of collaborative action networks (CANs) of practitioners who engage in cascading collaboration; and commitment of funding for facilitators, data managers, and other backbone staff (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012). Collaborative action networks commit to action planning and continuous improvement to align and improve organizations serving children, youth, and families using disaggregated data. Regular report cards, mobilization of sustainable funding, and engagement in policy change efforts round out the development with an aim of seeing at least 60% of all indicators showing improvement to be a "proof point" (Strive Together, 2019). As of 2015 when this study took place, no Strive Together Network member had reached this level (Henig et al., 2015).

In addition to serving as a benchmark, the Theory of Action serves as a gatekeeping device for voluntary membership in the Strive Together Network, which is based

on a self-assessment tool aligned to the developmental trajectory outlined in the Strive Theory of Action (Henig et al., 2015; Strive Together, 2019). At the time of the study, it was unclear from Strive's materials whether rural communities are systemically screened out. However, at the time of the study, there was a rural special interest group within the Strive Together Network, which holds annual convenings to bring together members of partnerships to engage in shared learning, and several rural communities were listed as members in 2014-15.

As Henig and colleagues (2015) note, there is limited research on this new generation of place-based school-community partnerships. This study examines a specific issue: scaling up a set of ideas developed in urban areas in a rural place with different social geographies, organizational landscapes, economies, and values, as well as different assets and needs for educational attainment and workforce development. In part, it addresses Henig and colleagues' (2015) call to understand how local collaborations relate to a national network by focusing on how participants make sense of local needs and knowledge of the Strive model in developing a network fit for purpose, in a particular time and place. The next section lays out the theoretical framework of sensemaking used to understand how participants bring together multiple strands of knowledge prior to engaging in collective action.

### **Theoretical Framework**

School-community partnerships require authentic relationships forged through reciprocal interactions and mutual trust to create action (Bauch, 2001). Prior analysis of rural cross-sector school-community partnerships focused primarily on social network structure (Miller, Scanlan, & Phillippo, 2017; Miller, Wills, & Scanlan, 2013) without attending to the social processes that support shared understandings. This study makes novel use of the theory of sensemaking, as described in the organizational and social movement literature.

### **Sensemaking in Organizations**

In organizational studies, definitions of sensemaking have four core similarities: (1) sensemaking is an ongoing, iterative social process; (2) sensemaking occurs as a response to events, actions, or changes in the environment that challenge expectations; (3) sensemaking contributes to agreed-upon understandings across individuals that are sufficiently similar to drive coordinated, collective action; (4) sensemaking is as a continuous process of ongoing action and understanding of the world (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

This study examines how members of a Strive-affiliated partnership made sense of their local educational landscape

in response to a series of events within and outside the community in an iterative and ongoing manner. Part of this process includes surfacing tacit, or personal, knowledge and transforming it to explicit knowledge, which can then inform and constrain action as explicit stories make certain actions possible while excluding others (Choo, 1996; Wieck, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). It also examines how agreed-upon understandings were constructed in "action-meaning cycles" (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 67) and serve as "way station[s] on the road to a consensually constructed coordinated system of action" (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 275).

### **Sensemaking in Social Movements**

In the social movement literature, collective action frames represent sensemaking on a group scale (Benford & Snow, 2000). Rather than aggregating individuals' understandings, these frames are "the outcome of negotiating shared meaning" (Gamson, 1992, p. 111), requiring members to work through disagreement. Benford and Snow (2000) identify three processes of collective action framing: (1) discursive processes, or the ongoing conversations among members through which reality is assembled and reassembled; (2) utilitarian and goal-oriented strategic processes refine frames in relation to the individuals mobilized; and (3) contested processes, or conflict among individuals mobilized and counter-frames that provide alternative explanations. Collective sensemaking in social movements is iterative and dynamic, resulting from the interplay of members and the environment, which distills events and experiences into compelling frames that motivate collective action among members (Benford & Snow, 2000).

### **Summary**

Across contexts, sensemaking describes social processes through which shared understandings develop and contribute to collective action. These iterative processes occur in response to novel situations by comparing new experiences to prior experiences to make sense of the world before acting. In cross-sector partnerships, this process requires developing shared understandings across different ways of seeing problems and potential solutions. Additionally, in partnerships that work across school districts, such as the subject of this study, understandings must be negotiated across community boundaries. Lastly, for partnerships affiliated with a national network, like Strive, this sensemaking includes bringing together multiple strands of knowledge to craft a partnership fit for purpose, place, and time.

## Methods

The analysis presented here is part of a larger case study of a rural school-community partnership conducted between November 2014 and June 2015 under an IRB approval from the University at Albany (Zuckerman, 2016a). This case study revealed the importance of collective issue framing in the development of the network, particularly the ways in which local needs and challenges shaped a network that deviated from the Strive Together model in its goals and structure. This finding suggested sensemaking as a theoretical framework for further analysis. The secondary analysis presented here draws primarily on interviews with those most familiar with the development of the partnership: the two partnership conveners, members of the backbone organization who shepherd the network by planning and facilitating meetings and communicating with members, a consultant, and four other members of the backbone organization. Interview and focus group data from 32 partnership members, along with documents and observations, served to triangulate findings and provide multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995).

### Case Selection

In addition to its national prominence, the Strive model was selected for this study due to efforts to scale it up by a founding member of the Cincinnati initiative in the state where the researcher resided during the initial study. To maximize what could be learned about the implementation of the Strive model in a rural place from a single case study, purposive sampling process identified critical cases (Stake, 1995). The publicly available list of Strive-affiliated partnerships was cross-walked with county-level and school-level data (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014; U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2013) to identify partnerships that primarily serve rural students. This process yielded two potential sites in non-metropolitan counties, one in the Midwest and one in the Northeast, both of which were identified by Strive Together as being in the “exploring phase” (Strive Together, 2019).

As the guiding orientation of the initial case study was civic capacity, or the mobilization of important stakeholders to a common agenda (Creswell, 2014; Stone et al., 2001), it was important to identify a partnership in which stakeholders had mobilized, developed shared goals, and engaged in community-level action. Examining websites and conversations with conveners of two rural Strive-affiliated provided information about development that led to the selection of the Grand Isle Network,<sup>2</sup> as Core Team members had met monthly for several years, clear goals

<sup>2</sup>All organizations and places have been given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality of the partnership and individuals.

were outlined on their website, and baseline data aligned to those goals were about to be released to the public.

### Participant Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to maximize the data collection through interviews and focus groups (Yin, 2016) by identifying individuals with active membership in the Network. Publicly available lists of members identified potential participants, and a conversation with one of the conveners helped identify consistently active members. To maximize the variance within this group (Yin, 2016), the next stage of participant selection considered membership in the key stakeholder groups identified in Strive and related literature (e.g., Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; McGrath, Donovan, Schaier-Peleg, & Van Buskirk, 2005) and civic capacity literature (e.g. Mitra & Frick, 2011; Shipps, 2003; Stone et al., 2001). These groups include K-12 administrators and educators, early childhood program directors, postsecondary leaders, business leaders, social service agency members, and parents. Efforts were made to recruit participants from each of the eight school districts in the Network, but most participants who agreed to participate either lived or worked in the biggest district of Big River.<sup>3</sup> Participants reflected the overall composition of the Network and population density of the region. Table 1 presents details on participants quoted in this manuscript.

### Data Collection

Fieldwork occurred over two weeklong visits to Grand Isle during which time interviews and focus groups were completed, along with three meeting observations that focused on issue framing. One meeting was open to the public and attended by the local media. Consent forms were not used for that meeting, but for all other meetings all participants provided written consent. Additionally, 39 individuals provided consent and participated in 28 interviews and 6 focus groups. Initial interviews and focus groups used a semi-structured protocol to assure similar data were collected across participants while allowing for probing of individuals’ understandings of the mobilization of stakeholders, the development of the common agenda, and the Network’s theory of action (Neuman, 2011). These questions focused on how individuals described their community, opportunities, and aspirations for young people, their involvement in the Network, the Network’s goals, and plans for meeting them.<sup>4</sup>

Second round interviews focused on the mobilization of action groups and their efforts to develop plans at the school level. Four similar second round focus groups were

<sup>3</sup>Additional details about the eight component districts can be found in Zuckerman (2016a)

<sup>4</sup>Interview protocols are available on request.

*Table 1**Selected Participants*

Pseudonym	Stakeholder Type	Role	District(s)
Drew	Afterschool	Core Team/Youth Network/Community Connector	Winslow
Steve	K-12 Administrator	Core Team	Big River/Little River
Hal	K-12 Administrator	Core Team	Big River
Michael	K-12 Administrator	Core Team/Steering Committee	Winslow
Greg	K-12 Administrator	Core Team	Green Lake/ Hawk River-Elk Falls
Maria	Postsecondary	Core Team	Big River
Linda	Non-profit	Core Team	Winslow/Big River
Janet	Non-profit	Core Team	Big River
Gillian	Non-profit	Core Team/Communications	Big River
Marla	Non-profit	Core Team	Big River
Laura	Parent	Parent	Big River
Carl	Backbone organization	Supervisor	Big River
Marilyn	Backbone organization	Convener	Big River
Heidi	Backbone organization	Grants manager	Big River
Barbara	Backbone organization	Convener	Big River
Diana	Backbone organization	Public engagement	Big River
Jane	Quest	Consultant	State Capital

conducted by a consultant. This individual was a member of an educational research firm, Quest,<sup>5</sup> located in the state capital and was not affiliated with the national Strive Network. Prior to these focus groups, the researcher and consultant communicated about the protocol questions, which like the interview questions addressed the efforts of school-level working groups. The inclusion of these focus groups in the research accommodated the Network members by preventing them from having to repeat answers for similar questions. The dual purpose of the focus groups was explained to all participants and informed consent was obtained. Both the consultant and researcher independently audio recorded and transcribed the focus groups verbatim. Although it could have potentially influenced participant responses, the presence of the consultant, who had worked with the Network for several years, did not appear to affect how forthcoming participants were during the focus groups, several of whom also participated in interviews with the researcher and spoke with a similar degree of candor and openness.

Interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and memos were created throughout to capture emerging themes (Yin, 2016). Additionally,

<sup>5</sup>Like other names, Quest is a pseudonym.

document collection yielded over a hundred documents, blog posts, media items, meeting minutes, and planning documents. Multiple data sources allowed for triangulation and supported internal reliability and validity (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2014). For example, steering committee minutes included images of clay sculptures used in the visioning process, which were referenced in the Governance Council meeting. Planning documents also were triangulated with interview data, and attendance of the public meeting allowed for direct observation of how members communicated with the public. The analysis presented in this article focuses heavily on the two conveners, along with other members of a local foundation. Interviews and focus groups provided triangulation for these key data sources.

### Analysis

Transcripts, memos, and documents were uploaded into an NVivo (2012) database to facilitate analysis. The initial analysis began with deductive coding derived from the literature on civic capacity (Saldaña, 2016 ; Zuckerman, 2016a). Examples of these codes included parent codes such as “mobilization,” under which child codes were created, such as “invitation,” “data,” “engagement,” and

“identifying members.” Coding at this stage also included developing new codes from the data. For example, “rural identity” was determined to be an important concept in issue framing not identified in the previous literature. In addition to frame content, frame location (i.e., schools) and type of frame (i.e., diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational) were coded. The second round of coding proceeded inductively to identify themes not found in the literature, such as “adaptation,” an *in vivo* code used to identify evidence of how a national model to the local context.

A matrix display in Excel was used to compare data within codes and across participants to identify relationships between the themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Yin, 2016). The initial findings (Zuckerman, 2016a) identified the need to investigate the processes through which collective action issue frames emerged. Therefore, a third set of codes was derived from both the data and the literature on sensemaking to examine collective issue framing and the processes through which they developed. These codes included adaptation, external learning, facilitation, framing activities, implicit to explicit knowledge, local knowledge, and processes.<sup>6</sup> For example, this statement by one of the conveners was coded as adaptation, drawing from her own words: “And that was a huge learning. That we could not ADOPT we needed to ADAPT.” A backbone member relayed that the 2011 Kania and Kramer article served as an impetus to take a group to Cincinnati to learn directly from Strive. This statement was coded as an example of “external learning.” The following quote from the consultant was coded as “implicit to explicit knowledge”: “There’s usually laughter in the room, because you tell people stuff that they totally know.”

### Study Context

Place-based school-community partnerships are “dependent on, and influenced by, the local histories, local cultures, and unique features of the places where people live and work” (Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko, 2007, p. 31). Therefore, a description of the Grand Isle area and the Network<sup>7</sup> proceeds the findings.

The Grand Isle Network is a school-community partnership associated with Strive Together. It is located primarily in Grand Isle County, classified as a recreation dependent non-metropolitan county (USDA, 2015). It encompasses nearly 3,000 square miles, much of which is heavily forested. Paper production, mining, and agriculture previously made up the economy, but these industries are in decline, with health care, tourism, and other service industries rising. Fewer than 50,000 people live in the

county, and the population density is approximately 20 individuals per square mile, although it varies by community. Participants identified sparsity of settlement as a challenge for mobilizing stakeholders. They also identified differences in the values, beliefs, and identifies of the 30 towns and villages in the Grand Isle area, organized into eight school districts, as creating challenges to mobilizing stakeholders. For example, participants reported that residents in the consolidated Hawk River-Elk Falls district were wary of outside interference and resisted collaboration due to a “fear of losing their own identity.” Additionally, both Native American and White participants reported “historical trauma” and deep distrust as barriers to developing relationships between the two groups. Further, participants described a socio-economic “bifurcation” of the community, which prevented interaction between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

Despite these challenges, participants were quick to identify strengths in their community and clearly took pride in them, including a collective approach to living in a difficult climate, challenging terrain, and declining economy that supported prior cross-sector collaboration efforts in K-12 and early childhood education. The Grand Isle School Collaborative (GISC) is a partnership of the eight school districts and the local community college, reportedly unique in the state, and has become a “solid coalition” and a “vehicle” for conversations on “moving the needle” on academic success. The Early Childhood Program (ECP) is a partnership between Head Start, the Department of Health, and the school districts that dates back to the 1990s. One participant described these earlier efforts as demonstrating that “collaboration works.”

Additionally, the Grand Isle area has a special asset: the Grand Isle Foundation (the Foundation). This private foundation served as the Network’s backbone organization during its launch, drawing on significant experience mobilizing community members, including the partnerships that preceded the Network. The Foundation provided financial support for a data dashboard and a developmental evaluation to be conducted by consultants from the Quest Institute, an applied research firm located in the state capital. Members of this firm served as thought partners and collected and shared real-time data with the Network, including the development of a youth survey aligned to the Network’s goals. In these ways, the Foundation’s capacity to serve as a backbone organization provided the Grand Isle Network with a head start in mobilizing stakeholders, keeping them engaged, collecting and analyzing data, and developing a common agenda. Participants reported that support from the Foundation and the two conveners were the key elements of the Network’s successful launch.

<sup>6</sup>Codebook available upon request.

<sup>7</sup>For a more in-depth description of the county and component districts, see Zuckerman (2016a; 2016b).

## Findings

This study examined how school-community partnership leaders in rural areas make sense of local needs in adapting a national model for school and community partnerships. The findings are organized around key themes: outside knowledge, community knowledge, “emergent alignment,” and the role of facilitators.

### Outside Knowledge

This section describes the strategies used to bring in new knowledge from outside the community and the ways in which this knowledge contributed to the development of the Network through iterative conversations.

Participants identified study trips outside their rural community as a strategy for bringing new information into the developing partnership. Foundation staff member Diana noted this strategy had been used in previous efforts and described these trips as “transformative” learning opportunities and as developing “a strong cohort of friendships that motivate people going forward.” Prior to the official launch of the Network, Foundation staff and GISC superintendents traveled to the state capital to hear Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) speak. According to convener Marilyn, this event and the following “debriefing” conversation shifted the group’s concerns from the “rhetoric around failing schools” of No Child Left Behind to the need to “integrate family supports and community supports into the school.” This experience prompted initial members of the Network to reexamine their understandings of low academic achievement.

However, Marilyn reported that participants in these conversations recognized that they could not work like HCZ. Instead, they looked toward the resources in their own community, identifying the Foundation as having “the social capital” to mobilize the community. As a result, the direction of partnership shifted toward community engagement and the need to reexamine the problem of low student achievement in the local context. This shift in priorities prompted Foundation staff to turn to the community for additional information.

They did so by holding three community meetings in 2010, which resulted in a strategic plan that convener Barbara and others reported “failed to gain traction” and drive action (described in the next section). At this stage, other external sources of knowledge provided clarity and a literal roadmap. According to Foundation staff member Diana, a colleague brought the 2011 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article on collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) to the group. She described the impact of that article, stating, “We read that and light bulbs went off, like ‘wow that feels a lot like what we’re doing.’ This puts

language and framework and theory behind our approach. So we had intuitively been functioning as a backbone at that time.” The article allowed Foundation staff to translate their implicit, tacit knowledge of their work into explicit language.

This article also introduced the Foundation to Strive and prompted staff to arrange a study trip to Cincinnati for a group of Network members. After the visit, Foundation staff facilitated “focus conversation” that worked to make explicit the group’s learning. Convener Marilyn reported, “One of the key learnings was that context matters. And that was a huge learning. That we could not ADOPT we needed ADAPT.” This learning again sparked a return to the local context and community.

Network members brought back Strive’s Roadmap, which prompted the Core Team to begin to develop their own local goal document. According to convener Marilyn, the group focused on developing its own set of goals over the course of more than a year. This process consisted of discursive conversations in which the conveners elicited and harvested ideas from members and then framed and reframed them until consensus was reached. Marilyn described this process of developing the Pathway, named to reflect the heavily forested landscape, stating:

I had [the Pathway] spread out on the floor in the office at one point and looking at how we were trying to get these indicators on the pathway and realizing they didn’t really fit there. And there were probably more indicators that needed to come later. So we needed to focus more on the broader statements. And so I fed that back to the Core Team and we dropped indicator level and made it more aspirational statements.

According to both conveners, this resulted from a lack of agreement on the “granularity” of typical Strive indicators of third grade reading scores and eighth grade math scores. While the Network rejected typical metrics of student success found in Strive networks, they maintained a focus on a common agenda, measurable outcomes, and shared metrics in their development of a student survey aligned to the Pathway.

### Community Knowledge

Frequently, efforts to bring new information to the Network resulted in a reevaluation of the local implicit knowledge in an effort to make sense of what a partnership using the Strive model would look like their community. Strategies for this work included large public gatherings, focus groups conducted by external partners, feedback from community members, and piloting action-planning



processes. These learning experiences influenced the emergence of the Network's goals, shared language, and structure.

As noted above, the Foundation held a series of three community gatherings in 2010. Convener Marilyn reported that participants for these meetings were recruited in "a very intentional process" of identifying the stakeholders who contribute to a healthy community across all eight districts. In a blog post, K-12 administrator Michael stated the intentional diversity "provide[d] an opportunity for differences to be shared and for our common interest in children to be strengthened." These meetings were designed to elicit stakeholder input on the issue of "educational success to the region's children and future workforce." At the first meeting, small group participants discussed their educational experiences and those of others in their lives. From these conversations, documents revealed that four areas of need emerged: a focus on adolescents and young adults, the needs of families, challenges faced by schools, and issues in the community.

At the second meeting, Foundation staff asked participants to envision positive changes and to identify opportunities and challenges for meeting those goals. Documents revealed this yielded a large number of narrowly focused solutions. Foundation staff reorganized these ideas into a strategic plan that covered early childhood through entry into the workforce in four areas: forward-looking educational transformation, bold employer investment, unprecedented community support, and leading-edge family engagement. According to Marilyn, this repackaged strategic plan was used as a motivating call to arms to mobilize the Core Team at the third meeting.

While this strategic plan succeeded in mobilizing nearly 50 individuals as the Core Team, it did not provide sufficient direction for action. After members traveled to Strive in Cincinnati and presented their learning to the group, the Core Team engaged in a yearlong process of creating the Pathway document that could provide direction for action. This work included structured dialogue and conversations among the Core Team members, as well as conversations with community members during teacher in-service days and meetings with local Elks and Lions clubs. Laura, a parent of two students at Grover Charter School reported participating in a focus group: "They had a couple of parent-focused meetings to decide how they would talk about student success initially and what parents thought would make student successful, what does student success look like for your student, from your view point."

From these opportunities for feedback surfaced disagreements about goals for youth across the region. Foundation staff member Diana reported that postsecondary education was the most challenging and "controversial" goal area in which to gain consensus. She reported part of this disagreement resulted from the local "culture,"

explaining, "There was a lot of pushback on that because a lot of the community members don't, they don't buy [the need for college]. And a lot of fear behind that is, we don't want to lose our kids. Once you've been to Paris, you won't ever come back." While several mentioned that adults in their 30s are returning to the community with work experience and spouses to raise their families in the Grand Isle area, Marilyn reported that among young people who attend highly selective colleges, few if any return to the community, providing credence to this fear.

Similarly, at the community data event, one high school student stood to publicly question whether young people's ambitions, as captured in the survey, to complete postsecondary and graduate degrees, was reasonable given the limited number of jobs in the community requiring those degrees. Like other rural communities, there appeared to be significant tension in wanting young people to succeed but to also stay in the community, and what success looks like. On the other hand, several participants mentioned brief upticks in mining provided a false sense of hope to young people that they could find living wage employment without a college degree. In fact, one such uptick in mining was so brief that from November to June, it had reversed.

Among the highly educated Foundation staff and the mainly college educated Core Team, there appeared to be agreement that postsecondary education and experiences outside the community were important for young people, but also for the community. Diana stated a belief that it was important for young people to leave the community and gain exposure to different people and ideas: "I think youth today are really handicapped if they NEVER leave the community." However, she also stated, "It's important that they leave, it's also really important that they be invited back and that they have livelihoods here." She and others voiced a desire not only for "our OWN kids to come back... We want ALL youth to have an option to choose rural." Foundation vice president Carl identified the need to retain or bring back "best and the brightest" through career pathways. For many, this process included not only identifying new economic opportunities, such as biochemical production to replace the paper industry that once turned the local forest into living wage jobs, but also building connections between youth and community.

Because of the controversial nature of this goal, Diana felt it was important to get the language right so that it was neither "patronizing" nor "damning by false promises," and noted every word was fought over. Yet she and others, particularly K-12 administrators Greg and Steve, were careful to describe the postsecondary goal as including any education beyond high school. This intentional framing appeared to be away to address conflict without harming the ability to mobilize a broad coalition. Despite trying to alleviate parents' fears that increasing college completion would increase the number of young people who do not

choose to return, Diana stated emphatically, “We’re going to change the climate on that. We’re going to change the water.”

Additional local information was collected in 2012 when the external partner, Quest, conducted a series of focus groups with community members to seek a greater understanding of what it would take to “move the needle on the Pathway indicators.” Jane, a member of Quest, reported that when the results of these focus groups were shared with the Core Team, people chuckled with recognition. She said, “You tell people stuff that they totally know, it’s like, ‘Oh that’s so true!’” She also reported the importance of the perspective brought by outsiders: “As outsiders, here’s what we see. Here’s the picture we paint of the area in terms of what it’s going to take and what we need to be careful of and what strengths we need to build on as we move the work forward.” In this way, Quest staff supported sensemaking by surfacing tacit knowledge and moving it to a more explicit, useable state. Important findings included a desire to see previous successes such as ECP shared more widely. However, they also identified a suspicion of using success stories from one district that had a history of work aligned to the Pathway. Jane reported community members saw this district as an anomaly and wanted to include other districts so “others will be able to see how the strategies will work in their context.” These statements suggested that despite a general understanding of the Grand Isle area as a place, there was not a sense of shared community or identity across the eight school districts.

Additionally, the Network engaged action-meaning cycles through their piloting of the student success survey, which aligned to the Pathway and included questions about student perceptions of relationships with teachers and caregivers, as well as access to afterschool programs, public libraries, and other community resources. Survey results were used in action planning with several community groups. From this survey emerged new understandings about the community, including the importance of trust and community identity. This understanding was particularly poignant as the pilot process took place in consolidated the Elk Falls-Hawk River school district described by Core Team member Linda as having “a strong history of feeling persecuted.” Although this district experienced consolidation in the 1960s, participants spoke of it as a recent event and attributed the ongoing anxiety in that district to the continued need to share resources with other districts. Linda further reported Elk Falls-Hawk River “has been forced to do some things because of finances they probably wouldn’t do otherwise,” such as sharing administrators and sports teams with a neighboring district. Participants expressed that in this district, cooperation was seen as a step toward greater consolidation and loss of their “strong

identity.” Others reported that the fear among the smaller communities was that the largest community, Big River, would have undue power and that collaboration would lead to a loss of their individual identities.

Convener Marilyn reported that, based on the pilot experience, they realized communities were not ready to work together to tackle regional problems. Despite this lack of readiness, she identified the need to move toward regional cooperation: “We also know that many of these communities can’t just plan in isolation, because there’s going to be some common issues that are regional.” To do this, she reported the backbone organization would connect communities once or twice a year by bringing together the leaders of the school-based Community Action Networks in “Link and Learn sessions.” She described the idea behind these sessions as creating a space “where they can get together and talk about what they’ve learned, talk about what they’re working on and then identify, is there a regional issue that we need somebody to really dig in and help us figure out.” She continued, “And if there’s a regional issue that comes up, then we’ll convene a regional group that works kind of across kind of both regionally, locally, and through the governance council, in a robust continuous improvement process.” Connecting groups from across communities was seen as a mechanism for cross-pollination, as well as building a regional identity around shared issues.

One of the regional issues she identified, which was echoed by eight other participants, was the recent increase of youth suicides and attempts. Marilyn described youth suicide as an issue where members of the different school districts could learn from one another. Participants reported that the widespread nature of the suicides and attempts across the region prompted members to reconsider what student success meant. Core Team member Marla asked:

So what does success mean? And I had somebody close to me whose child committed suicide and that child was a 4.0+ [GPA], was the top of his class, was a three-season letter winner, had his own business at 16, and killed himself. And there’s no drugs, there’s no girl issues, there’s no nothing that they can pinpoint. And for all intents and purposes, he’s success. But we missed the boat somewhere. So, I’m wrestling with that internally. And kind of rethinking my thinking about what *is* success, you know?

K-12 administrator Greg reiterated, “A lot of those kids are our top kids and are involved in things. It’s not just our kids who aren’t connected. So how do you—again, what it is that’s causing them to not feel connected, even though that they are? Where on the Pathway is that missing?”

The need to revisit the Pathway and the vision of the Network was taken up by the new, smaller Governance Council, which formed in January 2015 and spent its first six months reworking the vision and mission statement and reexamining the Pathway. Part of this work consisted of members' depicting their vision for the Network in visual form. Meeting minutes include images of colorful clay sculptures depicting trees, representing the local landscape. In the words of one member, "The trunk of the tree brings everything together, bearing fruit for our students." Some created chains, braids, and links to represent bringing together youth and the community. Others used visuals of an embrace and a nest, which notes describe as "protecting our eggs until they are ready to hatch." These symbols served as framing mechanisms that helped Governance Council members surface their hopes and goals for their work. They were later fed back to the Governance Council by the communications team during deliberations over the vision and mission statement. Communications team member Gillian set the stage for this discussion by summarizing the previous ideas as "connecting, bridging, coming together, weaving, joining, embracing, holding."

Prior to this meeting, focus groups with youth and community members had been held to see if the Pathway resonated and to check the Network's understanding of "student success" against the ideas held in the community. Gillian reported in the meeting that the word "student" did not resonate broadly in the community. The word "success" did resonate in the community; however it was reported that community members equated success not only with academic achievement or financial wealth, but also the idea of a "balanced whole person, someone who is caring, and empathetic, and connects well with other people." She reported, "What we learned from focus groups is that kids didn't want to be called out, they are parts of the community, and they want to be equal partners." Lastly, Gillian reminded the Governance Council of the need for inclusive, "We're all in this together language."

Having set the stage with language generated by the group and ideas generated by community members, the Governance Council revisited the vision and mission statement, calling out words that drew them in, including "strong," "together," "thrive," "our and we," "achieve," and "amplify." Conveners Barbara and Marilyn asked them to identify what they did not like, including a narrow focus on students and learning as a function only of schooling. Although the resulting statements were not significantly different, they included broader language on learning and included recognizing the existing strengths in the community.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See Zuckerman (2016a) for additional details on this process.

### **"Emerging Alignment"**

The outcome of sensemaking of outside learning and community knowledge was the recognition of a lack of readiness across communities to work together. However, conveners identified the need to get to action to keep moving forward and keep individuals mobilized. The Quest consultant, Jane, described this strategy as "emergent alignment." She and others explained that this strategy revolved around Community Action Networks, or groups in each district that would create action plans using their districts' survey data. To these ends, groups of adults and groups of youth worked with a trained facilitator. Governance Council member Janet described this strategy as "allowing community to decide what works best for them that is hopefully more sustainable" than top-down approaches that engender distrust in the smaller, more rural communities, particularly if they are seen as coming from the bigger community of Big River.

While the conveners recognized the importance of allowing each district ownership over their work, they also identified the need to bring these groups together. One strategy for bringing groups together was the large community gathering held in the fall of 2014. Community connector Drew described this event:

One of the things I really appreciated about the November convening is that it gave a lot of people the opportunity to realize this is not just a Big River issue or a Green Lake issue or a Winslow issue, it's Grand Isle... The kids were recognizing that they were lacking the same things in Winslow as they were in Green Lake and Big River. I felt like the kids, just making that connection that the world is bigger.

Drew continued, stating the people's perceptions of the communities as different is "not reality" and "a lot of those perceptions were cleared up at something like [the gathering] where everyone comes together in the same room." Alluding to the local high school sports rivals, Drew summarized, "It's not the Hawks vs. the Chiefs—we're the Grand Isle area." However, this meeting was scheduled on the same day as an important event on the Native American reservation, limiting participation of these community members. While the superintendent of the district that serves part of the reservation shrugged it off as a communication challenge, this oversight may speak to challenges in receiving feedback from all community members.

As part of efforts to develop shared understandings of regional needs, conveners talked about the need to develop Networked Improvement Communities to increase sharing and accelerate learning about what works in the local context. In June of 2015, Jane, a member of Quest,

conducted focus groups with participants and facilitators of several Community Action Networks. These focus groups provided an opportunity for individuals to share their stories. The information gathered from these groups was to be fed back to Network members during the first “Link and Learn” session held in January of 2016. Jane described the idea behind these sessions would be to create pockets of readiness to learn from one another, and for a shared understanding of common needs and a shared identity as a region to emerge naturally.

### **The Role of Facilitation**

The conveners appeared to play key roles in sensemaking by facilitating dialogue and deliberation among Network members and community members to surface ideas, develop consensus, and frame these ideas in easy to digest ways. Nearly all participants identified one or both of the conveners by name as the key ingredient of successful launch of the Grand Isle Network. Many also identified the importance of the Grand Isle Foundation, which appeared uniquely situated to serve as a backbone organization based on its previous work in the community and its use of particular practices for engagement, facilitation of conversations, and attention to issue framing. Foundation member Heidi reported there is a “very particular way the Foundation engages with the community,” or “what some might call the Foundation’s ‘secret sauce.’” She described this “way of doing things” as “[issue] framing and building social capital and mobilizing people equals change.” She noted that in this “community process,” framing and conversation go hand in hand with “constantly evaluating who is at the table, where are we going?” Convener Barbara reported this approach is “core to our DNA as a Foundation.”

Both conveners and other members of the Foundation reported using the Art of Hosting, a set of conversation practices, in “deliberate” efforts to engage individuals beyond their role in the Network. Foundation member Heidi described this as “Little tiny practices like [checking in], making sure everybody knows that they’re valued way beyond what they actually bring in their brains.” Additionally, the conveners and other Foundation staff reported the use of formal strategies for facilitation, including Technologies of Participation,<sup>9</sup> ORID (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decisional),<sup>10</sup> and Chaordic Stepping Stones<sup>11</sup> to surface

ideas and build consensus. Conveners and Core Team members reported these strategies create “safe spaces” for brainstorming. For example, K-12 administrator and Core Team member Steve described the importance of facilitation in building consensus for the pathway:

The Foundation does a very good job in facilitating these types of discussions. They have great strategies, getting ideas out in a brainstorming type environment that doesn’t create boundary lines or turf protection or whatever. Then they’ll mix up groups and by the end there’s been a really solid look at the ideas that are there and leaning towards which ones are more generally accepted than others.

Generally, participants agreed that the facilitators provided opportunities to discuss goals and aspirations for the community and recognized the facilitators’ ability to synthesize the group’s thinking.

In addition to the conveners, a group of Core Team members who were identified as “community connectors” received training to facilitate planning with Community Action Groups. This approach reflects what Foundation staff member Heidi described as “building the capacity in all of our key partners to be able to hold conversations in the same way, focusing on the importance of common language.”

The skill of conveners and others in facilitating structured dialogue positively contributed to the Network’s development by helping members surface ideas and repackage them into explicit problem and solution frames. These coherent frames supported action by providing common goals across the various school communities. The use of formal strategies for dialogue sets the Network’s efforts apart from everyday common sense and muddling through, particularly as these strategies were aimed at producing certain deliverables, such as the Pathway, around which community action groups began to take action.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the social processes of sensemaking through which partnership leaders developed shared understandings in the adaptation of Strive for their rural context. These iterative processes occurred in response to changes in the local environment and novel ideas from outside of the community (Choo, 1996). The findings suggest that in addition to reciprocal relationships (Bauch, 2001), purposeful deliberation within civic spaces leads to shared understandings required to move toward community-level action (Stone et al., 2001).

The iterative cycles appear to be underscored by the convener’s statement about the realization of the need to

<sup>9</sup>Technologies of Participation: <https://icausa.memberclicks.net/about-us>

<sup>10</sup>ORID <http://www.betterevaluation.org/lt/evaluation-options/orid>

<sup>11</sup>Chaordic Stepping Stones: <http://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/new-version-of-the-chaordic-stepping-stones/>

adapt the Strive model to the local rural context and thus engage deliberately with stakeholders in a variety of ways to ultimately develop a decentralized approach. This decentralized approach accommodated differences between each school district, as well as distrust of top-down efforts on the part of Big River by allowing groups of youth and adults in each district to engage in action planning aligned to shared goals. The conveners viewed these “action-meaning cycles” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 67) as a way to generating knowledge and purposefully bringing them together to learn from one another as a strategy for generating a sense of shared understanding of regional challenges, as well as contributing to a shared identity as “the Grand Isle area,” instead of individual districts. Emergent and flexible approaches are necessary for collaboration, with co-production of problem definitions and shared understandings driving the development of a dynamic, but cohesive group capable of acting on shared goals (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Quick, 2017).

Throughout, the facilitation skills of the conveners supported sensemaking through three strategies described in the social movement literature, including: (1) discursive communication among members; (2) strategic, goal-oriented processes; (3) and conflict (Benford & Snow, 2000). Although the findings will be discussed below in terms of these three processes, it is important to stress that sensemaking to generate knowledge for innovation and action does not occur in distinct processes, but are complex, iterative, and interwoven (Choo, 1996).

### **Discursive Sensemaking Processes**

Discursive sensemaking processes include the ongoing conversations among members in which understandings of reality are unpacked and repackaged (Benford & Snow, 2001). In the development of the Grand Isle Network, discursive processes frequently relied on informal and formal conversations within the Core Team and with community members. Participants noted that in some cases, informal conversations were easier due to the small size of the community. It appeared that most of the sensemaking revealed in interviews occurred in formal conversations as new information about Strive prompted leaders to seek out knowledge from local communities to create a coherent vision of for the Network.

The sensemaking literature does not address the role of designated facilitators, yet this study demonstrates the importance of the conveners’ facilitating formal conversations using specific strategies (e.g., Art of Hosting and Chaordic Stepping Stones) to surface people’s tacit knowledge and develop consensus in order to move toward collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Choo, 1996). Skilled facilitators play important roles in shaping discursive

processes by directing verbal exchanges and supporting relationship dynamics for deliberation (Quick & Sandfort, 2014), such as developing trust among participants and the creation of safe spaces for brainstorming, which was particularly important in Grand Isle due to the long histories of distrust between communities (Zuckerman, 2016b).

In addition to providing spaces for verbal interactions that refined shared understandings that would allow each school-community to move to action, the conveners also tested their understandings through the community action pilot, which served as an action-meaning cycle, through which understandings are consciously enacted and modified (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Wieck, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Based on this contentious event, the conveners determined that there was not yet readiness, in the form of shared understandings and a shared identity, for school-communities to work together across the region. However, as they worked to support individual school-community action groups, they planned opportunities for the cross-pollination they believed would allow members to engage in the conversations that would contribute to the development of shared understandings and common identities.

### **Strategic Sensemaking Processes**

Sensemaking also proceeded through strategic processes, which were goal-oriented, deliberative, and fulfill specific purposes (Benford & Snow, 2000). Within the Network, these goal-oriented processes were most evident in the development of the strategic plan, the Pathway document, and the revised vision and mission statements. These facilitated conversations surfaced problem identification among participants, which was consolidated by Foundation staff into diagnostic frames. The conveners facilitated conversations that generated potential solutions, or prognostic frames. Lastly, the conveners worked to repackage and reframe these ideas into motivational frames, or emotional calls to arms (Benford & Snow, 2000), that mobilized the Core Team. Examples of repackaging included bringing narrow solutions together in a broader strategic plan. Similarly, repackaging also occurred during the creation of the Pathway document. Choosing the name “Pathway” over roadmap was an intentional decision to reflect the rural, heavily forested geography. This work relied on multiple sources of knowledge and the ability of the conveners to create a coherent, easy to understand frame that illustrated the purpose of the Network and could connect with community members across the eight districts.

Like discursive processes, the conveners used strategic processes iteratively. While the original strategic plan did mobilize the Core Team, it failed to communicate beyond that group or generate action. New information from outside the local community provided an opportunity to revisit

this process, to revise the Network's common agenda, and ultimately to produce the Pathway document that resonated widely and supported the mobilization of community members for action planning. Similarly, strategic processes often focused on shifting tacit, or implicit, knowledge to explicit knowledge to guide action (Choo, 1996). For example, Quest members gathered community members' understandings and then served as a mirror to reflect their knowledge of the local context. Surfacing these understandings led to the recognition that the Network needed to accommodate a diversity of beliefs and needs across the eight districts. Like discursive processes, strategic processes led to a decentralized structure, while refining the vision to create broad engagement.

### **Conflict as Sensemaking**

Lastly, the negotiation of conflict supported shared understandings. Henig and colleagues (2016) suggest it may be easier to create partnerships in smaller, more homogenous populations, in part due to an assumption of shared values and an increased ability to have face-to-face interactions. However, in this countywide initiative, diversity did exist between the eight districts and the nearly 30 townships they serve. This diversity included racial diversity, economic diversity, and diversity in backgrounds as native born and transplants, as well as history of conflict between groups and defensiveness of the smaller communities against the perceived agenda of Big River. In particular, one of the conveners noted the need to smooth over conflict in part to maintain relationships and encourage mobilization of members because they see each other at the grocery store and their children's sporting events.

Participants reported that the diverse beliefs in the region led to conflict in the identification of a common agenda. While conflict can be detrimental to social movements, it also serves generative purposes (Benford & Snow; 2000). Conflict was most apparent in the development of the Pathway with the input of the diverse Core Team and from community members. In the area of academic achievement, conflict was accommodated by shifting to broader, more aspirational statements, rather than the narrow use of test scores. This shift allowed broad mobilization of members to continue.

Conflict in postsecondary education reflects the paradoxes Mitra, Movit, and Frick (2008) identified between wanting young people to succeed and wanting them to stay in the community. The prioritization of postsecondary education as an outcome may reflect both institutional ways of thinking and power differentials tipped toward schools and the predominantly well-educated, middle-class members of the network, some of whom had not grown up in the community (Biddle, Mette, & Mercado, 2018; Zuckerman, 2016b). However, while the primarily highly

educated professionals in the Network were committed to "changing the water" on postsecondary education, they accommodated the fears of parents by carefully framing postsecondary to include "any education after high school." They also tempered this college-for-all language with a strong desire to create a community where young people want to be (Florida, 2005; Mitra et al., 2008) and by strengthening intergenerational relationships (Zuckerman & McAtee, 2018). Like the adults in Budge's (2006) study, adults valued the natural landscape and the relationships offered by a smaller community. However, while many valued postsecondary education and experiences outside of the community, they did not equate success with leaving forever. Instead, they expressed the desire for young people to not only have the ability to choose to live anywhere but for them to want to choose the Grand Isle area. Throughout, participants highlighted the community over individual success, suggesting thick approaches to partnership development (Casto et al., 2016).

### **Limitations**

This exploratory case study provided evidence of how members of a school-community partnership engaged in iterative sensemaking processes to create a unique structure for their partnership. This study suggests the importance of sensemaking, particularly at the social frontiers (Miller et al., 2017) where diverse people, such as members of different communities, come together. However, it is constrained in several ways. First, the researcher experienced challenges in speaking with participants outside of the largest community. Secondly, it provides only one example of how sensemaking might proceed and is limited by the context of Grand Isle, which included prior collaborations and a backbone organization with a history of using social capital development and issue framing to engage in collaboration. Many rural communities may lack such a readymade backbone organization with capacity for facilitation and mobilization and so the findings should be applied cautiously.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study applied sensemaking theory to understand how actors interpreted and framed information as they developed a Strive-affiliated school-community partnership that was fit for purpose and place. In the Grand Isle Network, these sensemaking efforts bridged a large predominately rural geography with eight school districts, with different community identities and understandings of needs. To engage in sensemaking, the conveners had to build and maintain relationships while engaging in formal and informal communication that combined and

recombined new ideas, developed consensus, and surfaced tactic knowledge.

These efforts led to the realization that the Grand Isle Network could not simply implement the Strive model as it had been developed in Cincinnati, but it had to adapt it to their context. In part, this adaptation included the development of a loosely coordinate network of community action planning groups was seen as a way to begin to overcome the differences across the Grand Isle area while working to build consensus and connections at the social frontiers (Miller et al., 2017). Rather than wait for consensus to form, this emergent alignment strategy allowed groups to move to action more quickly and engage in additional action-meaning cycles. As these groups began action planning, Network leaders established connections and opportunities with the potential to accelerate learning, create a regional identity, and develop understanding of common problems.

Additionally, adaptation included moving away from contentious academic indicators. It also included framing postsecondary education as “any education after high school,” in order to accommodate strongly held beliefs among Network members in the importance of college for students to gain new experiences and for pursuing living-wage employment, and those in the community who feared this type of goal would lead to more youth leaving and not returning. Participants tempered this message of college with connecting connections between youth and community, as well as seeking employment pathways for students to stay or return.

Despite the limitations of this study, it offers several practical implications for school and community leaders, as well as others seeking to develop place-based school-community partnerships. First, in scaling up models such as Strive to support school-community partnerships in other rural communities, leaders must attend to context as they engage stakeholders; develop a common agenda; and shape the structure of the partnership, taking into consideration differences while working. This approach includes working continually to check new knowledge of partnership development against knowledge of the local community and to engage in conversations to make sense of both sources of information to support innovation. It may require an open-minded but skeptical approach to models developed in urban places by questioning how these efforts might unfold in the local context and anticipating unintended consequences.

Second, as the conveners emphasized, rural school and community leaders should think in terms of adapting models, rather than adopting models. Adaptation, however, requires capacity to support sensemaking processes, including skilled facilitators who can build relationships, create an environment of trust that facilitates brainstorming, elicit ideas from members, bring multiple sources of

information to the table, and create coherent frames. Rural areas may face challenges in doing so, including a limited number of organizations and limited capacity. For communities without a readymade backbone organization such as the Grand Isle Foundation this process might include the identification of community leaders, both formal and informal, who have the legitimacy to mobilize individuals, and building facilitation capacity. Backbone functions can be spread across several organizations, and new backbone organizations can be formed (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012). Additionally, rural areas may require additional time to overcome challenges created by geographic distance, diverse communities, a lack of shared identity, and different understandings of needs.

Lastly, the strategy of emergent alignment described here can help rural areas engage individual school districts in moving toward action while strategically bringing together groups in conversation to develop shared understandings and common identities to move toward regional change. This structure allowed action-meaning making cycles to occur, while also speeding up actions in communities to improve the lives of students.

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