

Leveraging Local Assets in Rural Education: Book Review

Hartman, S. L., & Klein, B. (Eds.). (2023). *The middle of somewhere: Rural education partnerships and innovation*. Harvard Education Press.

Review by Alycia Cole and J. Kessa Roberts
Utah State University

Citation: Cole, A., & Roberts, J. K. (2024). Leveraging local assets in rural education: Book review of “The middle of somewhere: Rural education partnerships and innovation.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 40(4). <https://doi.org/10.26209/JRRE4004>

In response to the prevailing misjudgment of rural communities, which constitute the heart of our nation, Hartman and Klein (2023) endeavor to reframe and highlight the innovative collaboration occurring in rural educational settings. This transformation in perspective is made possible by the way in which they emphasize the interconnected nature of rurality and the close-knit relationships among educational institutions, local businesses, non-profit organizations, and other resources, including the natural environment. *The Middle of Somewhere: Rural Education Partnerships and Innovation* presents 10 chapters that shed light on a variety of recent and largely successful rural educational partnerships, offering readers the potential to replicate these efforts and advance equitable rural education across the United States.

Employing a strengths-centered approach, Hartman and Klein’s three-part volume collectively addresses a multitude of educational challenges facing rural schools and communities. The book’s initial section tackles the persistent challenges of preparing, attracting, and retaining teachers in rural schools. The second section underscores the significance of participation in rural education networks, while the final section spotlights partnerships advocating for justice, equity, and inclusion. The editors organize the volume into these invaluable, coherent parts, each focusing on distinct aspects of rural education while also inviting readers to appreciate the interconnectedness and fluidity among chapters.

All correspondence should be directed to J. Kessa Roberts, School of Teacher Education and Leadership, Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT (kessa.roberts@usu.edu).

JRRE is associated with the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Penn State and is a publication of Penn State Libraries Open Publishing.

Thematic Reorganization

Drawing on this notion, our review employs a thematic reorganization of the chapters in *The Middle of Somewhere* to highlight cross-cutting themes: disrupting threats to viability; overcoming spatial and resource inequity; harnessing and building community; and crossing boundaries, expanding ecosystems. This approach not only broadens the foundational ideas presented by the editors but also offers a complementary examination of rural educational partnerships and innovations. By doing so, we aim to provide an appealing supplement, encouraging readers to actively engage with and synthesize these insights alongside the comprehensive analyses offered in Hartman and Klein’s volume. In the same way that the editors recognized that chapters could be included in different/multiple sections, we too, recognize that many chapters could be categorized in numerous themes that we identified. However, we chose to select and highlight those we felt were the strongest examples of our cross-cutting themes for this review. To aid the reader in comparing the volume’s thematic organization to ours, in Table 1 we provide this information alongside a brief overview of the individual partnerships found throughout the volume.

Disrupting Threats to Viability

We begin by focusing on the partnerships presented in the volume that effectively disrupt threats to viability and explore how rural communities address existential threats through innovative strategies and partnerships. In this section we highlight how the partnerships in Chapters 6, 8, and 9 of *The Middle of Somewhere* capitalize on geographic and demographic strengths, demonstrating how rural areas transform challenges into educational opportunities.

In Chapter 6, Maxwell and colleagues examine the evolution and development of their large partnership, the Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ), in South Texas. This

Table 1The Middle of Somewhere: Rural Partnerships and Innovation *Chapter Guide*

Chapter	Authors and brief overview of partnership	Volume's theme	Our theme(s)
1	Yahn et al.'s school-community-university partnership Community and Career Connected Learning (CCCL) enriches experiential learning for preservice educators in rural areas by integrating community alliances and career awareness.	Supporting teacher candidates and teachers	Harnessing and building community
2	Brenner et al.'s university-affiliated Partnership School is a public middle school for sixth and seventh graders built on the research-intensive Mississippi State University campus.	Supporting teacher candidates and teachers	Overcoming spatial and resource inequity
3	Downey and Luebeck's two trilateral partnerships: the Rural Teaching Pathways Project (RTPP) provides preservice teachers with a sequential clinical experience of three immersive practicums in rural schools, and the Standards-Based Teaching Renewing Educators Across Montana (STREAM) provides rural (mathematics) teachers with a <i>place-attentive</i> professional learning network.	Supporting teacher candidates and teachers	Harnessing and building community (Rural Teaching Pathways Project)
4	Grohs et al.'s Virginia Tech Partnering with Educators and Engineers in Rural Schools (VT PEERS) offers hands-on engineering activities for sixth through eighth grade science classrooms.	Supporting teacher candidates and teachers	Crossing boundaries, expanding ecosystems
5	Clark and colleagues' Kansas State University Rural Education Center (REC) highlights the creation of an annual summit on current rural challenges, a rural professional development network, and a distance learning grant program.	Engaging rural education networks	Overcoming spatial and resource inequity
6	Maxwell and colleagues' South Texas Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ) is a multi-district-university partnership which established multiple college and career learning academies.	Engaging rural education networks	Disrupting threats to viability
7	Klein's Alliance of Indigenous Math Circles (AIMC) university-K-12 remote network brings mathematicians, math circles, workshops, festivals and other connective opportunities to Indigenous populations across the United States.	Engaging rural education networks	Overcoming spatial and resource inequity
8	Hartman et al.'s Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery (OVMoD) school-university-community partnership provides diverse stationary, mobile, and online STEM/STEAM learning opportunities.	Promoting justice, equity, and inclusion	Disrupting threats to viability Overcoming spatial and resource inequity
9	Howley et al. share the partnership (Dean's Compact) behind the Ohio Low-Incidence Sensory Disability (LISD) Collaborative, which became a rural-centric, multi-institutional, statewide, hybrid LISD preparation programs for pre-service teachers.	Promoting justice, equity, and inclusion	Disrupting threats to viability Crossing boundaries, expanding ecosystems
10	Walker's La Voz Unida presents a unique educator-as-community partnership, where activism and advocacy outside school walls drive local policy changes needed to support undocumented students and families.	Promoting justice, equity, and inclusion	Harnessing and building community Crossing boundaries, expanding ecosystems

initiative, spearheaded by three visionary superintendents, strategically combated the imminent threat of a district high school closure. Through their adept pooling of resources, local support, and funding, they not only safeguarded but also significantly enriched the educational structure of three neighboring districts. Notably, the RSIZ tailored its initiative to meet 21st-century demands and the educational needs of its predominantly Hispanic student population by creating specialized academies in fields like STEM, health sciences, construction, and JROTC. The success of the RSIZ includes enhanced partnerships between area businesses; massive growth in enrollment capacities; and improved graduation, attendance, and certifications.

Like RSIZ, Hartman and colleagues' Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery (OVMoD), discussed in Chapter 8, showcases how educational institutions can effectively respond to external crises and maintain program quality under pressure. Faced with the necessity to maintain educational continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, OVMoD implemented the "STEAM Packs for Students" initiative, distributing over 2,100 learning kits that facilitated hands-on learning at a time when physical engagement was restricted. This initiative effectively extended OVMoD's broader efforts, such as their Discovery lab, by seeking innovative methods to engage youth with technology and creative problem solving. Furthermore, by forging robust partnerships with entities such as a local food equity nonprofit and an organization that provides music therapy, OVMoD not only sustained educational activities during a period of limited physical interaction but also bridged the gap in access to other resources, ensuring that a broad range of student needs were addressed. These efforts mirrored RSIZ's strategic collaboration and resource pooling to confront and mitigate threats to educational viability, underscoring common characteristics of resilience and innovation.

In Chapter 9, Howley and colleagues examine the Ohio Low-Incidence Sensory Disability (LISD) Collaborative's efforts to address special education training gaps in rural Ohio. Through strategic partnerships with Ohio's preservice education programs, the Collaborative implements a multi-institutional hybrid approach that enhances specialized education for LISD preservice teachers statewide. While the chapter adeptly acknowledges challenges, particularly in recruiting candidates for these programs, it underscores the necessity for widespread training opportunities and sustained inter-institutional collaboration. This plea addresses current educational disparities in services provided to students with low-incidence disabilities and sets a precedent for future initiatives to ensure all students receive high-quality education, regardless of geographic or demographic barriers.

These chapters effectively encapsulate Hartman and Klein's principal theme of utilizing local strengths to cultivate sustainable educational collaborations in rural settings. They also emphasize partnerships designed to mitigate threats to viability and illustrate how rural communities implement innovative strategies to tackle existential challenges. The initiatives presented—from RSIZ's community-based resource pooling to OVMoD's adaptive responses in crises and the LISD Collaborative's strategic educational approaches—collectively underscore the resilience and potential of rural areas to prosper by capitalizing on unique local resources and cooperative networks.

Harnessing and Building Community

Throughout our read, we also identified multiple partnerships that notably harnessed and built community, showcasing how rural areas proactively transform their educational landscapes through asset-based strategies. Such a thematic focus paves the way for an in-depth examination of Chapters 1, 3, and 10, each of which illustrates innovative strategies to engage and empower local communities. These narratives demonstrate how intentionality can leverage local partnerships and resources to contribute to the sustainable development and resilience of educational ecosystems in rural areas.

In Chapter 1 of *The Middle of Somewhere*, Yahn et al. present an exemplary model of harnessing and building community through the Community and Career Connected Learning (CCCL) initiative, which is a unique learning model that shifts the focus from participant-centered benefits to community thriving and values the significance of place and natural environments in developing skills and enhancing community capital. Furthermore, CCCL is distinguishable due to its focus on integrating preservice educators into diverse rural settings, challenging the notion that success requires leaving these areas. The chapter's case study of an effective CCCL provides an insightful look at how immersing preservice educators in rich, place-based learning experiences deepens their engagement with rural communities. By focusing on local educational needs, this approach not only enhances students' understanding of rural contexts but also aims to cultivate resilient future educators.

Downey and Luebeck's Chapter 3, also centers their learning model on the community rather than the individual, first and foremost by critiquing the homogeneous perception of rurality, emphasizing the need to expose preservice educators to diverse and distinct characteristics that shape rural communities. This chapter shares two trilateral case studies—the Rural Teaching Pathways Project (RTPP) and the Standards-Based Teaching Renewing Educators Across

Montana (STREAM)—the former of which we highlight in this section for notably exemplifying how carefully crafted educational partnerships tailored to the unique needs of rural settings can substantially improve teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development. The RTPP, implemented by Montana State University, is deeply embedded in local contexts and provides preservice teachers with immersive field experiences that not only deepen their understanding of place-based education but also integrate them into the very fabric of rural communities. By doing so, the RTPP not only prepares educators to address and overcome local educational challenges but also ensures they become pivotal contributors to the community, enhancing both educational and community resilience. This strategic, context-aware approach highlights the potential of educational programs to foster sustainable outcomes that can significantly enrich rural educational ecosystems.

In Chapter 10, the discussion shifts from preservice education to an illustration of an educator-driven grassroots initiative—the La Voz Unida—to effectively highlight how rural educators can step beyond traditional roles to build community, combat injustices, and advocate for much needed policy changes. Embracing elements of a narrative, Walker shares how a meeting in a local coffee shop grew to be collaborative, demonstrating the ways educators navigated various roles and identities within a rural community by seeking ways to garner the community’s support to mobilize and protect DACA students and undocumented families in a rural Midwest city. By harnessing their deep community ties and local knowledge to navigate and influence policy, Walker’s developed and sustained partnership not only echoes the significance of community engagement seen in Chapter 1’s CCCL but also underlines the dynamic potential within rural communities to address broader social issues.

Chapters 1, 3, and 10 each address unique aspects of community within rural settings, yet together, they underscore a cohesive strategy to overcome the geographic and resource-based challenges inherent in these areas. This unified approach not only taps into the latent potential of rural communities to cultivate robust partnerships but also aligns with Hartman and Klein’s narrative overview of the text as a whole, which stresses innovative collaborations and the deep interconnectedness within rural educational systems. By focusing on harnessing and building community, these chapters contribute to a broader account of educational innovation intertwined with community engagement that is essential for the sustained development of rural areas.

Overcoming Spatial and Resource Inequity

Another cross-cutting theme we identified was overcoming spatial and resource inequity in rural

education. While all partnerships and initiatives included in *The Middle of Somewhere* navigated rural spatial and/or resource inequities to some degree, such challenges are innovatively overcome across Chapters 2, 5, 7, and 8. These chapters demonstrate both the capacity to adapt educational practices to rural contexts and reveal the potential for such adaptations to enhance educational quality and accessibility.

Both Brenner et al.’s Chapter 2 and Hartman et al.’s Chapter 8 exemplify how educational initiatives can overcome spatial inequities by strategically integrating resources and facilities. In Chapter 2, the innovative relocation of a middle school to the Mississippi State University campus bridges the gap between rural students and high-quality educational resources often confined to more urban settings. This collocation not only affords middle school students access to advanced educational services but also creates a seamless continuum of learning opportunities by embedding them within a university setting. The presence of university faculty and preservice teachers enriches the educational landscape, fostering an integrative learning environment that exposes students to a broader spectrum of academic and professional possibilities.

In a similar vein, Chapter 8’s presentation of the Discovery Lab at the OVMoD harnesses the museum’s resources to craft an interactive learning space that transcends the typical educational boundaries faced by rural communities. By transforming the museum into a dynamic hub for STEAM education, the Discovery Lab mitigates geographical isolation by providing rural students with hands-on access to cutting-edge technologies and collaborative projects. This initiative not only admirably closes the physical and conceptual distance between rural students and advanced educational opportunities by traveling to multiple locations but also cultivates a practical understanding of technology and innovation.

Relatedly, Klein’s Alliance of Indigenous Math Circles (AIMC), described in Chapter 7, directly confronts the spatial and resource disparities Indigenous communities face by traveling to remote locations to conduct math circles, workshops, and festivals, bringing STEM education to Indigenous students. This direct engagement model is particularly effective in overcoming the geographical barriers that more isolated communities often face. The AIMC not only provides access to advanced mathematical concepts and problem-solving skills but, perhaps more importantly and certainly less common, does so in a culturally responsive manner that honors and incorporates Indigenous knowledge and traditions. Commendably, the AIMC’s strategy also cultivates sustainable educational pathways for Indigenous students, encouraging them to pursue further education and careers in STEM fields. By connecting these students with broader professional networks and opportunities, the AIMC

works to ensure that Indigenous voices and perspectives are represented in the sciences, thereby addressing both spatial and systemic inequities.

Clark and colleagues' Chapter 5 introduces a distinct strategy for addressing spatial and resource inequities in rural education, centered on Kansas State University's Rural Education Center (REC). REC's personalized approach empowers stakeholders and directly addresses the specific needs of local rural communities. This approach was achieved by soliciting comprehensive interviews with 281 rural district superintendents, providing REC with firsthand insights into responding districts' strengths and challenges. Capitalizing on these diverse perspectives, REC effectively aligns and designs its learning network to cater specifically to the unique circumstances of rural areas in Kansas. Admirably, REC's initiative clearly fosters a sense of agency among stakeholders, encouraging open responses to constraints and challenges. This sense of agency is vital for successful educational support in diverse rural settings, promoting active participation and ownership of solutions. REC's model combines strategic planning, individualized support, and collaborative partnerships, making it a robust example of overcoming spatial and resource inequities in rural education through tailored, contextually relevant initiatives. This approach also paved the way for additional collaboration that provided statewide resources for rural administrators, teachers, and students, thereby amplifying educational opportunities across rural Kansas.

The chapters in this section collectively advocate for innovative strategies to bridge educational disparities in rural areas. Chapters 2 and 8 emphasize the advantages of embedding educational programs within larger institutions to leverage their capabilities, while Chapters 5 and 7 focus on the value of forming adaptive networks that capitalize on local assets and cultural contexts. These strategies not only facilitate access to enriched learning environments but also ensure that these environments are tailored to the unique needs of rural students. By integrating external resources with the enhancement of internal community strengths, these chapters demonstrate how spatial integration can level the educational playing field, allowing rural students to engage in experiences and learning models previously beyond their reach, and paving the way for academic and career progression.

Crossing Boundaries, Expanding Ecosystems

Our last cross-sectional observation identifies the prominence of crossing boundaries and expanding ecosystems in rural education, a pivotal concept enhancing educational reform discourse. Unlike previous chapters, which primarily focus on localized asset utilization and

addressing inequities through spatial integration, Chapters 4, 9, and 10 showcase the innovative expansion of educational ecosystems through cross-sector partnerships and community activism. These chapters collectively explore how educational boundaries can be transcended to incorporate a wider array of stakeholders and resources, effectively highlighting the editors' call for flexible interpretations and underscoring the importance of adaptive, interconnected strategies in driving meaningful educational change across diverse rural contexts. Thus, the initiatives detailed here provide critical insights into the potential for rural areas to adapt to challenges and thrive by proactively redefining the parameters of educational engagement and community involvement.

In this broader context, Grohs et al.'s Chapter 4 and Howley et al.'s Chapter 9, while focused on different demographics and educational challenges, both illustrate the critical role of strategic partnerships in expanding the scope and effectiveness of rural educational initiatives. Chapter 4, detailing the Virginia Tech Partnering with Educators and Engineers in Rural Schools (VT PEERS) initiative, showcases a collaborative effort that integrates hands-on engineering into rural middle school science curricula, enhancing both student learning experiences and teacher capabilities. This initiative not only broadens students' perceptions of engineering careers but also strengthens the educational infrastructure by bridging the gap between K–12 education, higher education, and the engineering industry.

Similarly, Chapter 9 examines the Ohio LISD Collaborative, which addresses the profound need for specialized education in rural settings by establishing innovative, blended training programs. Howley and colleagues' initiative not only enhances the availability of qualified educators for students with sensory disabilities but also exemplifies how multi-institutional collaborations can effectively decentralize resources and expertise typically concentrated in urban centers, thus promoting a more equitable distribution across rural areas.

As the volume delves deeper into the varied approaches to addressing rural educational challenges, Walker's final chapter (Chapter 10) conveys a unique perspective by highlighting the role of educators as community activists. This chapter reveals how grassroots movements, such as La Voz Unida, leverage local connections and the deep community ties of educators to advocate for policy changes that protect and empower vulnerable populations. This laudable demonstration of the potential of educators to extend their influence beyond the classroom highlights the need for authentic interconnectedness of education with broader community and social issues.

Discussion

In our review of *The Middle of Somewhere*, we have delineated four cross-cutting themes: disrupting threats to viability; overcoming spatial and resource inequity; harnessing and building community; and crossing boundaries, expanding ecosystems. These themes expand the narrative established by the original themes—supporting teacher candidates; engaging rural networks; and promoting justice, equity, and inclusion—and aim to complement the foundational concepts presented by Hartman and Klein to emphasize further the innovative ways rural communities utilize local assets and collaborations.

Holistically, the book effectively demonstrates how strategic collaborations and innovative practices can revolutionize rural educational landscapes. By showcasing recent and successful rural partnerships that feature educational versatility and potential for significant societal impact, the authors illuminate the importance of context-sensitive and place-attentive initiatives. This broad examination not only highlights opportunities for replication but also underscores the need for adaptive strategies and robust community engagement to effect lasting educational change.

Furthermore, chapters detailing instruction-related concerns and sustainability issues highlight critical areas where resource allocation, logistical planning, and community engagement intersect to either facilitate or hinder educational progress. For instance, the transition to online and hybrid learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 1) and the ongoing struggle with teacher preparation in culturally and contextually appropriate pedagogies (Chapters 3 and 4) spotlight the urgent need for robust training and development frameworks that can adapt to rapid changes and local needs. These challenges are not merely operational but are deeply tied to the quality of education and the inclusivity of educational practices.

Moreover, the recurring premise of sustainability—be it through creative funding mechanisms, partnership stability, or resource sharing—echoes the editors' critique of the current funding models for rural education. Chapters 1, 6, 8, 9, and 10 articulate a common narrative of vulnerability to fluctuations in financial support, which often requires rural educational initiatives to operate under the constant threat of discontinuity. The struggles with securing and maintaining adequate funding not only strain existing programs but also stifle the potential for future expansions and innovations.

This constellation of challenges is integrally linked to equity in partnerships, where the imbalance in resource exchange and the inequity in collaborative efforts can exacerbate existing disparities within rural education systems (Chapter 1, 2, 4, 5, and 8). Addressing these issues requires a reassessment of how partnerships are formed

and maintained, ensuring that all stakeholders—schools, industries, and community members—are equally invested and benefit from the educational endeavors.

Hartman and Klein's advocacy for greater representation of rural perspectives in literature and media is crucial in this context as it raises awareness about the nuanced challenges faced by rural communities and highlights successful collaboration models that could inspire similar efforts elsewhere. Their collective call to rural educational leaders, decision makers, and policymakers to reevaluate and improve the prominent inequities is not just a plea for resources but a directive to fundamentally enhance the support structure for rural education, thereby empowering communities to build sustainable, effective educational systems.

Chapter Recommendations and Suggestions

Lastly, we highlight the recommendations and suggestions presented across the chapters of *The Middle of Somewhere*, which provide a robust guide for replicating successful educational initiatives in rural settings. These chapters collectively stress the importance of flexibility, community-centric strategies, and the dynamic engagement of diverse stakeholders in fostering enduring educational partnerships.

Across the chapters, the emphasis on harnessing diverse perspectives, particularly highlighted by Yahn and colleagues in Chapter 1, serves as a cornerstone for enhancing rural life. This approach cultivates natural tensions that emerge from diverse stakeholder interactions, which are crucial for building partnerships that actively involve and benefit the community, enriching local environments and bolstering social capital.

Trust and consistent communication are pinpointed as essential for the longevity and effectiveness of rural partnerships. The importance of these elements is underlined through the advocacy for dedicated liaisons and structured review processes to maintain open lines of communication, ensuring alignment of goals and continuity in university-affiliated partnerships as detailed in Chapter 2. Further expanding on the theme of collaboration, Chapter 3 discusses celebrating collective expertise and coordinating shared resources, which are pivotal in maintaining the integrity of partnerships while adapting models to fit local needs, rather than merely adopting preexisting approaches. Chapter 6 also emphasizes the importance of tailoring models to local contexts instead of simply adopting existing ones.

Equity in partnerships is another critical construct that emerges, emphasizing well-communicated, equitable exchanges that recognize the different needs and contributions of all partners. This concept is crucial for

ensuring that collaborations are perceived as mutually beneficial, thus fostering a productive and sustainable partnership environment, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 8. Additionally, establishing broad networks that include educational professionals across various sectors is recommended to enhance regional visibility and support for rural-serving entities, ensuring that these initiatives are not isolated but part of a larger, supportive framework.

Finally, an ecological approach to partnership, advocated by Clark et al. in Chapter 5, tailors support to the unique characteristics of each rural community. This approach not only emphasizes personal communication with stakeholders like superintendents to understand individual strengths and challenges but also encourages cooperation through professional development and educational networks. These strategies facilitate the sharing of experiences and innovations, which are vital for the continuous growth and adaptation of educational programs in diverse rural settings.

By weaving these strategies together, *The Middle of Somewhere* holistically offers practical guidance for those looking to replicate or innovate upon successful models of rural educational initiatives, advocating for a comprehensive and inclusive approach that leverages the strength of diverse collaborations and community engagement to meet the unique challenges of rural education.

Overall, Hartman and Klein's volume provides valuable and credible insight into rural education partnerships. The book's organization, both in structure and thematic presentation, contributes significantly to its overall effectiveness. In the volume's Introduction, the editors present the central problem of rural education inequity while dispelling deficit perspectives by focusing on rural education partnerships' positive and transformative aspects. Moreover, the editors speak candidly about how partnerships in interconnected rural communities are not without challenges. The editors and the chapter authors emphasize the importance of open communication, the proactive inclusion of diverse perspectives, and the necessity to blur traditional boundaries to encourage innovative practices and participation in partnership work. The book's focus on traversing such boundaries markedly serves as a strategy to address power dynamics within partnerships, representing a departure from conventional practices often found in partnerships.

Conclusions, Implications, and Impact

As a whole, the book artfully weaves together a diverse selection of articles through well-designed thematic categories. Each category speaks to distinct but interconnected themes including addressing spatial inequities in rural educational opportunities, capitalizing

on unique rural settings, and blurring traditional roles and boundaries during partnership development. By including multiple partnership types across rural communities with distinct resources and needs, the editors provide readers with a balanced perspective of these themes while simultaneously illustrating rural contexts' unique attributes and commonalities.

In *The Middle of Somewhere*, the repetition of introductory context across chapters, detailing the challenges and strengths of rural education partnerships, can both aid and impede reader engagement. This consistency ensures that each chapter stands independently, which is beneficial for those readers who are solely exploring specific sections or chapters, but this repetition may also serve to lessen the impact for those reading the volume from cover to cover.

Additionally, the chapters exhibit significant variability in focus, academia, and depth, ranging from detailed explorations of classroom-level collaborations to broader analyses of partnership dynamics. This diversity in perspective, from micro-level nuances within communities to macro-level partnership strategies, may initially disorient some readers but ultimately contribute to enriching the broader discourse by providing a comprehensive view of rural educational partnerships. Such a multifaceted approach illustrates the on-the-ground application of theories and offers overarching insights without delving into the granularity of classroom interactions. The variety of chapter foci encourages engagement from a wide range of educational stakeholders and underscores the importance of embracing diverse narratives to foster a deeper understanding of rural educational partnerships.

Situating the text within the broader rural education research and literature landscape, *The Middle of Somewhere's* focus on partnerships aligns with a key area of needed research in rural education, as evidenced by the *National Rural Education Association Rural Research Agenda 2022–2027* (National Rural Education Association, 2022), which highlights “partnership and community relationships” as one of five crucial areas for future research. Not only does Hartman and Klein's text fall squarely into this research area (Hartman et al., 2022), their focus on innovative practices and use of rich case study descriptions of specific, but successful partnerships around the county also answers calls for this work from educational stakeholders including practitioners, researchers, and policymakers (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). With evidence of “what works” predominantly situated in urban and suburban locales (Eppley et al., 2018), *The Middle of Somewhere* foregrounds place and rurality, not only highlighting the importance of context when developing, assessing, and adjusting rural collaborations but also demonstrating the effectiveness of rural partnerships to meet local needs.

Additionally, the focus on innovative collaboration between multiple stakeholder groups to address the challenges rural schools face is timely. It arrives on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the needs of many students and families, illuminated existing pre-pandemic inequities and resource constraints (Showalter et al., 2023), and left many rural educators searching for solutions. However, COVID-19 also demonstrated rural schools' resilience and innovation, building on a long history of rural schools working in these ways to meet new and existing challenges. Hartman and Klein's edited volume contributes further evidence of this resilience and innovation, thereby supporting an asset-based view of rural schools, places, and people.

In a time when rural places and people experience heightened challenges, *The Middle of Somewhere: Rural Education Partnerships and Innovation* emphasizes the need for innovative partnership relationships. Readers are reminded that innovation, collaboration, and a strengths-based perspective are not mere ideals but powerful tools for change. The achievements within these pages serve as a testament to the potential of partnerships in reshaping the educational landscape for rural students, reminding us that we can bridge the gap, leverage existing assets, ignite change, and foster a future filled with educational equity.

References

- Eppley, K., Azano, A. P., Brenner, D. G., & Shannon, P. (2018). What counts as evidence in rural schools? Evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence for diverse settings. *The Rural Educator*, 39(2), 36–40. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v39i2.208>
- Hartman, S.L. & Klein, B. (Eds.). (2023). *Middle of somewhere: Rural education partnerships that promote innovation and change*. Harvard Education Press.
- Hartman, S. L., Roberts, J. K., Schmitt-Wilson, S., McHenry-Sorber, E., Buffington, P. J., & Biddle, C. (2022). National Rural Education Association research agenda—2022–2027: A closer look at the research priorities. *The Rural Educator*, 43(3), 59–66. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1349>
- McHenry-Sorber, E., Biddle, C., Buffington, P. J., Hartman, S. L., Roberts, J. K., & Schmitt-Wilson, S. (2023). The NREA rural research agenda 2022–2027: An examination of the research process and findings. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 98(4), 448–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2023.2238527>
- National Rural Education Association. (2022). 2022–2027 National Rural Education Association research agenda. *The Rural Educator*, 37(3), 67–69. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1351>
- Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity*. National Rural Education Association. <https://www.nrea.net/why-rural-matters>