Relational Trust

HOW DO INTENTIONAL EFFORTS TO CULTIVATE TRUST ENHANCE COLLABORATION AND THE ABILITY TO MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND FAMILIES?

For 25 years, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program has provided afterschool and summer enrichment and learning opportunities to millions of youths who reside in communities that experience poverty. Most of these 21st CCLC programs are located within public schools, where school settings provide opportunities for afterschool and summer learning to be integrated within other school-based supports and programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Oftentimes, an outside community-based organization will serve as the grantee while still operating programming in a school setting. Due to funding and staffing constraints in schools, partnering with an external organization often becomes a necessity, and it can also yield unique benefits, such as introducing additional adults into youths' lives. However, collaboration with an external organization also poses risks for silos in program delivery, as well as for potential mistrust or misunderstanding between organization and school staff.

Relational trust—or the mutual confidence in, respect for, and understanding of expectations and obligations among groups—is recognized in education literature as crucial for effective school functioning and for improvement initiatives (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cranston, 2011; Schneider et al., 2014). In the case of collaboration between external grantees and

With funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is conducting the **21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery Study,** *a 3-year project designed to:*

Identify 21st CCLC programs that are integral parts of broader systems characterized by the coordination of multiple programs, activities, and services

Document strategies and approaches that support the coordination and integration of services; and

Explore how students and families may benefit from integrated and coordinated service delivery

AIR is conducting the study in collaboration with state education agencies in the states of Illinois, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Washington. This brief summarizes early findings from the study based on a series of interviews completed in the fall of 2022 with 21st CCLC project directors and site coordinators associated with 30 centers in the five states enrolled in the study.

school staff, relational trust can be a prerequisite for the successful integration of the 21st CCLC program within the school community. This brief explores two 21st CCLC programs, located in Newport, Rhode Island, and Kennewick, Washington. The grantees for these programs, Newport Community Schools (NCS) and Educational Service District (ESD) 123, respectively, offer models for how external organizations can cultivate trust within the school site and, in the case of Washington, among various organizations, thereby enhancing their collective ability to serve students and families.

The stories of collaboration demonstrated by NCS and ESD 123 illustrate deliberate strategies and takeaways for how to foster relational trust and buy-in from all involved parties. Although strategies may differ across sites, they generally involve the following:

Belief of district, school, and organizational leaders in the inherent value and need for involving partners in providing supports and opportunities to students and families

Communication structures that are consistently utilized, enabling the visibility of different organizations within the school and the fostering of positive relationships

Demonstrated responsiveness from organizational partners to student, family, and school needs, as they evolve

We elaborate on these points in upcoming sections in this brief by sharing how both NCS and ESD 123 have cultivated relational trust with the schools they support through 21st CCLC funding.

NEWPORT COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Despite its reputation for affluence, the city of Newport, Rhode Island, grapples with pronounced economic disparities, including significant portions of its school-aged population living at or below the poverty line. Compounding these challenges for Newport Public Schools are reductions in financial aid from the state, which constrain the district's ability to adequately address student and family needs. In response to these pressing needs, Newport Public Schools partnered with United Way of Rhode Island's Community Schools RI (CSRI) initiative to found NCS in 2001 to address the middle school's demand for afterschool and summer programming. NCS adopts a community schools philosophy, which emphasizes collaboration with cross-sector community agencies to promote holistic child development and foster positive family and community outcomes.[1]

Recognizing the financial constraints within Newport Public Schools, district and school leaders have actively embraced the wealth of resources offered by NCS to enhance support for students and families. Notably, leaders have embraced the 21st CCLC programming model as a means of providing comprehensive support outside of traditional school hours and addressing both academic and nonacademic needs. One school leader expressed her and others' commitment to providing afterschool and summer programming, likening it to having "dr[u]nk the Kool-Aid." Echoing this sentiment, the superintendent emphasized the indispensable role of community-based partners in delivering wraparound support through afterschool and summer programming. This buy-in from district and school leaders plays a pivotal role in fostering the relational trust necessary for organizations like NCS to thrive within school settings.

Over the course of 2 decades, NCS has undergone substantial growth and evolution. Initially established to serve Thompson Middle School (TMS), NCS swiftly expanded its 21st CCLC programming to include Rogers High School (RHS). In 2009, NCS took another significant step by introducing its NCS Connects program to its schools. This initiative provides a diversity of supports, activities, and services designed to address (a) needs such as for social and health supports as well as (b) barriers

to learning such as limited family involvement and also encourages family involvement to foster student success. In 2010, NCS once again broadened its scope by assuming responsibility for adult education services through the Aquidneck Island Adult Learning Center program, a highly comprehensive adult education program offering academic and workforce development/training opportunities. Through its consistent expansion and adaptation to community needs, NCS has not only enhanced its offerings but has also solidified its reputation as a trusted partner within the district, fostering deeper collaboration and support for its initiatives.

The executive director of NCS attributes the organization's capacity to expand to its status as an independent nonprofit that was established explicitly to serve as a 21st CCLC grantee. NCS, with its singular mission to work in collaboration with local schools, Newport Public Schools, and community partners, to provide educational opportunities to complement classroom learning and supports academic success, personal responsibility and economic self-sufficiency, maintains a leadership and organizational structure separate from that of the district. This unique structure allows NCS to effectively pursue external funding sources and support the organization's long-term sustainability. The district further supports NCS through funding three full-time NCS employees to provide behavioral support at its three schools.

> **If we didn't have the ability to leverage other funds, our program would be very small in size and scope of service.** We would not able to respond nimbly with a tremendous amount of flexibility at the drop of the hat . . . Very rarely does Newport Community Schools say, *'I can't help you.'* And it's because we have other funds and have the ability to offset, leverage other funds to support other expenses that 21st Century dollars can't cover beyond the grant amount.
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> — *Executive Director, NCS*

The success of NCS further stems from its commitment to integrate within the schools it serves. For example, school and district leaders, school staff, and parents attest to the extent to which NCS has become deeply embedded within the framework of schools it serves, even to the point that parents can't discern NCS staff from school-day staff.

NCS adopts a community schools philosophy, which emphasizes collaboration with cross-sector community agencies to **promote holistic child development and foster positive family and community outcomes.**

> **We are so heavily embedded in both 21st Century funded schools** if you walked in the door, you would not know the difference between a Newport Community School employee or one of our Program Coordinators being a Newport Community School employee versus a Thompson or Rogers employee. You just wouldn't notice.
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> — *Executive Director, NCS*

> **They're present during the day . . .** our students get to see, and young people get to see the [NCS] staff during the day. They get to see them as part of the whole team
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> — *Superintendent, Newport Public Schools*

To understand the success of NCS in establishing meaningful relationships with school and district staff, it's crucial to delve into the organization's focus on identifying and addressing existing service gaps within both the school and the wider community. Throughout the years, NCS has played a pivotal role in filling disparate needs, from stepping in to create a summer program when TMS faced cuts, to addressing food insecurity through its on-site pantry, to developing targeted programs to assist with Newport's recent influx of English learners and Newcomers.

> **The community school has stepped in on numerous occasions to help meet that need.** Newport is an extremely diverse community, whether it's social, economic or whatever the case may be, we have diverse needs and not all kids have the same need, but the community school reaches out, rolls up its sleeve to help whatever the need may be. The unique thing about the relationship between Newport Public Schools and the Newport Community School is the goal is the same and we work together to reach it.
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> — *TMS Teacher*

As a result of its long-standing presence and dedication to addressing needs, NCS serves as an important case study for how to develop trusting and enduring relationships between centers and schools. More specifically, we've identified enabling processes and structures:

Strategies for Building Trust

- **Presence during the school day:** NCS has four school-based 21st CCLC staff members in addition to the three staff members who provide behavioral support to students and generally fill in gaps when needed. These constant interactions with both students and school staff enable NCS staff to demonstrate their commitment and competence in serving students and provide touch points for daily communication and relationship building. NCS staff emphasized the importance of their staff and leaders participating in school-day meetings and teams (e.g., the multi-tiered systems of support team) and school improvement planning, often serving as critical thought partners alongside school leaders.

- **Addressing emergent needs:** TMS staff highlighted the extent to which NCS actively listens to the needs identified by school staff and then takes steps to address those needs, thereby building trust. For example, several TMS and RHS staff members noted how NCS enables them to address the health and wellness needs of their students by providing food and clothing assistance. A school administrator similarly praised NCS for its nimbleness in its ability to help the school address specific needs as they arise, often by providing creative solutions to complex issues.

- **Resource expansion:** Through aggressive fund development efforts and bringing together community partners, NCS has greatly expanded the capacity of the organization to meet the needs of students and families. Examples include bringing mental health and service providers together by holding resource fairs and securing grants for specific programs that the district identifies as a need, such as social emotional programming, academic recovery and Paraprofessional training.

Ultimately, the relational trust between NCS, TMS and RHS has expanded NCS's capacity to deliver high-quality and valued services. NCS' leadership is regarded as a trusted voice in conversations about school improvement. This trust has further enabled NCS to broaden its collaborations with the school district, including the exploration of new adult programming and the provision of services for the high school's growing English learner population. In essence, NCS's enduring presence and commitment to listening and addressing needs through resource expansion have fostered relational trust and serve as a compelling model for effective community-school partnerships.

EDUCATIONAL SERVICE DISTRICT 123

Educational service districts (ESDs) in Washington state play a pivotal role in bolstering the state's K–12 education system by facilitating connections between local public schools and state and national educational resources. Among these, ESD 123 stands out as a crucial support system for its school districts, aiding them in navigating the challenge of addressing diverse student and family needs within the constraints of limited funding. Highlands Middle School, a K–8 school located in the Tri-Cities area of Kennewick, exemplifies an institution grappling with common challenges stemming from a substantial population of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch and a growing population of English learners and migrant students.

ESD 123 provides extensive support to Highlands Middle School by serving as the grantee for its 21st CCLC program. In addition to overseeing the administration of the 21st CCLC program, ESD 123 facilitates access to a diverse range of instructional content, intervention specialists, and resources for both the program and the school. ESD 123 also funds a full-time student assistance professional at Highlands Middle School who delivers drug and alcohol education to students while also offering referrals to community resources.

To enhance the continuum of support available to students and families, ESD 123 has actively pursued additional partnerships, including with the organization Communities in Schools (CIS). CIS aims to provide intensive case management services for participating youth within school settings through an on-site coordinator who works with a caseload of students and their families. As ESD 123's project director of the 21st CCLC grant explained, formally inviting CIS as a partner on the 21st CCLC grant has facilitated enhanced collaboration between the two organizations. This collaboration has further led to an expansion of programming and services available to the youth served by both organizations.

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> **Communities in Schools was newer to the area at the time, and so I saw what they were doing at some of our partner schools,** and some of our schools had them, and I learned more from a site coordinator when I went to do site visits, and I'd be like, *'What does your job entail? What does that look like?'* . . . Then from there I spoke with the directors and [said] just like, *'Hey, I think this will be a great partnership, especially [because] most of the kids you serve come to [our] program. How can we get students that come to program that maybe are off your radar, how can we get them into your services? How do we work together better where we're not overloading you and you're not overloading us?'* — *Project Director, 21st CCLC*

ESD 123 further found a partnership with Gear Up (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), a federally funded program aimed at preparing students for college and career readiness. At Highlands, a site manager leads a team of tutors and enrichment providers who deliver afterschool programming and family engagement activities. Ultimately, these three organizations (ESD 123, CIS, and Gear Up) blend and braid their resources to co-host events and expand the reach of their programming.

Despite being staffed across diverse external ESD 123 organizations and occupying similar roles in service provision and student support, these coordinators share a collective mindset that fuels their day-to-day collaboration. On any given day, these individuals will communicate with each other to refer students, swap resources or community provider suggestions, and collaborate on school-wide programming. This close collaboration extends to the school's guidance counselors and school administrators, ensuring seamless integration with the school day and widespread accessibility of services and supports for Highlands' students and families. The staff view themselves and their counterparts as part of the overarching service delivery system at Highlands Middle School. This shared perspective fosters consistent interconnectivity among staff:

The ability to seamlessly collaborate not only requires actions initiated by program administrators but also relies on the relationships among individuals involved in the day-to-day work. As they are all located within the school, staff members describe forming relationships with each other, facilitated by sharing office space (in the case of the 21st CCLC and Gear Up program coordinators) and attending school-day meetings and trainings.

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> Honestly, I think really it's just been communication and just being like . . . *'I know Tommie from being at ESD and having trainings and stuff with him.'* It's just Nelly, and I borrowed her room just so that we had a place to do [our activity] . . . We needed a room for a program. And so that just kind of built that trust and that communication between us. And I think at one point I had a family that needed something, so we went to her. She had a student that needed something, so she came to me. [The 21st CCLC coordinator] and I are office neighbors, and so that just kind of worked . . . And so I think it's just that, being back in our offices, it's easier to talk when you're just chit-chatting, you're walking by, *'How was your weekend?'* kind of thing, and then just being where you see people at other trainings and stuff.
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> — *Manager, Gear Up*

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> **It takes a village, and it takes a community to make something happen and to make it an amazing thing. It's not one person, it's everybody.** Even if you don't think you have what it takes or the big picture of it, everybody's . . . a puzzle piece. And when you all come together, you make it all work, you make it fit, you complete the big picture. And if you're trying to do it all on yourself, you're going to burn out and you're not going to have it.

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Likewise, ensuring that organizational staff can integrate further into the school culture requires a commitment from both organizational staff and the school administration to foster cultural alignment. Both organizational and school/district staff acknowledged the important role of building administrators in creating buy-in and encouraging collaboration:

> **I think the administrators and counselors act as liaisons between programs.** And I've certainly referred the students with some drug issues to Mr. [Student Assistant Professional] or some other issues to Ms. [CIS Coordinator]. I've had my parents say, *'Hey, my kid needs help.' 'Okay, afterschool program.'* And then we have therapists and counselors . . . and they go to administration, and then we try to find some other pieces that can support them. *—School Administrator*

Here we elaborate on some intentional practices that we observed at Highlands to facilitate the development of relational trust, such as establishing structures of continuous communication or hiring individuals who align with the culture of the school. These strategies offer valuable insights for school or district leaders, as well as external providers, to consider.

Strategies for School/District Leaders

- **Designating opportunities for different organizational staff to connect:** Establishing open and ongoing channels of communication serves as a cornerstone for building meaningful relationships and creating organic opportunities for collaboration. When asked about their close bond, the 21st CCLC and Gear Up managers at Highlands attributed the development of their relationship to having shared office space. A school administrator at Highlands similarly emphasized the importance of creating intentional touch points or opportunities for different organizational staff to meet each other and regularly connect. These opportunities may look like administrators scheduling regular meetings with different organizations or encouraging them to participate in the same training and professional development sessions as their staff.

- **Partnering in the grant-writing process:** District and school administrators at Highlands discussed the value of the individual school site taking a large role in shaping how to deliver and who delivers services within school buildings. For example, school administrators will collaborate with ESD 123 when applying for federal or state grants, to ensure that applications are written and tailored to the specific needs of the school.

Strategies for Outside Organizations

- **Selecting the right people:** The ability to form relationships and to collaborate effectively with others are critical skills that organizations should prioritize in their recruitment or hiring efforts. The 21st CCLC project director at ESD 123 highlighted her organization's deliberate approach of assigning individuals to specific schools based on their compatibility with existing teams. In addition, hiring staff that align with the school's culture matters significantly. CIS, for instance, involves school administration and staff in the hiring process for coordinator to ensure goodness of fit and help secure buy-in from school staff and administration at the beginning of the partnership.

- **Continual and deliberate needs sensing:** Like the practices observed at NCS, the staff at Highlands emphasized the significance of proactively soliciting input from each other and school personnel on existing needs and having conversations on how to align services and supports to address those needs. For instance, CIS requires its site coordinators to conduct annual needs assessments at each school site, which involves having conversations with a spectrum of school and organizational staff. At the end of the year, the coordinator will present to the administrators and other support staff how their programming deliberately aligns with the documented needs of the school. Likewise, ESD 123's 21st CCLC project director shared the importance of regularly meeting with the directors of CIS and site coordinators to assess the ongoing successes and challenges of their partnership.

CONCLUSION

The case studies of NCS and ESD 123 illustrate the pivotal role of relational trust in fostering effective collaboration among external organizations and schools. NCS, deeply embedded within TMS, exemplifies how strategic processes, continuous presence, and resource alignment contribute to an enduring and powerful partnership. ESD 123 and its partnerships with CIS and Gear Up demonstrates how organizations can position each other as collaborators rather than competitors and embed themselves within the school to provide an integrated service delivery system. The highlighted strategies for building trust, both within the school and among external partners, offer valuable insights for education leaders and external providers seeking to enhance collaboration and coordination of services and supports.

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