



Identifying Key Drivers of Effective Community Schools: Lessons Learned From the Evaluation of the Chicago Community Schools Initiative

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The Community School Strategy

Community schools are a strategy to support students, their families, and the broader school community through cross-sector partnerships with community agencies and providers that support whole-child development and positive family and community outcomes. Ideally, community schools act as service hubs in their neighborhoods and communities, uniting families, educators, and community partners to accelerate equitable student outcomes in health, education, and employment. A widely shared vision for how the school and its partners can support youth, family, and community well-being and coordination and alignment of services, activities, and supports are key to community school's success. Community schools are places where everyone's voice matters and where shared and authentic decision-making is the norm. There is a growing evidence base suggesting that community schools, when implemented well, can positively influence a variety of student outcomes and enhance the effectiveness of schools, particularly those schools serving a high proportion of students and families living in poverty (Maier et al., 2017). This brief describes what we have learned from working with Chicago Public Schools to study the implementation of the community schools model.

The Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Community Schools Initiative (CSI) seeks to promote student growth and development by removing barriers to learning and providing access to new, integrated learning opportunities oriented at supporting whole-child development. With financial support provided by a variety of funding sources, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grants, resource coordinators at CSI schools are responsible for guiding efforts to implement community school activities and services to serve students and families. Typically, schools select a lead community partner agency who employs the resource coordinator and provides services and activities. The resource coordinator also develops partnerships with other community providers that enhance the domain of activities and services being provided in each CSI school.

Learning From the Implementation of the Community School Initiative

One of the goals of the evaluation support AIR provides to CPS is to document and share practices and approaches which appear to support implementation of community schools. As part of this process, we conducted interviews with school administration, CSI resource coordinators, school advisory board members, and lead partner agency managers. We also conducted focus groups with program staff, daytime teachers, and parents.

In this brief, we outline a series of processes that we found to support implementation of the community school model. The identification of these processes is based on evaluation activities conducted with two sets of Chicago community schools: (a) one set of potentially higher implementing schools evaluated over a 3 year period (2017–2020) and (b) a set of schools that began implementation of the initiative in 2018 and was evaluated over the past two school years (2018–19 and 2019–20).

We focus on three key components that appear to be critical to community school implementation based on what we learned in working with this set of community schools:

- a shared vision for community school implementation
- establishment of internal and external communication structures
- mechanisms for authentic shared decision making

In this brief, we describe how these critical components are interconnected and contribute to community school implementation.

Community School Vision

A key element of developing a community school is developing a shared vision for how the supports, activities, and services being provided will address student and family needs and promote whole child development. As a result, the shared vision guides community school implementation and is critical to understanding how community schooling takes shape in a school overall.

AIR AND THE CPS CSI

Since 2011, community school experts at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) have worked with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to support the Community Schools Initiative (CSI), administered by the district. In supporting community schools in CPS, we

- conduct rigorous, multimethod evaluations that examine both the implementation of community schools and the effects on student outcomes;
- develop and provide tools, training, and ongoing support to help community school leaders and staff create, improve, and maintain excellent programs; and
- provide guidance to school, community agency, and district stakeholders on critical organizational policies and processes that drive effective CSI implementation and ensure high-quality learning environments for students.

As part of our evaluation, we asked interview and focus group participants to describe what they understood to be the vision for their community school and to reflect on how well they believed that vision to be understood by others in the school community. We found that two elements related to vision adoption were key to understanding the implementation of the community school model at any one school: (a) the extent to which that vision is shared among a wide range of stakeholders associated with the school (e.g. students, day-time staff, parents, community members) and (b) the goals for community school impact on students, families and the surrounding community. We describe the contributions of each of these elements in the following sections.

Developing a Shared Vision

Having a shared vision means that a wide variety of stakeholders (e.g., students, families, principals, teachers, service providers) understand the intended benefits of community schools for students and families and the approach taken to implement services and activities in support of those benefits. A shared vision is critical because it ensures that key stakeholders are working toward a set of common goals and that they have a clear understanding of the role they play to support community school implementation. In CPS CSI schools, we found there to be a connection between three important elements around developing and using the shared vision to support community school implementation:

1. Developing a shared vision for implementation of the strategy
2. Establishing systems for communicating about activities and services related to the community school initiative
3. Implementing structures to support authentic shared decision making (Naftzger, Bradley et al., 2020; Naftzger et al., 2019; Naftzger, Diehl et al., 2020).

For example, we found that if school leadership strove to implement the strategy with a focus on increasing connection with the community, then communication efforts might concentrate on building bridges with the community, while shared decision-making structures might focus primarily on ensuring representation by community members on decision-making bodies. In contrast, at schools whose leadership focused on creating a community school that supports the whole child, they might focus both on communication with multiple audiences and on decision-making structures that target inclusion of parents and families, as well as service providers and daytime staff. In both examples, it is the vision that drives what is emphasized in terms of strategy adoption and the approaches employed in communication efforts and collective decision making.

Establishing mechanisms for frequent communication with stakeholders who support community school operations directly, as well as stakeholders that participate in community school activities and services creates a means for sharing goals and the vision guiding community school implementation. For example, communication efforts can be used to provide opportunities for both parent and family leaders and school staff to provide input into activity and service design and execution in alignment with the vision. A school could also leverage communication with parents and community members more broadly, such as through a newsletter, to reify the vision and provide updates on how programs and services are supporting the vision.

Ensuring authentic opportunities for shared decision making requires that stakeholders involved in these processes have the opportunity to shape and contribute to the vision, as well as develop a common understanding of the vision for the community school. This is a process that must be intentional and managed. Without a common shared vision across decisionmakers in the school, opportunities for decision making and leadership will be in tension with one another. For example, if a school’s advisory board believes the vision to be increasing community connection, they might prioritize activities and services that support that aim. If the school’s administrative team holds the belief that the vision should be based on improving student’s academic growth, they will likely prioritize services and activities that seek to meet that goal. While programming related to the two goals, community connection and academic growth, may breach some shared domains, there is a distinct possibility that the differences between these groups may inhibit overall implementation of the strategy. To ensure authentic opportunities for shared decision making, each decision-making body (such as the CS advisory board, parent groups, and school leadership teams) must have the opportunity to contribute to, understand, and agree what the goals are for the community school in order to ensure continuity and consistency in implementation of the community school approach.

We have seen that, over time, schools that appear to be implementing the community school strategy with a high level of efficacy have developed these systems and have by and large developed, refined, and shared their vision widely.

Vision Focus

Once adopted, a community school vision should be used to guide decisions about the types of programming offered, as well as define the importance of efforts to develop systems for communication and authentic shared decision making. As described by key stakeholders, the vision typically represented a summary of what they hoped to achieve by adopting the community school approach. From our interviews with school administration and CSI resource coordinators, we identified six themes around which a vision for implementation of the strategy centered: whole-child development; providing a warm, welcoming school environment; providing high-quality programming and services; targeted improvement of academic or related skills; fostering student connection; and increasing connection to the community. Frequently, leadership in CSI schools reported a vision for community school implementation that could be categorized within multiple vision themes. Table 1 expands on the definition of each of these themes.

Table 1. Descriptions of Vision Themes

Vision theme	Description
Development of the whole child	Programming that supports student growth across multiple domains, meets the needs of families with programming and supports, and integrates the school into the surrounding community.
Providing a welcoming environment	Focus of the initiative is on creating a safe, welcoming environment for students and families. This often is described as an effort to change the climate in a school or to provide a safe place for students to be outside of school hours.

Vision theme	Description
Offering high-quality programming and services	Partnerships with organizations are targeted toward offering a wide variety of programming to students and parents, with the goal of enhancing student exposure to a variety of enrichment and learning opportunities. Often described in conjunction with other vision themes.
Targeted improvement of student academic and/or other skills	A focus on providing programming that will support the improvement of academic or specific skills such as social and emotional competencies or skills related to the school's priorities, such as those in the arts at magnet schools.
Fostering students' connection to school	Often related to providing a warm, welcoming environment and most often evident in high school programs, programming is oriented toward improving school-day attendance and promoting greater connection to school.
Developing or increasing connection to the local community	A focus on creating a new image of the school within the local community or a focus on creating a "community hub" through program offerings of interest to a wide variety of stakeholders who live in the community but do not necessarily have children in the school.

It is important to note that the community school vision adopted by a school does not appear to be static, as we have seen a progression over time in how leaders describe their vision (Naftzger, Bradley et al., 2020; Naftzger et al., 2019; Naftzger, Diehl et al., 2020). We observed that after the first year of community school implementation, many schools refined their vision, in particular, reducing the number of vision themes they aimed to achieve. Generally, schools also moved closer to primarily supporting a whole-child vision of implementation. Although the focus of a given community school's vision is an important component in driving other key implementation elements (e.g. Services and programming, communication efforts, decision making structures), it is unlikely to matter if it is not shared among those stakeholders charged with designing and implementing programming and services for students and families or among the families and students benefiting from these opportunities. Having strong communication structures when it comes to developing, sharing, and evolving the vision is critical to ensuring a vision is widely understood and valued.

Communication Structures

Communication structures are essential for supporting community school implementation, ensuring that a commonly vision is shared widely across stakeholders, and ensuring that students and families make use of the initiative's programs, events, and offerings. To understand how schools were supporting communication about community school vision, activities, and services, several components of communication were important to define. The first component is the **intention** of communication – is it process oriented or designed to support program outreach. Process oriented communications are intended to communicate about the work of implementing the community school strategy, such as notices about meetings like advisory board convenings or the needs assessment process, agendas, events that provide additional opportunities to participate in decision making, and announcements of decisions made about activity and service implementation to name a few. Outreach communications are intended to communicate

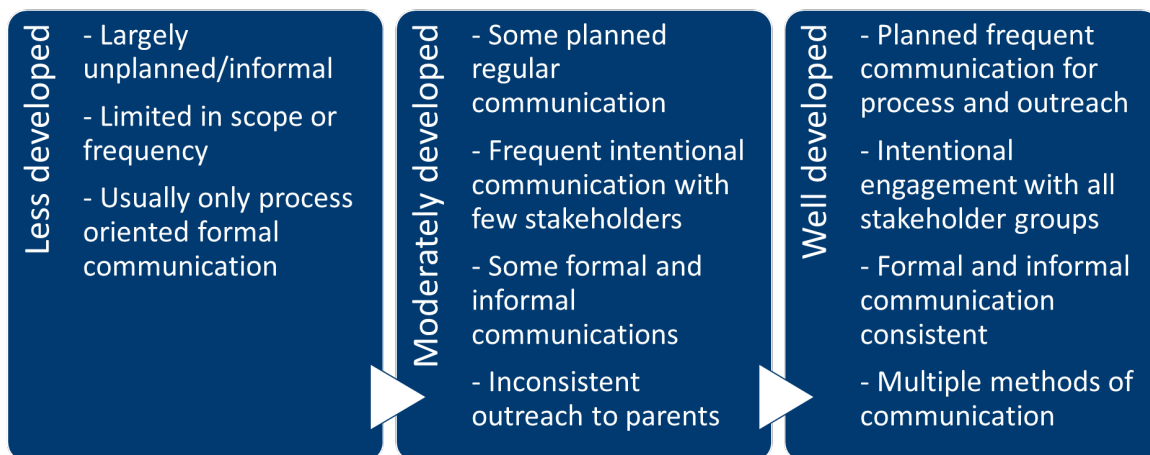
about the opportunities for students, families, and community members to participate in community school activities, services, and events, and boarder changes related to the community school such as the adoption of a community school vision. Both process-oriented and outreach communication efforts need to be intentional and clear to support community school implementation.

The second communication component is the **means** by which communication takes place: formal or informal. For example, formal communication might take place through a monthly newsletter or social media postings about upcoming activities. Informal communications might be unscheduled conversations with students or caregivers about what programing they would like to see in the future.

Frequency is the third communication component: frequently or infrequently/unscheduled. For example, a school resource coordinator might send out monthly newsletters about upcoming programing – frequent and scheduled – or they might make a point to quickly talk to caregivers as they come to drop off students in the morning about opportunities the caregivers or students might be interested in – infrequent/unscheduled.

These three components, taken together, define the overall strategy for communication within a given school. The communication strategy implemented at a school can have tangible implication for the success of creating a shared vision and ensuring shared leadership. Additionally, how stakeholder groups receive communications (formally, such as through newsletters and social media posts, or informally, such as by unscheduled “check in” conversations) and the frequency with which these communications occur often determines how successful a school is when conveying information about both activities related to the day-to-day implementation of the strategy and the recruiting of participants for CSI activities. We have found that most schools fall into one of three broad categories in terms of community school-related communication structures: less developed, moderately developed, and well developed (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Continuum of Communication Structures



Schools with well-developed communication structures appeared to have more success with streamlining implementation and consistently ensuring high participation in activities for students and caregivers. They have strategies that facilitated both formal and informal communication, encouraged frequent communication with all stakeholder groups, and had multiple methods for reaching out to students and caregivers. Some schools reported unique communication strategies, such as social media posts on several platforms and conducting outreach through community and faith-based organizations. The most frequent formal communications to families and caregivers about programming opportunities were through robocalls to parents, school newsletters, and emails.

We have seen evidence of the importance of having both formal and informal strategies for implementation-related communication as well. An “open-door” policy between staff working to implement community schooling on a day-to-day basis and school leadership allowed for efficient handling of the daily challenges of implementation. Formal communication mechanisms, such as meeting announcements, agendas, and notes summaries were needed to ensure opportunities for a variety of stakeholders to engage in authentic decision making opportunities to examine if implementation is aligned with the shared vision, review data, address concerns, and to plan for the future. For schools that struggled to implement a formal internal communication structure, there were often challenges – from coordinating initiative activities to developing trust between decision-making bodies or with staff charged with day-to-day implementation external to those groups (e.g., community school advisory committees).

It is important to note, however, that while a well-developed communication structure is optimal, schools do evolve over time. We found that as schools in the newly implementing cohort matured, they progressed from less developed communication structures to the moderately and well-developed categories. Almost all of the schools in Chicago’s high-implementing cohort exhibited moderately and well-developed communication structures.

Shared Decision Making

Shared decision making and collaborative leadership are one of the pillars of the community school model (Maier et al., 2017) but making sure that this pillar is a central part of implementation depends on a school’s ability to develop a shared vision and then communicate that vision to drive implementation. Each member of a CSI school community (student, families, school and program staff, community members) has a unique perspective and set of experiences that collectively provide a picture of how youth and their families can benefit from community school activities and services. Gathering these perspectives and providing opportunities for stakeholders to participate in *authentic* shared decision making helps ensure the development of responsive programming and fosters a culture of shared responsibility for implementation.

In the Chicago CSI, school advisory committees are the primary structure for creating shared decision making opportunities. These advisory committees are typically comprised of key stakeholders, including school and partner agency staff, students, parents and family members, and representatives from the surrounding community. Some schools were more successful in recruiting and engaging advisory committee members regularly, and we have found that this success was facilitated by an established system of internal communication. A robust internal communication system enabled advisory committee

members to share information, conduct regular meetings, and allowed for input on decisions being made about community school implementation. In addition, these communication approaches ensured that advisory committee members felt that their role in guiding the initiative was meaningful and relevant. Schools without these structures in place were often only moderately successful in recruiting a wide group of stakeholders, but engaging them in more meaningful, authentic decision making appeared to be unsuccessful.

When it comes to ensuring authentic shared decision making, our work to date has not provided any strong indication that one specific approach in terms of the composition of the board and frequency of engagement is more successful than others in ensuring authentic decision making, however having robust communication structures in place appears to improve involvement from stakeholders. One strategy being tried in CSI schools presently to improve shared decision-making is to enlist community school advisory committees in a formal quality improvement process, which involves both a self-assessment and action planning process supported by an aligned set of tools and supports.

It does appear, however, that having structures such as advisory committees in place is not enough to ensure that stakeholders have authentic power to impact the implementation of the initiative (authentic shared decision making). Rather, there must be a shared vision and a strong sense of the value that shared decision making has in meeting the goals of the initiative. Parents and families also need to be seen as educational leaders that need a seat at the table to contribute to and shape the vision for community school implementation. Otherwise many of these structures only serve to ensure that the formalities of conducting meetings and completing paperwork are addressed. For stakeholders to have authentic opportunities for collaborative decision making, they must engage with each other frequently, review progress and hear concerns, and, most importantly, act on decisions in some tangible way in terms of how the community school strategy is implemented.

Conclusion

CSI is a promising approach to improving the educational and health outcomes for many underserved and disenfranchised youth, their families, and the communities they live in. For CSI schools to be successful, there are three components that appear to be essential:

1. A **shared vision** for implementing a program that supports the whole child;
2. A **communication strategy** for robust communication to support implementation and make stakeholders aware of activities and services; and
3. Authentic **opportunities for shared decision making** with all community school stakeholders.

Although the Community School Initiative takes many forms across the country, our work to explore the critical components and promising practices through which the initiative is implemented across contexts is crucial to understanding how the model, in all of its forms, can best be supported.

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