Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative: Case Study of Collaborative Leadership

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Deepa Vasudevan, Rachel Blume, Neil Naftzger, and Dominque Bradley[1]

Introduction

Considered a core element, or pillar, of an effective community schools strategy, *collaborative leadership* encompasses intentional decision making and distributed responsibility for the implementation of community school programming and services.[2] This approach to decision making involves engaging a variety of stakeholders who contribute meaningfully to support the development and implementation of an overall vision aligned with the community school strategy. Collaborative leadership is complex in practice and requires intentional structuring of systems that foster relational trust among stakeholders and effectively leverage the collective expertise of all involved. In this case study, we highlight intentional strategies, promising practices, challenges, and lessons learned from two community schools in Chicago that demonstrate strengths in collaborative leadership.

Background

Since 2002, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has implemented the Community Schools Initiative (CSI) as a strategy to support students, families, and the broader school community through creating partnerships among district schools and community-based organizations and providers. A key component of CPS CSI is ensuring that the needs of the school community—particularly the academic, social, and emotional needs of students enrolled in specific CSI schools—are identified and met with high-quality programs and services. Through the initiative, each community school designates a lead partner agency (LPA) that is responsible for providing out-of-school-time programming in the school

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[1] The authors developed this memo in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative and the Diehl Consulting Group.

[2] The Community Schools Playbook identifies four pillars of a comprehensive community schools strategy: Integrated Student Supports, Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities, Active Family and Community Engagement, and Collaborative Leadership and Practices.

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and for hiring the full-time resource coordinator (RC) who is responsible for managing the day-to-day aspects of these programs and engaging parents and the community. For most of CPS's community schools history, there has been a significant reliance on the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grant program, administered by the Illinois State Board of Education, to fund implementation of CSI in CPS schools. There are other strategies that complement CSI in Chicago including Sustainable Community Schools (SCS), Full Service Community Schools (FSCS), and partnerships with community based organizations in CSIx schools. During the 2018–19 school year, CPS, in collaboration and partnership with the Chicago Teachers Union, began providing district funding to support implementation of the SCS initiative at 20 district schools, including Greenwood, one of the schools in this case study. SCS Initiative funding is different from 21st CCLC funding for community school implementation in that it focuses on whole-school transformation, including school-day instruction, in accordance with a series of eight principles and six pillars. To date, more than 200 schools and about 50 organizations have participated in CSI.

For the past 20 years, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®), in partnership with Diehl Consulting Group, has supported CPS CSI by conducting evaluations of schools funded by the 21st CCLC program and providing technical assistance to uphold effective implementation of the strategy.[3] Through this evaluation work, the AIR–Diehl team has identified key drivers that contribute to successful CSI implementation in the schools we have studied.

With the purpose of guiding continuous improvement efforts within CSI and making contributions to the broader field of community schools, CPS, AIR, and Diehl team members decided, in 2023, to develop an approach that would translate CPS CSI evaluation findings into a suite of practice guides for CSI schools and the broader field of community schools. The team identified a set of key practices for successful CSI implementation, which align with the key practices, or pillars, of the Community Schools Playbook and previous evaluation findings related to CPS CSI. These practices formed the foundation for developing a series of case studies and related practice guides of CSI schools engaged in promising approaches.

Key Practices of Effective Community Schools

| Collaborative Leadership | Strong Partners | Integrated Student Supports | Family Engagement |

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[3] For more information about AIR and Diehl's evaluations of CPS CSI, please see our website: https://www.air.org/project/chicago-public-schools-community-schools-initiative.

These practice guides are intended to support schools that are considering implementing or are currently implementing the community school strategy. Further, these efforts intend to provide deeper insight for CPS and the broader field about the conditions needed in schools to foster high-quality implementation and to further define what *fidelity to the CPS community schools model* means. Click here to access our Collaborative Leadership practice guide, or see our website.

Research Questions

In our efforts to identify promising practices related to collaborative leadership, we set out to answer the following set of research questions:

1. How do the selected case study schools value and approach collaborative leadership?
2. How do the RC and administrators engage in collaborative leadership?
3. What are the essential structures and strategies for collaborative leadership and decision making? More specifically, what is the role of the leadership team in driving authentic, collaborative decision making?[4]
4. What are the common challenges and barriers to collaborative leadership, and how have they been addressed?
5. How do the conditions that support collaborative leadership relate to and reinforce other CSI implementation practices?

Sample and Methods

Drawing on evaluation and practice-based insights, AIR, CPS CSI, and Diehl team members collectively identified a subset of CSI schools demonstrating strong implementation practices for each of the practice guide topics. The team identified two schools that demonstrated unique strengths in their approach to collaborative leadership: Greenwood Technology Academy (K–8) and Hilltop High School (9–12).[5] To further confirm appropriate school selection, the research team held informal conversations with three district-level CSI Program Coordinators who directly supported the identification of schools. These conversations offered our team a comprehensive understanding of the selected schools, including unique strengths and challenges in CSI implementation; changes in student population, experiences, and needs; leadership transitions; and school climate and culture.

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[4] All CSI schools are required to create and convene leadership teams that represent the school community and that can guide community school planning and implementation through collaborative decision making.

[5] Schools have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. To see the list of actual schools involved in our research, please see https://www.air.org/resource/spotlight/airs-community-schools-work

Sample Description

Greenwood Technology Academy, a Pre-K–8 school located in a westside Chicago neighborhood, enrolls approximately 400 students. Greenwood is one of eight technology academies in the city that have a focus on technology literacy. Located in one of Chicago's most populous neighborhoods, the neighborhood surrounding Greenwood can be characterized by historic economic disinvestment and high levels of crime and community violence. Like many schools across the country, Greenwood has experienced a significant influx of newcomers or refugee students and families, which has posed additional challenges for the school.

Hilltop High School, a 4-year magnet high school in southwest Chicago, enrolls nearly 3,000 students, making it one of the city's largest high schools. The school offers several key program pathways, including an arts program, a career and technical education program, and an International Baccalaureate program. Additionally, Hilltop has a significant population of Spanish-speaking/English learner students and families who require translation services and support.

Data Collection Methods

At each school, data collection began with interviews of coordinators and school administrators involved in CSI implementation. At Greenwood, we interviewed two Resource Coordinators (RCs) who collaborated on CSI activities: the CSI grant-funded RC (funded through 21st CCLC) and the Sustainable Community Schools (SCS) coordinator (funded by the CPS Sustainable Community Schools Initiative).[6]

Both the principal and assistant principal at Greenwood asked to participate in their interview together. At Hilltop, we conducted interviews with two assistant principals who either were formerly overseeing or currently oversee the initiative alongside the RC funded through 21st CCLC. Additionally, we interviewed the LPA manager at Hilltop, who had been identified by the coordinator as a key participant in the CSI decision-making process.

We then conducted observations of both schools' leadership teams and held a follow-up focus group with four members of the leadership team at Greenwood. Finally, we conducted a review of relevant documents (e.g., leadership team meeting agendas and notes, school websites, each school's CSI service plan) to provide additional context for interview findings.

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[6] The CPS Sustainable Community Schools Initiative is a community schools strategy funded by the district that similarly emphasizes creating partnerships among district schools, community-based organizations, and providers to enhance the flow of resources into schools. The strategy is unique in its mission to enhance school-day instruction and supports, including a focus on cultivating the use of a challenging and culturally relevant curriculum and the adoption of restorative justice practices to address disciplinary incidents and misconduct.

Key Findings

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

At both schools, collaborative leadership necessitated (1) inviting and building on the diverse expertise of multiple school and community members and (2) distributing responsibilities among collaborators. Administrators played a key role in setting the culture and tone for collaborative leadership at their schools, particularly related to empowering individuals to take on new responsibilities. Administrators understood the value of identifying talents and distributing tasks among school staff and community partners. RCs believed that role distinctions within leadership helped ensure achievement of shared purpose and avoid territorialism.

Administrators and RCs' beliefs in each other's competency and dedication to the initiative affected their comfort levels with sharing responsibilities. Additional structures that enabled school administrators to rely on their RCs to take authority on operational matters included (1) intentionally fostering a positive relationship that allowed for shared learning and growth and (2) flexible communication structures that recognized the availability and preferences of both parties.

Deliberate strategies and structures strengthened collaborative leadership. Leadership teams at both schools were strategically designed with intentional community representation and provided a meaningful space for on-the-ground problem solving and decision making. Also, both schools had an underlying commitment to create transparent and efficient communication channels; promote cross-team collaboration; and build a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and comfort among all parties.

Common challenges to collaborative leadership included (1) making time to collaborate with busy schedules (particularly for administrators); (2) meaningfully engaging voices that were harder to reach, such as voices of parents and students; (3) navigating territorialism, power dynamics, and competition among community partners for space and resources; and (4) RC and administrator turnover, which disrupted relationship building.

The mindsets and strategies of collaborative leadership, such as open-door communication, building trust, and respectful appreciation of other individuals' contributions, **reinforced other foundational elements of effective CSI implementation**, such as parent and community engagement and the establishment of strong, supportive partnerships.

Collaborative Leadership Beliefs and Approaches: "I want everybody's voice."

Collaborative leadership, **as defined by school leaders, involved intentionally incorporating diverse voices and fostering a culture of collective decision making and shared responsibilities.** This section delves into the perspectives and practices of administrators, RCs, and leadership team members, highlighting the importance they placed on inclusive decision making; the pivotal role administrators played in shaping a culture of shared leadership; and the benefits that emerged from their collaborative efforts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

At both Hilltop and Greenwood, collaborative leadership necessitated drawing and building on the diverse expertise of multiple school and community members and distributing responsibilities among collaborators.

- Administrators understood the value of identifying talents and distributing tasks among school staff and community partners.

- Administrators played a key role in setting the culture and tone for collaborative leadership at their schools, particularly related to empowering individuals to take on new responsibilities.

- RCs believed that role distinctions within leadership helped ensure achievement of shared purpose and avoid territorialism.

At Greenwood, collaborative leadership centered on celebrating, uplifting, and incorporating the unique talents of school staff and community members into decision making and program implementation. Greenwood's administrators and RCs shared how the initiative benefited from tapping into team members' diverse experiences, insights, and skills. Administrators emphasized the importance of their role in identifying their staff members' talents and creating a culture where school and community members felt comfortable speaking up and contributing to larger initiatives.

Although both coordinators recognized the value of inviting different voices to the table, they also both emphasized the importance of **role distinctions** within a collaborative leadership approach to ensure shared purpose and avoid territorialism. Ultimately, the intentional focus on leveraging the diverse skills within the school community while maintaining a distinction of roles contributed to a more cohesive and effective implementation of CSI, as illustrated in the following quote:

"Shared leadership is everybody knowing what they're called to do. Everybody has a role and responsibility, and together we're more unified when we are together . . . I want everybody's voice. I don't care if it's the janitor, the crossing guard, security. . . . everybody has their voice. And when we share knowledge, when we share resources, then we're better able to be effective in what we've really come to do."

– Greenwood RC

At Hilltop, RCs and administrators described the importance of collaborative leadership to gain perspectives and incorporate different voices into decision making, particularly in the context of a large and diverse school community. The Hilltop RC believed that gaining insights from teachers, administrators, parents, staff, and students was critical to comprehensively understanding and addressing schoolwide needs. In a school with nearly 3,000 students, the RC relied on input from the administrators, who each work with specific grade levels and program committees (e.g., parent advisory council and bilingual parent advisory council) and have a pulse on relevant student needs and dynamics. In the quote that follows, the RC explained:

"We [RCs] don't get to see everything, so we're constantly working with those teachers, those parents, and the administration. Without these collaborations, I would be a one-woman team and you can't do much."

– Hilltop RC

Hilltop's administrators played a pivotal role in integrating the RC and other community partners into various school initiatives and committees. For example, administrators invited the RC to serve as the co-committee head of the parent engagement committee and previously invited her to serve as a member of the freshmen on track committee. At a community level, Hilltop administrators similarly worked to actively connect and elevate the voices of family and community members. Notably, Hilltop empowered its parent advisory committee to determine how to allocate family engagement funding. The sharing of power serves as a foundation for the next section, in which we delve into the importance of building relational trust between coordinators and administrators.

"Great Thought Partners": Building Relational Trust Between Coordinators and Administrators

Establishing and nurturing a positive relationship between RCs and administrators is fundamental to the success of CSI implementation. At Hilltop and Greenwood, both RCs and administrators characterized their relationship as one of mutual trust, respect, and a commitment to shared learning and growth.

Administrators expressed how their beliefs in an RC's competency and consistent communication affected the extent to which they felt comfortable sharing responsibilities. By positioning the RC not just as an implementer but as a strategic contributor to the decision-making process, administrators enabled the RC to leverage their on-the-ground experiences into the creation of successful programming. Notably, administrators at both Hilltop and Greenwood often yielded to the authority of the RC on operational matters, a deference rooted in the perceived competence of the RC and their demonstrated efficiency in accomplishing tasks. For example, the administrator at Hilltop demonstrated trust in the RC by deferring to the RC on a pivotal decision on how to staff the tutoring programming. The RC explained in the quote that follows:

"I gave [the administrator] pros and cons, like, 'This is pros and cons of doing it this way. This is pros and cons of doing it this way.' And [the administrator] basically said, 'I trust your opinion. You've been here. You know what you think needs to be done.'"

– Hilltop RC

Administrators and RCs also demonstrated attentiveness to each other's communication styles, which contributed to a positive and trusting relationship. At both schools, administrators and RCs developed their own communication structures and cadences grounded by individual preferences, collaboration priorities, and contextual realities. One of Greenwood's administrators noted the importance of building the initial relationship with the RC and how meeting frequently early on can help both parties familiarize each other with the supports, resources, and programming offered by the initiative and the school community. Likewise, Greenwood's RC acknowledged that finding time for relationship building was oftentimes challenging for a coordinator and an administrator dealing with competing priorities. In the quote that follows, the RC advised other RCs to be proactive in introducing themselves and being friendly with their administrators:

"Be present. I'm going to use myself, for example, from this year. Where I sit now, I barely see [administrators] because I'm always in my office. If I stayed in my office all the time, I would never be able to get to know them. I have to come down and get to know people. And that would be something that [RCs] have to do. They have to make time to get to know the principals . . . sometimes the principal will be resistant, but at least you made the effort. Like I say, it's a lot going on [at a school] . . . Just make time to have a friendly conversation."

– Greenwood RC

Overall, positive relationships between RCs and administrators were essential to the success of CSI implementation. At both Hilltop and Greenwood, relationships between administrators and RCs were characterized by mutual trust, respect, and frequent, open-door communication. The next section explores how strategies, structures, and processes outside of the RC–administrator dynamic can similarly foster collaborative leadership.

Building Blocks: Collaborative Leadership Conditions, Structures, and Strategies

Although relationships and structures differed at Hilltop and Greenwood, leaders at both schools identified some of the enabling conditions for the creation of a culture of collaborative leadership, as well as structures and strategies that can foster transparency, trust, and respect among collaborators.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Collaborative leadership worked best with the following enabling conditions:

- Deliberate, intentional communication structures between administrators, RCs, and leadership team members

- Cross-team collaboration with the goals of reducing silos and redundancy

- A leadership team strategically designed with intentional community representation that provided a space for on-the-ground problem solving and decision making

- Building an intentional foundation of mutual respect, trust, and comfort between administrators, RCs, and other collaborators

The following specific strategies supported the enabling conditions listed above:

- **Schedule a minimum of weekly check-ins** between RCs and administrators.

- **Share documents and data** with the RC to support their understanding of the school and promote transparency.

- **Include RCs in school operations beyond CSI** (e.g., sitting on school decision-making committees) to ensure they have opportunities to hear a diversity of voices and incorporate that input into the initiative.

- **Structure leadership team agendas** around the pillars of the initiative, include program data, and provide spaces for leadership team members to present and/or connect with each other.

School leaders emphasized the importance of deliberate communication structures (e.g., regular meetings, note-taking, and shared online systems) in responding to the competing demands at their school. Establishing regular communication channels between collaborators fostered consistency during leadership transitions, enhanced accessibility, and built trust among partners. Specific strategies used by RCs and administrators at schools included the following:

- **Schedule regular check-ins, a minimum of once per week,** between RCs and administrators to discuss their shared goals and vision for programming and provide opportunities to discuss ongoing implementation challenges or solutions.

- **Create and share meeting agendas, "note catchers," and a running log of action items** to assist with leadership transitions and onboard new leadership team members.

- **Provide shared access to key documents (e.g., student participation trackers, budgets)** with the RC and partner organizations to support their understanding of the school and promote transparency. For example, in the following quote, a leader of Hilltop's LPA explained how using an Excel spreadsheet for the CSI budget promoted transparency and trust between the school and the LPA:

"When we get the CSI budgets, I create my own budget, an Excel sheet that is then shared with the principal, where he can edit, I can edit, the assistant principal can edit, and we talk about it together. There is no, 'Oh, I'll do this on my end,' or that just covers everyone. It's very, very transparent from both sides."

— Hilltop's LPA Manager

Administrators and RCs emphasized the importance of reducing silos by promoting transparent communication and seeking opportunities for cross-team collaboration.
Both Hilltop and Greenwood employed distinct strategies. At Hilltop, each assistant principal was appointed to specific school committees (e.g., parent advisory council) and student grade levels, and Greenwood had two administrators who could alternate attending the various committees led by instructional staff. Based on the designated involvement of administrators in relevant committee work, efforts to reduce silos in the work included the following:

- **Produce detailed notes from each meeting** so that administrators can stay up-to-date without attending each meeting.

- **Administer and discuss results of surveys** that capture ideas and perspectives of parents, students, and teachers.

- **Ensure representation in groups and committees**, including in the CSI leadership team. For example, Greenwood staffed its leadership team with representatives from its different decision-making committees.

- **Foster connections between the work of the CSI leadership team and other decision-making groups**, such as the parent advisory committee or bilingual parent advisory committee.

Leadership teams played a critical role in collaborative leadership. At both schools, leadership teams comprised diverse school and community representatives who reviewed data and engaged in real-time problem solving and decision making. Strategies for structuring and implementing an effective leadership team included the following:

- **Purposefully select leadership team members.** One of Greenwood's RC's explained how they designed the leadership team membership based around the SCS community school pillars, the needs assessment, and the general goal of "get[ting] as many voices as possible to the table" so that they can get better accomplish the goals of the initiative.

- **Organize the meetings around data and program updates.** At Hilltop, the RC began the meetings by highlighting key data points (e.g., percentage of students who came into programming, percentage of students attending, parent engagement numbers), any challenges, fundraising needs, and monthly community workshops happening. The meetings ended with updates (e.g., CPS updates from the administrator, LPA updates from the RC's supervisor, student voice committee updates, parent coordinator updates) and questions.

- **Designate a formal role for the leadership team in the decision-making process.** At Greenwood, the administrators explained how the RC administered surveys to students, teachers, and parents; compiled the data; and presented results to the leadership team. After reviewing the data, everyone on the team weighed in on specific operational matters, and then the RC and administrator met independently to make a final decision. The RC then communicated the decision back to the leadership team, and team members provided any final input.

- **Provide space to address identified needs and challenges and collaboratively devise solutions.** At Greenwood's leadership team meetings, team members discussed how to best support the growing refugee populations in their schools and provide appropriate services and programming for the new students and families. Similarly, in the following quote, an administrator at Hilltop explained how their leadership team meetings provided opportunities for different stakeholders to receive pertinent information and make decisions related to funding and other logistics.

> *"We need to determine how things are going to be funded and what supports do we have . . . There isn't always a one-size-fits-all model for that, but continuous discussion to see where we're at in that specific time point so that we could reach a mutually agreed-upon conclusion based on the most updated information is probably how we go about that."*
>
> *– Hilltop Administrator*

Administrators, RCs, and leadership team members shared that collaborative work was possible at their schools only because of a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and comfort between collaborators. Such a foundation was evident during a meeting with Greenwood's leadership team—the team members (including the LPA manager, coordinators, administrators, parent leaders, and teachers) began with an opening activity focused on each member sharing their insights into family and community strengths. Later in the meeting, each team member took ownership of their work by sharing their program updates, and they all took several moments during the meeting to celebrate one another through applause and kudos. In the following quote, a member of the leadership team emphasized the importance of making team members feel valued and respected.

> *"[Collaborative leadership] means that I'm valued. My voice is important. My voice matters. My voice carries weight to some of the decision making. Someone's actually listening to what I have to say."*
>
> *– Greenwood Leadership Team Member*

Common Challenges, Barriers, and Lessons Learned

In this section, we explore the common challenges faced by schools, such as the perpetual struggle to find time for meetings due to busy schedules, territorial conflicts among groups competing for resources, and disagreements between key stakeholders on initiative implementation. The solutions these schools engaged in to address these challenges emphasized the importance of deliberate communication, upfront goal setting, and maintaining a focus on shared objectives.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Hilltop and Greenwood faced challenges to collaborative leadership, which included the following:

- "Finding time" to collaborate when juggling busy schedules (particularly for administrators)

- Meaningfully engaging parents and students who face structural and cultural barriers to participation

- Navigating territorialism, power dynamics, and competition among community partners for space and resources

- General inequities in compensation and promotion opportunities, along with an overreliance on passion of collaborators, leading to turnover in administrator and RC positions and disrupting relational trust

Both coordinators and administrators recognized that limitations on time created challenges for consistent communication. The two administrators at Greenwood described how having both of them supporting the initiative and sharing tasks made their involvement more manageable. Greenwood also approached the challenge of identifying time for leadership team meetings by creating a survey at the beginning of the year that asked all leadership team members about their availability.

Meaningfully engaging students and families, particularly for those who face barriers (e.g., logistical, cultural, structural) to participate in leadership, remained an ongoing obstacle for both Hilltop and Greenwood. Various stakeholders at Greenwood shared that, although leadership team members understood the vision and goals of the initiative, the difficulty remained in communicating the vision to parents, who may not have been as involved in the school and/or harbored trust issues rooted in past negative experiences. As part of parent engagement efforts, one of Greenwood's RC's described intentionally championing the benefits of the initiative through presentations at parent leadership groups.

Likewise, an administrator at Hilltop identified the challenge of engaging parents who have very busy lives and/or have negative associations with the school. This administrator noted that, in their work to build connections with parents and community members, the parent engagement groups primarily represented Latinx parents. The administrator and their team had been thinking about how to better engage the voices and experiences of those families and parents who are frequently not represented. At Hilltop, in particular, the administration discussed efforts to ensure that Black families were engaged in their leadership structures and in the overall culture.

The Hilltop administrator, along with administrators at Greenwood, also emphasized the importance of creating positive associations with underrepresented parents, including parents whose students experience disciplinary incidents, by finding opportunities to communicate about their children's achievements or by generally making them feel welcomed at the school.

"How are you intentionally going to seek out that information from people who aren't sitting at the table? [For example], when parents come in for discipline meetings, are you asking them questions about what they would want? Because those are usually the people who are on the outside, the parents who are always coming in for discipline issues . . . I don't see you at these meetings, but you feel we need something. Your voice is just as important as the parents who are here every day."

– Hilltop Administrator

Addressing territorialism, power dynamics, and disagreements necessitated proactive communication and the establishment of clear goals and expectations. Administrators at both Hilltop and Greenwood emphasized the importance of intentional communication when forming partnerships. Hilltop's administrator highlighted the value of initial individual meetings with all involved parties to understand their perspectives, followed by regular group meetings to foster cohesion. Greenwood's administrators emphasized the importance of maintaining open communication and frequent initial meetings to set expectations and reinforce partnership goals in cases of tension between RCs and administrators.

The challenge of staff turnover, which can be common in a field dominated by low compensation and an overreliance on passion or enthusiasm for the work, halted progress in relationship building and disrupted relational trust. Hilltop has approached this challenge by developing transparent and ongoing communication tools (see Building Blocks section) and an understanding that the RC specifically can play a significant role in representing the initiative, particularly when a change in school administration occurs. As the LPA manager explained, the RC, through deliberate relationship building, was influential in fostering positive perceptions of both the initiative and the nonprofit organization they represented. Likewise, both administrators at Greenwood agreed that new administrators should deliberately familiarize themselves with the initiative and be generally present at events and leadership team meetings.

Collaborative Leadership Can Reinforce Other Community School Pillars

The key practices of effective community schools, including collaborative leadership, do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, our findings shed light on how these key practices interrelate and can reinforce each other through similar mindsets, strategies, and structures.

Greenwood and Hilltop collaborators shared the importance of championing student and family engagement in their collaborative approach toward equity and inclusion. An administrator from Hilltop referenced how their approach to collaborative leadership deliberately involved collecting input from parents and helping them feel more connected to the school. The administrator explained how parent engagement and collaborative leadership efforts were mutually reinforcing.

"And just having them [parents] feel like they have a say in it [decision making], makes them more connected to the school . . . I think collaborative leadership just means . . . Are we having two-way conversations? Is it us just telling you what we're going to do? Or is it us getting feedback on a plan? Is it them telling us what they want and us giving them feedback on whether that's possible or not, or what needs to happen? So, I think it's just the feedback loop is what collaborative leadership means in community parent engagement."

– Hilltop Administrator

Likewise, we observed in Greenwood's leadership team (which included a couple of parents) that leadership team members provided updates on their ongoing parent engagement initiatives, including a summer institute aimed at building parents' capacities and interests in leadership.

Collaborative leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering and sustaining strong, supportive partnerships. According to Hilltop's LPA manager, initiating strong partnerships began with intentional efforts to bring everyone to the table, assign roles, and engage in purposeful conversations about goals and expectations. The emphasis on collaborative decision making extended to budgeting at Hilltop, where both school administrators and LPA staff had equal access and ability to contribute. Administrators, coordinators, and leadership team members at both schools further described implementation of the initiative as a deliberate partnership and shared responsibility between the school and LPA, as exemplified by the inclusion of the LPA logos in both schools' leadership team agendas. Likewise, collaborative leadership and strong partnerships relied on relational trust built through mutual respect and demonstrated competency. The deliberate inclusion of LPAs in decision-making processes and the appreciation of the partnership's voice and contributions underscored the symbiotic relationship between collaborative leadership and the establishment of robust and supporting partnerships.

Conclusion

Overall, our findings illustrate how collaborative leadership was integral to both schools' approaches to CSI implementation. Collaborative leadership does not prevent all conflict or tension; however, it is a method that can remedy and facilitate solutions as dilemmas arise. Both schools confirmed that collaborative leadership required an ongoing commitment, open lines of communication, and bodies such as the leadership team to distribute power and responsibility. Collaborative leadership relies on all stakeholders distributing authority over decision making, building on the diverse strengths and talents of community members, and developing a culture in which RCs and community school leaders (e.g., school administrators, community partners, parent advisors) can flourish with a sense of purpose and ownership over their collective efforts.