COMMUNITY SCHOOLS PRACTICE GUIDE SERIES

PRACTICE GUIDE 1: COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

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Practice Guide 4: Family Engagement

In This Guide:
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- ★ Importance of the Practice
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This series highlights key components of the community school strategy, explains the conditions and levers that enable effective practices, and offers strategies and action steps to enhance the work. These guides are designed for school administrators, resource coordinators, and community school leadership team members. Practice guides are informed by research-based strategies, and they draw on the experiences and expertise of community school practitioners.

What is collaborative leadership?

Collaborative leadership is a pillar of community schools and is the intentional and meaningful engagement of different groups (e.g., youth, families, community members, program partners, school administrators, resource coordinators, and school staff) in decision-making processes, delivery, and support of community school programming and services.

A collaborative leadership structure:

- **Integrates diverse perspectives** of school and community members to carry out and sustain community school programming and services.
- **Distributes authority, control, responsibility, and accountability for success** among those who have a vested interest in the community school's success.
- **Elevates the strengths and expertise** of school and community members to ensure that programs and services address a diversity of student and family needs.
- **Uses both formal (e.g., leadership teams) and informal strategies (e.g., community gatherings)** to engage school and community members.
- **Requires a school culture, cultivated by school administrators, that fosters inclusivity, respect, transparency, and trust.**

> *"Shared leadership is everybody knowing what they're called to do. Everybody has a role and responsibility, and … we're more unified when we are together."*
>
> – Resource Coordinator

Why is collaborative leadership important in a community school strategy?

Collaborative leadership:

- **Strengthens connection and commitment** to the community school strategy.
- **Supports the creation of a common vision** in which everyone's interests, hopes, and concerns are heard and considered when making decisions.
- **Strategically guides the development and sustainability** of community school programs and services.

> *"[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."*
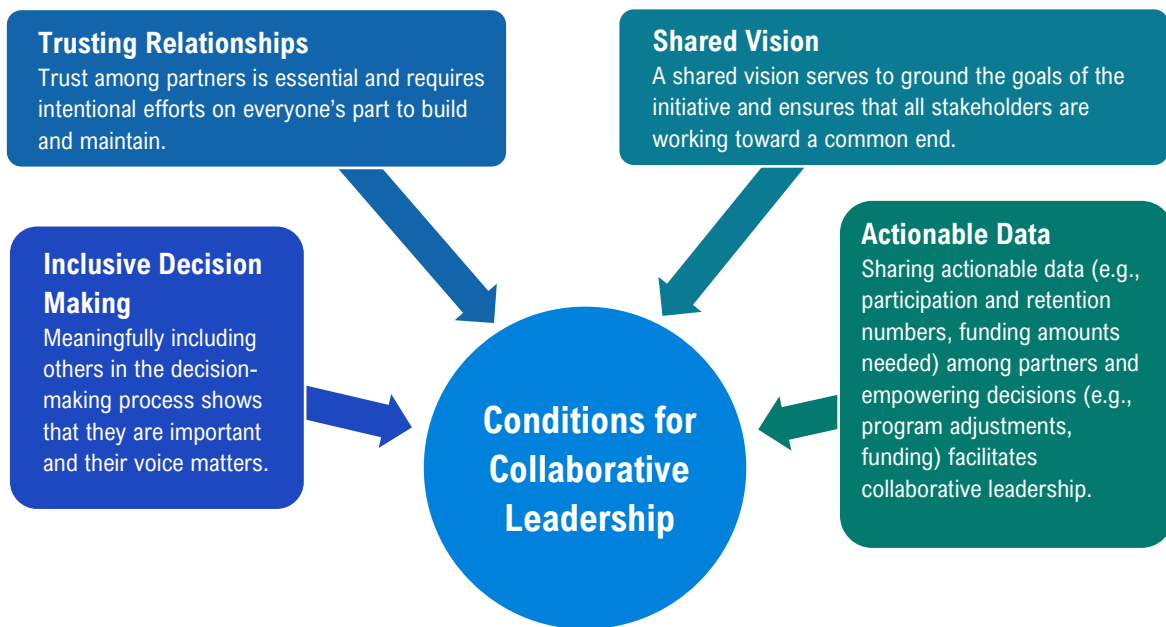>
> – Leadership Team Member

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Chicago Public Schools

Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative

What **conditions** enable successful collaborative leadership?

Intentionally creating the conditions for effective shared leadership can foster the successful implementation and realization of all the pillars within the community school's model.

Trusting Relationships
Trust among partners is essential and requires intentional efforts on everyone's part to build and maintain.

Shared Vision
A shared vision serves to ground the goals of the initiative and ensures that all stakeholders are working toward a common end.

Inclusive Decision Making
Meaningfully including others in the decision-making process shows that they are important and their voice matters.

Actionable Data
Sharing actionable data (e.g., participation and retention numbers, funding amounts needed) among partners and empowering decisions (e.g., program adjustments, funding) facilitates collaborative leadership.

Conditions for Collaborative Leadership

What are the **key levers** to create the conditions for successful collaborative leadership?

School administrators play an essential role in setting the culture and tone for collaborative leadership by involving and empowering others in decision making. Community school leaders (administrators, resource coordinators, partners) must adopt a collaborative leadership mindset through which they engage in shared decision making, distribute responsibility, share school- and student-level data, and fully commit to community school implementation. The following strategies can help establish and sustain collaborative leadership:

1. Cross-team communication (e.g., between the community school leadership team and school committees) to reduce siloes and redundancies.

2. A school leadership team with intentional community representation for problem solving and decision making.

3. A strong, respectful partnership between school administrators and resource coordinator(s) supported by deliberate and intentional communication structures.

What does collaborative leadership look like **in action**?

1. Cross-team communication

Strategies

Unite and clearly define the connectivity between various school initiatives and committees focused on specific student populations or school priorities (e.g., family engagement, bilingual education, community school implementation).

Routinely share key program data and documentation (e.g., student participation trackers, budgets) with leadership teams during meetings to help partners build their understanding of school activities and to promote transparency.

Create processes for documenting and sharing information across committees so that everyone is aware of each other's work, can avoid duplication of efforts, and can identify opportunities for collaboration.

Create transparent systems of communication toward a shared understanding of decision-making processes that occur in both the past and the present.

Promote an understanding of the community school's initiative and pillars as part of a whole-school strategy rather than as an isolated program.

Action Steps

- **Hold cross-team meetings and events** with leadership team members and other decision-making groups **to foster connections**.
- **Develop and share documents** that describe the purpose and goals of each committee.

Incorporate into leadership team and committee meetings the space to review program-, school-, or student-level data and have data inform decisions around programming, action planning, or sustainability (e.g., fundraising needs).

Produce detailed notes for all team and committee meetings and share them via email and add to a shared online drive.

Share meeting agendas, notes, and a running log of action items in an accessible format (e.g., a shared drive) to assist with leadership transitions and onboard new leadership team members.

Engage with the community school leadership team and other decision makers about how their work connects to or enhances the community school pillars.

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2. Community school leadership team with intentional community representation

Strategies	Action Steps
Purposefully recruit diverse school and community representatives (school staff, students, parents, community members/partners, school leadership) who can help inform community school implementation.	**When recruiting members, consider:** • Alignment with the community school pillars. • Findings from needs assessment data. • Overall goal of bringing diverse perspectives to the work, particularly from underrepresented communities.
Clearly define the common goals and purpose of the community school leadership team.	**Hold individual meetings** with key stakeholders to **understand their vision** and goals for the initiative. Then hold **group meetings to come to consensus** and a common purpose and goals as a group.
Structure leadership team meeting agendas so members can engage in real-time problem solving and decision making, in addition to information sharing.	**Share responsibility in the creation of leadership team agendas and in leading portions of the agenda** to give partners the opportunity to contribute to and facilitate conversations around decision making.
Make sure team members feel valued and respected by providing space for them to meaningfully contribute to meetings and connect with one another.	Provide **intentional opportunities** during meetings **to celebrate** each other's accomplishments.

"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."

– Resource Coordinator

3. Strong relationships between resource coordinators and administrators

Strategies	Action Steps

Identify a mutually agreed-upon communication structure that builds a positive and trusting relationship and prioritizes routine opportunities to discuss programming goals, updates, implementation challenges, and solutions.

Schedule regular check-ins.

Discuss communication styles that consider individual preferences (e.g., texting vs. emails, appointments vs. open door), time demands, and the day-to-day realities of operating a school.

Build professional capacity for implementing and sustaining the initiative for both the administrators and the resource coordinators (RCs).

Seek **professional development opportunities** to enhance the knowledge of the core pillars of community schooling.

Entrust RCs with strategic and operational decision making regarding community schools planning and programming.

Encourage RCs to advise and take charge of hiring program staff, developing program budgets, and drafting portions of the school's continuous improvement work plan.

Integrate RCs into school operations and structures so they can gain insights into the needs and assets of the school and build relationships with school leadership, staff, students, and families.

Invite RCs to participate and engage in:
- School committees (e.g., student governance, behavioral health, attendance)
- Grade-level team meetings
- School events

Share key documentation and data (e.g., budgets, grant information, school improvement plans, program data) with the RCs to help them better understand school-day operations and promote cohesion.

Discuss school-level updates and current budgetary information during weekly meetings.

Forward and share access to information that can inform the work of RCs.

Ensure quick follow-up on assigned tasks, responsibilities, and commitments to demonstrate reliability to school and community partners.

Document decisions, action items, and progress and **share regularly** with school leadership.

Be transparent about challenges as they arise and **share successes frequently**.

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What are common challenges to collaborative leadership and possible solutions?

Common Challenges	Possible Solutions
Time limitations can lead to challenges in consistent communication.	✓ **Develop communication structures** that take into account individual preferences, collaboration priorities, and contextual realities. Poll team members at the beginning of the year to determine availability for meetings. ✓ **Divide tasks** among administrators, school staff, and community partners to create manageable expectations for involvement.
Parents and students face structural, cultural, and logistical barriers to participation and engagement.	✓ **Identify missing or underrepresented groups** in leadership teams, committees, and programming. Review your needs assessment and participation data to identify groups. Consider various forms of diversity at your school (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture, language, ability, age, gender). ✓ **Connect with families and students via informal conversations or short surveys** to better understand the nature of participation barriers and to brainstorm opportunities and solutions for engagement. Review this data to inform decision making. ✓ **Seek to understand community perceptions of your school** when building connections. Past negative experiences may have cultivated mistrust or wariness about engaging with administrators, faculty, and/or other staff.
There is potential for territorialism, power dynamics, and competition for resources among school and community partners.	✓ **Proactively communicate to establish clear goals and expectations** with partners. Hold ongoing meetings with partners to build mutual understanding, foster cohesion, and co-develop goals and expectations focused on student and family needs and the activities, supports, and services provided. ✓ **Define the roles and expectations** among school and community partners and document commitments. Role distinction among partners can help ensure achievement of a shared purpose and avoid territorialism.
There may be disruptions in relational trust among collaborators due to staff changes (i.e., administrator, RC turnover), low commitment to the community school strategy, and compensation inequities (i.e. between collaborative partners).	✓ **Integrate RCs into school leadership structures and routines** (e.g., committee work) to foster familiarity and trust among school and community collaborators and make visible their contributions as trusted advisors. ✓ **Deliberately familiarize new or incoming administrators to the key tenets of the community school strategy** to cultivate stronger commitments. ✓ **Encourage both administrators and RCs to attend key school events and leadership team meetings** to bolster positive perceptions of the value and benefits of community school efforts.

Call to Action …

✓ School administrators and resource coordinators should review this practice guide individually and together. Invite additional community school staff and partners to review it too.

✓ Schedule time in your administrator-resource coordinator and leadership team meetings to discuss key takeaways from the guide. Explore the following questions: (1) What aspects of collaborative leadership are we implementing well? (2) What aspects can we strengthen?

✓ Incorporate areas for improvement in your school's action plan. Focus on simple steps that build on your collaborative leadership strengths while addressing areas for development.

Framework: *The Community Schools Playbook:* https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/
Practice guides were developed in partnership with the American Institutes for Research and the Diehl Consulting Group.