Key Drivers for Successful Implementation of Community Schools Initiatives: Early Lessons Learned

Community schools support students, their families, and the broader school community in service of whole child development and positive family and community outcomes. As service hubs in their neighborhoods and communities, community schools unite families, educators, and community partners to accelerate equitable student outcomes in health, education, and employment. Community schools strive to be places where everyone's voice matters. As such, they include multiple structures and platforms for shared and authentic decision-making.

Over the past decade, AIR has supported the implementation and evaluation of various community schools initiatives across the country. From our work with the Community Schools Initiative administered by Chicago Public Schools, the Florida Community Partnership Schools model, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools' Community Schools initiative, we have identified key drivers[1] related to successful implementation of a community schools initiative.

Seven Key Drivers Related to Successful Implementation of Community Schools Initiatives

Developing a shared vision

Developing a shared vision that permeates and is adopted by all key stakeholders associated with the school and **investing in structures and processes** that help to reinforce and elevate the shared vision. Some of these practices are summarized in a field-focused brief that highlights the importance of communication and shared decision-making structures.

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[1] All of the key drivers require planning and may be bolstered by funding from **initial planning grants** that can be used to help develop the shared vision, relationships, and partnerships necessary to support effective implementation of a community schools initiative. The Florida Community Partnership Schools model is one example of a system that relies on planning grants to help support the implementation of a community schools initiative.

Ensuring the principal and school administration are fully committed

Ensuring the principal and school administration are fully committed to (a) a comprehensive community schools initiative characterized by each of the four primary pillars, as opposed to adopting a very narrow vision for what implementation of such an initiative should accomplish (e.g., raising test scores), and (b) the concept of collaborative school leadership.

Creating opportunities for meaningful and authentic family and community leadership and engagement

Creating opportunities for meaningful and authentic family and community leadership and engagement, particularly for nondominant families. The Family Leadership Design Collaborative is an example of intentional work happening in this space.

Providing training and professional development

Providing training and professional development to ensure the community schools director or resource coordinator understands the model and has the skills and/or knowledge to develop the relationships and partnerships needed to drive effective implementation of a community schools initiative. The Community Schools Playbook from LPI and trainings and supports from the Coalition for Community Schools and the National Center for Community Schools are designed to support this goal.

Selecting partners that are truly seeking to work collaboratively with all school stakeholders

Selecting partners that are truly seeking to work collaboratively with all school stakeholders to adopt the activities and service strategy that make the most sense for the school. Partner agencies play a critical role in how the community schools initiative is implemented, and the role and function of partnerships vary widely across models, even within initiatives like the Chicago Public Schools' Community Schools Initiative.

Engaging in ongoing assessment to ensure that staff have the knowledge and skills to do this work effectively

Engaging in ongoing assessment to ensure that staff, who are responsible for coordinating strategies that are part of a community schools initiative, have the knowledge and skills to do this work effectively. Through our work with Chicago Public Schools, we designed a self-assessment tool and process to help new community schools get familiar with the model, assess implementation, and create annual targeted action plans to improve implementation. In a similar but more involved process, the Center for Community Schools at the University of Central Florida developed a certification process in relation to the Florida Community Partnership Schools Initiative. Through this process, certified schools document that they have met a series of benchmarks associated with a set of standards adopted by the Community Partnership Schools Initiative. Completing the certification process presents an opportunity for schools to think deeply about components of the model and to substantively assess how well they are achieving each standard.

Fully integrating and coordinating student and family supports and opportunities for learning, development, and leadership in the school

Fully integrating and coordinating student and family supports and opportunities for learning, development, and leadership in the school. To support integration, schools should be able to blend and coordinate resources. For example, Chicago Public Schools has taken steps to integrate funding for multitiered systems of support, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC), and district-provided funds for restorative practices and culturally relevant curriculum development to create integrated service delivery systems that are driven by a community schools framework.

To learn more about AIR's work in community schools, contact Neil Naftzger at nnaftzger@air.org.

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1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3239
202.403.5000