knowledge

brief

Organizational Structures to Support Oakland Community Schools

This brief is part of a series that shares findings from a research collaboration between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) focused on understanding implementation of the community school model in the district.[1] This brief highlights findings related to essential structures and systems to support OUSD community schools, specifically examining the areas of *collaborative leadership, strategic partnerships, and coordination*. While community schools frameworks vary across the country, scholars and practitioners agree that certain key structures and practices are necessary to successfully achieving desired school and student outcomes.[2] Research also suggests that the ability of student services and supports—a key strategy of community schools—to effect student outcomes often depends on the quality of their integration as fundamental components of the life and academic mission of the school.[3] The organizational features discussed in this brief are designed to facilitate deeper integration of community school services and supports, ultimately supporting improved student outcomes. This brief aims to illuminate how these elements function in practice to support effective community school implementation in Oakland.

KEY FINDINGS

- The mature OUSD community school sites studied have implemented the key organizational structures of the OUSD community school design: collaborative leadership, strategic partnerships, and coordination. These elements were consistent across sites, with some adaptations to individual school contexts.
- Leadership, partnerships, and coordination were identified as essential structures in supporting schools to make progress toward desired school improvement and student outcomes. As the district increases the number of community schools, these structures continue to be important areas for investment and support.
- Principals helped create a school culture that views multiple stakeholders as integral to schools' functioning and success in promoting better student outcomes.
- The community school manager plays a critical role in integrating the partnership work of the school with its academic mission, serving as a high-level administrator managing, leading, and coordinating the community work to support school and student needs.

John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Leadership at community

schools often looks different from that of traditional schools. While the principal remains the guiding force, non-school site entities—such as partner agencies, community school coordinators, and sometimes families—may play an integral role in school vision, planning, coordination, and even management. Although cross-sector collaboration between school and community-based entities can entail challenges, the ultimate aim is a school culture in which adults work together to support students' learning needs.[4]

All five of our sample sites demonstrated a collaborative leadership model in which the principal, community school manager, key partners, and select teachers cooperated in leadership, planning, and coordination. School staff identified that having both teachers and partners at the table was an important feature of the leadership approach at their community school, as each offered valuable perspectives. Principals played a significant role in facilitating collaboration between instructional and support staff, at times, setting the tone around partners and partnerships, especially among school staff who may be reluctant to "share space" with non-traditional colleagues. Principals also played a key role in prioritizing parents and parent voice, and keeping the academic mission of the school at the center of the community school work.

"We're one team. I never think of any of that team as an outside agency coming in. They're the core of our school."

"Partners need to feel like they're wanted, included, and, I mean, I think that's a team job, but I think because [our principal] has that attitude, it makes the team know that they're allowed to have that attitude, too. So, *she's a tone-setter.*"
— Community Partner

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

By providing and aligning

resources, community-based partners are a critical ingredient of community schools, to supporting school goals.[5] In practice, school-community partnerships are often complex and at times challenging, involving distinct organizational cultures, accountability systems, communication styles, and perspectives.[6]

Our research showed that school staff view partner organizations to be at the core—rather than the periphery—of the school's academic mission and goals; in some cases, partner- and school-employed staff were practically indistinguishable. Partners provided key resources, from academic supports such as tutoring, mentoring, and afterschool programming to health and mental health services, to field trips and sports camps. In addition to fulfilling their primary role as service providers at the school, partners often played roles in the sites' family engagement work, Coordination of Service Team, or spent extra time communicating and coordinating with teachers.

The CSM's role as a connector is critically important to aligning partnerships and support services with the school's academic mission.

Partnerships required time for coordination and, occasionally, tough conversations to ensure partner resources were best leveraged to support student and school needs. Each site appeared to have one or more primary partners—organizations and personnel who played a more significant role at the school site. Though they represented different agencies, the core partners had all held

long-term, institutional relationships with their sites. However, strong partnerships often took years to develop and, in many cases, required strong leadership from school principals and others to set the tone that partners belonged at the school.

"So, all these folks get together once a week to review referrals that teachers have submitted; and then, we'll invite the teacher to come, be a part of that discussion, present the referral; and within 15 minutes, we go through a whole kind of protocol to get us through talking through challenges, root causes, and then action planning."
— Community School Manager

COORDINATION

Integrating the additional

support services of community schools into the fabric of the school requires extensive coordination. The Community School Manager (CSM) and Coordination of Services Team (COST) are important components of this coordination work.

Community School Manager. The CSM plays a critical role in community school planning, coordination, and management. CSMs were viewed as high level administrators; collaboration with a site's principal was a predominant aspect of the CSM's daily work. While the CSM role varied across sites, collaborating with school leadership, interfacing with partners, engaging families, and ensuring students' basic needs are met were the most frequently described realms of responsibility for CSMs. In addition to these responsibilities being closely related to each other, they are also closely linked to the academic core of the school. For example, the CSM's role in managing partnerships is often shaped by shared leadership decisions with the Principal, which reflect the school's academic goals and priorities. Further, the CSM's work often included engaging families' in their children's and the school's academic life. And finally, the CSM's role in identifying and coordinating student services was seen as critical to removing students' barriers to learning. By integrating the partnerships, family engagement work, and student services with the instructional capacity at community schools, the CSM may be particularly important to ensuring that community school implementation effectively supports teaching, learning, and ultimately, positive student outcomes.

> "We go through a kind of **protocol to get us talking** through challenges, root causes, and action planning."

Coordination of Services Team. In addition to the CSM role, the COST is a primary mechanism for coordinating services and supports, and addressing individual students' barriers to learning. While the COST existed prior to the implementation of the district's official community

"[We] meet to discuss the data and also the priorities of the school. And then, the community schools manager goes out and finds partners, community-based organizations that can help fill those needs."
— Principal

Having teachers and partners at the table is an important feature of the community school leadership approach, as each offers valuable perspectives.

schools initiative, staff in many schools noted that its role has grown and developed considerably in the last several years.

COST meetings are a central structure in bringing together many of the players within the community school framework. Although there is some variation in the composition of the COST across schools, teams typically include the community school manager, health and mental health partners, school administrators, and teachers. COST meetings focus largely on health and behavioral health, although some address academic and other student issues as well. While teachers in general are not present at all COST meetings, most student referrals begin with teachers. This system of teacher referrals appeared to be fairly consistent across all sites, with variation in the amount of feedback or follow-up that teachers received after making a referral. Some staff expressed interest in more systemic data-driven approaches to identifying students who may need additional supports, for instance making referrals based on students' academic data, in addition to teacher referrals based on classroom experiences and interactions.

COST meetings are a central structure in bringing together many of the players within the community school framework.

IMPLICATIONS

As OUSD continues its scale-up efforts to expand the community school model to more sites, the role of school leadership, community partners, Community School Managers, and Coordination of Service Teams are essential. Our research indicates that, consistent with OUSD's community school design, these represent key foundational elements for community schools as they implement an expansive vision of what a school is and how it can and should serve its students. School principals and community school managers in particular are critical to developing strong relationships with partner organizations and with families, and adopting a collaborative leadership approach that encompasses and acknowledges the role of multiple stakeholders. As a result, community schools can foster a school culture in which school staff and community partners work together to support students' needs and academic success. These findings indicate that these structures and strategies built into Oakland's community school model are key to successful implementation, and warrant continued support in both emerging and developed community schools.

john w. gardner center for youth and their communities

Stanford Graduate School of Education
365 Lasuen Street, Third Floor
Stanford, CA 94305-2068
Phone: (650) 723-3099
gardnercenter.stanford.edu

1 For a complete description of this research collaboration, including methodology and OUSD community school design, see series overview.
2 Sanders, M. (2015): Leadership, partnerships, and organizational development: exploring components of effectiveness in three full-service community schools, School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice; Dryfoos, J. (2005), Full-service community schools: A strategy—not a program. New Directions for Youth Development, 2005: 7–14.
3 Moore, K. A. and Emig, C. (2014). Integrated Student Supports: A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers. Child Trends White Paper. http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-05ISSWhitePaper1.pdf
4 http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/combuild_IEL.pdf
5 Coalition for Community Schools (2015)
6 http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/combuild_IEL.pdf

The research presented here is based on interviews with principals, teachers, community school managers, community partner organizations, and other key staff in five OUSD schools (elementary, middle, and high), many of which had been implementing the community school model since the district's community school initiative began in 2010. The Gardner Center would like to acknowledge our OUSD partners as well as the Kaiser Foundation Hospital Fund for Community Benefit Programs at East Bay Community Foundation for their support.

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
Community Schools, Thriving Students

Photography: Hasain Rasheed Photography