



STRONG COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS FOR STRONG COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



Julia Daniel
University of Colorado Boulder
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National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
(802) 383-0058
nepc.colorado.edu

KEVIN WELNER
PROJECT DIRECTOR

WILLIAM MATHIS
MANAGING DIRECTOR

ALEX MOLNAR
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR

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At Quitman Community School in Newark, NJ, parents, teachers, school staff and partners all work together to ensure that students succeed. Recognizing the importance of consistency and trusting relationships, teachers and community school staff have spent years working to make the school a welcoming place for families and community members. Families are encouraged to take advantage of resources for them and their children, like the full-service health clinic. The school also offers opportunities for parents to build their capacity in order to participate as leaders at the school, helping to shape everyday activities as well as the school culture. This creates a positive school environment and demonstrates how collaborative leadership can be built among multiple stakeholders for school and community success.¹ But what does research tell us about the role of strong community relationships in building community schools?

Executive Summary

Community schools have gained attention as mechanisms to bring about equitable access to high-quality educational resources, extended learning time and opportunities, integrated student supports, and collaborative engaging relationships with parents and communities. In order to effectively create conditions that provide equitable access to such resources, community school leaders need to employ specific strategies and collaborative practices for the implementation of such strategies can support their efficacy. This brief examines research on educational leadership and the importance—for school climate, student learning and relations—of strong collaborative relationships between community partners, teachers and school leaders.

In particular, collaborative relationships among teachers, parents and other school stakeholders can lead to several positive outcomes. They help improve the organization of the school, improve student learning, and increase the commitment from and trust between the different people working at a school and the surrounding community. In a community school, collaboration between stakeholders can support the successful implementation of integrated student supports, expanded learning time, and meaningful family and community engagement. Creating successful collaborative leadership in schools requires the following long-established but crucial strategies:

- *Create Time* for collaboration so that stakeholders can assess issues, set common goals, make plans, reflect and build on practice, and deepen relationships.
- *Prioritize Process* so that people can engage honestly and constructively in problem solving and creating shared ownership of the process by creating designated spaces for open dialogue, collective reflection and improved practices.
- *Create Structures and Roles* so that there are meaningful ways for stakeholders to sustain participation and develop leadership, including regular meetings and supportive but challenging leadership.
- *Commit to Collective Leadership Development* that builds the capacity of community members and other stakeholders to engage in meaningful ways helps improve conditions for learning and growth both inside and outside of the school.

There is a basic common sense to each of these four recommendations, yet they are not sufficiently prioritized or pursued. This memorandum calls attention to the foundational research for leadership based on collaborative relationships and explains its particular importance for community schools.

Introduction

Systemic divestment in low-income communities has perpetuated inequitable access to important resources for students like high-quality curriculum, qualified teachers, and community wealth.² Moreover, out-of-school factors driven by income inequality, such as family income level or food insecurity and housing instability, account for about 60% of the variance in student achievement.³ While community schools are not a panacea to address deep and historical inequities, they are gaining attention as a strategy to create equitable education systems. They do this by providing access to resources and supports to address out of school factors that get in the way of learning, increasing the educational resources at schools, and transforming the school into a community hub of which parents and community members have a level of ownership.⁴

Implementing an equity-oriented community school approach, however, takes more than intention. Community school leaders must employ specific strategies to accomplish such ambitious goals. The research on educational leadership has identified strong collaborative relationships between community partners, teachers and school leaders as important to improving the quality of the school climate, student learning and relations with the community.⁵

This paper considers the research on collaboration between families, communities and schools with attention to how community schools in particular are well-positioned to take advantage of strategies that draw on the knowledge and skills of multiple stakeholders.⁶ Creating collaborative processes and roles requires specific attention and commitment. I conclude with recommendations for what community school and district leaders can do to foster collaborative leadership among people from the school, families and communities.

What is Collaborative Leadership?

Collaborative Leadership is a form of shared decision-making in which a school leader, such as a principal, creates a structure for sharing decisions and responsibilities with key stakeholders, establishing a vision and implementing a process for working towards that vision.⁷ It moves schools away from models that emphasize strong leadership from one person, to have leadership flow through various stakeholders as they work together to improve practices, solve problems and pursue common goals.⁸ Such an approach works best when spaces for frequent and open communication between players allow the necessary time for trusting relationships to be developed.⁹

In a collaborative approach, school leaders also understand that each stakeholder can bring a unique set of expertise to the collective work when power and responsibility are shared. They should therefore help create time before and after school or on weekends for collaborations to take place. This is especially important in low-income communities where parents often have long and varied work hours. Of course, because time is a resource, states and school districts have a key role to play, ensuring that the necessary time is made available.

This paper uses the term collaborative leadership, which shares characteristics with other leadership models referenced in the paper that distribute leadership and engagement of various stakeholders in similar manners.¹⁰ Schools with deep and broad distribution of leadership are able to best sustain reform efforts¹¹ and build the school's capacity,¹² often benefitting student achievement.¹³ Longitudinal, large-scale mixed-methods studies demonstrate that higher achieving schools grant leadership influence to all school members and other stakeholders to a greater degree than lower-achieving schools, with the most significant differences seen when leadership is exercised by school teams, parents and students.¹⁴

Leadership is often conceptualized by a single heroic leader who retains almost exclusive control of an organization or a school. However, such rigidly hierarchical forms of leadership are not sustainable and often do not succeed at their goals, due to challenges such as exceedingly high expectations for one person, burnout, or low levels of teamwork and learning among people positioned below such a leader.¹⁵ In contrast, as formal school leaders such as principals share control and influence with other players, their own influence isn't diminished and may actually increase.¹⁶ This is because influence in schools isn't a zero-sum game. As stakeholders share leadership, work settings and teacher motivation improve, working relationships are stronger, and commitment to shared goals increases.¹⁷

Collaboration is important to building the collective strength of those involved in the school so that they can improve the schools themselves and student outcomes. Successful school reform is associated with three elements. First, in successful reforms stakeholders are trusted, respected and encouraged. School leadership is distributed among these stakeholders such that they collaborate in decision-making through a supportive and facilitative structure. Second, in successful reforms, a professional community values differences, focuses on the enhancement of learning for all students, de-privatizes practice,

collaborates, and promotes critical reflective dialogue. Third, these reforms have a strong capacity for learning identified in an ongoing, optimistic, caring, nurturing professional development program.¹⁸

A Logical Connection: Community Schools and Collaboration

Community schools seek to involve the community in the functioning of the school, based on the idea that the school and community can support each other and that such forms of participation improve democratic processes and educational experiences. Community schools in the U.S. originated in early 20th century models that saw schools as “social centers” that could support communities.¹⁹ Later, drawing on the ideas of John Dewey, proponents sought to have schools play a role in addressing social inequities and poverty created by the Great Depression through democratic, community-oriented approaches to schooling.²⁰ Black Americans struggled and built schools under segregation that were important social hubs for the community and based on strong community participation, shared experiences, and mitigation of economic hardships and violence from white supremacists.²¹ Community schools draw on these historical precedents, grounded in the idea that the resources and knowledge of the community are essential to supporting student learning and community improvement.²²

Community schools today can learn a lot from such movements, and collaborations beyond the school—extending to community stakeholders—is a fundamental component of community schools.²³ Reformers can help create the supportive conditions that support meaningful parent and community engagement, which is critical for fostering trusting relationships to support student learning.²⁴ They can do this by welcoming families into the school, having mechanisms to develop families’ leadership, and creating collaborative processes that include teachers and community partners in decisions and planning.²⁵

The very design of a community school is collaborative by nature, since the goal is to integrate school and community resources to meet the needs of students. This level of resource integration requires structure, leadership and support. A manager can effectively integrate different components of the model by supporting collaboration between stakeholders.²⁶ The Community School Director (CSD) helps coordinate different aspects of the model and often develops the internal and external processes and relationships that help connect students, families and communities to school resources. Principals, in turn ensure that partner agencies, CSDs and other stakeholders play integral roles in school vision, planning, coordination and managing.²⁷ This helps to create cohesion and integration of the instructional core with the other services and supports provided to students and strengthen relationships between key stakeholders at the school.²⁸ Whereas the CSD develops the internal and external processes and relationships, principals can ensure that stakeholders play roles in school vision, planning, coordination and managing.²⁹

A collaborative culture with clearly defined responsibilities builds the capacity for school and community resources to be better leveraged and aligned to meet student needs.³⁰ Ideal-

ly collaboration means that students and families are able to address issues that get in the way of learning, and educators are better able to incorporate knowledge of the community into the curriculum.³¹ Families have different strengths and face different challenges such as language barriers and negative histories of interacting with school staff.³² Because community schools can involve families and community members in the schools, they can more effectively determine which specific services, supports and capacity-development needs will support their engagement in the schools and in their children's education.³³ Sustained coordination and collaborative leadership support community schools in improving student outcomes while building trusting relationships between communities and schools.

Defining the Roles of Stakeholders in Collaborative Relationships

This section outlines how five different types of stakeholders—principals, teachers, CSDs, parents and external organizations—can contribute to collaboration at the school level. For the most part, the research presented below broadly demonstrates the benefits of collaboration with and by these stakeholders. As applied specifically to community school reforms, however, the lessons from this research are particularly powerful and relevant.

Principals

Principals play a crucial role in transforming schools.³⁴ Principals who are committed to equity and social justice can promote inclusive cultures and practices in schools and build positive relationships outside of the school.³⁵ They effectively share leadership in reform efforts when they view their teaching colleagues as professional equals and consistently work to include others in creating change³⁶ using an “inclusive-facilitative orientation”³⁷ through which teachers and others influence decisions and have shared ownership of the school.

Distribution of leadership that includes teachers, parents and district staff supports student achievement without diminishing school leaders' own influence.³⁸ Collective leadership indirectly influences student achievement through its influence on teacher motivation and work setting.³⁹ As school leadership establishes trusting and collaborative climates, stakeholders are able to take on initiatives with supportive, ongoing, relevant professional development, improving the conditions and motivation for teachers. This, in turn, is related to students' positive impressions of teachers' instruction, interactions with students and the challenges and expectations they place on their students. Positive student impressions of these factors promote students' academic self-concept, participation and engagement, influencing achievement.⁴⁰ When principals and teachers share leadership, and leadership practices are targeted at improving instruction, teachers' working relationships are stronger and student achievement can be higher.⁴¹ Principals influence learning by setting a tone or culture that supports professional learning and by taking explicit steps to support teachers' personal growth through actions like direct observations and conversations in individual classrooms and in team meetings.⁴²

Principals help sustain the mission of the school, drive programs that improve instruction, and support collaboration by creating structures and professional development for stakeholders. The principal can also support Community School Directors (CSDs) in their work as coordinators of different aspects of the model. Regular contact, shared decision-making, and coordinating tasks between principals and community school directors result in a more engaged community and improved school capacity.⁴³ For example, CSDs from one community school initiative shared that supportive leadership from the principal helped create vision and orientation towards a common goal, which made a tremendous difference in their ability to coordinate services.⁴⁴ Principals who successfully implement the community school strategy share leadership, creating a social hub for teachers, parents, administrators and community partners that allowed for frequent and open communication and time to build capacity for collaboration.⁴⁵

Community School Directors

Community School Directors, also called community school managers and coordinators, play an essential role in creating community partnerships at schools.⁴⁶ They connect families with teachers, resources and services and connect the students and teachers with community resources and opportunities.⁴⁷ CSDs work to align the efforts of partners with curricular goals, engaging community members and parents into the school and coordinating the delivery of services.⁴⁸ The capacity of a school to partner with community services impacts the effectiveness of supplemental resources in supporting student learning.⁴⁹

CSDs, along with families and principals, play an integral role in promoting a school vision and in planning, coordination and management of the school goals.⁵⁰ As described in the section on principals above, strong relationships between principals and CSDs are critical to successful reforms. The relationships grow over time, with regular communication on topics ranging from resource use and allocation to troubleshooting challenges that arise.⁵¹ According to a study by Fehrer and Leos-Urbel,

Community school managers at all five sample sites had developed strong relationships with the school principal and played a role in school leadership and planning. Both community school managers and principals reported that regular communication and a strong relationship allows the community school manager to ensure that the systems, relationships, and supports he or she is overseeing are aligned to school and student goals. At most sites, community school managers met regularly with the principal, often checking in multiple times throughout the day.⁵²

Regular contact with principals allows CSDs to align their work with the school and student goals⁵³ and gives teachers more time to develop and engage students in academic content.⁵⁴ Shared leadership, especially between principals and CSDs, is crucial to successful implementation of the model.⁵⁵

Teachers

Especially for low-income students, lasting relationships with teachers can influence how welcome they feel in an environment and how much effort they put into their schoolwork.⁵⁶ Unfortunately working conditions, teacher turnover and teachers' experience of shared leadership with principals tend to be worse in high-poverty schools than in low poverty schools.⁵⁷

The retention of great teachers is particularly important for low-income students. Teachers are more likely to stay at a school if they see themselves as part of a collaborative team, feel supported by school leadership, have influence over their work environments, and trust their principal as an instructional leader.⁵⁸ For schools working to improve teaching and learning, Allensworth points out that:

More critical than identifying those few especially effective or ineffective teachers is to develop collaborative relationships among teachers, school leaders, and families so that schools are not reliant on a few good teachers... Schools that struggle with low achievement, especially those serving the most impoverished communities, face extraordinary challenges in developing strong organizations that can maintain a strong teaching staff. But building those organizational supports is what is needed to provide a high-quality instructional environment for all students and improve equity in educational outcomes.⁵⁹

Teacher leadership in schools can help create a learning community in which teachers and others learn together.

As teachers raise issues and work on solutions together, they build trust and improve practice,⁶⁰ and they can translate school improvement principles into classroom practices, drawing critically upon various resources and expertise.⁶¹ This happens as practices that promote shared leadership help to improve trust and teachers' expectations of the effectiveness of the teachers in their school.⁶² For example, professional learning communities, in which teachers collaboratively study, observe each other and reflect on practices, can support such improvements.⁶³ Importantly, teacher involvement in school decision-making is clearly correlated with positive student outcomes.⁶⁴ Thus, teacher learning improves instructional practice and helps the school reach its reform goals.⁶⁵

Families and Community Members

Family-community-school partnerships that support schools can be an important factor for student and school success.⁶⁶ When teachers involve parents in children's learning, they tend to see powerful effects on student learning.⁶⁷ In the schools they studied, Bryk et al (2010) found that the ones with robust ties between school actors, parents and the local community benefitted greatly from these relationships.

[A] coherent school community program for improving student learning requires managing a diverse array of academic and social support services and sustaining the relationship with multiple institutions that provide them.... When school-community ties are strong, the development and maintenance of effec-

tive plans are easier to accomplish.⁶⁸

These ties helped them to create a more supportive overall environment for student learning. Recognizing the existing capacities and knowledge of families, schools can build these community members' capacity to engage as school leaders through creating a healthy school culture. In particular, parent and community engagement should be the norm, and the school should support the development of new skills and knowledge in families and school staff.⁶⁹ This can increase trust and successful engagement.⁷⁰ Trust in turn strengthens the social base in the school community so that reform initiatives can grow over time and significantly improve a school's capacity to educate all its children.⁷¹

Efforts to engage underserved families and communities must address inequities that present particular challenges. When traditional models of family engagement such as Parent-Teacher Associations lack cultural relevance or parents don't feel welcomed and respected by school personnel, they can limit family and community engagement.⁷² While parents across all race and class backgrounds care deeply about their children's education,⁷³ low-income parents and parents of color are often not provided opportunities to participate in meaningful ways.⁷⁴

Engagement that connects the culture and values of the community with the school can help to improve conditions and relationships within the school as well as between the school and the community.⁷⁵ Strong community school models create ways for parents and community members to share power and decision-making with school staff and principals on a range of topics, including school budgets or curricular choices.⁷⁶ Community participation is critical in setting the agenda and programming of a school.⁷⁷ For example, in Chicago's Community School Initiative, many schools include representatives from their partner agencies on the school improvement planning teams.⁷⁸ Because community schools emphasize collaborative school cultures and meaningful parent engagement, they are well-positioned to improve on existing processes to transform schools into a resource hub for communities that builds the strengths of both the communities and the schools.

External Organizations

Schools also benefit from creating meaningful partnerships with external groups, particularly non-profit organizations or government agencies.⁷⁹ Such partnerships can increase access to services for students and families and help address some out-of-school barriers to learning such as inadequate access to healthcare or housing.⁸⁰ Such partnerships extend beyond providing services. They can include defining problems, developing solutions and implementing plans. The result can be forms of engagement that bring local knowledge into the school and increase the power of the surrounding community.⁸¹ For example, community organizing led by those who are impacted by policies, such as low-income parents and youth, can push for and win changes in school and district practices, and result in increased resources and shifted power dynamics that support increased collaboration.⁸²

Collaboration Matters to School Reform and Learning

Collaborative leadership can impact growth in student learning as it increases the school's capacity for academic improvement.⁸³ While the research discussed above focuses on the importance of collaborative leadership in implementing and sustaining community schools, it can also increase academic outcomes.⁸⁴ Below is a brief review of the research on how collaboration helps to improve conditions for, and outcomes of, teaching and learning.

Collaboration Supports School Improvement Efforts

A collaborative approach to whole school reform can improve both school climate and instruction.⁸⁵ Collaborative leadership is an essential support needed to significantly improve schools' capacity to reform. In this process, school leaders must nurture the leadership of others, based on a shared vision.⁸⁶ Leaders must also create the space, time and support for developing the capacity of school and community stakeholders to be able to engage in collaborative processes.⁸⁷

Impact on Teaching and Learning

Collaborative leadership in schools is positively associated with improved conditions in schools, which impact student behavior and learning.⁸⁸ The capacity of a school is its ability to support teaching and learning, enable the professional learning of the staff, meaningfully engage parents and community members in school governance, and implement strategic actions to continually improve the school.⁸⁹ Schools that are supportive, characterized by shared decision-making and a shared sense of purpose, tend to demonstrate important elements that advance student achievement. These elements include cooperative relationships, higher levels of interaction and increased teacher motivation, efficacy and accountability.⁹⁰ When teachers in a school work collectively to improve instruction, and when school leadership is inclusive and focused on instruction, the school tends to show the largest improvements in student learning over time.⁹¹

Doing it Well

Collaborative decision-making is more than just involving everyone in decision-making processes. It must be implemented in a way that is responsive to the school context and in which stakeholders are united around clear vision, tight processes and democratic accountability to the community, lest it create confusion and disorganization.⁹² Collaborative leadership happens when school leaders are able to build on the foundations of wisdom, willingness to learn, and expertise of teachers and others.⁹³

Recommendations: Strategies for Creating Collaborative Relationships

Building collective leadership in schools is a promising strategy for creating successful community schools. Based on existing research, the following practices would help community schools effectively practice collaborative leadership in schools:

- *Create Time*: Making time for collaboration to assess issues, set common goals and make plans is important.⁹⁴ It is also important to allow time for collaborations to grow and create spaces and times for participants to build this practice and deepen relationships.⁹⁵ Teachers benefit from having time to plan, examine student work, collaborate and reflect on practice.⁹⁶
- *Prioritize Process*: Open dialogues that create shared ownership between stakeholders does not happen by chance; it is developed within designated spaces in which people engage honestly and constructively in problem solving.⁹⁷ A well-defined process can create rich learning communities in which stakeholders engage in collective reflection and improve practices. Effective processes allow everyone to stay attentive to issues of formal and informal power.⁹⁸
- *Create Structures and Roles*: Formal relationships and collaborative structures create meaningful ways for stakeholders to sustain participation and grow leadership.⁹⁹ Stakeholders should have regular meetings, as frequently as every week to discuss their work and build their collective capacity.¹⁰⁰ Leadership that provides both support and pressure can contribute to changing attitudes, beliefs and practices for effective reform.¹⁰¹
- *Commit to Collective Leadership Development*: Learning communities in schools that support and challenge teachers help them improve practice.¹⁰² Building the capacity of community members to engage in meaningful ways helps improve conditions for learning and growth both inside and outside of the school.¹⁰³ Sharing data and research can create a neutral, collaborative space for all stakeholders to learn together, while at the same time measuring progress holding each other accountable for their work.¹⁰⁴

These four recommendations speak to long-established wisdom emerging from research and from practice. They are also often ignored; they are not sufficiently prioritized or pursued. Yet for a community school reform, these strategies—and a commitment to collaborative leadership—can easily be the difference between success and failure.

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