

# Introduction

The Community Schools movement is growing across the country and is a non-partisan solution that promotes local decision making to accelerate student success. The Community Schools strategy has evolved as a vehicle for whole-child, whole-family, whole-community prosperity, through intentional school-family-community partnerships. This strategy, “transforms a school into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. As partners, they organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive.”<sup>1</sup> At the system level, Community Schools bring together diverse actors—educators, young people, families, districts, service providers, community and faith-based organizations, civic and government entities, and businesses—to build a Collaborative Leadership Structure. The growing body of evidence about Community Schools, alongside the Community Schools Standards,<sup>2</sup> show the essential role this strategy plays in changing the outcomes of young people and supporting thriving communities. It is from this context that we share the guide to *Building a Community Schools System*, an update to our 2011 *Scale Up School and Community Partnerships Guide*.

**A Community School** can be described as a “local engagement strategy that creates and coordinates opportunities with its public schools to accelerate student success. It serves as a vehicle for hyper-local decision-making that responds to the unique needs of each community.”

**A system** is a collection of parts that interact and function as a whole. It is an area with geographic boundaries whereby diverse cross-sectoral leaders engage in a Collaborative Leadership Structure to coordinate opportunities that support whole-child, whole-family, and whole-community.

*Building a Community Schools System* is written for diverse audiences engaged in Community Schools efforts, from planning to integration of the Community Schools strategy in their community and/or district to existing systems of schools looking to further sustain, deepen, and expand this strategy. The audiences for this guide are inclusive of leaders at any level of their community that desire to sustain community-wide collaboration toward better results for children, youth, families and communities.

We begin by introducing the concept of system-building through Collaborative Leadership Structures and functions. We then introduce the five-stage process for Building a Community Schools System, unpacking each stage within the subsequent sections.

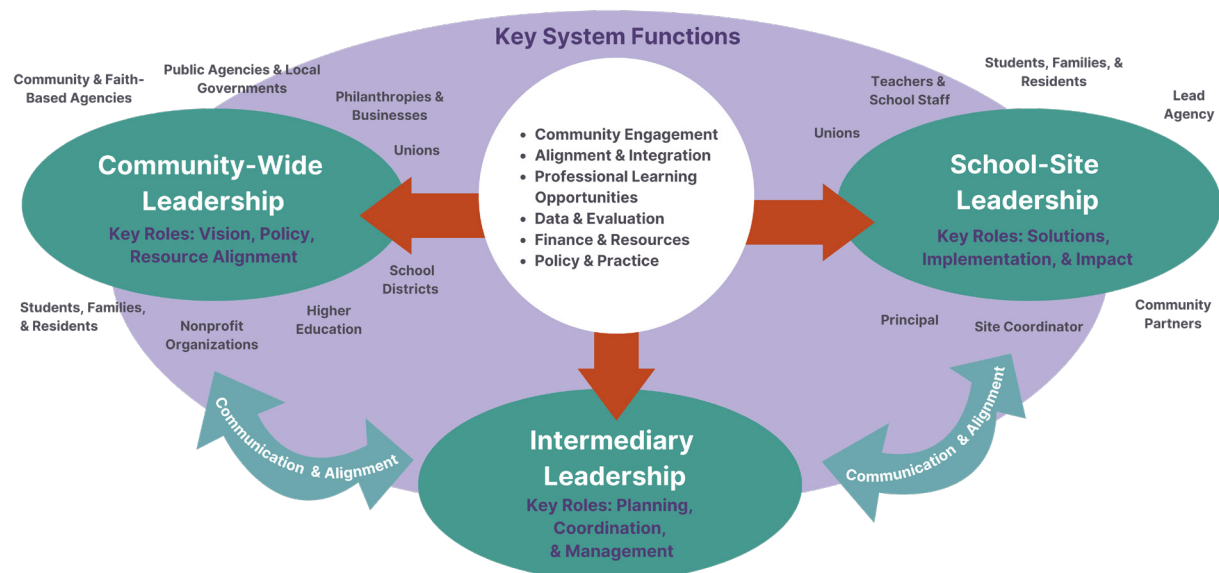
<sup>1</sup> Community Schools Forward. (2023). Framework: Essentials for community school transformation (p. 2). Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/3935/download?inline&file=CSF\\_Visual\\_Framework\\_Essentials\\_Community\\_School.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/3935/download?inline&file=CSF_Visual_Framework_Essentials_Community_School.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Coalition for Community Schools. (2018). Community School Standards. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership. Retrieved from <https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/08/Community-School-Standards-2018-1-1.pdf>

# System-Building through Collaborative Leadership

The Community Schools strategy is not a model or a program; rather, it is a comprehensive approach that intentionally reconstructs education systems into community-wide collaborative and sustaining efforts that cultivate relational trust, shared accountability, continuous learning and improvement, and leverage resources and supports to progress the lives of students, families, and communities. What makes this strategy unique is the principle of shared decision-making, whereby schools, districts, and intermediaries create leadership space for diverse voices and perspectives, sharing power and resources in an equitable way. Collaborative leadership is the hallmark of the Community Schools system-building because it creates a structure for sharing ownership and accountability by bringing together cross-sectoral partners (see Figure 1 for the collaborative leadership illustration).

**Figure 1. A Collaborative Leadership Structure for Community Schools**



Collaborative leadership activities ensure that the voices of youth, families, and residents are heard, and that system practices, provisions, and policies reflect community needs and preferences. The Collaborative Leadership Structure depicts how leadership is shared across key roles and responsibilities to build capacity of each functional area. A continuous flow of communications and efforts to align the work of both school-site and community-wide leaders is facilitated by intermediary leadership to keep the initiative on track. A shared vision fuels the initiative to build a Community Schools system.

The Collaborative Leadership Structure connects community-wide leadership, intermediary leadership, and school-site leadership:

- **Community-wide leadership** (e.g., elected officials and executive officers from school districts, government, United Way chapters, universities, businesses, community- and faith-based organizations) is responsible for inclusively constructing the overall *vision, policy, and resource alignment*. It creates the context and capacity for sustainability and expansion. It serves as a networking vehicle for policy development and communication in which leaders whose responsibilities reach across a broad population within the defined geographical region system decide why and how to align their resources to build and sustain a system of Community Schools.
- **School-site leadership** (e.g., families, residents, principals, teachers, community partners, and young people) is responsible for *planning, implementation, and continuous improvement towards measurable student, family, and proximate community results*. Leaders ensure that implementation builds on a desired state of a school's community developed by students, families, and residents, mitigates challenges, satisfies student needs, aligns with the school's academic mission, and generates practice knowledge and data to inform improvements.
- **Intermediary leadership** (a way to link together and facilitate a working group comprised of managers from the community-wide organizations) provides planning, coordination, and management. Leadership powers the work by ensuring communication between community-wide and school-site leaders and by facilitating operational functions at all leadership levels and across school sites. It convenes school and community partners, provides strategic planning, and ensures that what happens at the community leadership level empowers students, families, and practitioners at school sites.

This collaborative structure creates conditions and mechanisms for ongoing development, coordination, and support that over time leads to system-level change. However, system building is a regenerative and continuous process, often punctuated by changes in leaders, resources, policies, practices, and external environmental factors that inform and/or influence the system. To create a sustainable and adaptable Community Schools system, the partners in this structure engage in six functions: community engagement, alignment and integration, professional learning opportunities, data and evaluation, finance and resources, and policies and practices.

**Table 1. Six Functions and Intent**

<b>Function</b>	<b>Intent</b>
<b>Community Engagement</b>	This function focuses on the authentic engagement and inclusion of young people, families, and community members, from the start and throughout system building at all levels of the leadership decision-making. Through a co-design process, shared and inclusive decision-making, a Community Schools system integrates community engagement as an essential part to guiding the development policies, provisioning of resources, and changing of practices.
<b>Alignment &amp; Integration</b>	This function spreads and deepens the commitment to the results-based framework and overall vision. Alignment involves working among organizations and with other related systems to support shared goals and facilitate overall progress. Integration requires explicit blending of resources, practices, and policy connections among organizations, programs, and activities that result in progress toward shared results regardless of organizational affiliation.
<b>Professional Learning Opportunities</b>	This function plays an essential role in embedding a Community School’s culture within the larger community by transmitting values and attitudes, assumptions, and expectations consistent with the vision. It also focuses on the constant skill building for professionals responsible for facilitating collaboration at each leadership level to foster the conditions for learning and the principles of Community Schools that help build effective relationships.
<b>Data &amp; Evaluation</b>	This function focuses on the collection and analysis of information. It illuminates implementation by tracking the system’s indicators (e.g., attendance and chronic absence, academic growth and deeper learning, and partnership effectiveness.) and integrates different databases for improved decision-making while ensuring the requisite confidentiality.
<b>Finance &amp; Resources</b>	This function enables sustainability by ensuring existing financial, human, and other resources are identified and used to leverage new resources and are coordinated for greater efficiency and responsiveness to accelerate the achievement of results.
<b>Policy &amp; Practice</b>	This function supports regular communication between community and site leaders with collecting data and community input to identify areas of need and opportunity for school districts and partner agencies in developing financial, administrative, operational, and strategic policies and procedures in support of Community Schools.

# Overview of the Five Stages for Building a Community Schools System

This Guide builds on the evidence and practices of Community Schools system leaders from across the country, who offered their iterative feedback throughout the updating of this tool. The document was validated through convening of multiple focus groups from systems leaders and the Community School Leadership Retreat that consisted of national leaders from fifty-four unique places.

In this Guide we introduce a five-stage framework for building a Community Schools System:

**STAGE 1: Start a System of Community Schools**

**STAGE 2: Broaden Community Engagement**

**STAGE 3: Design a Collaborative Operating Framework**

**STAGE 4: Implement Systemically**

**STAGE 5: Sustain and Grow a Community Schools System**

Change happens across the stages, as illustrated by the upward arrow running across the stages, a visual representation of a movement toward building, improving, collaborating, and strengthening a Community Schools system. As illustrated in Figure 2, each stage is additive to the previous, designed with corresponding milestones to move system-building efforts forward. Along the continuum, a Community Schools system builds a shared vision and values and engages in collaborative functions across its structure. Organizations can engage with the Guide at any given stage. The purpose of the Guide is to build a Collaborative Leadership Structure characterized by continuous improvement, depth, sustainability, and strengthening of a Community Schools system.

**Figure 2. Five Stages for Building a Community Schools System**



Below we introduce the intent for each stage. We approximate that each stage equates to six-month sprints toward achieving the associated milestones, although variations by local contexts should be anticipated.

## **STAGE 1: Start a System of Community Schools**

Associated milestones:

- 1.** Convene Innovators
- 2.** Assess Readiness
- 3.** Compile a Rationale for Community Schools

Stage 1 presupposes that the community has begun its journey of building a Community School system by already having in place, or in mind, at least one Community School. In Stage 1, a dedicated group of innovators interested in building a Community Schools system comes together to ask, “What is our community’s capacity to launch a successful Community Schools system?” The group could be comprised of various community actors, such as community members, funders, state and local policymakers, direct-service providers, or participants in similar systems. To evaluate readiness to begin the five-stage process, the innovators need to share knowledge, lived experiences, organizational expertise, and data to develop a rationale for systems building and use their networks and spheres of influence to recruit additional partners.

## **STAGE 2: Broaden Community Engagement**

Associated milestones:

- 1.** Engage Broader Community
- 2.** Develop a Shared Vision & Purpose
- 3.** Customize a Results-Based Logic Model

The innovators’ conversations lead to learning communities with the goal to authentically expand and deepen the leadership base reflective of the community. Together, representatives across sectors, institutions, and organizations, inclusive of families, young people, and community members, design and commit to a board vision for their community, develop clear results for children, students, and families, and customize a results-based logic model to show how inputs and strategies interact to lead to measurable impact.

## **STAGE 3: Design a Collaborative Operating Framework**

Associated milestones:

- 1.** Evaluate Key Functions
- 2.** Distribute Leadership
- 3.** Prepare Rollout Strategy

The designated leaders will clarify roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms of participating partners. One primary role is to select an organization to facilitate an intermediary partnership that will provide operational and leadership support at the systems level, oversight, resource, and policy development for a sustainable system. The new intermediary will also develop a strategy to address scope, site selection, site coordination, and professional learning opportunities.

## **STAGE 4: Implement Systemically**

Associated milestones:

- 1.** Initiate Professional Learning Opportunities
- 2.** Align Key Functions
- 3.** Use Data for Continuous Improvement

As the system builds its professional learning opportunities, partners will receive capacity building that will strengthen implementation. At the same time, system leaders will continue to align practices, policies, and processes across the system, school sites, school district offices, agencies, and partner organizations. System leaders will collect and analyze data that are aligned with the results framework to support continuous improvement.

## **STAGE 5: Sustain and Grow a Community Schools System**

Associated milestones:

- 1.** Expand and Deepen Community Schools
- 2.** Build Financial Capacity
- 3.** Build Political Capacity



Sustaining and growing a Community Schools system requires constant attention. Leaders should not take their eyes off key systemic challenges that can derail change efforts such as leadership transitions, funding changes, and policies. Regular system scans across all four characteristics of effective systems building—shared ownership, spread, depth, and sustainability—can help identify areas that need attention. The system should refresh and strengthen its leadership and engage the community in a process of continuous improvement. The system must also attend to the key sustainability elements of financial and political capacity and have the funds, leadership, and policy support to ensure that the system will sustain leadership changes.

## **How to Use this Guide**

The Guide is divided into five parts, one for each of the five stages. Each section offers an overview of the corresponding stage, articulates the associated milestones, and introduces a set of associated benchmarks in a rubric form. The rubric in each section offers Community Schools Standards-aligned actions community-wide actors, intermediaries, and Community School sites should make across functions as they build toward a Collaborative Leadership Structure, which is also addressed at each stage within the rubric.

For more information and capacity building opportunities visit our website:

<https://www.communityschools.org/>