

Stage 3: Design a Collaborative Operating Framework



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

Overview

During Stage 3 the designated leaders will clarify roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms of participating partners. Two primary tasks are to a) select an intermediary leadership that will provide operational support and b) select leadership at the community-wide level that will promote the vision, provide administration resources and policy development for a sustainable system. Finally, the new system will develop a rollout strategy that addresses scope, site selection, site coordination, and professional learning opportunities.

Milestones

Milestone #1: Evaluate Key Functions

In Stage 1, policymaking partners began to create the context for change. Now, new questions arise. Who should do what? By when? **The Collaborative Leadership Structure describes the partners and functions that are required as system building progresses** (see the Introduction of this guide). The framework offers the sequence of actions needed for implementing a shared vision and how to get the job done.

Partners need to see that their participation is valued. They also need to agree to support activities in their respective areas of influence and expertise. A review of the comprehensive benchmark list organized by function and leadership level can guide partners in understanding how an organizing framework can facilitate their work.

Milestone #2: Distribute Leadership

In this stage, **ownership of the vision increases on all leadership levels of the Collaborative Leadership Structure as decision-making begins to shift from traditional hierarchal practices to distributed leadership, a teams of teams approach, to fulfill the necessary tasks identified in the evaluation of the key functions.** Community-wide leaders, intermediary leaders, and site leaders address the same functional areas; however, their roles and responsibilities differ dramatically. Community-wide leaders are primarily responsible for promoting the vision, developing policy, and resource alignment. Intermediary leaders are primarily responsible for planning, coordination, and management. Site leaders focus on site solutions, implementation, and impact. In the initial stages of developing a Community Schools system, the arrangement for an intermediary may be informal, with one or two organizations taking the lead. Over time, community leaders may recast the arrangement to become more inclusive and integrated. Ultimately, regardless of the organizational makeup, the intermediary needs to be of service to site and community leaders.

Milestone #3: Prepare a Rollout Strategy

Decide on the focus, direction, and scope of site-level expansion. A Community Schools system should spread both geographically and by grade level. To set the stage for success, the site selection process should ensure that prospective Community Schools demonstrate the basic leadership capacity for transformation into operating Community Schools. Some systems have provided planning grants to interested schools; others have selected sites with a history of school and community partnerships. Depending on data, available resources, and inquiry information, any or all of the following site selection criteria might apply:

- Prevalent effects of poverty
- Diminishing attendance and/or enrollment
- Disparities in data across populations
- Lack of student and family engagement
- School leadership readiness
- Neighborhood challenges
- Feeder pattern

Build a working budget for an individual Community School. Case studies have shown Community Schools produce a high return of investment.³ The most significant costs for a Community School are a year-round, full-time Community School Coordinator, professional learning opportunities, and some flexible funds for responding quickly to innovations and solutions identified in the co-designing process. Although school districts provide space at no cost in the belief that schools are public facilities and that partners are dedicated to the vision and mission it is important to assess existing costs to evaluate future leverage.⁴

Hiring, supporting, and leading the facilitation of Community School development is a key decision. With the “lead agency” approach, a community partner hires and supervises a site Coordinator in consultation with the school principal, teachers, parents, and students. Like an intermediary at the community level, a site-level lead agency is usually a highly credible partner. The lead agency agrees to uphold the shared vision in terms of its organizational resources, relationships, and expertise. Many lead agencies bring additional resources from their own organization to the Community School and capture funds from public and private sources not otherwise available to schools. The lead agency approach offers the further advantage of demonstrating the school’s desire and ability to work with community partners as well as its commitment to community engagement and collaborative partnerships.

³ For return-on-investment studies, see for example: Bloodworth, M. R., & Horner, A. C. (2019). *Return on investment of a Community Schools coordinator: A case study*. Albuquerque, NM: Apex. Retrieved from https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI_Coordinator.pdf ; Martinez, L, & Hayes, C. D.

(2013). *Measuring social return on investment of Community Schools: A case study*. New York, NY: The Children’s Aid Society and The Finance Project.

⁴ Deich, S., & Neary, M. (2021). *Financing Community Schools: A framework for growth and sustainability*. Washington, DC: Partnership for the Future of Learning. Retrieved from <https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/assets/downloads/Financing-Community-Schools-Brief.pdf>

While many Community Schools systems take a lead agency approach, some communities determine that the school system’s direct management of a school site is preferable. In some cases, lodging both the intermediary and lead agency roles within the district is deemed the most efficient way to spread, deepen, and sustain the expansion of Community Schools. While building a system of Community Schools, both approaches can be integrated. Differences in culture, goals, staffing standards, and other factors can affect these relationships. Ways to resolve such issues include:

- Collaborating on a Coordinator job description that will be used regardless of who hires
- Developing a set of responsibilities of a lead agency (a school district or a partner)
- Building an understanding of the intermediary’s role in supporting and evaluating the strategy
- Involving the school principal, teachers, and families in selection of a lead agency partner
- Including the school principal, teachers, and families in selection of the Coordinator
- Providing shared professional learning opportunities for all parties at the site

What It Takes to Be an Effective Community School Coordinator

Community School Coordinators play a unique role. They are by nature boundary-crossers, able to work in the school and the community and bridge the culture of each. They have the skills to reach to teachers and other school staff and to reach out to families, residents, and community groups. They possess the planning and organizational ability to bring together school staff and partners to focus on results. Here is the skillset to look for:

- Strong planning, coordination, and communication skills
- Political awareness
- Experience in several community sectors, including but not limited to schools
- Solid grounding in developmental theory and experiential learning
- The ability to see the “big picture” and attend to details
- An ability to listen, connect people, and make things happen

Pitfalls

There are five common pitfalls in this stage:

- Putting too much leadership responsibility on a single individual or organization
- Not thinking through how the same functions apply to various leadership levels even though functions will not receive equal attention at the same time
- Ignoring the importance of defining benchmarks for partners' accountability to one another
- Putting too much emphasis on dollars at the outset of planning and forgetting to look at how existing planning, research, and program development assets may be redirected to support the system
- Lacking a clear set of criteria for the selection of potential Community Schools for communication to all partners
- Overlooking the importance of determining whether a community partner or the school coordinates community and school resources at the site level

How You Know You Are Making Progress

STAGE 3: Design a Collaborative Operating Framework			
MILESTONES (est. 6-month sprints)			
1. Evaluate Key Functions 2. Distribute Leadership 3. Prepare Rollout Strategy			
Indicators (Action/Benchmarks) Toward Milestones			
Function	Community Wide	Intermediary	Community School (Site)
Community Engagement	<p>Site visits to Community Schools for elected officials and potential partners as well as for initiative leaders, family members, and residents are well attended and designed to build community support</p> <p>Two-way communication with state and federal officials is ongoing</p>		<p>Site leadership platforms are developed and participate in planning results frameworks and roll out strategies</p>
Alignment & Integration	<p>A rollout strategy, including a plan and timeline for selecting Community Schools, is in place</p> <p>Community partners participate in developing the school system’s strategic plan. The school system’s plan reflects the results framework</p> <p>The results framework supports the school system’s strategic plan</p>	<p>Conversations are convened to ensure that district school plans incorporate community schools’ principles as related to the results-based framework</p> <p>RFPs and MOUs underscore the importance of alignment of resources to attain specified results</p>	

Indicators (Action/Benchmarks) Toward Milestones			
Function	Community Wide	Intermediary	Community School (Site)
Professional Learning Opportunities		<p>Pre-service training for Community School coordinators is organized and facilitates their continued capacity building in appropriate, district-led professional learning opportunities</p> <p>Technical assistance and professional learning opportunities respond to the needs identified by participants</p>	
Data & Evaluation	Partners facilitate data sharing through interagency agreements and necessary policy change	Accountability for achieving indicators in functional areas is distributed among partners	To organize its work, every site develops a results and indicators framework based on the community wide framework
Finance & Resources	Funding and resource arrangements for further planning are negotiated and MOUs established	Grant money is sought and used strategically to leverage additional resources	
Policy & Practice			
Progress Toward a Collaborative Leadership Structure			
Collaborative Leadership	Accountability for achieving indicators in functional areas is distributed among partners	An intermediary with norms, experience, and capacity consistent with the initiative's vision agrees to provide planning, management, and coordination across the initiative	Site teams representing school and partners, staff, families, and community members lead the school site team