Stage 1:
Start a System of Community Schools

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

Overview

Stage 1 begins to develop the first characteristic of effective system building: a shift in ownership and activity across several functions, including leadership development, data collection, alignment of shared goals, and efforts to build broad community engagement. At the end of Stage 1, a system emerges with shared ownership, a motivating shared vision, and growing capacity to broaden community support.

Initially, a small group of innovators interested in expanding Community Schools—citizens, funders, school leaders, state and local policymakers, participants in similar community systems, and providers—comes together to ask, "What is our community's capacity to launch a successful system building effort?" To evaluate community readiness, the innovators need to share personal, community-based, and organizational knowledge. Their conversations create learning communities in which innovators from a variety of sectors engage as equals—

despite differences in the types of authority and resources they command. Based on their findings, the innovators develop a rationale for building a system and use their contacts and talking points to recruit additional partners.

As the initial group of innovators expands, new participants get to know each other and share knowledge and their dreams of what a system of Community Schools might look like. They visit local Community Schools or jurisdictions where Community Schools are beginning to grow. They consider how a commitment to building a Community Schools system is likely to affect their personal and organizational interests. Eventually, the group reaches agreement on a broad vision for the system. The system goes public with its vision by developing a marketable brand and using local success stories to broadcast the idea of Community Schools and deepen community knowledge and support.

Milestones

Milestone #1: Convene Innovators

Innovators are people who see the value in a new idea and take the lead in helping others see its advantages. School superintendents, United Way chapters, and other non-profit officials, community leaders, government representatives, members of faith-based communities, college and university educators, and participants in similar systems are just some of these types of leaders. It is helpful to engage people who demonstrate:

- A sense of urgency that communities need to do more to help children and young people succeed
- An ability to see the glass half-full rather than half-empty
- A facility for working with others
- An openness to new ideas

To build a strong foundation for a systemic approach, it is important to look for ways to:

- Share leadership
- Broaden perspectives
- Dream big
- Acknowledge self-interest
- Encourage honest, shared exploration
- Acknowledge power differentials

Milestone #2: Assess Readiness

A primary objective of Stage 1 is to determine a community's initial readiness for system and to identify areas of strength and weakness. To what extent can the effort draw on the strategic leadership, existing infrastructure and management functions, technical and financial resources, staff, and networks of other groups and agencies? Are people ready for change? Attention should be paid to both the external environment in which system-building will occur and the internal, organizational environments that will influence the direction and energy of the effort.

Table 2, "Assessing Readiness," can help guide conversations and evaluate readiness. Assessments should be honest, confidential, and extend over several sessions. However, answers need not be exhaustive, and it is not necessary to delve into issues that address organizational costs and conflicting ideas about how to move forward. The same topics of leadership, commitment, and other characteristics of a sustainable system will be considered in more depth as the systems-building process evolves.

Findings should be evaluated. Do the facts point to sufficient community desire and organizational capacity to build a large-scale system of Community Schools? If not, areas in which capacity seems weakest should be examined alongside next steps that could improve readiness. If the current political and economic context is not favorable, considerations should be made as how to keep interest alive until the environment changes.

Table 2. Assessing Readiness

Assessing Readiness: Questions to Help You Start

- **What's the need?** What do the data say about children's readiness for school and their performance in school? Does performance vary across the community?

- **Demographic shifts.** What do recent data reveal about the changing student population in your school district? Are you ready for change?

- **Current Community Schools activity.** How many schools in your district define themselves as a Community School or by a similar name? Can you identify community partners already working with schools that may participate in building of a Community Schools system?

- **What's working?** In what ways have existing schools succeeded? What would other schools like to replicate?

- **Leadership and constituency.** To what extent are high-level leaders in the district and in the public, private, and non-profit sectors aware of Community Schools? What constituent and special interest groups could be mobilized to encourage district-wide support? Are there individual school board members or other local elected officials who might be especially responsive to the Community Schools strategy?

- **School system capacity and commitment.** Does your district encourage creativity, support innovation, and seek external resources? Does it have a policy governing relationships with community partners? How is the district organized to connect with community partners? Does your district have an office of community partnerships?

- **Collaborative strength.** What has been your district's and community's involvement in collaborative initiatives? Have the efforts been positive and/or lasting? Which of the initiatives still exist? Could they help convene a Community Schools conversation?

- **Related initiatives.** What groups in the community are engaged in work related to Community Schools? Is there a P-20 Council, a mayor's cabinet or cross-sector group, or an after-school, school-based health clinic, mental health clinic, mentoring, or other type of programmatic network? How might they be a resource for a Community Schools strategy?

- **Political and economic context.** What conditions in your community might argue for the development of a Community School? How can you highlight the benefits of Community Schools to address the realities of your current situation?

Milestone #3: Compile a Rationale for Community Schools

If the facts suggest that a community is ready for a Community Schools system, the next step is to **make the case through presentations/talking points that convey both the facts and shared beliefs and attitudes about Community Schools.** The case must communicate a clear and succinct rationale for Community Schools, highlighting ongoing work of schools, and facts that express internal and external readiness.

Pitfalls

There are four common pitfalls associated with Stage 1:

- Not taking the time to scan the environment to see what else is happening that could support or derail a Community Schools strategy

- Failing to reach out to key leaders of other collaborative efforts whose assets are vital to the success of the system of Community Schools-building efforts

- Overlooking what is already happening in schools that could demonstrate the power of a Community Schools system

- Neglecting the value of a powerful vision for mobilizing the entire community

How You Know You Are Making Progress

STAGE 1: Start a System of Community Schools			
MILESTONE (est. 6-month sprints) 1. Convene Innovators 2. Assess Readiness 3. Compile a Rationale for Community Schools			
Indicators (Action/Benchmarks) Toward Milestones			
Function	**Community Wide**	**Intermediary**	**Community School (Site)**
Community Engagement	Conversations with local elected officials and executives to receive feedback	Open meetings to present community-wide data and invite feedback	Most students' households are engaged to share challenges, hopes, and desired opportunities to remain engaged
Alignment & Integration	The initiative collaborates with other community initiatives working to achieve similar goals		
Professional Learning Opportunities		Partners participate in site visits, community forums, and other opportunities designed to familiarize them with Community Schools, outline the assumptions and expectations of community-wide and site partners, and build common ground across the initiative	

Indicators (Action/Benchmarks) Toward Milestones			
Function	**Community Wide**	**Intermediary**	**Community School (Site)**
Data & Evaluation	Partners use data to inform their decision to move forward		Site teams make decisions about which data are most relevant and useful to collect based on result and indicator frameworks
Finance & Resources	Resources are earmarked to finance a Community School coordinator position at each site		Site-level partners play a signifcant role in identifying and leveraging local revenue sources, including in-kind contributions from partner agencies
Policy & Practice	A convincing, evidence-based rationale to build a system of Community Schools is clearly articulated		
Progress Toward a Collaborative Leadership Structure			
Collaborative Leadership	Relationships with lead agencies and local partners are formed to begin imagining a shared vision	An emerging intermediary body creates organized opportunities to meet, facilitate discussions, forge relationships, and provides continuous opportunities for feedback and reflection	Community leaders, educators, students, and their caregivers are convened to examine student/family feedback, imagine their Community School, and identify assets