

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS PRACTICE GUIDE SERIES

Practice Guide 1: Collaborative Leadership

PRACTICE GUIDE 2: STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

Practice Guide 3: Coordination of Integrated Student Supports and Expanded Learning

In This Guide:

- ★ Defining the Practice
- ★ Importance of the Practice
- ★ Conditions for Success
- ★ Key Levers to Create Conditions
- ★ Recommended Strategies & Action Steps
- ★ Solutions to Common Challenges
- ★ Call to Action

This series highlights key components of the community school strategy, explains the conditions and levers that enable effective practices, and offers strategies and action steps to enhance the work. These guides are designed for school administrators, resource coordinators, community school leadership team members¹, as well as current or potential community school partners. Practice guides are informed by research-based strategies, and they draw on the experiences and expertise of community school practitioners.

What are strong partnerships?

To provide high-quality wraparound supports and enrichment opportunities for students and families, community schools must engage in sustained and healthy collaboration with community organizations and local providers.

Strong partnerships are characterized by ...

- high levels of trust
- mutual respect and recognition of each other's value and expertise
- collaboration and shared decision making
- flexibility to adapt and respond to emerging needs
- ongoing communication and coordination
- clear expectations and shared accountability between school and partners

For our [school] population, it gives us new ways to connect them with things they might need or be interested in. ... I think every member of our staff sees how we are more a part of the community [through] having more relationships with [community] organizations. —School Staff

Why are strong partnerships important in a community school strategy?

Strong partnerships are essential to achieve the pillars of a community school strategy, as they enable schools to (1) offer high-quality expanded learning opportunities; (2) deliver comprehensive supports using a whole child approach; and (3) strengthen opportunities for community and family engagement. Through these partnerships, schools can more effectively operate as community hubs for their students, families, and staff.

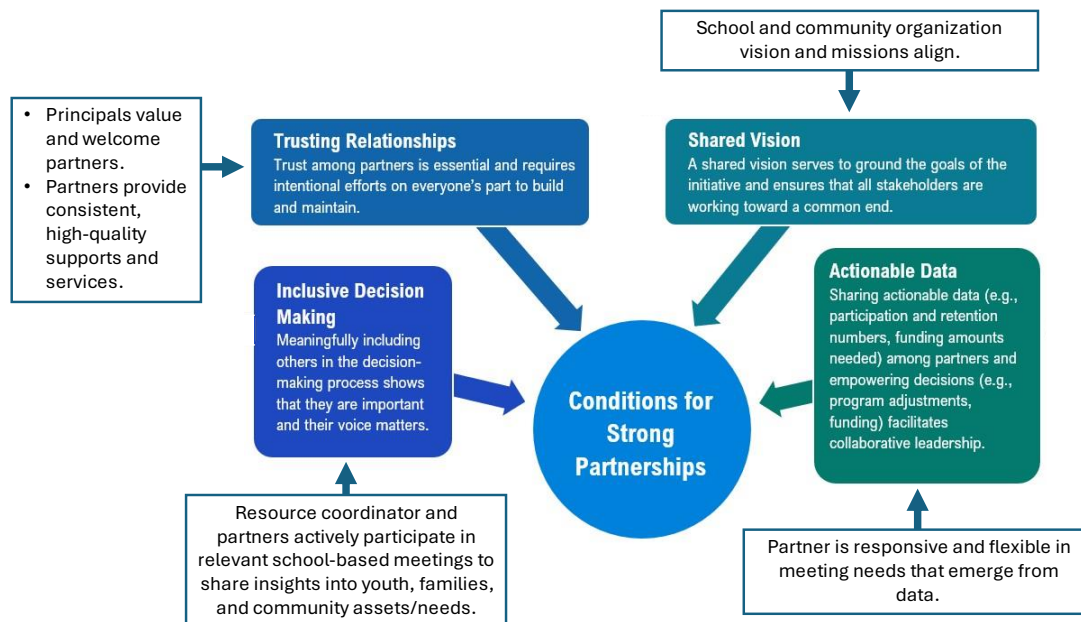
Strong partnerships are critical to the work of...

- **centering community-oriented perspectives and context-specific expertise**
- **diversifying and expanding wraparound services and program offerings**
- **broadening outreach and engagement efforts** with students, families, and community members
- **deepening opportunities for culturally relevant and inclusive programming** for students and families
- **adding professional capacity and resources (e.g., on-site youth workers, grant writing)**, which alleviate time and task pressures on school-day professionals.

¹ Community school leadership teams guide community school planning and implementation through collaborative decision making. For more on leadership teams, please see Practice Guide 1: Collaborative Leadership.

What conditions enable strong partnerships?

Intentionally creating the conditions for strong partnerships are similar to those for developing effective shared leadership (see [Practice Guide 1: Collaborative Leadership](#)). However, as this practice guide shows, understanding the conditions for creating and sustaining strong partnerships are aligned and more granular. Strong partnership require (a) a principal's welcome of community partners, predicated on the belief that schools can and should be a platform for connecting students and families to a broader set of supports and opportunities; (b) partner capacity to deliver consistently and reliably on the services they provide; (c) vision alignment; (d) partner organization capacity to adapt to new and emergent needs, and (e) the resource coordinator and partners to actively participate in school-based meetings.



What are the key levers for creating the conditions for successful partnerships?

In an ideal school–community partnership, schools and community-based organizations share a vision in their work with youth and families and have a clear understanding of their roles and expectations. Key strategies include the following:



1. Identifying partnerships informed by emerging needs and interests of the school community



2. Creating a shared vision, values, and roles between the school and partner



3. Setting up communication channels and structures to assess ongoing needs and program quality

What are recommended strategies and action steps to build strong partnerships?

1. Identifying partnerships informed by emerging needs and interests of the school community

Strategies

Through school leadership teams, **schools regularly and collaboratively assess community assets and needs** to identify opportunities and service gaps, determine priorities, leverage existing and new partnerships, and avoid duplication of services.

Administrators and leadership teams thoroughly vet new organizations before committing to new partnerships by conducting research, having initial conversations to assess partner capacity, and considering fit within the school environment.

Administrators, RCs, and leadership teams regularly collaborate to identify partnerships, including decision making about when to deepen and expand existing partnerships and when to form new partnerships based on emerging interests and needs.

Action Steps

- **Identify school- or community-level needs (e.g., specific services, translation supports) regularly** through conducting and using needs assessment data and updated school demographic information.
- **Conduct asset mapping** to identify existing providers and resources located in the school or nearby.
- **Check-in regularly with existing partners** to tailor and expand supports and services to respond to school's population, context, needs, and strengths.
- **Identify new partners** to address remaining support or opportunity gaps.

- **Develop criteria for identifying new partners** by considering their familiarity with school/community, alignment with school vision and values, record of positive communication practices, and high-quality delivery of supports.
- **To prevent alienation of specific communities**, assess underlying goals of partner agencies and the populations that they serve.

- **Support RC in their role as partner liaison** (e.g., coordinating partnerships, using resources effectively).
 - **In weekly check-ins**, RCs and administrators discuss potential partnerships.
 - **In leadership team meetings**, RCs and partner staff provide updates on existing partner activities.

What are recommended strategies and action steps to build strong partnerships?

2. Creating a shared vision, values, and roles between the school and partner

Strategies

School creates a process for onboarding partners that allows for vision alignment and discussion of mutually beneficial partnership expectations.

School and partner organizations identify and assign a dedicated partnership liaison (e.g., RC) to coordinate programs and services and facilitate ongoing communication between school and partners.

School administration acts as key champions for partners, building a welcoming, inclusive school culture in which partner staff feel trusted, appreciated, and understood as community advocates.

Action Steps

- Hold initial meetings to discuss **expectations, vision, and priorities**; and to set clear, shared expectations for the partnership.
- **Ensure partners recognize the uniqueness of each school and tailor services** accordingly.
- Mutually develop, clearly delineate, and document **roles and responsibilities** in formal agreements.
- **A dedicated liaison (e.g., RC)** is employed by the school or community partners.
- **Administrators empower the RC** to coordinate external partnerships and use resources effectively.
- **Administrators, RCs, and leadership teams regularly meet and collaborate** to identify, secure, and manage partnerships.
- **Administrators demonstrate support for partnership** by
 - **familiarizing themselves with organizations,**
 - **integrating partners into school operations** (e.g., partner joins school-based teams)
- **Recognize the crucial role that RCs play** in initiating and supporting partnerships, avoiding over-or-under management of relationships.
- **Promote partner visibility with school faculty and staff** through sharing information and updates.
- **Hold regular (e.g., quarterly) meetings** with partners to communicate needs and share information about new program offerings or services.

What are **recommended strategies and action steps** to build strong partnerships?

3. Setting up communication channels and structures to assess ongoing needs and program quality

Strategies

Both school staff and partners use regular, open, respectful communication to ensure that partnerships thrive.

Both the school and the partner organizations mutually benefit from the partnership.

School and partner organizations create mutually agreed upon systems for ensuring reliability, quality, and alignment of programs and services.

Action Steps

- **Fulfill duties consistently and transparently** in the partnership.
- **Establish effective methods and norms for communication** (e.g., email list, shared online drive).
- **Share detailed notes for all team and committee meetings** via email or a shared online drive.

- **Share costs** of programming and events between schools and partners.
- **Seek out funding sources** that can be shared and that prioritize collaboration and partnership.

- Invite partners to **join the school leadership team** to provide updates and contribute to shared decision-making for community school operations.
- Create a **shared system to assess program quality** and discuss needed adjustments.
- Select a **tool to measure program quality and designate a point person (e.g., RC)** to oversee assessments and program adjustments.
- **Meet regularly (e.g., quarterly)** to discuss the quality of services and partnerships.

"I think [building strong partnerships with schools] takes a lot of patience, a lot of time, and a lot of just being mindful that, yes, the school may have reached out to form this partnership, but let's highlight what's working, and then let's see how we can uplift that and support them in that. ... So, tailoring [the work] to each school, listening and being open to do things differently, even if it's not something that you've done before [or] that you're used to."

- *Lead Partner Agency (LPA) staff member*

What are common challenges to strong partnerships, and how can they be addressed?

Common challenges	Possible solutions			
School and partners struggle with collaborative leadership (e.g., joint decision making, administrator involvement).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Review and implement promising practices, including strengthening cross-team communication, developing a community school leadership team that is representative of the community, and cultivating trusting relationship between RCs and administration. ✓ Clarify and align expectations for leadership team participation, including drafting formal documents to ensure aligned understanding of the purpose and responsibilities of each member. ✓ For more information about collaborative leadership, please refer to Practice Guide 1: Collaborative Leadership in this Community Schools Practice Guide Series. 			
School and partners lack a streamlined system to share information and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Together, school and partners establish regular, open communication channels, such as sharing a common Excel spreadsheet for budgeting, creating a common running log for meeting notes, and using a shared drive for accessing documents. 			
Trust between the school and partner organizations is negatively impacted by staff and administrative turnover.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ School staff and established partners can meet and regularly communicate with new administrators to build their awareness and understanding of the work of existing partnerships. ✓ Use a formal onboarding process with new employees to provide an overview of existing partnerships, roles and responsibilities, and the shared vision for the partnerships. ✓ District and school leaders can identify Lead Partner Agencies (LPAs), in which an LPA collaborates with each community school and helps liaise with additional partners. For example, Chicago Public Schools designates LPAs who employ an on-site RC for each community school and hire additional staff. In their role, LPAs monitor partnership activities and service quality. They also provide supervision and professional support to RCs. This approach helps to ensure that positive organizational structures and reputations can outlast individual tenures, cultivating foundational trust needed in partnerships. 			
School and community partner staff lack familiarity and understanding about purpose and functions of partner organizations.	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partners and school administrators identify and commit to regular, transparent communication processes. ✓ Partners and school staff participate in annual review meetings to formally define and review roles and expectations for the partnership. </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Outline school needs and resource gaps and the school's vision for the partnership. > Designate and empower a "partnership liaison" to facilitate communication and collaboration with school staff. </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Tailor services to the needs of the school. > Follow through on commitments to planned programs and services. </td> </tr> </table>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partners and school administrators identify and commit to regular, transparent communication processes. ✓ Partners and school staff participate in annual review meetings to formally define and review roles and expectations for the partnership. 	<p>Administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Outline school needs and resource gaps and the school's vision for the partnership. > Designate and empower a "partnership liaison" to facilitate communication and collaboration with school staff. 	<p>Partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Tailor services to the needs of the school. > Follow through on commitments to planned programs and services.
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School and partners lack a common systematic approach to monitoring service activity and quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify common measurements for needs and asset assessment and provide common data collection tools (e.g., surveys, interview and focus group protocols). ✓ Determine who will be responsible for quality monitoring and data collection activities. ✓ Design ongoing processes with regular touchpoints; use data in decision-making conversations. 			
Partners that rely on single source funding risk discontinuation, which may lead to loss of involvement in schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Partners and school administrators should discuss financial sustainability of partnership from the outset; to reduce dependency on single source funding (i.e. short-term grant), consider joint planning to diversify funding streams and cost-sharing. ✓ Partner organizations should actively engage in diverse fundraising activities, such as grant writing and donor cultivation, and encourage school staff involvement in these efforts. 			



✓ School administrators, RCs, and current or potential partner organizations should review this practice guide individually and together.

✓ Schools should schedule time in administrator–RC and leadership team meetings to discuss key takeaways from the guide, including:

- > What aspects of strong partnerships are we implementing well?
- > What aspects can we strengthen?

✓ Incorporate areas for improvement in your school's action plan. Prioritize simple steps that build on your collaborative leadership strengths and addresses areas of growth.

Framework: *The Community Schools Playbook*: <https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/>
 Practice guides were developed in partnership with the American Institutes for Research® and Diehl Consulting Group.