

Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative: Case Study of Strong Partnerships



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Introduction

To successfully carry out the vision of community schools, schools must build strong partnerships with local organizations that centralize access to essential services and expanded learning opportunities for students and families.

Intentionally coordinated partnerships can

help transform schools into vibrant hubs of social supports and enrichment activities that promote the holistic well-being of children, youth, families, and the broader community. Indeed, school–community partnerships have been linked to positive outcomes in areas such as academic performance, school attendance, school climate, student leadership skills, and family engagement (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henry, 2014; Henry et al., 2017).

However, building meaningful community partnerships is not easy work. Developing and sustaining partnerships requires community school collaborators to create a shared vision, develop governance structures for ongoing collaboration, engage in healthy communication practices, and ensure investments of time and effort from school leadership. In this case study, we highlight key practices and lessons learned from two Chicago community schools with demonstrated strengths in forming and sustaining school–community partnerships.



¹ The authors developed this article in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative and the Diehl Consulting Group.

Background

Since 2002, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has implemented the Community Schools Initiative (CSI) as a strategy to support students, families, and the broader school community. In alignment with the key pillars of the community schools strategy, CSI relies on the development of cross-sector partnerships so that schools can offer high-quality wraparound supports and enrichment opportunities for students and their families.² In this section, we provide specific context about CPS's approach for partnership development, as well an overview of CPS CSI's research and technical assistance partnership.

CPS CSI Lead Partner Agency Model

In Chicago, a focus on strong partnerships begins with a lead partner agency model. Given the time and resources required of schools to create and sustain a broad range of cross-sector partnerships, CSI leaders recommend that CPS community schools designate a lead partner agency to facilitate program and additional partnership management. In this approach, the lead partner agency takes responsibility for hiring and managing a full-time, school-based resource coordinator (RC), who primarily oversees the school's CSI-funded afterschool and summer learning program. Lead partner agencies often take the lead on hiring additional staff for partner schools' afterschool and summer enrichment and academic programming; the lead partner agencies may also hire school-day staff or contract with external vendors for specific program offerings.

In Chicago, CSI has identified a set of lead partner agencies, which include community-based organizations, universities, and locally based national nonprofit organizations. District-level community schools program coordinators work with community schools administrators (most often principals) to select the lead partner agency that collaborates with their school. Although lead partner agencies help to develop and sustain cross-sector partnerships, it is common for CSI schools to have multiple, long-standing community partnerships with other organizations that may work in parallel or in conjunction with the lead partner agency to support specific populations or provide distinct services. To date, more than 50 organizations have formed partnerships with more than 200 CSI schools.

CPS CSI Research and Technical Assistance Partnership

For more than a decade, AIR, in partnership with Diehl Consulting Group, has evaluated CPS CSI schools funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program and provided research-informed technical assistance to schools to support effective implementation of the community schools strategy.³ Through this evaluation work, the AIR–Diehl team has identified key practices that contribute to effective CSI implementation.

² The [Community Schools Playbook](#) identifies four pillars of a comprehensive community schools strategy: Integrated Student Supports, Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities, Active Family and Community Engagement, and Collaborative Leadership and Practices.

³ For more information about AIR and Diehl's evaluations of CPS CSI, please see our website: <https://www.air.org/project/chicago-public-schools-community-schools-initiative>.

In 2023, CPS, AIR, and Diehl team members decided to translate CPS CSI evaluation findings into a suite of practice-oriented resources to (a) guide CSI continuous improvement efforts in Chicago and (b) make a broader contribution to the field of community schools. The team identified a set of key practices that drive successful CSI implementation, which align with the community schools pillars outlined in the [Community Schools Playbook](#) and previous CPS CSI evaluation findings. We developed case studies and related practice guides for each of these key practices to highlight the efforts of CSI schools engaged in promising approaches.

Key Practices of Effective Community Schools

Collaborative Leadership

Building Strong Partnerships

Integrated Student Supports and Expanded Learning

We aim for case studies and complementary practice guides to be useful for school and community leaders who are considering or currently implementing the community schools strategy. We also hope that these research-based resources help CPS and the broad field of community schools develop deeper insight into the conditions needed in schools to foster high-quality implementation. To see our “Strong Partnerships” practice guide and other resources, please visit our [website](#).⁴

Research Questions

To better understand how CPS community schools cultivate strong partnerships, we set out to answer the following set of research questions:

1. How do community schools identify and establish partnerships?
2. What school structures (i.e., resources, practices, and routines) and conditions enable the cultivation of strong community partnerships? What structure and conditions help sustain long-term partnerships?
3. What are common challenges to developing strong partnerships, and how do school and community partners address barriers?
4. How do the structures and conditions that support strong partnerships relate to and reinforce other key community schools’ practices?

⁴ Case studies, such as this one, provide research-based context and detailed findings about observed implementation practices at community schools. The practice guide series, informed by case study research, are condensed, action-oriented tools intended for use by community schools practitioners.

Sample and Methods

Drawing on evaluation and practice-based insights, CPS CSI, AIR, and the Diehl team collectively identified a subset of CSI schools demonstrating strong implementation practices for each of the key practices for effective community schools. The team identified two schools that demonstrated unique strengths in their approach to strong partnerships: Hilltop High School (Grades 9–12) and Merrit Elementary School (prekindergarten through Grade 8).⁵ The research team held informal conversations with two district-level CSI program coordinators who directly supported the identification of schools to confirm the school selection. These conversations offered our team a comprehensive understanding of the selected schools and their lead partner agencies, including their unique strengths and challenges in CSI implementation, student and family demographics, and overall climate and culture.

Sample Description

Hilltop High School, a magnet high school in southwest Chicago, enrolls nearly 3,000 students, making it one of the city’s largest high schools. The school offers several programs of study, including an arts program, a career and technical education program, an AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, and an International Baccalaureate program. More than 80 percent of Hilltop’s students come from low-income households. Additionally, a quarter of the student population’s first language is Spanish; many Spanish-speaking students are English learners, and their families require language translation services and supports. Hilltop has partnerships with several external organizations to provide robust academic opportunities and holistic supports aligned with the needs of students and families. To carry out CSI implementation, Hilltop partners with Greenfield Community Alliance (Greenfield), its lead partner agency. Below, we describe Greenfield’s role at Hilltop in more detail.

PARTNERSHIPS AT HILLTOP: GREENFIELD COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

Greenfield Community Alliance (Greenfield) is a community-based organization dedicated to promoting equity and racial justice by supporting local youth and adults in areas such as education, housing, health, and immigration. Greenfield employs a multifaceted approach to building community capacity. It engages in grassroots community-organizing efforts, provides free mental health services, and serves as an access point to community resources. At Hilltop, Greenfield is the **lead partner agency** and has appointed (1) a full-time resource coordinator, who implements CSI programming, and (2) a part-time parent coordinator, who organizes parent leadership committees and related adult educational programs (e.g., high school completion courses, financial literacy, health and wellness, and digital literacy workshops). Additionally, Greenfield helps connect Hilltop and other community schools with a network of local wraparound service providers to address primary and mental health care needs. Greenfield coordinates its service provision with other community partners at Hilltop, including

⁵ Schools and organizations have been assigned pseudonyms to protect identities of research participants. To see the list of participating schools and lead partner agencies involved in our case study research, please see our [website](#).

(1) a community-based mental health provider with an on-site clinician at Hilltop; (2) a city-based intermediary afterschool program, which provides apprenticeships, internships, and project-based afterschool and summer opportunities to Chicago teenagers; (3) a national nonprofit organization focused on integrated student supports, which staffs a site coordinator who works with a caseload of students at Hilltop; and (4) the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative, which provides college and career readiness programming.

Merrit Elementary School is a PK–8, neighborhood-based public school located on the north side of Chicago, serving more than 1,000 students. Situated in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood, Merrit serves an increasingly diverse migrant and refugee population. According to school leadership, more than 50 different home languages are spoken among students, and approximately 70 percent of Merrit’s student population classify as English learners. At various points throughout the year, the school enrolls and welcomes students who are refugees or migrants, including students who may have not received a formal education before coming to Merrit. Many students and families who are migrants and refugees receive case management services through school partnerships. The school also collaborates with numerous neighborhood-based organizations, including a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting immigrants and refugees that is across the street from the school. Below, we describe the key partnerships at Merrit.

PARTNERSHIPS AT MERRIT: CRESTWOOD, SUMMIT, AND SARI CENTER

Crestwood University Chicago partners with several public schools on Chicago’s north side to offer holistic programming that meets the needs of each school’s population of students and families. These partnerships follow the principles of the community schools strategy and the university’s goals of strengthening teaching and learning, preparing students for postsecondary education, engaging the Crestwood community, and advancing civic engagement. Crestwood University serves as the lead partner agency for seven CSI schools, including Merrit. At Merrit, the Crestwood CSI manager hires and supports the full-time resource coordinator, recruits student volunteers from Crestwood to support afterschool programming, and coordinates field trips for Merrit students to visit Crestwood’s campus.

Summit is a nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive and culturally responsive services for immigrants and refugees. It offers a variety of on-site wraparound programming for adult education, health and wellness, and workforce training. Summit also partners with several elementary and high schools to bring free counseling services into school buildings. At Merrit, Summit has a part-time clinician who manages a caseload of students, organizes social and emotional learning programming for the general student body, and provides professional development and mental health workshops for school staff and parents.

South Asian Resource Center for Immigrants (SARI Center) is a local nonprofit organization dedicated to facilitating community well-being and uplifting immigrants from the South Asian diaspora through direct service, education, and advocacy efforts. The SARI Center provides public benefits connections, immigration and citizenship services, adult education, health education, a seniors program, and community-organizing

activities. At Merrit, the SARI Center leads the Parent Mentor Program, an Illinois grant-funded initiative that aims to encourage parents from low-income backgrounds to become community leaders through employment and workforce readiness programming. A parent mentor coordinator works on-site three days a week to support “parent mentors,” who receive stipends to assist in select classrooms. The coordinator also organizes parent workshops and helps parents create their own schoolwide events.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

For this case study, we conducted a host of interviews and focus groups with a variety of community schools collaborators from each school and lead partner agency and reviewed related primary documents. To analyze data from diverse sources, we engaged in analytical thematic memo writing. To learn more about our data collection activities, see the Appendix.

In the remainder of this article, we provide a summary of findings and highlight four thematic findings organized by our research questions. The article concludes with overarching takeaways.

Key Findings

We organized our findings into four themes driven by our primary research questions and case study analysis. Below, we present a summary of key findings across these four themes.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. *In Search of Shared Values: Identifying, Selecting, and Onboarding Community Schools Partners*

Both schools engaged in collaborative processes to identify and onboard new partners that were guided by emerging student and family needs. School administrators, lead partner agency staff, and resource coordinators worked together to ensure partnerships aligned with the schools’ visions. In collaboration with their resource coordinators and CSI leadership team, school administrators engaged in needs and assets mapping, determined whether to expand current partnerships or establish new ones, vetted potential partners, and sought to clarify expectations and roles of the partnership before onboarding.

2. *Sustaining Healthy Partnerships: Structures, Conditions, and Strategies for Success*

Both schools sustained healthy partnerships through (1) school administrators who valued the contributions of their community partners, (2) resource coordinators who were empowered to make decisions regarding CSI implementation, (3) a partner agency that had visibility during the school day, (4) clear communication structures to support trust and transparency, and (5) partnerships designed to be mutually beneficial and sustainable.

3. *Common Challenges to and Tensions in Sustaining Partnerships*

Challenges to developing strong partnerships included (1) the absence of **coordinated communication systems** to build schoolwide knowledge and information sharing, (2) ensuring **racial and cultural representation in partnership engagement**, and (3) high rates of turnover among resource coordinators and administrators, which **disrupt relationship building and service delivery**.

4. *Connecting Strong Partnerships to Implementing the Community Schools Pillars*

Overall, school staff cited strong partnerships as essential to implementing the pillars of the community schools model by enabling schools to offer high-quality and culturally responsive programming and services that engage students, families, and the community. **The mindsets and strategies supporting strong partnership**, such as continuous communication and transparency, also reinforced other foundational elements of effective CSI implementation, such as collaborative leadership.

In Search of Shared Values: Identifying, Selecting, and Onboarding Community Schools Partners

In this section, we highlight practices and strategies used by Hilltop and Merrit during the initial partnership selection and development stage.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Successful partnership formation relies on administrator buy-in (i.e., a strong belief in the potential or existing contribution of a local organization to support students and families). At Merrit and Hilltop, administrators and resource coordinators sought to identify new partnerships and/or expand existing partnerships to address emerging needs and interests of their school communities.

- Administrators at both schools recognized the value of external organizations to support their visions of holistically serving students and families.
- Merrit and Hilltop administrators involved their resource coordinators and lead partner agencies in partnership decision-making processes.
- Both school and organizational leaders regularly assessed school needs to determine whether existing partnerships were sufficient or if new partnerships were needed.
- After initiating a new partnership, administrators and lead partner agency staff emphasized the importance of holding regular meetings with school and organizational staff to establish shared norms and expectations and ensure vision alignment.

At Merrit, administrators and the resource coordinator used specific criteria to identify and vet partners. Administrators emphasized the importance of selecting partnerships based on (a) vision alignment with their school’s values, (b) specific student and family needs (e.g., translation support, cultural competence with focal student and family demographics), (c) organizational proximity to school, and (d) pre-existing relationships. Additionally, Merrit administrators stressed the importance of gathering background information about the potential partner—both formal and informal—before onboarding a new partner to ensure alignment with the school’s vision and values. One administrator explained, “When we talk about partnerships, it’s seeing who has [a] vision aligned with our vision.” Administrators also emphasized the importance of ensuring that partnerships align with the school’s commitment to inclusivity of diverse cultures and that organizations do not promote specific missions (e.g., missions tied to a particular religious group or political affiliation) that could cultivate biases or sow conflict. Likewise, perceptions of an organization’s competency (e.g., the organization’s past ability to initiate programming and communicate effectively with school administration) also played a role in administrators’ decision making.

Although school administrators have the final say in matters regarding partnerships, resource coordinators, lead partner agencies, and school leadership teams collaboratively identified and recommended partnerships that fit the school population’s needs and interests. For example, at Merrit, the resource coordinator and principal worked closely to identify, secure, and manage partnerships by engaging in regular asset mapping to identify school priorities. In their weekly check-ins, they discussed potential partners and reviewed ongoing partnership activities. Together, they also hosted monthly family engagement events, inviting external partners to showcase their resources and services.

Similarly, Greenfield (Hilltop’s lead partner agency), leveraged its long-standing ties to the neighborhood to coordinate parent and community connections on the school’s behalf. Administrators collaborated with the resource coordinator, who worked closely with the Greenfield team to deepen community and family engagement through designated CSI funding and staffing. Although administrators made the final hiring decisions (e.g., determining which school staff could be hired as afterschool program staff), they also placed significant weight on the resource coordinator’s input in the decision-making process.

At both schools, administrators emphasized the importance of regularly assessing the needs and interests of students and families to determine whether existing partnerships were sufficient or if new ones were needed. For example, significant increases in the number of refugee and newcomer students enrolling in Merrit led the school to increase the number of wraparound services and mental health supports available. For example, Summit’s on-site clinician expanded the number of days spent at the school from one day a week to three days a week. Similarly, both administrators and the resource coordinator supported the expansion of the role of the SARI Center from solely offering adult education

and workforce programming to managing the school's Parent Mentor Program to better align with the evolving demographics of the school.

Merrit's administrators preferred to grow existing partnerships over establishing new ones, citing logistical challenges of the school managing more than 15 partner organizations. They also noted that new partnerships often faced first-year implementation hurdles, which required significant time and attention from administrators and school staff.

Lead partner agency staff and school administrators emphasized the importance of taking early and intentional steps to cultivate partnerships, including setting expectations for one another and clearly defining responsibilities for both school and organizational staff. At Hilltop, for example, Greenfield highlighted its approach to partnering with schools focused on transparency, tailoring its service delivery to each school's specific needs, and setting clear expectations from the start. Greenfield emphasized that having initial meetings with partnering schools' leadership was critical during the early phase of the partnerships to (1) discuss expectations for the partnership and (2) ensure vision and priority alignment. One Greenfield staff member elevated the importance of defining expectations while also staying flexible in the partnership so that partner services can be tailored to align with the school's specific needs and culture:

"I think it 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 just see how we can uplift that and support them in that. As opposed to wanting to implement our own ways, just because we have seven other schools and it has worked for us there, doesn't mean that it's going to work that way for this new one. So, tailoring to each school, listening and being open to do things differently, even if it's not something that you've done before that you're used to."

– Greenfield Staff Member

Hilltop's administrators also echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of holding meetings early on to establish clear expectations and a shared understanding of the partnership. For example, Hilltop's administrators discussed the importance of initial meetings to coordinate and delineate responsibilities and formally document these agreements (e.g., establish a memorandum of agreement).

CSI managers from both schools' lead partner agencies emphasized the value of securing initial buy-in from school administrators, who could serve as "champions" for the initiative. Greenfield's lead partner agency manager described the importance of forming the CSI leadership team when onboarding new schools to ensure that all key stakeholders involved in the partnership and CSI implementation become familiar with each other and the initiative. Similarly, the CSI manager at Crestwood, Merrit's lead partner agency, noted the importance of establishing a strong partnership

between the principal and resource coordinator early on. This team prioritized setting a consistent meeting schedule between the resource coordinator, Crestwood’s manager, and principal to clarify partnership expectations and lay the groundwork for robust collaboration.

In summary, initiating strong partnerships requires buy-in from school administrators, resource coordinators, and lead partner agencies, along with onboarding processes that foster a shared understanding of partnership expectations and establish a foundation for ongoing communication and needs assessment. In the next section, we delve further into the unique conditions, structures, and strategies that sustain strong and healthy partnerships.

Sustaining Healthy Partnerships: Conditions, Structures, and Strategies

Dedicated people and processes across schools and community organizations are critical to cultivating and sustaining strong partnerships. At Hilltop and Greenfield, we observed several enabling conditions that fostered a culture of transparency, trust, and respect between schools and their partner organizations.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

The following conditions, structures, and strategies enabled healthy partnerships to flourish in community schools:

- **School leadership buy-in.** School administrators understood the **value and contributions** of partner agencies to both engage and benefit their students and families. They championed the efforts of partner organizations within their school communities.
- **resource coordinator agency and leadership.** resource coordinators felt empowered by principals and CSI managers to make CSI implementation decisions regarding CSI implementation. As the “face” of the lead partner, resource coordinators also acted as a school-based liaison, coordinating programs and services and facilitating ongoing communication between schools and partners.
- **Visible school-day presence of partner staff.** Partner staff were well integrated into school operations and were familiar faces for school-day staff, students, and families.
- **Clear communication structures.** School and partner organizations established structures and routines, such as regular check-in meetings or use of shared documents, to ensure ongoing connection, transparency, and understanding about partnership efforts, decision making, and outreach.
- **Mutually beneficial partnerships.** Schools and partners collaborated to ensure mutually beneficial alignment in their work and identified opportunities to collaborate and support each other outside of direct programming.

Ultimately, these efforts fostered **school cultures of trust**, characterized by **mutual respect, familiarity, and a shared appreciation** for each other's contributions among school administrators, resource coordinators, partner staff, and the broader school community.

School administrators play a crucial role in initiating and supporting partnerships, facilitating introductions between partner agencies, sharing information with partner organizations, and helping to integrate programs into the school's culture. At both Merrit and Hilltop, principals sought to integrate their resource coordinators into school-day operations by inviting them to serve as members of various school committees (e.g., Hilltop's parent committee, Merrit's behavioral health team) and providing them with their own offices to enhance their accessibility to school staff, students, and families. Likewise, resource coordinators at both schools noted that administrators regularly invited the resource coordinators to add content to their schools' newsletters, providing an important platform for advertising CSI programming. Finally, Merrit's administrators further affirmed their commitment to CSI by incorporating formal goals into their Continuous Improvement Work Plan related to increasing the number of students who participate in CSI programming.

At both schools, the resource coordinator and administrators described their relationships as grounded in mutual trust and respect. This trust enabled resource coordinators and administrators to jointly make decisions about school partnerships, programming, and CSI implementation, while administrators entrusted lead partner agencies to allocate CSI resources (e.g., funding, staffing). Administrators at both schools, for example, empowered resource coordinators to hire school-day teachers as CSI staff and manage relationships with CSI-affiliated organizations. Greenfield staff described how Hilltop's school administration supported the resource coordinator in identifying new partnerships or opportunities to enhance the comprehensiveness of programming, such as creating a vocational program with a nearby community college. Likewise, Greenfield staff attributed their successful track record of (1) consistent program delivery and (2) securing additional grants to the trust that Hilltop's administration had in them to make decisions about the CSI budget.

Although Hilltop entrusted Greenfield's resource coordinator with expanded learning hiring decisions, Greenfield encouraged school administrator and staff perspective's on their hiring and management processes, to ensure that their staff aligned with Hilltop's needs and demographics. For example, Greenfield staff described their intentional efforts to involve school administration in expanded learning hiring decisions, especially when hiring Hilltop teachers for programmatic roles. Hilltop's administration also weighed in on hiring decisions for organizational roles at Greenfield, such as recommending an active Hilltop parent for Greenfield's parent coordinator position

At Merrit, administrators similarly trusted their school resource coordinator to lead hiring of school-day teachers for CSI expanded learning programming and to determine the use out-of-school time funding, allocated from the district, to enhance CSI programming. The resource coordinator also took ownership of hosting monthly resource events at the school and inviting partner organizations to participate in these events. **Resource coordinators at both schools promoted visibility of their lead partner agencies in their school buildings and streamlined communication across different groups.** At Hilltop, both the resource coordinator and parent coordinator prioritized being accessible and visibly participatory within school community activities and happenings. The resource coordinator, for example, regularly attended school-day events, and both the resource coordinator and parent coordinator participated in school committees, such as the parent advisory committee and bilingual advisory committee. Hilltop's resource coordinator also worked regularly with a Hilltop guidance counselor (who also leads CSI programming) to coordinate referrals to Greenfield or Greenfield-affiliated wraparound service providers. Hilltop staff noted that Greenfield stood out due to its level of integration within the school, with most students regularly interacting with the resource coordinator during the school day.

At Merrit, the resource coordinator served as a liaison between partner organizations and schools, helping partners better integrate into school operations. The resource coordinator frequently invited partner organization staff to PAC and BAC meetings, parent workshops, and other programming led by the SARI Center and Summit. Additionally, the resource coordinator invited Summit and the SARI Center to join the Merrit CSI leadership team, which, according to a SARI Center staff member, accelerated their knowledge of Merrit as well as helped to develop trusting relationships with faculty and staff. All three school-based partners at Merrit (the resource coordinator, Summit's clinician, and the SARI Center's parent coordinator) maintained school-day presence and visibility by regularly interacting with teachers, attending school-day events, and organizing or volunteering for schoolwide activities.

Both school personnel and partners emphasized the importance of open communication channels and shared documents to strengthen trust and collaboration. Merrit's resource coordinator and lead partner agency manager noted that the commitment of Merrit's administrator to meeting regularly with the resource coordinator demonstrated their dedication to CSI and strengthened implementation of the initiative. Similarly, Hilltop's administration and lead partner agency staff prioritized frequent meetings and open communication. In addition to attending the biweekly meeting with the resource coordinator and Hilltop administrator, lead partner agency managers attended monthly leadership team meetings and participated in collaborative budget discussions with school administrators at the beginning of the year. By maintaining consistent communication and transparency, Hilltop and Greenfield (the lead partner agency) ensured alignment of goals and efficient coordination of resources. One Greenfield staff member explained,

“[Our responsibilities are to] build relationships and be a part of the decision making, and to be aware of things that are happening at the school. So, we are very intentional in our communication, and we communicate with them a lot: with the principal or assistant principal.

– Greenfield Staff Member

Greenfield staff also shared that fiscal and hiring transparency is critical for a healthy school community partnership. For example, both Hilltop and Greenfield regularly engaged in direct conversations about CSI budget priorities, expenditures, and fundraising efforts. To facilitate these conversations, the school and partner share an online Excel spreadsheet for the budget that both parties can edit and update. Relatedly, Greenfield staff described

their intentional efforts to involve school administration in expanded learning hiring decisions, especially when hiring Hilltop teachers for programmatic roles. Hilltop’s administration also weighed in on hiring decisions for organizational roles at Greenfield. For example, a Hilltop assistant principal recommended an active Hilltop parent for Greenfield’s parent coordinator position. These practices helped ensure that hiring decisions aligned with Hilltop’s needs and demographics.

To ensure that mutually beneficial partnerships, both schools and partner organizations engaged in bi-directional resource and cost sharing, thus moving these relationships from transactional encounters to collective ownership of the work. Greenfield supported Hilltop in a myriad of ways beyond CSI programming, such as providing volunteers and staff for Hilltop’s annual Summer Bridge Program, an event welcoming incoming freshman and sophomore students and families. Likewise, Hilltop helps Greenfield by advertising its available services or programming and offering physical space for events. Greenfield and Hilltop have also identified additional ways to collaborate outside of CSI, such as by identifying opportunities to cohost events and share the cost of resources with each other. For example, one Hilltop administrator described how sharing the cost of required security at afterschool or weekend events ultimately saves both the school and Greenfield funding that can be redistributed to other programming and events. Finally, Hilltop administrators and staff also demonstrated support to Greenfield through advocacy for continued funding, particularly in response to state board of education funding cutbacks. Hilltop teachers have accompanied Greenfield on advocacy trips to Springfield, and Hilltop’s administrators drafted a letter in support of continued funding.

As a result of these efforts, both schools described the culture of strong partnerships as one of mutual respect, familiarity, and appreciation. The SARI Center’s parent mentor coordinator and Greenfield staff described the environment at their schools as welcoming and positive toward external partners. Likewise, teachers described feeling valued and listened to by their partner organizations, with one Hilltop teacher sharing how the Greenfield team frequently listens to Hilltop staff members’ ideas and contributions to CSI programming. Similarly, a Merrit staff member expressed appreciation for the resource coordinator’s “flexibility” and receptiveness to staff ideas: “Whatever program you want to start, she’s willing to try.” School staff at Merrit and Hilltop also recognized how their community partnerships have provided critical “manpower” to address the

diverse needs of their students and families. Staff also provided multiple examples of how their lead partner agencies have expanded their school’s capacity to authentically engage and welcome the community and alleviate that pressure on the classroom, enabling them to focus on teaching. One Hilltop staff member explained,

“The value in having partners that are not just in the school but outside the school [is that it] alleviates the stress of pulling one individual or one group too hard one way or another because of the size of our school.”

– Hilltop Staff Member

Each school also had a large population of teachers who regularly collaborated with partners or participated in partner-led events and activities. For example, Hilltop’s administrator estimated that more than 70 teachers work regularly with community partnerships or other organizations (e.g., Gear Up). At Merrit, numerous school staff have engaged with partners through

either staffing CSI programming, participating in Summit workshops and professional development on mental health, or engaging parent mentors in their classrooms. Each year, approximately eight different elementary classrooms have SARI Center–affiliated parent mentors supporting their teacher. Summit’s director shared how teachers directly reach out to their organization with requests for student referrals or a desire for specific workshops and professional development.

Hilltop’s teachers described school staff qualities that they believe enable strong partnerships to be formed and sustained, which included an emphasis on long teacher tenures that allow for growing familiarity with long-term community partners as well as the passing of institutional knowledge during resource coordinator transitions. The presence of teachers who are familiar with and supportive of partnerships has helped to generate more opportunities for teacher participation in collaborative grant writing with partner organizations as well as program development. Additionally, many Hilltop teachers were former employees of local community organizations; conversely, there are also Hilltop partner organization staff who used to be teachers. Similarly, at Merrit, Crestwood’s lead partner agency manager shared how their partnership benefited from the school’s long-term administrators who understood the value of partnerships, had deep familiarity with the work of community partners, and actively championed partners’ work.

Although both Hilltop and Merrit maintained overall healthy cultures of partnerships where administrators and school staff valued their partner organizations, challenges still emerged in coordinating partnerships and ensuring culturally responsive programming. We describe and expand on these challenges in the next section.

Common Challenges to and Tensions in Sustaining Partnerships

In this section, we explore the common challenges faced by schools and partner organizations and strategies used to address these challenges.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Challenges to the maintenance of strong partnerships included the following:

- **A lack of coordinated systems and communication methods** to build schoolwide knowledge and information sharing
- **Ensuring racial and cultural representation and engagement** with partner organizations
- **High rates of turnover among partner agency staff and school administrators**, which disrupts relationship building and service delivery

Strategies and solutions for these challenges emphasize the importance of **regular, transparent communication processes** and intentional efforts by administrators and resource coordinators to **integrate partners into school-day operations**.

Due to the high volume of co-occurring partnerships, programs, and initiatives at both schools, Hilltop and Merrit have faced challenges with coordinating and streamlining information about student and family referrals across partnerships. At Hilltop, for example, we observed that administrators and school staff perceived CSI's work as one funding stream for out-of-school programming rather than as a whole-school strategy, which compartmentalized the work of expanded learning from the delivery of integrated student supports. To address these siloes, the resource coordinator regularly engaged with staff from other partner organizations to identify opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing.

Administrators and staff from Merrit's three primary partner organizations (Crestwood, Summit, and the SARI Center) also acknowledged the difficulty with keeping students, families, and school staff informed about the evolving supports and programming. A staff member from the SARI Center shared her organization's challenge of balancing their desire to keep school staff updated on available resources while also not wanting to overwhelm them with constant communication. This staff member explained,

"I think teachers now know that SARI Center exists because we've done these presentations, and some of the older teachers might've known [our work] from when we had the youth program, but what about all the new programs we're starting or the new initiatives we're starting, or the things that we're doing? There's no one concise way to get that information out to teachers, and they're really busy . . . but I don't think it's the school's fault. I think it's just . . . how do you get information out in a very efficient way in a space that's constantly changing, and transitioning, and is very human?"

– SARI Center Staff Member

Merrit’s school administrators expressed a similar concern that a lack of awareness of the services provided by partner organizations could limit staff from making referrals or hinder students and families from accessing available supports, while increasing the burden on administrators and the resource coordinator to manage all communication across organizations. Both partner and school staff recommended stronger communication channels and clear structures for managing cross-organizational referrals to address these challenges.

Administrators at both Hilltop and Merrit described challenges regarding ensuring racial and cultural representation in partner engagements. For example, at Hilltop, an administrator raised concerns about the limited participation of Black and Asian families in partner organizations like Greenfield, which primarily serves Latine/Spanish-speaking families. The administrator emphasized the need for culturally affirming engagement to better connect with families in racial, cultural, and linguistic minorities:

“It’s really hard to navigate being a space where we’re honoring the culture of the majority of the students, but how are we also inviting that the minority of the population in? And so there is a lot of stuff that is very geared towards Latinx families and not necessarily the Black families in the community. We have a small Asian population as well. And so that is something that I want to think about more deeply and figure out.”

– Hilltop Administrator

Merrit administrators also identified tensions when considering partnerships that specifically focused on supporting specific ethnic groups. Although Merrit administrators wish to cultivate partnerships that can foster belonging and acceptance for their diverse student population, there have been occasions in which organizations focused on specific ethnic populations reproduced divisive politics and patterns of social marginalization of home countries that may have alienated students and families. In some cases, Merrit administrators have intentionally communicated with organizations the importance of their school values of social inclusion, and they have also communicated to families that organizations should support the entire school population and not just one ethnicity. In response, some partner organizations have paid attention to how they communicate their services in an inclusive manner. For instance, Summit changed its name from one that had emphasized supporting Asian immigrant families to signal that its services and outreach aim to support the increasingly diverse population of immigrant communities. Administrators also emphasized the importance of vetting partnership by their mission, agendas, and activities to ensure that their work does not alienate any subpopulation (e.g., by religion, nationality, or race).

Turnover among resource coordinators and partner organization staff disrupted relationship-building efforts and related service delivery at community schools. Even in schools with exemplary community school practices, it is common for resource coordinators to exit after one or two years due

to low salaries amid increased cost of living. For example, Crestwood’s CSI manager and resource coordinator shared that the low salaries tied to CSI grant restrictions led to frequent resource coordinator turnover. Similarly, Greenfield’s CSI manager shared that Hilltop’s current resource coordinator was the school’s third resource coordinator in five years, which affected the consistency and stability of CSI programming. To address these challenges, Crestwood’s CSI manager proposed solutions for retaining resource coordinators, such as leveraging the university’s tuition benefits or applying for additional grants to raise the salary of the resource coordinator. Merrit, in the past, had also demonstrated willingness to use school funds to offer retention raises to resource coordinators, recognizing their critical role in implementing the community schools strategy.

School administrator turnover also disrupted and weakened program delivery by requiring the creation of new buy-in and trust building for partnerships. For example, Hilltop’s parent coordinator explained that a new administrator, who was less familiar with Greenfield as a community organization and hesitant to establish regular meetings, had initially disrupted ongoing family engagement efforts. To address the challenge of turnover, Hilltop administrators described the importance of ongoing communication tools, such as shared note catchers and standing meeting agendas, to preserve institutional knowledge and memory. Greenfield’s CSI manager also noted that the resource coordinator played a significant role in onboarding new Hilltop administrators to CSI and fostering positive perceptions of both the initiative and their partner organization. In the next section, we explore strong partnerships in relation to the pillars of a comprehensive community schools strategy.

Connecting Strong Partners to the Implementation of the Community Schools Pillars

Across our case study research, school staff shared that strong partnerships were essential to successfully implementing the pillars of the community schools strategy. More specifically, staff discussed how partnerships enabled schools to offer high-quality expanded learning opportunities, deliver comprehensive wraparound supports using a whole-child approach, and strengthen community and family engagement. We found that the conditions supporting strong partnerships, such as continuous communication, transparency, and mutual respect, also reinforced foundational elements of effective CSI implementation, including collaborative leadership. Exhibit 1 provides examples of how strong partnerships strengthened implementation of the community schools pillars, which we expand upon in the sections that follow.

Exhibit 1. Example Programming, Organized by Community Schools Pillar

	<h3>Integrated Student Supports</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Through Merrit's partnership with Summit, an on-site clinician provides mental health services three times a week, along with professional development for teachers on social and emotional learning strategies and workshops for families about mental health.• Greenfield's Neighborhood Network facilitates access to many wraparound service providers.
	<h3>Expanded Learning Time and Opportunities</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greenfield and Hilltop successfully procured funding to establish a workforce program with Richard J. Daley College. This program enabled a select group of Hilltop students to participate in a paid internship, receiving workforce training and skills development.
	<h3>Family and Community Engagement</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greenfield significantly influenced Hilltop's vision for authentic, parent engagement by organizing parent leadership committees and engaging Latino-speaking students and families.• CSI collaborated with the Indo American Center to host events that celebrate diversity and uplift the various cultures of Merrit's students and families.
	<h3>Collaborative Leadership and Practices</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Through the Parent Mentor Program, the SARI Center empowers immigrant parents at Merrit to contribute to school decision making by providing professional development and paid opportunities for parents to work in classrooms to learn more about their school.

Integrated Student Supports

Strong partnerships not only expanded the capacity of schools to meet the wraparound service needs of students and families (e.g., mental health services, physical health exams, food and clothing) but also promoted unique efficiencies to facilitate access to services and support. At Hilltop, Greenfield leveraged its Neighborhood Network, a coalition of more than 70 organizations, including local agencies and social service providers, to ensure that students and families had access to a wide range of wraparound services and supports. Through this network, Greenfield established structures and processes to promote information sharing, such as quarterly meetings with all school-based Greenfield staff to keep them updated about referrals, school needs, and programming. resource coordinators and parent coordinators at each school also actively leveraged their relationships with families to provide “warm referrals” to wraparound services providers through the network. Finally, the network aimed to further reduce barriers by using NowPow, an online referral tool that centralizes data sharing across its member organizations.

Similarly, at Merrit, administrators emphasized the critical role that their partnership with Summit played in supporting the school’s diverse body of students, many of whom were first- and second-generation immigrants and refugees. A Summit clinician provided on-site services three days a week, during which they worked with a caseload of students requiring intensive mental health support. Likewise, Merrit’s resource coordinator aimed to reduce information siloes by inviting Summit staff to join the school’s CSI leadership team. Merrit’s administrators also sought to integrate CSI meaningfully

into the school's overall system for integrated student supports by encouraging the resource coordinator to attend the school's behavioral health team meetings and refer students in need of social and emotional learning support to CSI expanded learning and enrichment programs. Finally, Merrit's resource coordinator and administrators collaborated on annual asset mapping and promoted information sharing of available partnerships and supports through monthly events and resource fairs.⁶

Expanded Learning Time and Opportunities

Hilltop's administrators and school staff emphasized the value of partnerships between nonprofit organizations and school staff in securing grants to fund new programming, expand resources, and bridge funding gaps. Grants often require community collaboration and evidence of existing program impact, areas where partnerships excel. Greenfield has been instrumental in filling funding gaps at Hilltop by jointly applying for grants and additional funding. Through their strong partnership, Greenfield and Hilltop have successfully pursued external funding opportunities, such as securing additional summer funds in 2020 to support students' social and emotional needs and obtaining an external grant to establish a workforce program with Richard J. Daley College.

The resource coordinator at Merrit similarly provided expanded learning programs that aligned with students' academic and social and emotional needs and reinforced the school's vision of cultural inclusivity. The resource coordinator's involvement in the school's behavioral health, career and college readiness, and health and wellness teams kept the resource coordinator informed of pressing needs and allowed them to collaborate with school leaders on workshops, events, and programs to address those needs. Leveraging their network of community partnerships, the resource coordinator identified and implemented afterschool and summer programming that was relevant and impactful. The resource coordinator also collaborated with the SARI Center to launch programs, such as a Bollywood Club, celebrating cultural heritage and giving newcomer students the opportunity to see their cultures recognized by the school.

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement

Strong partners played a pivotal role in strengthening both schools' approaches to authentic parent, family, and community engagement. According to school staff and administrators, Greenfield actively steered Hilltop's vision for meaningful parent inclusion and fostered a welcoming environment for parent participation. Hilltop staff, for instance, credited Greenfield with transforming their school space into a community hub that welcomes parents and community members. Additionally, Greenfield, which largely hired from within the community and had mostly bilingual staff members, provided bilingual translation support and funding for parent enrichment opportunities that go beyond school-based funding for family engagement activities. According to a school administrator, Greenfield's parent coordinator, who is a Hilltop parent, significantly shaped the school's vision of parent engagement by leading the parent advisory committee and bilingual advisory committee.

⁶ For more information about Merrit's approach to integrated student supports, we encourage you to read our article and practice guide available on our [website](#).

Importantly, the parent coordinator was a fluent, native Spanish speaker and parent, which helped many Latine/Spanish-speaking Hilltop parents feel more welcome and comfortable with school volunteering and event participation. Finally, Hilltop administrators and Greenfield staff also discussed how Greenfield leveraged its status as a local community-based organization to better support families who may mistrust or feel intimidated by school administrators and teachers based on past experiences or inexperience with U.S. public education. One Hilltop administrator noted,

“If you had a negative experience at school, you may not want to ask the administration or the people that you see as somebody who harmed you for assistance. But if I’m connecting you with a community organization [created] specifically just to help parents, you may be more likely to connect with them than with the assistant principal or the dean who just suspended your kid.”

– Hilltop Administrator

Likewise, Merrit school staff, partners, and the resource coordinator described how partnerships with both Summit and the SARI Center provide a platform for engaging and empowering the community and parents. For example, the resource coordinator and SARI Center parent mentor coordinator collaborated on hosting parent workshops, which provided opportunities for parents to learn more about their school and help organize relevant cultural events. Through the Parent Mentor Program, parents (often first-generation immigrant mothers with limited formal employment experience in the United States) received stipends for working in classrooms, organizing events, and just generally receiving insight into the school’s culture. The parent mentor coordinator streamlined processes to interact with the school, helped parents apply for jobs, and offered skill and résumé-writing workshops.

Collaborative Leadership

At both Merrit and Hilltop, we observed how consistent actions, mutual respect, and flexibility in decision making not only strengthened the maintenance of strong partnerships but also empowered resource coordinators and administrators to engage in collaborative leadership practices. Merrit and Hilltop partner staff shared that their school administrators practiced collaborative decision making by inviting partners and families to provide input and contribute to planning both CSI and school-day operations. One staff member at Greenfield explained,

“What stands out about Hilltop’s admin is that they fully trust us as a partner. They give us the space when we need it. And when I say space, not just the space to implement programs, but to speak.”

– Greenfield Staff Member

These partner organizations in turn strengthened both schools’ approaches to collaborative leadership by staffing programs that built leadership skills for parents and provided opportunities for families to contribute to shared decision making. For example, the SARI Center managed the Parent

Mentor Program at Merrit, and Greenfield’s parent coordinator helped organize Hilltop’s parent advisory committee and bilingual parent advisory committee.

Conclusion

Strong partnerships between schools and community-based organizations are essential for expanding and deepening a school’s capacity to support the holistic well-being of students, families, and communities. Building healthy partnerships requires time, flexibility, dedicated staff, and clear structures to ensure that efforts evolve to meet emerging and unique needs of students and families. Our case study illustrates how two Chicago community schools championed their partners, intentionally involved them in their daily operations, and fostered a culture of respectful collaboration. On the partnership side, organizations hired and supported school-based staff, such as resource coordinators, to enhance school-day visibility of community partnerships and promote integration of activities and supports within school operations. With an aligned vision and mutual commitment, school–community partnerships are a powerful strategy for sustainably supporting students and families, thus fulfilling the promise of the community schools strategy.

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Appendix. Data Collection Activities

To provide an in-depth analysis of Community Schools Initiative (CSI) implementation and strategies for collaboration with partner agencies, we conducted a series of interviews, focus groups, and document reviews. Below, we provide a summary of these efforts, detailed in Exhibit A1.

Exhibit A1. Case Study Data Collection

	Hilltop High School	Merrit Elementary School	Totals
Interviews			
<i>Resource coordinator</i>	<i>n = 0</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 1</i>
<i>Principal</i>	<i>n = 0</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 1</i>
<i>Assistant principal</i>	<i>n = 2</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 3</i>
<i>Lead partner agency manager</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 2</i>
			7 interviews
Focus groups			
<i>Partner agency staff</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 2</i>
<i>School staff</i>	<i>n = 2</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 3</i>
			5 focus groups
Observations			
<i>Lead partner agency training</i>	<i>n = 1</i>	<i>n = 0</i>	<i>n = 1</i>
Document review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSI service plan • School website • Lead partner agency website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSI service plan • School website • Lead partner agency website 	

Hilltop High School. We interviewed two assistant principals involved in implementing CSI. We also interviewed the Greenfield Community Alliance CSI manager and subsequently conducted a focus group with four Greenfield staff members, based on the manager’s recommendation. Focus group participants included Hilltop High School’s parent coordinator and resource coordinator (resource coordinator), the manager of community schools, and the director of community schools. Additionally, we held two focus groups with five Hilltop school staff members whom the school’s resource coordinator recommended. These staff members included a school counselor, a librarian, a paraprofessional, a language teacher, and a career and technical education teacher.

Merrit Elementary School. We interviewed the school’s resource coordinator, the Crestwood CSI manager, the principal, and an assistant principal. Following the resource coordinator recommendations, we conducted a focus group with four Merrit staff members involved in CSI, including a school counselor, a librarian, a math teacher, and an art teacher. We also held a focus group with three staff members from two additional partner organizations at Merrit—the director of behavioral health from Summit and the education department manager and Parent Mentor Program coordinator from the SARI Center (South Asian Resource Center for Immigrants).

Finally, we reviewed relevant documents from both schools (e.g., school and organization websites, CSI service plans) to provide additional context for our interview findings.



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