

# Understanding the Implementational and Organizational Roles of Community School Managers

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## Background

- Community schools are a location for and network of partnerships between the school and community resources that support student achievement, and family and community wellbeing (Oakes et al., 2017)
- Community schools have been used as a comprehensive approach to school reform, demonstrating positive student, school, family, and community outcomes (Dryfoos, 2002; Durham & Connolly, 2016; Galindo & Sanders, 2019)
- Community school managers (CSMs) play an important implementational and organizational role in implementing community school models.
- In their implementational role, CSMs enact the practice of community schools. CSMs are also important in their organizational role, or how they fit into the organizational structure of the school, to ensure that community school models are integrated into the school organization.
- Clarifying CSMs' leadership role and establishing organizational structures to support CSMs are critical in the implementation and sustainability of community schools.

## Research Questions

- RQ 1: What is the CSM's role in the implementation of community schools? What is the CSM's role within the school organization? How do the CSMs' organizational roles affect their ability to serve students, families, and communities?
- RQ 2: How do school organizational structures facilitate or hinder the implementation of a community school model? How do CSMs navigate school organizational structures?

## Data and Methods

- The data were collected as part of an on-going, multi-year evaluation of a Community Schools Initiative (CSI) at a large, urban, East Coast school district, focusing on one elementary and two middle schools.
- The evaluation team conducted semi-structured interviews with the CSM and principal at each school for approximately 60 minutes. Central office staff were also interviewed.
- Interviews from three CSMs, two principals, and one district employee working directly with the CSMs were coded for analysis in this study.

## Results

### *CSMs' implementational and organizational role*

- CSMs understood their implementational role as identifying and meeting the needs of students and families to ensure that students have the supports necessary to succeed. The district provided direct assistance to CSMs to support their implementational role.
- The CSMs' organizational role—where they fit in the organizational map and how they integrated into the school organizational structures—remained unclear. There was little consistency in the school teams on which CSMs participated nor any agreement on their authority within the school.

- From the ambiguous organizational position, CSMs attempted to integrate themselves into existing organizational structures by serving on various school teams and assumed various roles within the school.

### *Negotiating leadership*

- The three schools exhibited a spectrum of leadership structures that happened to overlap with their level of CSI implementation.
- Principal D at Mountain Elementary was resistant to the idea of changing the leadership structure and expected all decision-making processes to go through her. Principal D closely monitored CSM Jasmine’s actions, which undermined Jasmine’s authority as a CSM. Consequently, Jasmine felt it necessary to “manage” principal D.
- Principal S at King Middle was more comfortable giving CSM Chris more autonomy over his work, but still held most of the decision-making power within the school. Principal S viewed the school goals as “what *I* [emphasis added] want,” but she gave Chris leadership within those boundaries.
- Principal C and CSM Lydia at River Middle described their relationship as collaborative, emphasizing their work together on the administrative team. Principal C viewed leadership as shared throughout the “leaders in the building.”
- Without clear expectations for the change in organizational structures a community school model will bring, schools were vulnerable to leadership turf wars with the principal.

### *Establishing structures or creating flexibility*

- All CSMs identified little change in the social and structural organization of the school with the CSI—without which CSMs remained organizationally unsupported and the CSI was perceived as unsustainable. Consequently, the CSMs needed to balance existing organizational structures and the necessary flexibility to effectively implement the CSI or create their own supportive structures.
- While the introduction of the CSM role and school-level teams were two vital organizational structures created for the CSI, there was a consensus that not enough structures were in place to fully integrate and support the CSI. This created challenges in staff buy-in, isolation of partnership work, and sustainability of the CSI.
- Existing structures that remained too rigid, like the procurement process, further created barriers for CSMs.

### **Discussion**

- Though the CSMs unequivocally understood their implementational role—identifying and providing necessary resources to students and families—their organizational role was more ambiguous. As a result, CSMs incorporated themselves into existing school organizational structures like teams, but unclear expectations of changes in the organizational structure necessitated a negotiation of leadership structures and resulted in minimal change in organizational structures that supported the CSMs’ work.
- Adams (2019) identified the importance of alignment in the district, partnering organizations, and the school in implementing and sustaining community school models. The schools in this study had this alignment for most implementational aspects of the CSI, but this alignment did not extend to the organizational aspects of the CSI such as leadership structure and comprehensive referral systems.