

MAKING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS WORK:

A Framework for Integrating Services and Partners

By Frank A. Mirabal, Tryphenia Peele-Eady, Ph.D., Ranjana Damle, Ph.D., Angelo Gonzales, Ph.D.



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Introduction

Teachers and schools have a crucial impact on student achievement (Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain 2005; Chetty et al. 2011). However, it has become clear in recent decades that students in low-income neighborhoods have fewer opportunities for high-quality education than their more-affluent counterparts. It is well documented that poverty, poor nutrition and health care, and unstable social environment are barriers to learning (Bireda and Moses 2010; Chang and Lawyer 2012). The community school movement is based on the premise that school-based health care, family support services, and extended learning result in student resilience and success in school and beyond (Community School Research Brief, 2009). These efforts complement rather than supplant school reforms focused on instruction, curricula, and school management.

Full-service community school models have emerged in the last three decades amid a growing recognition that schools can do more than instruct. The goal is to establish the school as the point of service to address a variety of student needs, a more efficient approach than the current system, in which services are provided in a range of settings both in and out of schools. Community schools have struggled with a range of issues, including contending with services that are co-located yet fragmented, providers who work independently of others, and disconnected programs. Over the years, community school models have evolved from a simpler strategy of co-locating of services and providers within a school toward a more complex strategy of integrating systems. These systems include aligned service components, shared goals and information, and common infrastructure across providers—all in service of the whole child.

Purpose of this Brief

This brief focuses on the concept of integration, explores its nuances, and identifies practical implications for community school practitioners, particularly those at the site level. Its purpose is to deepen knowledge about the concept of “integration” in the Elev8 initiative’s full-service community schools. Elev8 is a national community-school initiative operating in four areas of the country—New Mexico, the subject of this brief, Baltimore, Chicago, and Oakland. In a previous issue brief, Pierce, Mirabal, and Linney (2010) posited eight key ingredients to successful integration (see page 4 for discussion). Additionally, the authors created an integration rubric that could be used as a tool by the community school coordinator and other school practitioners to further the goals of the school through Elev8.

Since that original brief was published, Elev8 New Mexico has had the opportunity to use the integration rubric in four middle schools in the state. Although the rubric has proven to be a useful tool, we have learned through our experiences in these schools that the concept of integration is more nuanced than originally thought.

In this brief, we draw upon the original conceptualization of integration and lessons learned from the four Elev8 New Mexico middle schools. We also draw from archival documents and data gathered from interviews and a focused roundtable discussion with a group of previous and current Elev8 practitioners to deepen our conceptual understanding of integration. Our hope is that this study will be of use to practitioners working in community schools, who are seeking strategies to build an integrated system of support for students and their families.



Understanding the Context

The significance of the full-service community school emerged in the literature of the 1990s. For example, Adelman and Taylor (1997) argued that the barriers to learning and healthy development need to be addressed not just through educational reforms or with school-linked services. They instead proposed a systems reform that included “melding resources of home, school, and community to create a comprehensive, integrated approach,” with policy shifts to back such an approach.

Community schools have evolved from simple to more complex models. No longer mere hubs of co-located student-support services, they have become comprehensive, interdependent, and integrated service models that have the potential for a long-term positive impact for students, families, and the community. According to Grossman and Vang (2009), school-based health and extended learning programs improve students’ health, life skills, and attachment to schools, in addition to improving attendance and reducing risky behaviors. Additionally, family support programs in schools pull the parents in by providing access to a variety of services, thereby promoting better well-being for students and greater support from caring adults. The authors conclude that when all of these supports are integrated, they are more likely to be “multiplicative, rather than merely additive.”

There is strong and consistent evidence that community-schools programming creates a multitude of desirable

outcomes in terms of student achievement, students’ engagement with school, family-school connection, and benefits to family and community as a whole (Blank et al., 2003; Community Schools Research Brief, 2009). Beyond evaluating the impact of community schools on student achievement and school-community support systems, recent studies have addressed the issues of the cost of services and resulting benefits to the student and society. A recent case study sponsored by the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) measuring the social value produced by investments in two community schools showed positive results (Martinez and Hayes 2013). Social value is assessed not only in terms of improved student performance, but also the monetary returns generated and costs avoided by the social investments. According to the study, the CAS programs produced \$10.3 in social value for \$1 invested in one school and \$14.8 in social value for every \$1 invested in the second school.

While there would be little dispute in principle about the worth of integrating school and community resources to improve case management, avoid waste, and limit costs, there are many practical hurdles that interfere with programs and staff working together. The ultimate vision of complete integration may confront entrenched factors, such as narrow goals of programs or funding, turf disputes, unequal funding streams, and power structures that prevent seamless integration. In the next sections, this brief addresses the issues facing true and total integration of services, and presents recommendations based on local experience.

Conceptualizing Integration

Pierce, Mirabal and Linney (2010) began to document integration within the Elev8 full-service community schools. Building on two years of implementation and integration work at five pilot Elev8 sites, the authors identified the eight following key ingredients to successful integration.

- 1) Services are coordinated not just co-located
- 2) Shared ownership, responsibility and accountability
- 3) Tie services to support school goals
- 4) Provide opportunities to develop and strengthen relationships
- 5) Ensure quality service indicators
- 6) Provide intermediary support
- 7) Incorporate community resources and parent assets; and
- 8) Engage school and district leaders

In this early work, an integration continuum was also developed with four distinct signposts (awareness, coordination, collaborative practice, and sustainability) to allow practitioners to assess where they are in the integration process. The integration continuum also provided benchmarks to assess the progress of schools as they matured towards sustaining integration at their school site.

This early conceptualization of integration provides a solid foundation to build on. However, as the Elev8 initiative has matured and new knowledge has emerged, our conceptual understanding of integration has become more nuanced. Based on this experience and subsequent analysis, we posit that the Pierce, Mirabal and Linney (2010) integration framework can be distilled into two core dimensions: 1) institutionalization of policies and procedures; and 2) collaborative relationships.

Integration Framework:
Institutionalization of Policies and Procedures and Collaborative Relationships

| Integration: Conceptual Framework | | Institutionalization of Policies and Procedures | |
|--------------------------------------|------|--|------|
| | | LOW | HIGH |
| Collaborative Relationships | LOW | | |
| | HIGH | | |

As the table above shows, in this framework integration on a school campus varies from low to high along two conceptual dimensions: 1) the depth and breadth of collaborative relationships; and 2) the institutionalization of policies and procedures that foster integration. The underlying assumption of this framework is that integration is at its apex when a school has both strong, collaborative relationships and policies and procedures that undergird integrative practice. School-level integration that is high on institutionalization of policies and procedures but low on relationships, or high on relationships but low on institutionalization represents an unstable and tenuous system. To achieve successful and productive integration, the relationships must be well-developed among all stakeholders and staff, and the school must have in place policies and procedures that have been carefully developed and institutionalized to facilitate smooth relationships and seamless functioning of all the components.

As a starting point, dynamic school-community relationships are established to address both the academic and non-academic needs of students and their families. At the center of the relationship-building process is the site coordinator. Data collected from interviews and focused roundtable discussions suggest that the site coordinator position is critical in establishing relationships between and among key stakeholders within a school community. One former site coordinator referred to the site coordinator position at a community school as the chief operating officer (COO). In other words, the site coordinator function is instrumental in coordinating all non-academic services in a school. Integration is advanced when the “COO” (site coordinator) establishes a good working relationship with the “CEO” (principal) of

the school. In some cases, the relationship between the site coordinator and principal may make or break a community school. Moreover, a level of trust between the site coordinator and principal needs to be established to ensure that the two key stakeholders agree on the overarching goals and objectives of the school.

It is also important to consider establishing mutually reinforcing relationships between and among key stakeholders to support integration on a school campus. It is a common experience that institutional knowledge exits when key participants leave established structures.

Lessons learned from Elev8 New Mexico suggest that a community school can become vulnerable when a principal leaves and there is not a cohesive vision for the school. To mitigate this challenge, it is important to create opportunities for key stakeholders in the school-community partnership to cultivate relationships that support a unifying vision and collective goals for the school. These relationships may start with the site coordinator or principal serving as an intermediary. However, it is important for relationships to grow between other key players in a school.

Another important factor is communication between and among key stakeholders within a school community. Data from the focused roundtable discussion suggest that communication between and among key stakeholders becomes institutionalized when expectations are clearly defined through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other guiding document. In the Elev8 New Mexico context, the MOU serves to create an accountability structure that guides the school-community partnership.



Moreover, the MOU is a fluid document that outlines:

- 1) roles and responsibilities of participants;
- 2) goals and objectives;
- 3) intended outcomes;
- 4) timelines; and
- 5) a set of deliverables that can be crosschecked at various points in time.

In sum, the MOU can open dialogue among partners and serve an accountability function.

Data also suggests that integrative practice becomes institutionalized when new or existing school structures are optimized. In the context of Elev8 New Mexico, regular site team meetings were created to provide a structure to support a holistic vision for students, families, and the school community. The site team meetings also provide a mechanism to share data, coordinate referrals for students and families, share partnership opportunities, and coordinate interventions.

To advance integration at a school site, it is important to consider inclusion of community partners in existing school structures. Historically, schools have developed structures to increase collaboration and break down silos between and among teachers, administration, and departmental leads. These structures may include curriculum and instruction teams, parent-teacher organizations, health and wellness teams, and student advisory offices. However, many of these structures have not traditionally included key community partners, such as those providing afterschool activities, health care, and family support services. By integrating these existing school structures and expanding them to embrace community partners, schools have the opportunity to be more holistic in meeting the comprehensive needs of students and their families.

Institutionalizing procedures is a critical step in the sustainability of integrative practice. However, it is also important to consider school-level policies that advance integrative practice. For the purpose of this discussion, school-level policies can be characterized as the semi-permanent rules that govern relationships and behaviors within a school. School-level policies may be known by other names (e.g. procedural directives or compacts) depending on the school or school district. While these school-level policies may have different names, it is important to consider how the formal and informal rules govern integrative practice on a school campus.

In previous sections, we have discussed how certain school structures advance integration by being more inclusive. However, if these procedures are not

memorialized in school policy, schools run the risk of reverting back to non-integrative or “siloed” practice when there is turnover in key staff. For this reason, it is important to consider drafting school-level policies that foster shared leadership. For example, schools can write into their bylaws that certain school structures must have proportionate representation from community partners and parents. Further, schools can develop policies whereby community partners and parents are included in hiring decisions that impact the school, such as the school principal or site coordinator.

School-level policies can also support the alignment of school-community resources. Schools in disadvantaged communities typically have access to federal Title I resources to support student achievement and parent involvement. However, Title I resources often are not adequately distributed to support the infrastructure necessary to support these two broad goals. Given the importance of a site coordinator in a community school, schools can develop policies that allow Title I resources to support this important coordinating function, which in turn helps to align resources on a school campus in support of these two broad goals.

Meanwhile, state- and district-level policies can advance integrative practice in schools. In 2013, Elev8 New Mexico and other community leaders successfully advocated for the Community Schools Act in the New Mexico state legislature. Key provisions of the Act added language in the state’s public school code to include the integration of services in schools through a site coordinator. The Act also contains provisions that demonstrate how existing state and federal resources could be better aligned to support core community schools principles, including integration.

In the next section of this brief, we provide a nuanced analysis of integration from the practitioner, parent, student, and community-member perspectives. Data in this section was collected at the site-level over a 15-month period.

The Elev8 New Mexico Experience: Integration in Action

Interviews with Elev8 participants (Elev8 personnel, service providers, parents, students, and select members of the school community) suggest that integration is an organizationally dependent construct. Notions of what constitutes successful implementation of integration across the Elev8 school sites change over time and look different across the contexts in which integration occurs. As one respondent noted, and as most would agree, *“each school is its own culture and community and entity of itself.”*

Each Elev8 site maintains considerable flexibility in how it achieves integration. Although integration varies from site to site, Elev8 participants tend to characterize integration as the process through which providers coordinate their activities to provide services to Elev8 students and families. Elev8 participants can be heard referring to Elev8 as integration, sometimes using the terms “Elev8” and “integration” interchangeably, and thus suggesting that Elev8 and integration are one and the same.

One respondent indicated that integration is evidenced when:

“...organizations really work together like one organization, and the supervisors work together to hold everyone accountable in a coaching way.”

Another respondent added:

“There’s a perspective that we’re all working together and trying to do the same thing.”

Another respondent described a well-functioning integration system as:

“...one team. If you were to go in and see that team, you wouldn’t know who worked for who because they work together.”

One respondent offered the following as an example of integration in action:

“So there was a young man who had a sore on his mouth and the teacher noticed that it wasn’t healing. And so that teacher sent the student to the school-based health center. The school-based health center did their questionnaire, and realized that the family was living out of their car and immediately walked the young man to the family resource center. And then the family resource center got more information and figured out that the mom was struggling with drug issues and had attempted suicide, and took the child back to the school-based health center to have them follow up more deeply with some behavioral health supports. I mean, that is a seamless example of integration.”

This final example highlights ways in which a teacher, the school-based health center, and the family resource center at an Elev8 school site worked collaboratively to assist a student and his family and perhaps saved the life of a child.

This example also provides a frame for showcasing key designations of strong integration: shared, collaborative leadership; common goals; and, as one respondent noted, it “supports not supplants.”



To this end, Elev8 practitioners provided some critical reflections regarding integration:

- **Co-location, coordination, and collaboration.**

In describing what integration is or is not, respondents describe a range of integrative models, including co-location, collaboration, and coordination. This comprehensive model suggests that supports must be connected. “Co-location is important, but collaboration [plus] coordination, [is] true integration.” Respondents argued that having a lot of supports without the knowledge of what each component is supposed to do is problematic. From this perspective, Elev8 provides the frame for coordination of services **and** effective collaboration among service providers to occur.

- **Integrating existing services.**

Several participants made the point that integrative programs, practices, and policies were in place at their respective schools long before Elev8. However, in such cases, our research suggests that providers often existed in isolation, worked from a single-strategy focus, and involved limited partners. Although respondents agreed that the work of integration can be challenging, they also agreed that integration presents an opportunity for the different providers to leverage resources and save money, which in turn advances Elev8 New Mexico’s sustainability efforts. As characterized by one respondent, “You’re bringing in all of these providers and different services to the school.”

An important caveat in this framing is not to view Elev8 as a substitute for what is already happening at the school site, but as a supplement to current efforts. In other words, as one respondent expressed it, “[Elev8 is] not here to take over what you’re doing. We’re—we’re all here together. This is what broad impact is about, right?”

- **Training for and sustaining integration.**

Several participants also felt that sufficient training and orientation must be provided to promote and sustain true integration. One coordinator noted the need to regularly “reintroduce Elev8” to the individual school sites either through updates or planned orientations to keep teachers and the entire school community abreast of updates and changes as they occur.

The same can be said for participating parents and families. Site coordinators argue that the “vocabulary”

describing integration needs to be more accessible to parents and students “so parents know the agenda when they hear it; so they know what [integration] is” when they see it.

All respondents agreed that good integration takes time to establish. Almost uniformly, those interviewed described the need for sufficient time to have dialogue with and establish relationships among team members. Respondents also emphasized the important need for Elev8 representatives, especially the site coordinator, to “be present” and “walk the hallways”—to be visible and maintain close communication with providers and positive relationships with the principal, teachers, parents, and other members of the school community.

In addition to these challenges, respondents also identified several essential ingredients of integration:

Memoranda of understanding allow “Elev8 to kind of oversee—not to be the boss of, but just to kind of help keep things within—coordinate and oversee.” MOUs function as a tool of communication and accountability.

Weekly site team meetings are the cornerstone of integration as it manifests in the schools.

Productive communication and relationships among providers and members of the Elev8 team are essential for integration to work, as are shared philosophies and goals.

The site coordinator is central to the success of integration. As noted by one respondent, “The site coordinator is critical in being able to establish that team because their job, in my opinion, is to really understand each of the organizations, the nuances of those organizations, what they do, what they need to get done within the school district, and understanding the school district system and how to get it done.”

Recommendations

Institutionalization of Policies and Procedures

Institutionalization of policies and procedures is a core component for fostering integration on a school campus. The following recommendations are drawn from effective practices that have been developed by Elev8 New Mexico's four school sites.

- **Identify a site coordinator.**

Effective integration requires dedicated staff support to ensure accountability to integrative practice. The Elev8 model utilizes a site coordinator in this role to build relationships, act as a liaison between the school and community partners, schedule integration meetings, develop meeting agendas, and share data with stakeholders. Ideally, the site coordinator is a full-time position on a school campus. If this is not feasible, identifying an existing staff person within the school team to fulfill this role is important. However, school leaders should be mindful that professional development to support the site coordinator at a school is critical.

- **Set up an integration team in your school.**

The purpose of an integration team is to have a structure in which core members of the school-community partnership come together to build relationships, plan, solve problems, coordinate referrals, and share information. Institutionalizing an integration team within a school has two primary benefits. First, it reduces the risk of a school principal making unilateral decisions regarding the school without consulting other core members of the team. Second, it facilitates continuity of leadership when school leaders, school staff, or community partners leave the school. In other words, an integration team can maintain a crucial store of institutional knowledge and promote policies and behaviors to keep integration going even when core members of the team depart from the school.

- **Ensure cross-disciplinary representation in existing school structures.**

Having representation across the range of service and program areas on school teams ensures that the holistic needs of students and their families are addressed and creates a better alignment between the school and its community partners. For example, schools can invite extended learning providers to participate in the work of curriculum and instruction teams to foster alignment between the

traditional and extended school day. There are many existing structures within a school (e.g., health and wellness team, student advisory office, or parent-teacher organization) that can be integrated with representation from school-community partners. These structures can also be a launching point for cross-disciplinary professional development opportunities, such as health care staff training afterschool staff on identifying risky behaviors.

- **Embed integrative practices in school goals and policies.**

Accountability to integrative practice needs to be anchored by a shared vision and understanding of what the school-community partners hope to accomplish. In New Mexico, the Elev8 team created a "Super MOU" with its partnering school districts that represents the work of all its community partners in one document. This MOU outlines a scope of work for each community partner, creates an accountability structure to monitor goals and objectives set forth by schools and partnering agencies, and establishes procedures for data sharing. Moreover, schools and school districts can reflect integrative practices in their policies, such as the parent involvement policy, and through other operational documents like student success and school improvement plans.

- **Maintain a system of communication.**

Schools are complex organisms that have many moving pieces. The purpose of integration is to combine academic and non-academic supports to maximize the benefits for students and their families. With this in mind, it is important to set up a system of communication that facilitates both one-way and two-way communication, to ensure that key players in a school are sharing information in a timely manner. In the Elev8 New Mexico context, schools accomplish this by scheduling regular site team meetings with key stakeholders to discuss important issues affecting students, families and the school community. Data are also regularly shared at site team meetings to assess progress and inform decision-making. Elev8 New Mexico also shares one-way communication with key stakeholders through a monthly newsletter and a blog.

Collaborative Relationships

Recognizing that the greatest asset in an integrated system is the people within it, the following represents some considerations on how to build robust relationships at a school site to support integration.



- **Identify a site coordinator with strong skills and attributes and support his or her professional development.**

Data from the integration roundtable discussion suggests that finding the right coordinator is essential to cultivating relationships between the school and community partners. Building a common language and developing trust among a broad swath of stakeholders requires good communication and strong problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Likewise, site coordinators need to have the dedication and perseverance to cultivate the necessary relationships to move integration forward. An effective site coordinator with the skills to bring people together and develop trusting relationships can be a powerful force within a school community to support integrative practices.

- **Build leadership at all levels.**

The principal generally has the authority to make decisions regarding what is in the best interest of the school and the school population. However, there are many individuals who assume positions of informal power and influence in the decision-making process, including site coordinators. Building a cadre of “champions” within teaching staff, providers, families, and community groups can help sustain an integrated system.

- **Establish mutually reinforcing relationships.**

In the workplace, it is common that institutional knowledge leaves when a key staff person leaves. To mitigate this challenge, it is important to build relationships between and among key players in the school environment (e.g. site coordinator and health care providers or extended learning providers and family engagement providers). Ensuring that many people have a strong understanding of integration helps to establish an institutional memory that can survive the departure of key members of a school community.

It is particularly important for the principal and site coordinator to cultivate other leaders within the school who possess both the knowledge and the vision to help carry the work forward should a vacancy arise in either of these positions. Mature community schools should also consider developing a formal succession plan to minimize the disruptions that occur due to staff turnover.

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