

# ORGANIZATIONAL COHERENCE

*School leaders at New Highland RISE Elementary and Elmhurst United Middle School talk about their path to creating learner-centered community schools*



This brief draws on interviews with school principals, community school managers (CSMs), and district leaders in two community schools and focused on school improvement efforts based on Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) full-service community schools model (FSCS). New Highland RISE Community Elementary School (RISE Community) and Elmhurst United Middle School (Elmhurst) are situated in adjoining Oakland, California neighborhoods roughly one mile apart, east of the Oakland International Airport and near Oakland's southern border with San Leandro.

**SEPTEMBER 2020**

COMPANION BRIEFS IN THIS SERIES FEATURE COMMUNITY SCHOOL LESSONS FROM:

- **Bridges Academy**
- **REACH Academy**

## SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS, 2018-19

	ELMHURST UNITED	NEW HIGHLAND RISE
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	95%	98%
Students with Disabilities	14%	10%
English Learners	32%	53%
African American	30%	33%
Latino	63%	60%
Asian	3%	5%

### BACKGROUND

Community schools are generally characterized by three broad operational approaches:

- Provide motivating and engaging learning opportunities during the school day, after school, and in the summer.
- Offer essential health and social supports and services.
- Engage families and communities as assets in the lives of children and youth (Coalition of Community Schools, 2019).

Until recently however, few researchers have examined how these elements are coherently operationalized to create learner-centered environments that advance equitable student outcomes. At the district level, for example, McLaughlin and her colleagues recently documented how OUSD’s Community Schools & Student Services office creates “the infrastructure, collaboration, and leadership

needed to bring alignment across district FSCS components” that are otherwise sub-units of other district departments or initiatives (McLaughlin, et.al., ch.5). This same challenge to organizational coherence prevails at the school level. Academic faculty, afterschool partners, family resource centers, early learning programs, and health and wellness units operate in shared spaces but often with independent budgets, separate accountability reporting lines, and disparate professional norms. It falls to the site leadership team, including the principal and CSM, to cohere these different parts of how “we do school” in OUSD.

### What is organizational coherence and why is it important to the success of community schools?

At Elmhurst, Principal Kilian Betlach speaks about coherence in actionable terms. Long before Elmhurst became a community school, he quipped, “we were Elmhurst Divided.”

In other words, coherence is defined by a deep, shared understanding about the purpose of school and about why adults show up for work at the campus every day. How school leaders and educators are supported to do this coherence work can make the difference between organizational confusion, distrust, and demoralization, or community schools characterized by shared purpose, effective collaboration, and community trust.

We asked two veteran community school principals, their CSMs, and other school leaders how they work as a team to create high-functioning, learner-centered community schools. What we heard follows.

### **GETTING CLEAR ON THE "WHY"**

The leadership teams at RISE Community and Elmhurst agree that the path to a strong, coherent community school is paved by a clear shared vision among faculty, staff, partners, and families about their collective purpose as a school. As Elmhurst Principal Betlach stated succinctly: to make progress “we need to get clear on our ‘why’.”

And, this is not to be confused with clarity about goals or strategies. Academic and youth development goals are set by the district and embedded in state accountability systems. But successful collective action on goals requires a shared understanding about why a school team will pursue specific goals and also about how they will work together to achieve them.

One principal explained that, too often, leaders begin with “These are our goals, particularly our academic goals. And then we track back to: What skills do our kids need to [achieve] those goals?” This, the principal continued, is usually a mistake. He elaborated, “[We should begin with] this is our vision. This is our mission. And this is what drives... why everyone is here. And then we map back from that.”

At RISE Community, Principal Samantha Keller worked with her CSM and other school stakeholders to reduce their vision statement into a deceptively simple, actionable sentence.

## **New Highland RISE Community School**

### **Our Mission**

At RISE Community School, we promote student achievement through academic and social emotional learning in a safe environment.

We are: Safe, Kind, Responsible.

But staff at both schools emphasize that, while a written mission statement is a touchstone for action, developing a deep and shared operational understanding about the purpose and moral imperative of their community school work is a continuous process. Some of that understanding happens through formal meetings, family engagement, and professional development activities. More frequently, school leaders shared that a common vision emerges as they engage community stakeholders in less formal, routine conversation about their values and about the meaning they find in teaching, professional learning, mentoring, and youth development.

School leaders explain that these frequent opportunities to reflect on mission and vision are centered on district academic achievement goals but are shaped by their school community. This taps into the inherent motivation and discretionary effort of every adult in the building, including parents and community stakeholders.

**Shared Purpose Supports Professional Development.** One principal talked about how mission and vision conversations facilitate and provide a logic for progress monitoring and for providing continuous correction for teachers. These interactions provide opportunities to reflect with teachers and school partners about the joy and fulfillment they take in learning, about why they care about their students' journeys as readers, writers, and thinkers.

As one CSM explained: "You can go to trainings ... and learn the prescriptive ways to do a role. Or you can own it. And feel like our campus gives us room to own it – to cycle, design, test, and redesign" guided by a shared community understanding about the why.

### **Shared Understanding Engages School**

**Partners and Communities.** Another principal and CSM talked about how it was not enough to have parents just "hang out" and socialize on campus. They want to connect family engagement to the academic mission of the school.

To accomplish this, they leverage opportunities to engage parents in common reflection about the school's mission to serve as a "hub" for multi-generational learning and social justice informed by community values. These conversations have informed strategic planning with the Family Resource Center about on-site learning opportunities for families that are responsive to community needs.

At Elmhurst, Principal Betlach noted that these conversations about mission and vision with parents were essential for building trust within the community. Families need to know, he added "that we are here to join with them in kinship," to conceive of the school as a place where "we develop community," and not as a place where kids just learn to take "their place" in the economy.

## **Shared Understanding Advances Academic Engagement and Instructional Capacity.**

Principals and CSMs were quick to draw a bright line between a shared understanding of their “why” and success with important district goals. Most often mentioned was that a shared vision with families builds trust in the community that, in turn, translates into improved overall attendance and a reduction in chronic absenteeism. As one principal stated, a shared community school vision provides a clear logic and value proposition for families to “want to bring their children to this building.”

Both principals and CSMs described how a shared vision among adults at the school is instrumental in building program coherence and instructional capacity at the site. It enables leaders and stakeholders to see opportunities for improvement and to act in line with the shared purpose.

For example, school leaders explained that a shared vision helps hiring teams to carefully select and induct new staff who will buy in to shared purpose, and who possess the collaboration and continuous learning and improvement dispositions that will make them a good match for the school and the community. CSMs further noted that a clear shared understanding of mission and priorities at the site level also helped them to vet and induct afterschool and out-of-school time partners who willingly embrace the vision, and will focus on coherent integration of interventions with schoolwide goals.

Both principals and CSMs offered that a shared vision contributed to longevity among staff and to stable partnerships at their school over time.

## **DISTRIBUTING LEADERSHIP ACROSS SCHOOL FUNCTIONS**

How does leadership work in coherent community schools? A common view of school leadership is that the principal sets the direction and priorities and that teachers, school partners, and staff are held accountable for progress toward goals. This paradigm of leadership and accountability comes from insights gleaned from studying managers and employees in factories (Aguayo, 1991).

But principals at RISE Community and Elmhurst are quick to point out that schools are not factories, teachers and school partners are not employees, and that their identities as principals are much more akin to that of a coach than a manager.

Each emphasized that a community school is first and foremost a community of caring, mission-driven professionals. Their formative experiences as school principals has taught them that success happens when every adult in the school takes initiative and feels both capable and empowered to act in the service of shared purpose.

**Building Leadership among Instructional Staff.** By tapping into the inherent motivation of educators to hold themselves accountable for the success of all students, principals at RISE Community and Elmhurst empower action toward goals. They work with their CSMs to distribute and cultivate leadership among teams of faculty, staff, and key partners that own responsibility for progress in the areas of instructional leadership, personnel hiring, health and wellness, family engagement, attendance teams, and culture and climate.

As Principal Keller described it, she spent the better part of her first year at RISE Community just listening and observing the task environment and state of relationships that already existed in her school. In that initial time, she looked for leadership potential in every part of the school. “Then,” she said, “you want to develop people into their roles and ... allow people to ... lead [some essential part of] the work. And so [this coming school year], I have a teacher in mind to be my math lead.” She approached him and said: “I need you to step up and do this work.”

She also said that in the next year she intended to appoint a teacher to lead the personnel [hiring] team. She said she planned to have a teacher “lead it, schedule the interviews, and send the calendar invites.” She concluded that she is asking people to step into those roles and to trust that she will make sure they are successful.

**Extending Leadership to Community Partners and Non-Teaching Staff.** Distributed leadership is part of a culture of shared influence within an Oakland community school – not just between the principals and teachers, but including all of the school partners and support staff and families that make up the school community.

Elmhurst CSM Ariel Benavides shared that after her first few years at Elmhurst she felt that she had reached the limits of what she could professionally contribute and continue learning. Her principal convinced her to stay, in part by engaging her in a dialogue about what she thought were her core strengths and what she wanted to learn going forward. She and the principal agreed that she had remarkable skills as a relationship builder. And they set out to shape the CSM role in a way that tapped into her strengths and that enabled her to keep leading and learning.

She is now in her seventh year at Elmhurst and plays instrumental roles as the lead for the Coordination of Services Team (COST), but also in developing the restorative practices work and in leading and elaborating the school’s culture and climate teams. More importantly, her induction as an Oakland community school leader informs the way that she approaches leadership development among all stakeholders with whom she collaborates.

She explains:

*Anything can be a job where you clock in and you clock out. Or folks can really bring their full selves. And I think when folks feel incorporated ... and [feel] valued in the work, they bring their full selves. And so, we try to do that with our partners as well. [They] are not just a side resource that we dip into, but I communicate that 'you have a place here and we are better because of you.' .... Our office manager, for example, he and I started the same year. He was an AmeriCorps person brought on to just do [office] work. And now he runs the office and leads a team of four!*

**Empowering Youth to Lead.** At Elmhurst, Principal Betlach spoke about the power of extending the concept of distributed leadership to youth in the upper grades. He noted that students are “culture carriers” in a school and can play powerful roles in cultivating a safe and supportive culture of learning among peers.



He noted that Elmhurst had recently been re-constituted as the new home school for students at two other campuses that were closed. He lamented that in the tumult of the merger he had not had the opportunity to delegate more of the peer induction activities to Elmhurst student-leaders.

Looking to the next school year, he mused how he might delegate more to his students:

*Maybe having kids design some first week activities and having them... design some different T-shirts that say, 'I'm an Elmhurst United leader.' Having them get to wear those shirts, making sure they know the answers to a lot of questions that [new] kids are going to have..... And just have them build that excitement for the school. I think that would have really helped us [during the transition year] and invested [new 8th graders] in some of the 'whys' of our policies.*

Ultimately, school leaders at Elmhurst and RISE Community build teams to carry forward the many complex tasks and relationships of a community school and then distribute leadership to those teams. In their view, this approach cultivates agency and mutual accountability to the shared vision among all the stakeholders in a school. Their approach to shared power and influence has unlocked creativity in problem-solving and service delivery by empowering caring adults to act on new opportunities to operationalize key strategies, including, most notably, improving attendance, engaging families, and removing barriers to learning through COST and school-community health and wellness initiatives.

## **FOSTERING STAKEHOLDER COMMITMENT, PARTICIPATION, & COHERENT ACTION VIA TEAMS**

The benefits of a shared community school vision can lend coherence to almost all aspects of adult collaboration. For example, Coordination of Services Teams (COST) and Restorative Practices leadership teams are designed to structure adult collaboration and to operationalize multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) in Oakland schools.

But change leaders at Elmhurst and RISE community were quick to point out that the mere existence of these formal collaboration structures does not, on its own, lead to coherent action. In fact, the principals at both schools describe arriving in their first year to find organizationally chaotic schools. They found a great deal of instructional support, and family engagement activities going on – but those activities and functions operated somewhat independently and sometimes in discord with one another.

In response, the leadership team at Elmhurst sought to “locate the school in the community.” Or, in RISE Community’s terms, to make the school a “hub” for service to community. Each, in their own way, described an organizing vision which emphasizes the responsibility of the school to its community and the social importance of education to the civic empowerment of youth and their families.

This vision provides a coherent logic for collaboration: it clarifies the “why” of COST goals, restorative practices, attendance promotion strategies, and student transition planning with sending and receiving schools in the neighborhood.

### **Collaborating to Bridge Afterschool**

**Services to the Instructional Day.** At RISE Community, an important leadership goal is to cultivate a vision of student success that is shared by afterschool and daytime instructional faculty and that centers collaboration on common learning goals in math and English language arts. To accomplish this, the principal created informal bridges by encouraging the afterschool provider to hire teachers into the afterschool program, and opened doors for the afterschool staff to provide push-in type services to students during the regular school day.

By lowering the virtual wall between the two groups, she encourages greater participation and inclusion of staff in common professional development and strategic planning. These common activities build trust as teachers and afterschool staff draw on their shared funds of knowledge to solve problems, cohere operations and drive new ways of “doing school” together.



### **Collaborating across Preschool, K-5, and Middle School Communities to Smooth Transitions for Children and their Families.**

Another way “locating the school in the community” is operationalized in OUSD community schools is that staff are encouraged to view the schooling enterprise from a neighborhood standpoint. Elementary, middle, and preschool programs, for example, are typically organized as separate and discrete communities of practice. From the broader community perspective though, these schools are part of a continuum of youth development in a neighborhood. As such, the lack of apparent connection and transition planning across these grade levels – even when they are co-located or just steps away from each other – can be baffling to parents. To remedy this disconnect, CSMs at RISE Community and Elmhurst have cultivated relationships with feeder schools and preschool programs to widen the scope of community schooling, especially where they share families in common.

At RISE Community, for example, CSM Eve Delfin works in concert with nearby Early Learning programs and with the District’s Kinder Readiness Program Manager to share resources and hold common activities at the elementary school. The goal is to familiarize parents of pre-kinder children with the K-5 campus and to create a more integrated community-wide “First 10” experience for children. RISE Community extends its playground to zero-to-five play groups, and extends other wellness services, including dental health, vision care, food pantry, and

family engagement activities to children and families in their neighborhood Early Learning Center. School leaders credit these community school linkages to a reduction in chronic absenteeism in the grades K-5 as closer Pre-K collaboration facilitates more coherent messaging to parents about the relationship between regular school attendance and learning.

### **WORKING TOGETHER TO ESTABLISH INFORMAL NORMS THAT CARRY AND COMMUNICATE A LEARNER-CENTERED CULTURE**

A defining feature of community schooling in OUSD – and at RISE Community and Elmhurst specifically – is a vision of student success that requires a shift from a teacher-centric culture to a learner-centered culture. This shift implies change leadership that moves beyond curriculum and instructional standards, to methods, approaches, and pedagogy that provide every student with equitable access to the curriculum and that address barriers to individual learning. Principals and their CSMs agree that changing the culture is all about a focus on relationships.

### **Cultivating Learner-Centered Relationships among Teachers in Community Schools.**

Collaborative relationships among school leaders and faculty can communicate a learner-centered culture to youth and families. At RISE Community, the road to becoming a learner-centered school begins with establishing professional development norms

that empower teachers to apply their knowledge and instructional skills to engage every student in learning. RISE Community teachers are oriented to self-identify as learners first, and as teachers of content secondarily. As a teacher, RISE Community’s principal explained, “you should expect me to be in your classroom a lot; ... you should expect to get feedback from me ... And, you should expect me to be honest with you ... and trust that I will help you succeed.” As the principals describes this approach to professional coaching, teachers who see themselves as learners are best able to model the habits and communicate the mindsets conducive to learning to their students.

By situating teachers as learners, the principal can also connect teacher learning to their shared community school vision for student learning. At RISE Community this often means that school leaders help teachers to conceive of new and different ways of meeting all students where they are while making sure that students don’t stay where they are.



“When I first arrived,” explained Principal Keller, “I would just ask questions, ... why do we do things this way? I could not believe how often I got the answer: ‘That’s how we’ve always done it.’ And I just did not understand that thinking because clearly it [was] not working.” She would then remind teachers about their shared vision:

*It’s our job to cultivate a love of learning. This is the beginning of a very long journey, hopefully, in terms of education. And if [the kids] already hate it, feel disenfranchised or [they are] getting suspended left and right by the time they’re in third grade, that’s scary to me. Because there’s such a long road ahead and so much potential there. And so, ... I had to convince people, ... that there were other ways of doing things. And then ... trust me, if you do it this way, it’ll be easier [to achieve our vision].*

### **Extending a Learner-Centered Culture to School Partners and Families in the Community.**

At both Elmhurst and RISE Community, leaders and CSMs see a learner-centered culture as an enabling factor for strategies to improve attendance, reduce suspensions, and cultivate trust and positive communication with and among students, families, and adults on their campuses. This work begins with school-based activities that explicitly foster interaction (e.g., cultural celebrations, art and music exhibitions) and family engagement activities that center explicitly around adult learning interests (e.g., cooking classes, neighborhood safety, social services, wellness forums, and computer technology skills classes).

One principal noted how simple actions – like making sure that school pride tee shirts are extended to school partners, parents, and all adults who work or volunteer on the campus – can build community and promote a sense of belonging.

At RISE Community, CSM Delfin led efforts to continue reaching out to families during the COVID pandemic. She focused on connecting families to healthy food through a relationship with a local food bank and made sure that the district's food distribution channels for children were accessible to Spanish- and Mam-speaking families. These events and activities signal the centrality of values that support learning, including whole child health and wellness, equity, emotional safety, and service to community.

At Elmhurst, the principal has made it a priority to recruit staff and engage partners who have roots in the community. Elmhurst CSM Benavides, for example was raised and attended school in the neighborhood.

Principal Betlach explained:

*I look for people who not only might see themselves figuratively in the kids they teach, but literally as well. ... I'm thinking of one of our colleagues who grew up in West Oakland, but is essentially the grownup version of our kids ... we have some former students who, one's a PE teacher and one works in our front office. They are our kids, they went to school here, they wore that uniform. So that really matters and it's a lot easier to build relationships with community.*

At RISE Community, Principal Keller has focused on reducing faculty and leadership turn-over as a cornerstone for building a culture of trust in the community. She has worked to build teacher satisfaction through an approach to professional learning that emphasizes continuous improvement as an art, rather than faithful implementation of routines. And, she has noted that her own consistent presence and longevity at the school has been noticed by students and parents, builds trust in her leadership and commitment, and translates into improved student attendance.

At both schools, the CSMs have found more subtle but no-less powerful strategies that create opportunities for teachers and school partners to “connect” with kids in positive and learner-centered ways. Each of them described efforts to make sure that restorative justice strategies and check-in/check-outs with kids become routine ways of building relationships and “doing school,” rather than formal events or scripted activities.

The CSM at Elmhurst explained that her approach is to encourage teachers to incorporate restorative practices and social and emotional learning as part of routine conversations with kids and families. “What does it look like,” she asks rhetorically, “to get my teachers on board with having those [relationship-building] conversations with their students. Of like, ‘Hey, what's up?’ ‘Hey, I've miss you.’ ‘Hey, I noticed you've been gone.’ That matters.”

With respect to teacher-parent engagement, she observes:

*You can't [just barge] into families' businesses, particularly across race and culture. You have to build a foundation first. That could be an hour and a half of an interview, but what are a couple of the things [that teachers] can do to make sure that [they] build the steppingstones to [those] hard conversations?*

The principal summed up his approach to learner-centered community building with a favorite quote from Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest whose ideas about community empowerment serve as a guide: you must strive for “a compassion that doesn't stand in judgment of the burdens the poor have to carry, but rather in awe of the dignity in which they carry it. So, ... if you demonstrate that you're not going to judge,” then you can build community “in kinship” with your families.

## **TOWARD A COHERENT COMMUNITY SCHOOL: LEARNING FROM OAKLAND SHARED VISION**

We learned from change leaders in Oakland's RISE Community and Elmhurst that coherence is defined by a deep, shared understanding among all school stakeholders about the “why” of school. This work began in each case by articulating and building sustained consensus about shared purpose and then very transparently connecting the “how” of strategy and school culture to that shared purpose.

School principals and community school managers work together to build consensus on a vision for a learner-centered school that advances equity and social justice by meeting students where they are and providing access and removing barriers to academic, social and emotional learning for every child.

**Strategy Explicitly Tied to Vision.** Leaders in both schools reported that clear vision provides direction to action. As the CSMs at both schools frequently mentioned: it's all about relationships. Principals and CSMs spend a great deal of their time and energy forging collaborative relationships across their daytime faculty, afterschool programs, health and wellness partners, family engagement staff, and with their families. It is important to them that COST, hiring teams, culture and climate teams, and attendance teams do not function as self-contained initiatives, but that each team's work is strategically connected to the vision through collaborative relationships. This assures that principals and CSMs can confidently distribute leadership to teams, tap coherently into district and community resources, and cultivate innovative problem-solving and mutual accountability directed to shared purpose.

**A Culture Supportive of Learning for Everyone in the School and its Community.** Oakland's community school leaders often report that they are not just schools that are “of” or “located within” a community. They are in the business of building community through an empowering approach to education.

In this way, community schools aim to create strong cultures of learning that begin with adults – including the principal – who conceive of themselves as learners and model the habits of persistence and continuous learning for their students. At RISE Community and Elmhurst, teachers and partner staff are organized into teams that engage in constant inquiry about the quality of their practice and the progress of their students. Regardless of official title, adults take on roles as coaches, mentors, team leaders, and peer observers who routinely collaborate in learning, and in providing each other with timely feedback or conversation about improvement in practice. This culture is extended to families as family engagement staff focus on meeting the learning needs of parents and caregivers through topical forums, educational events, and formal classes for adults offered on the school campus. Change leaders at these two schools report that even their youngest students are astute observers. They quickly learn how to learn and that school is a safe place to learn by watching how adults in their school collaborate to solve problems, honor each other’s contributions, and help each other learn to improve.

## REFERENCES

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**Photos:** Elmhurst United & RISE Community Instagram Pages

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH SERIES

This brief is part of a series from a research collaboration between OUSD and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University focused on understanding community school implementation in Oakland schools. The Gardner Center would like to acknowledge the OUSD principals, community school managers, and district leaders who generously contributed their time and shared their professional knowledge and observations as part of this study.

The full series is available at [gardnercenter.stanford.edu](http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu).