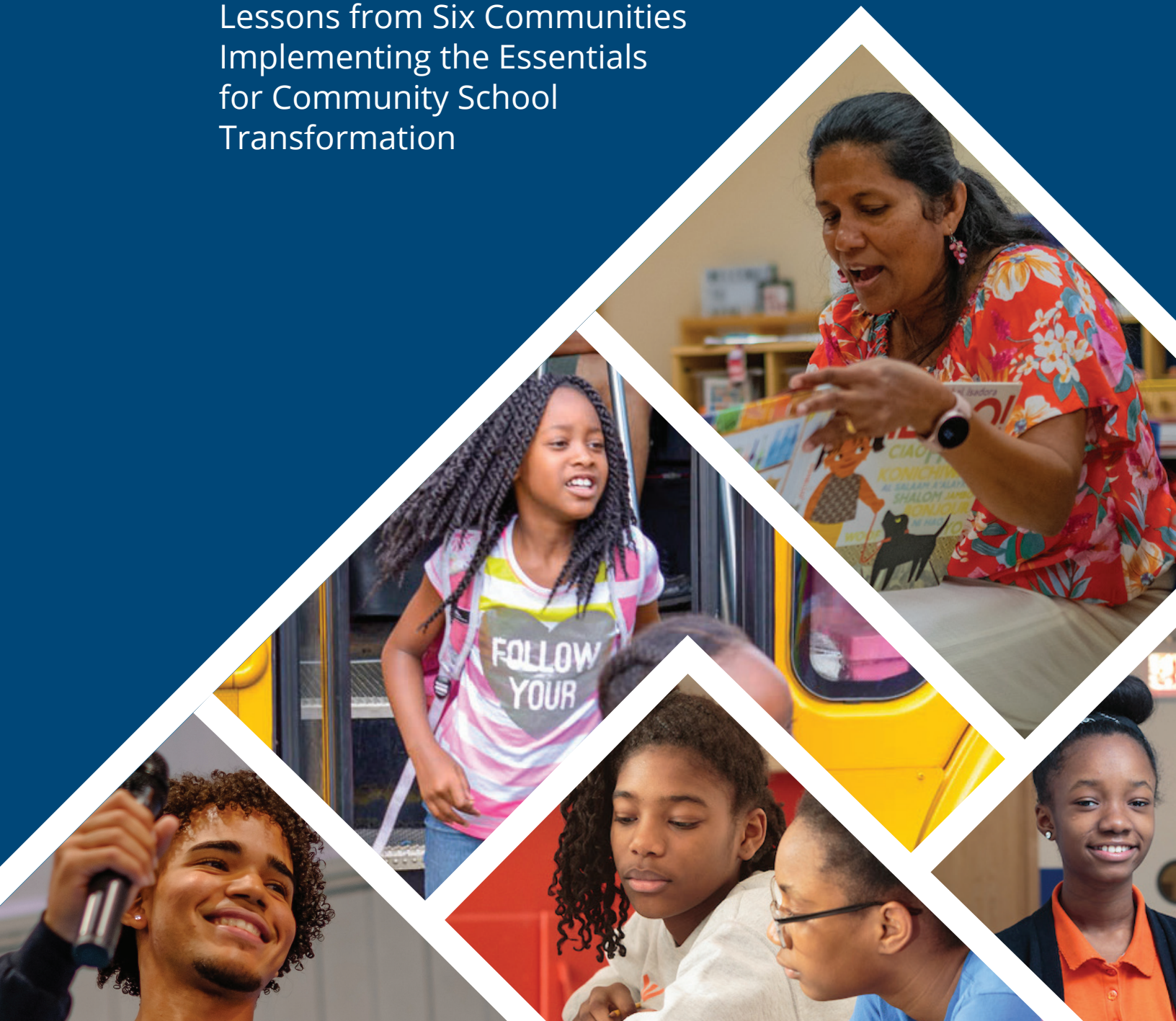
National Center for
Community Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Framework to Practice:

Lessons from Six Communities Implementing the Essentials for Community School Transformation



Overview

This white paper presents lessons from the Community Schools Forward (CSF) Lab, a national initiative designed to advance the implementation of the Essentials for Community School Transformation framework. Funded by the Ballmer Group and developed in partnership with the Learning Policy Institute, the Coalition for Community Schools, the Brookings Institution, and the National Center for Community Schools (NCCS), the initiative engaged six communities across the country, representing 13 schools in diverse geographic and demographic contexts, over an 18-month period of sustained coaching, technical assistance, and collaborative learning.

This white paper examines how participating communities translated the Essentials framework into action and what they learned about creating the conditions necessary for sustainable implementation. **A central finding emerged across all sites: Successful community school implementation depends not only on the adoption of key practices, but also on the development of four enabling conditions that make those practices possible:**

Trusting Relationships

Reciprocal relationships between students, families, educators, and community partners are built through transparency, reliability, and mutual care.

In community schools, trusting relationships create the foundation for meaningful and effective collaboration, engagement, and shared responsibility for student success. Without trusting relationships, the other enabling conditions are difficult to develop.

Shared Vision

A collectively developed and clearly articulated understanding of the school community's goals, values, and desired outcomes for students and families. In community schools, a shared vision aligns interest holders around a common purpose and guides coordinated action.

Inclusive Decision-Making

Building consistent decision-making structures that embed the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of students, families, educators, and community partners ensures that the priorities, strategies, and solutions that drive implementation are grounded in community input while building collective ownership. In this way, every perspective is valued, and outcomes are a shared responsibility.

Actionable Data

Relevant, timely, and accessible data can be directly used to inform decisions, improve practice, and monitor progress. In community schools, actionable data includes academic, attendance, behavioral, and well-being indicators, as well as qualitative insights from students, families, and other interest holders, and is used to drive continuous improvement.

These conditions did not emerge automatically. They were intentionally cultivated through leadership practices, governance structures, continuous improvement processes, and both district and initiative infrastructure. Across sites, the enabling conditions served as the bridge between community school practices at the school level and sustainable transformation at the systems level.

Key Findings

Core Components for Site-level Enabling Conditions

These key findings across CSF Lab sites capture what distinguished the most resilient and effective sites, from repositioning the Community School Coordinator as a strategic leader, to strengthening the shared governance of Community School Leadership Teams, to grounding decisions in authentic community voice through Assets and Needs Assessments, to weaving the strategy directly into existing school improvement plans. Together, they point to a central insight: Community schools work best not as a separate initiative, but as a coherent, embedded way of doing school — one built on strong enabling conditions.

1. Positioning the Community School Coordinator as a Leader

The Community School Coordinator (CSC) is the cornerstone of effective implementation, the connector between the school, its families, and the surrounding community. However, when coordinators are limited to only managing programs and coordinating events, their transformative potential goes unrealized. Across CSF Lab sites, the most significant shifts occurred when principals intentionally embedded coordinators into core leadership structures — school improvement teams, student support teams, and community engagement committees — giving them voice and visibility in decisions that shape school culture and strategy.

Coordinators described a meaningful evolution in their roles: from service managers to strategic leaders who drive collaboration, alignment, and continuous improvement. Processes that enabled this shift include protecting dedicated time for principal-coordinator collaboration, mapping coordinator participation across teams and governance structures, designing intentional hiring and onboarding processes, and investing in professional development specific to the coordinator role.

2. Strengthening Community School Leadership Teams

Community School Leadership Teams (CSLTs) — known across sites as advisory committees, site councils, or community school teams — serve as the governance infrastructure of the community school strategy. When functioning well, these teams distribute ownership of the strategy across educators, coordinators, families, students, and community partners, transforming governance from a compliance function into a vehicle for collective problem solving and continuous improvement.

Lab sites found that the most effective leadership teams were connected to the school's existing working groups (such as multi-tiered systems of support attendance and school climate teams), used consistent data to drive decisions, and developed clear communication structures that reduced duplication while keeping the community school strategy aligned with broader school and district priorities.



3. Conducting Meaningful Assets and Needs Assessments

Assets and Needs Assessments (ANAs) are most powerful when treated as an ongoing process of community inquiry and continuous improvement, not a compliance exercise. The most effective ANA processes moved beyond standardized surveys to engage students, families, educators, and community partners in authentic, asset-based dialogue that surfaced actionable insights and strengthened shared ownership of improvement priorities.

Lab sites discovered that administrative data alone rarely tells the full story. Incorporating "street data" — the perspectives and lived experiences of community members gathered through focus groups, informal interviews, and direct engagement — led to more honest and comprehensive understandings of both barriers and strengths. Equally important was closing the loop: communicating findings and follow-up actions back to the community to build trust and accountability.

4. Developing Integrated Implementation Plans

Sustainable community school implementation requires that the strategy be embedded within existing district and school improvement plans. Across Lab sites, the most resilient initiatives rejected the framing of community schools as a separate initiative and instead positioned the strategy as a way of doing school: a coherent approach that amplifies and aligns the school's existing commitments to student success, equity, and whole-child development.

Strong implementation plans answered three core questions: What does success look like? How will progress be measured? How will the work actually get done? When community school priorities were woven directly into school improvement planning and when progress was shared transparently with all stakeholders, the strategy gained durability and coherence.

Systems-Level Coherence for Sustainable Implementation

While the key findings above emerged at the school level, sites consistently emphasized that enabling conditions are a layered, mutually reinforcing phenomenon that must be cultivated at both the site and initiative level — sustained by broader district and initiative infrastructure. Three systems-level findings emerged.

1. Creating Conditions for Shared Vision and Inclusive Decision-Making

One of the most significant lessons from the CSF Lab is that shared vision does not emerge from agreement alone. It is produced through shared understanding of the strategy and deliberate systems and structures that bring interest holders together around common priorities and shared accountability.

PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

District steering committees/advisory councils
Facilitate communication across levels of the system, coordinate resources, monitor progress, and ensure implementation efforts remain aligned with the broader vision for community schools.

Cross-functional attendance teams
Bring leaders from different departments to synchronize efforts and align resources in addressing chronic absence.

Integrated school improvement planning
Aligns community school goals with school and district improvement priorities, ensuring the work is aligned rather than working in silos.

Shared decision-making protocols
Clarify how interest holder input is collected, considered, and incorporated into planning and resource allocation.

Feedback loops
Communicate how interest holder input influences decisions and builds transparency, trust, and ongoing participation.

Sites made the strongest progress when community schools were embedded within existing district improvement efforts rather than positioned as stand-alone initiatives. Cross-functional leadership teams, district advisory councils, and integrated planning processes created recurring opportunities for educators, families, community partners, and district leaders to make sense of data together, identify priorities, and align action.

In this way, districts were not simply reducing silos. They were institutionalizing the enabling conditions of shared vision and inclusive decision-making through governance structures that could outlast individual leaders and funding cycles.

2. Building Trust Through Distributive Leadership

Across CSF Lab sites, trusting relationships emerged as a foundational enabling condition for implementation. While trust is often understood as a school-level dynamic among principals, coordinators, educators, families, and partners, the Labs underscored the critical role of systems-level leadership in creating the conditions for trust to develop and become embedded in organizational practices.

A key lesson was the importance of having a district administrator or initiative leader responsible for stewarding the work across schools and departments. This role provided a consistent point of coordination, communication, and accountability, helping bridge the school-based implementation with district priorities and resources. By holding the vision for the work, facilitating cross-department collaboration, building community school capacity, and supporting implementation challenges, leaders helped build trust and confidence that the work was valued, supported, and sustainable.

PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

District-Level Stewardship

- Designate a district administrator to lead or coordinate community school implementation.
- Serve as a bridge between schools, central office departments, and partners.
- Ensure community school priorities remain visible during district planning and decision-making.

Principal-Coordinator Partnership

- Establish regular principal-coordinator planning meetings.
- Clarify leadership roles and decision-making responsibilities.
- Include coordinators on leadership teams and in school improvement discussions.
- Review data and implementation progress jointly

Cross-System Relationship Building

- Convene schools to share successes, challenges, strategies, and lessons learned.
- Invest in joint professional learning across roles and departments.
- Facilitate collaboration between district offices, schools, families, and partners.

The key lesson is that trusting relationships should not be viewed solely as an interpersonal outcome. They can be intentionally cultivated through leadership practices, organizational routines, and systems level stewardship that enable collaboration, support, and shared accountability. These systems create clarity, predictability, and structured opportunities for working together, allowing relationships to deepen over time. Effective implementation relies on aligned, interdependent roles — principals, coordinators, district leaders, and lead agency partners — each supported by clear responsibilities, structured collaboration, and shared accountability.

3. Transforming Data into Actionable Data

A critical lesson from the Lab sites is that data alone does not constitute an enabling condition. Actionable data requires systems that support interpretation, dialogue reflection, and action. Strong data systems are foundational for high-quality implementation.

Lab sites gathered multiple forms of data, including academic, attendance, behavioral, social-emotional, family voice, and partner feedback. The most successful sites were not necessarily collecting more data. Equally important was how data was used: not as a compliance requirement, but as an ongoing tool for collaborative inquiry, relationship building, continuous improvement, and shared accountability.

Transparent data sharing with families and community partners, in accessible, family-friendly formats, emerged as a powerful strategy for building trust and strengthening collective ownership of school improvement. When actionable data was integrated into decision-making processes, it helped ensure that community school implementation remained responsive, aligned, and focused on whole-child outcomes.

Hear about key findings directly from the practitioners.

nccs.org/CSFvoices

PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

Regular data review meetings
Examine data with leadership team to identify priorities and guide interventions.

Assets and needs assessment
Leverages school and community data and street data to inform planning and resource allocation.

Continuous improvement cycles
Use data to monitor progress, pilot strategies, and refine throughout implementation.

Shared dashboards and progress monitoring tools
Provide a common set of measures for tracking implementation and student outcomes across schools.

By creating regular opportunities to review, interpret, and act on information, districts transform data from a compliance exercise to a driver of collective decision-making and improvement. The Lab used chronic-absence data as a high-yield indicator that helped practitioners develop and strengthen systems for data analysis.

The CSF Lab shows that sustainable community school transformation does not come from adding more committees or new layers of work. It comes from building intentional infrastructure that creates the enabling conditions for collaboration and coherence. Districts made the most progress when governance structures supported inclusive decision-making, leadership routines cultivated trust and role clarity, continuous improvement processes turned data into shared learning, and strategic alignment anchored a common vision. These systems are not technical add ons; they are the mechanisms that allow community schools to function as an integrated, districtwide strategy rather than isolated site-level efforts. When districts design and sustain this infrastructure, community schools become part of the culture of how the system works, enabling long-term, adaptive transformation.

Implications for the Movement

As the community school movement continues to grow, several overarching lessons from the CSF Lab offer guidance for practitioners, systems leaders, policymakers, and intermediaries:

Trust is the essential entry point

Meaningful community school transformation moves at the speed of trust. Enabling conditions — shared vision, inclusive decision-making, and actionable data — build upon a relational foundation that must be intentionally cultivated and sustained.

The strategy must be embedded, not added

Community schools are most effective when positioned as a core approach to school improvement, not a separate initiative. When the strategy is integrated into existing plans, structures, and improvement cycles, it gains coherence, sustainability, and impact.

Implementation requires ongoing support and thought partnership

The depth of progress achieved through the CSF Lab reflected the value of sustained, adaptive technical assistance — coaching, communities of practice, peer learning, and joint leadership development — over an extended period. Meaningful transformation takes time.

Outcomes should be evaluated on a trajectory

Early leading indicators — improvements in school climate, community voice, systems and structures, and attendance — lay the groundwork for longer-term gains in academic achievement and student well-being. Community schools should be evaluated with an understanding of this developmental arc.

Systems should prioritize enabling conditions

These conditions will become sustainable when they are reinforced through leadership structures, governance routines, continuous improvement processes, and integrated data systems.

The insights shared here reflect real-time learning

Six initiatives at different stages of implementation, each bringing distinct expertise, working simultaneously to build systems, capacity, and strategy within a limited pilot timeline. Even within these constraints, the practice-based evidence gathered — grounded in practitioner voice and diverse local context — offers a meaningful contribution to the community schools movement's knowledge base, one that can inform broader adoption, continuous improvement, and sustained policy investment.

As a practice-based center, NCCS has drawn directly on the CSF Lab's lessons to shape its own approach to technical assistance, built with the knowledge that transformation depends not only on strong practices, but on the systems built to sustain them. There is more work ahead, but the willingness of CSF Lab sites to pilot, adapt, and share their lived experience has strengthened the movement's shared understanding of what it takes to embed community schools for lasting impact.

Children's Aid
Every step of the way

National Center for
Community Schools

The National Center for Community Schools is a division of Children's Aid.

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