

The Basics



Building Your Advisory Council

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CSLX
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
LEARNING EXCHANGE

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Key Takeaway

The advisory council brings together voices within a school and community that can speak to a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. This group works together as part of a community school to develop and hold a deep understanding of student and family priorities, experiences, and strengths, and how they inform a community school strategy. Their role? To guide, shepherd and champion community school development.

What is The Basics?

Welcome to The Basics by CSLX! In this series, we'll cover foundational elements of community school development by answering the questions we see most from practitioners like you. Have a question you don't see covered here? Please **get in touch**.

Now, let's get down to The Basics, shall we?

What is an advisory council?

Advisory councils, leadership committees, design teams. The group of school and community stakeholders that come together to develop and grow community school work goes by many names. But no matter what they're called, their roles remain the same: to guide, shepherd and champion community school development, from planning to implementing, growing and sustaining.

The advisory council (the term we'll use here)¹ brings together voices people within a school and community that can speak to with a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. This group works together as part of a community school so as to develop and hold a deep understanding of student and family priorities, experiences, and strengths, and how they inform a community school strategy. It's important to have representation from diverse stakeholders groups – school and district leadership, parents and caregivers, teachers and labor representatives, and community partners, and youth, if appropriate – each bringing their own expertise and perspectives to the table.

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“At its core, advisory council development is about engaging new and existing partners and stakeholders in different, deeper ways.”

In district-wide community school initiatives, we recommend having an advisory council at the district level – especially during the initial stages of planning and implementation. As specific school sites begin designing and implementing site-specific community school plans, they will likely develop their own advisory councils.

Why do we need a community-school specific advisory council?

Engagement around community school development matters – and not just engaging the “usual suspects.” At its core, advisory council development is about engaging new and existing partners and stakeholders in different, intentional ways.

¹ “Advisory Council” is used in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) framework to describe the decision-making body that guides community school development. For clarity, we'll use that same term.

A strong community school strategy extends beyond the life-cycle of a grant, beyond a particular leader’s tenure, and beyond the interest of a group of passionate parents or staff. And having a wide range of people and groups connected to and holding accountability for your community school ensures that this work continues to be responsive over time. Different stakeholders bring new expertise, connections, resources, information and perspectives to the table – all qualities that support long-term sustainability. Those diverse voices and experiences ensure that your advisory council is not just guessing at the experiences and priorities of students and families, and provides a broader range of supporters who might know about how to access new resources. Lastly, diverse stakeholders can connect you to a wider breadth of data and information about the experiences of students and families connected to your school.

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“Without having a diversity of voices and experiences reflected in your advisory council, you will only be guessing at the nature of the experiences and priorities of students and families, and you risk missing out in learning about or accessing new resources.”

Early in your community school development, you may look to already existing teams or governance bodies to fill the role of an advisory council. As your work continues to grow, however, it will become increasingly important to have a team dedicated to monitoring, supporting and championing community school development.²

Who should be on a district or site-based advisory council?

Let’s dig a little deeper into the “who” of advisory council composition.

- ▶ **District leadership** – At the district level, this would ideally include high-level cabinet members and/or someone from the superintendent’s office. At the site-level, this would include site leaders like the principal and/or assistant principal. Keep in mind: If the superintendent and/or principal are not directly involved in the advisory council, extra efforts will be needed to keep them in the loop, on-board, and connected to the community school development process.
- ▶ **District administrators** – This should include staff holding key community-school-related roles, for example, the Director of Student Services, the MTSS Coordinator, Family Liaison staff, and/or the Director of Instructional Innovation.
- ▶ **Dedicated community school personnel** – For example, a district and/or community-based lead agency community school director or site-level community school coordinator.
- ▶ **Parents and caregivers** – Schools working in meaningful partnership with parents have better learning outcomes for students. A diverse group of caregivers should be included on the advisory council, representing different grade levels, backgrounds and socio-economic representations of the school/community.

² It’s also important to note that the California Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP) Framework identifies a “shared decision-making council” as one of the four proven practices of community school development. LEAs and school sites may design shared decision-making models differently in terms of their composition and scope, but they are expected to engage students, staff, families, and community-members in determining the focus and direction of the community school effort. If you are considering applying for an implementation grant, you should be aware of this grant requirement.

- ▶ **Teachers and school personnel (certificated and classified staff)** – School staff are an integral part of the advisory council. Curriculum leaders from the teaching team can provide valuable input. Educators who engage with students beyond the classroom also have useful expertise to share. Labor representation can bring another aspect of teacher voice to the table.
- ▶ **Community** – Community partners (e.g., social services organizations, youth services organizations, parent leadership groups, afterschool program providers, and mental/behavioral health providers, among others), other municipal agencies, institutions of higher education, early childhood practitioners, civic organizations, and business partners can also bring additional expertise, experiences, and resources to a community school.
- ▶ **Students** – While authentic student participation and voice may not be possible from the get-go, building towards an advisory council that includes students helps ensure that students are an integral part of community school planning and design.

*Want more guidance on how to select advisory council participants and build your team? Ask your key thought partners to review **the Building an Advisory Council Tool** and collectively map out who you might connect to and how you might engage them.*

Can you help me understand what an advisory council should NOT look like?

Remember, the goal of advisory council development is to assemble a team of diverse stakeholders with different expertise and perspectives to share. **Your Advisory Council is not:**

- ▶ **A group of “yes” people.** The team’s goal is not to “rubber stamp” decisions made by the principal, CSC or district lead. Rather, the team’s role is to co-create a community school alongside school and district leadership.
- ▶ **A group that steamrolls process to advance a particular agenda.** It’s important to ensure that all advisory council members’ experiences and perspectives are honored and valued. It is also critical that advisory council members “show up” for this work and each other in collaborative, respectful and collegial ways. Last, advisory council members always center their work on what’s best for students (and families), and not on any particular agenda they may be bringing to the table.
- ▶ **Passive.** The advisory council members take an active role in community school planning and implementation. They do the work – they do not passively receive reports on the work.
- ▶ **The usual suspects.** While an existing team can step into the role of community school advisory board (e.g., MTSS steering council), it is important to ensure that advisory council membership includes new voices, including people you and other school and district leaders may not already hear from, and informal leaders (in addition to people with leadership titles). The advisory council should also include voices from the community, including community-based partners.
- ▶ **Infrequent collaborators.** On the contrary, advisory councils meet regularly and work consistently to accomplish their charge.

What kind of things, concretely, does an advisory council do?

The advisory council has many specific responsibilities that ebb and flow throughout the community school planning and development process.

In the early stages of community school development, the advisory council may do the following:³

- ▶ **Identify shared beliefs and values**, agree on a shared understanding of the community school strategy, and develop a common vision of student success;
- ▶ **Discuss and decide group norms**, decision-making processes, meeting times, accessibility accommodations (e.g., interpretation or child care), and expectations for participation;
- ▶ **Conduct, spearhead, or participate in a needs and assets assessment**, engaging an increasingly inclusive body of stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, community partners). Analyze this data and begin to identify specific priorities, desired outcomes and potential school sites for community school development;
- ▶ **Develop an implementation plan** that includes initial goals and priority areas for community school development, as well as a plan to continuously assess and improve implementation.

The ongoing work of the advisory council might begin during the planning phase and continue on through implementation. This work often includes:

- ▶ **Monitoring progress** toward agreed-upon outcomes, using data to assess progress (or not);
- ▶ **Sharing out the work** of the advisory council to the broader community of school, family and community stakeholders;
- ▶ **Engaging other stakeholders** on an ongoing basis, specifically around building relationships that support and sustain community school work. For example, advisory councils might expand over time to include other municipal agencies or community partners who bring new ideas and resources (including but not limited to funding) to the table;
- ▶ **Addressing specific challenges** to community school transformation as they arise;
- ▶ **Celebrating team successes**, like arriving at a shared vision and goals, landing on an implementation plan, or finding new partners and resources ;
- ▶ **Developing long-range funding** and sustainability strategies that include money, staff, and advocacy from diverse community and public agency partners and leaders;
- ▶ **Calling for and advocating for policy changes** in key institutions to support community school development.

³. Adapted from the Federation for Community Schools' Guide to Community School Transformation (2009).

Our staff is completely overloaded. How can I ask them to serve on one more committee?

This is an absolutely valid concern. School staff and teachers often are already maxed out on committee membership, team participation, project leadership and the like. So consider the following when building your advisory council.

- ▶ **Maximize existing team and relationships.** At the site level, do you already have a representative group of stakeholders convened around a related effort, such as a school improvement team, an MTSS committee, or a community-impact group? In the initial community school planning stages, this team could hold beginning conversations to inform community school development. You can move towards establishing a more representative advisory council as community school planning develops.
- ▶ **Staff the advisory council.** Ideally, the Community School Coordinator will “staff” and support the advisory council – with the engagement and support of an ad-hoc team. The Coordinator and their team will ensure that meetings are regularly scheduled, tightly planned, well facilitated and productive, and will also work with individual team members on follow up, determine action items and so on. If you do not yet have a coordinator on staff, the role of staffing the advisory council could be held by an administrator (e.g., Assistant Principal at the site level, Associate Superintendent at the district level) or lead agency partner, in consultation with their respective site- and district-leaders.
- ▶ **Minimize the “time ask” of council participants.** Ensure that as much legwork as possible is done in between meetings as possible – this is where that coordinator or administrator support is critical. Be clear with advisory council members about what will be asked of them in terms of time and effort, and stick to those parameters.
- ▶ **Respect people’s time and effort.** It’s important to honor the commitment that advisory council members make to this work. How? One way some community schools do so is by compensating staff time for advisory council participation.⁴ Ensuring that meetings are productive and stay on track and on time is another way to respect the commitment members make to the process. Finally, publicly acknowledging advisory council members and their commitment, time and contributions is an important way to honor their work.

Who can staff the advisory council?

Well, it depends. Ideally, at the site level, the Community School Coordinator (CSC) staffs the advisory council. Convening and supporting the work of this team is a key role that the CSC plays. But in reality, the council often needs to come together before a CSC is brought on board. In that case, at the site level an advisory council may be staffed by the principal or assistant principal, a teacher-leader, or a community partner.

At the district level, the advisory council could be staffed by the *district Community School lead* (e.g., Community School Director, Community School Coordinator, Whole Child Systems Specialist). In the event that this person has not yet been brought on board, then the early iteration of the advisory council might be staffed by a member of the district leadership team (e.g., an Assistant Superintendent, or an Executive Director), and possibly supported by a consultant and/or backbone organization.

⁴. As of Jan 1, 2023, classified and certificated salaries were an allowable CCSPP expense. Unfortunately, the current CCSPP funding stream does not allow spending on stipends for families. However, financial compensation to caregivers and/or community members could be offered through other district funding sources, or via contract with a CBO tasked with supporting family/community engagement.

Regardless of who at the district level is staffing the council, the district lead will need support from **an ad hoc team** to inform community school planning and decision-making. There will be important technical decisions to make – for example, What is the salary scale of a Community School Coordinator? What types of fiscal guidance will sites need to inform their Community School planning? How will the district support sites in sustaining the Community School Coordinator role after the end of the CCSP funding? Many of these decisions go beyond the purview of the advisory council and require district staff involvement (often senior district staff).

If we have an advisory council, do we still have to engage the broader public?

The short answer is YES, absolutely! The advisory council is one important group to guide, champion, and sustain your community schools initiative. It is a working council that dedicates substantive time, thought, and care to supporting community school development. But they are just one modestly-sized group of individuals. You ABSOLUTELY need to engage the broader community in this work.

Here are some ideas of how:

- ▶ **Ask your advisory council to serve as a “team of ambassadors”** to carry the work of your community school development back to their own networks, communities, or constituents.
- ▶ **Share community school development goals, priorities and progress** with the broader school, family and community ecosystems through your district’s existing communication channels! For example, as part of weekly newsletters or district updates, include regular leadership updates, presentations to the school board, parent group and community meetings or through direct outreach.
- ▶ **Host school, group, and/or community gatherings** to look at data, share input on plans, and otherwise help shape the meaning-making process the advisory council is stewarding.

These types of public engagement – sharing information and progress with and asking for input from the broader public – both go a long way towards generating public support for and investment in community school development.

TABLE 1: COMMUNITY SCHOOL STAKEHOLDER & LEADERSHIP ROLES

District Ad-hoc Team	
<p>Community School district lead (e.g., Director of Community Schools and Student Support Services, Community Partnerships Manager)</p> <p>District leadership (e.g., superintendent, assistant superintendent)</p> <p>Site-level Community School development leaders (e.g., principal/AP or CSC at identified community school site)</p>	<p>Engaged consultants/coaches (e.g., professional facilitators, process coaches)</p> <p>Community-level partners engaged with the district and/or multiple schools already (e.g., community youth services, mental health providers, larger afterschool program providers, civic organizations)</p>
Community School Advisory Council	
<p>Other senior district leadership – cabinet members, department heads</p> <p>School board members</p> <p>Labor leadership (classified and certificated)</p> <p>Parents/caregivers</p> <p>Teacher/leaders outside of the formal labor relationship/structure</p> <p>School leadership – schools that are undertaking Community School development⁵</p>	<p>Community partner organizations, providing services and supports to students and families</p> <p>Key community partners</p> <p>Community/city leaders</p> <p>Municipal stakeholders, (e.g., representation from the county health department, the park district, libraries, chambers of commerce, mayors’ offices, local health systems, large employers in the county or region, and/or the faith-based community)</p>
Public & Other Stakeholders	
<p>School leadership – schools not yet undertaking community school development</p> <p>District leadership – superintendents, assistant superintendents, cabinet members/department leaders, school board members</p> <p>Parents/caregivers</p> <p>School leadership – principals, assistant principals</p>	<p>Labor leadership – union representatives</p> <p>District-level community school leads – including coaches</p> <p>Teacher representation beyond formal labor relationships</p> <p>Community partners – including program providers, representation from other municipal agencies, local philanthropic community, representation from higher education</p>

⁵ If, through part of your CCSPP application process or very early community school development, you’ve identified or prioritized schools for community school implementation, then these principals or school leadership team members should be included on the advisory council. Should sites have not been identified or prioritized, then consider including principals of existing community school sites. If that’s not feasible, then consider including a representative from the principals’ association or a similar structure. The voice of school leadership is important to this process, and as such, they should play a role on advisory councils in any way that makes sense for your local context.

What other resources can I use to help with building my advisory team?

The CSLX team has found the following tools to be helpful in our work with other schools and districts. Have a great resource to share? Please **get in touch**.

Working with School Leadership Teams (National Center for Community Schools)

We Know Us: Guide to Participatory Meaning Making with Young People (Hello Insight)

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