



The Basics

The Role of the Principal

SEPTEMBER 2025



CSLX
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
LEARNING EXCHANGE

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What is The Basics?

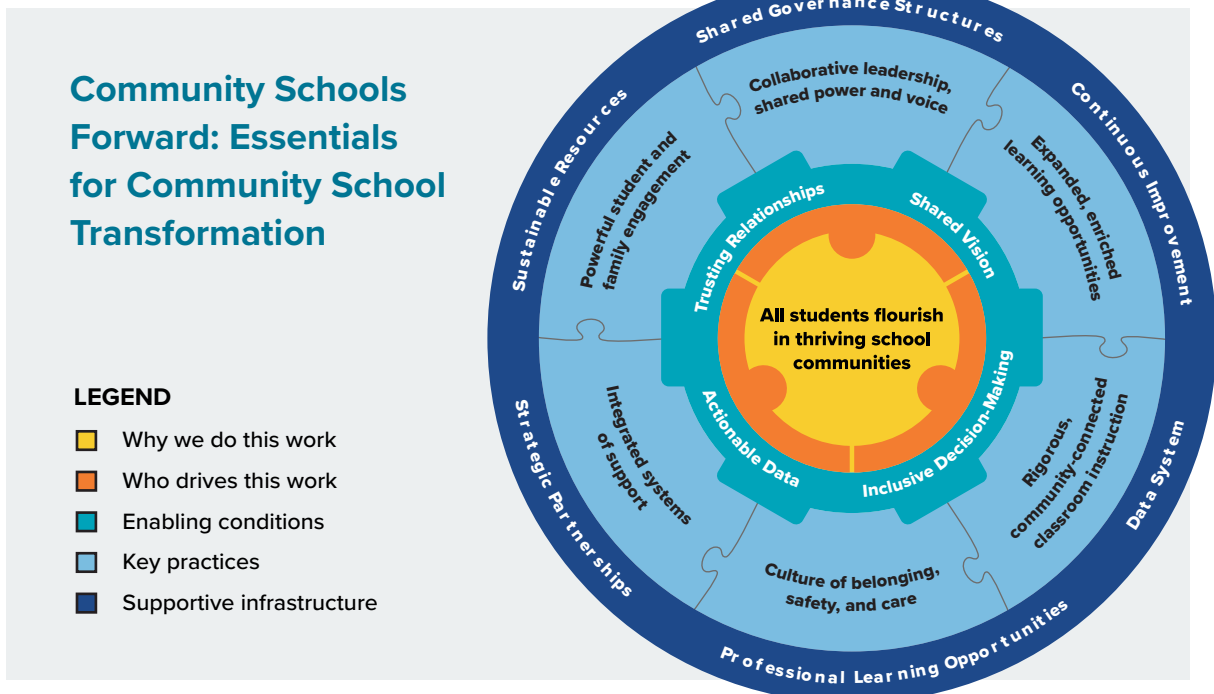
Welcome to The Basics by CSLX! In this series, we cover foundational elements of community school development by answering the questions we see most from practitioners like you. In this edition of The Basics, we dive into the role of the community school principal, along with the skills, dispositions and supports that are necessary to successfully fill it. 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 a community school?

Community schools take a whole child, whole-community approach to learning. They leverage the resources of the whole community – students, families, educators, and community partners – to build relationship-centered, supportive, and equitable school communities where learning is culturally-rooted, inclusive, rigorous, and relevant.

What does this look like? For starters, students and families are the heart of a community school. School leaders, educators, and partners work to create community among families, students, and teachers and staff and become places of belonging for everyone. Community schools see staff and students and their families as assets and partners, not “clients” or occasional interest holders. Community school principals and administrators actively seek to build relationships with, understand and get to know, and learn from staff and students and families. All of this sets the stage for schools where all students thrive. The Community Schools Forward Taskforce’s **CS Essentials Framework** outlines the key elements necessary for undertaking this transformation (take a look through it if you haven’t already – it’s going to come up again!). It doesn’t, however, capture the unique work community school principals do to foster and cultivate trust, center everyone’s work on equity, strengthen instructional practice, and change the ways people work together.



What are the skills of a community school principal?

Take a look at the CS Essentials Framework (the “wheel,” as we affectionately call it) and zero in on the Enabling Conditions – trusting relationships, inclusive decision-making, actionable data, and shared vision. These conditions are the on-going fuel for community school development. Among other things, they represent new ways for schools, families, students, teachers and communities to work together. A community school principal reflects both the skill and will to lead their school communities in ways that are, at times, counter to how a principal is traditionally expected to lead. They need the curiosity, patience and humility, as well as the knowledge to lead improvement efforts and school transformation by bringing interest holders together to collaborate in new ways.

Take **inclusive decision-making** as an example. Traditionally, decision-making in school settings might be done relatively autocratically. While a principal may seek input from a couple of teachers, a parent or two, or the assistant principal, they – the principal – generally make decisions on their own.

This is because, in part, in most schools principals are positioned at the top of a decision-making hierarchy. Community schools take a different approach. In a community school, principals routinely work with interest holders to understand their perspectives and experiences, and to make strategic decisions. Along those lines, CS principals and their teams also ask who is not already at the table, and seek out perspectives that are oftentimes not present. In other words, community school principals meaningfully involve people who will be directly impacted by decisions in *making* the decisions themselves.

For example, when it comes time to put together their yearly budgets, community school principals do not take on that task in isolation. They consult interest holders, they listen to and take into account other people’s visions, priorities and goals, and they check their planning with teachers, students, and families. And while community school principals may not be able to respond to the priorities and wishes interest holders surface when it comes to their budgets (the financial pressures schools are under are very real), everyone in the school community is clear about why certain decisions were made and interest holders feel heard. Throughout the process, CS principals are clear with everyone about how they’re gathering feedback and from whom, how the decision will be made and by when, and how the decision will be communicated out to the larger community.

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“Collective responsibility emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual accountability—leaders support each other, hold each other to high standards, and recognize that the health of the community relies on each member’s commitment to the collective vision and care for one another.”

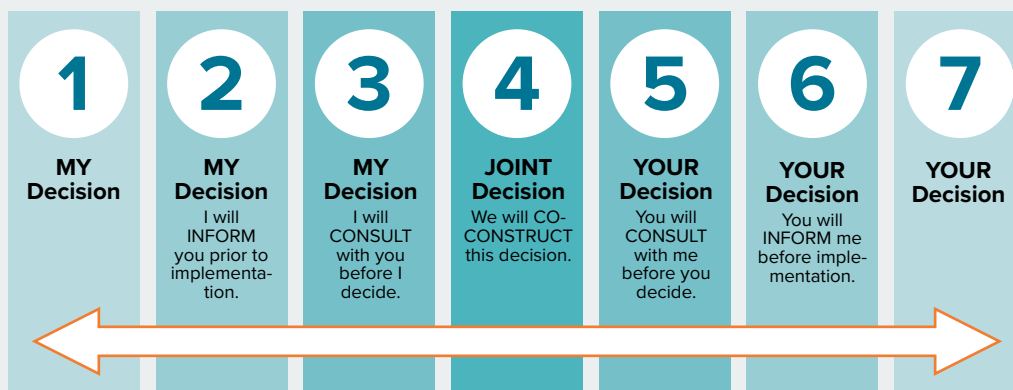
– Dr. Jennifer Steiner, Assistant Superintendent of PK-8 and Middle Schools at San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)

What about when it’s a call that can only be made by the principal? Community school principals deeply understand the priorities and perspectives of school interest holders so that they are able to factor those perspectives into their decision-making process, and are able to articulate their rationale. This kind of leadership demonstrates both will

(the motivation to be curious about what others think, and to share power) and skill (the capacities to facilitate, listen, communicate, and meaningfully connect).

One important note here around shared decision-making and transparency. A lack of clarity – around the process and around who is involved *and* in what ways – can damage trust between schools and interest holders. It is the principal’s job to communicate and manage expectations, and demonstrate reliability and consistency when it comes to how decisions are made. There are all different types of decisions, every day, every week, every month... you get the picture. Not every decision can be made by consensus – as noted above, there are some decisions that fall only on the principal to make. Or sometimes it just doesn’t make sense or possible to have a group weigh in.

Inclusive decision-making doesn’t mean that everybody gets to decide on everything but that there are opportunities to meaningfully participate in different parts of the decision-making process. It also means that school teams are very clear with one another and with interest holders about what kind of decision is being made, and what role they will play in making that decision. For example, the decision-making continuum below (and [linked here](#) with additional details) by the Catalyst for Educational Change¹ outlines different types of decisions, provides some guidance on how to go about making a decision, and offers ways to think about interest holders’ level of engagement in making them. True CS principals rarely make decisions alone in the end – because their decisions are guided by the values, matrices and visioning documents that have been co-constructed by the school community. So even when the principal is making a decision alone, they are not making it in isolation, but are guided by the perspectives and preferences of a wide range of interest holders.



Another example of community school principal leadership shows up in how they co-design and advance a **shared vision**. Community school principals play a key role in bringing together a wide range of interest holders to co-create a vision for their schools, set goals to move that vision forward, and engage in strategic planning. They identify priorities, together. They listen to each other’s hopes and dreams for their school community, and together, articulate an actionable vision for how their school will look and feel as a result of their efforts. CS principals and interest holders collectively agree on their values and north star —

¹ Catalyst for Educational Change, Culture of Collaboration Resource Guidebook, page 37.

the “why” of their work – to keep each other focused as they move through the community school development process. This all takes additional time and commitment on the part of the principal to ensure that people at the table represent interest holders in the community. While it can be quicker for school administrators to make decisions solely based on what they think is best, the additional time and consensus-building ensures that each and every person in the community knows the what, why and how of their school.

Community school principals use **actionable data** to be solutions-focused, collaborative and creative problem solvers. When confronted with challenges, community school principals engage in group problem-solving. They seek ideas, ask questions and encourage different perspectives to understand the root cause and figure out pathways forward. Part of this work involves engaging with and making meaning out of multiple forms of data, from the quantitative like attendance rates and test scores, to the qualitative like empathy interviews and focus groups. Community school principals do this data work with teams of interest holders – do we sound like a broken record? – so they can get as complete a picture as possible of the experiences of youth and adults connected to their schools.

This is all predicated on building and sustaining **trusting relationships** between CS principals and interest holders – among them teachers, families, students, and community partners. Without trust, interest holders will not feel comfortable sharing their opinions on decisions, for example, or participating in shared decision-making structures. People won’t believe that their experiences will be honored or perspectives will be taken into consideration. Sometimes building – or rebuilding – this trust among interest holders takes time, overcoming long-held beliefs, and engaging in courageous, restorative conversations. Community school principals do this work because they know that without a foundation of trust -- and without relationships that promote psychological safety -- community school development can’t take root, and won’t flourish.

A note on shared leadership

Stellar community school principals ground their work (and the work of their teams) in shared leadership structures. Pause here for a minute. Notice that we haven’t referred to community school principals as “*the* leader” of their community school. That’s because there isn’t *one* leader in a community school – leadership is a collective responsibility and dynamic action. It is distributed *among* interest holders. It’s not autocratic or top-down, dependent on formal status, or a “my way or the highway” type of culture. Relationships, shared decision-making and shared leadership are cornerstones of community school development. As such, strong community school principals invite and develop leaders across interest holder groups. Collectively, they engage ever-widening circles of interest holders in developing a vision for their school, sharing leadership and accountability for achieving that vision, and making decisions that shape the experiences of the students and adults connected to their schools.

Community school principals demonstrate the skill and will to think differently about the role that schools play in their broader communities. The trusting relationships that CS principals work to build and model don’t just exist within the school walls. CS principals work to also build relationships and trust with the broader community, too, in large part because they see schools as places of community connection, enrichment, and belonging for everyone – students, teachers, school staff, families and community members alike.

How do principals and community school coordinators work together?

The community school coordinator (CSC) – sometimes called a community school manager, community school director, or resource coordinator, among other names – plays an essential leadership role in a community school. A CSC functions as a high-level school administrator – similar to an assistant principal – to develop, strengthen, and sustain community school partnerships and practices aimed at supporting student learning and development.

CSCs and principals work hand-in-hand to engage interest holders, build trust and relationships, and advance community school development work. The CSC often functions as a “chief of staff” to the principal’s CEO, and works to connect different school teams, interest holders and partners to one another, and to school goals and a shared vision for their schools. They engage in shared leadership – both in their working relationships and also in how they connect interest holders into their work.

Part of this partnership’s success rests on role clarity, routines and authenticity. Relationships between CSCs and principals thrive when there are clear expectations and routines for how they work together, depending on preferences, leadership styles, and approaches to team building. Early in their working relationship, they define communication preferences (emails? Texts? Hallway chats?), discuss leadership and working styles (using tools, for example, like the Enneagram, Strengths Finder, and others), develop a shared understanding of priorities for the CSC’s role and goals for the year ahead, and have regular check-ins (usually with a standing agenda to track progress over time).

One of the ways CSCs and principals can model shared leadership is by being clear, honest, and direct about who holds responsibility for different aspects of the work. Open lines of communication and regular opportunities to check in are important tools here, as are convening meetings, working agreements, and shared visions.



“The touchpoints we have together are like a reset button for me, a chance to refocus and prioritize what matters most—belonging and continuous improvement.”

– Principal Anita Morales, Fortuna Elementary

One factor that shouldn’t be overlooked is the importance of the “fit” between the CSC and the principal. We don’t mean friendship – we mean an ability to work together productively. Whether or not the two people holding these roles are a good fit has implications for hiring, the length of the CSC’s tenure, and even the overall success of community school implementation efforts. The principal and the CSC should have some complementary skill sets, be a good fit from a work style perspective, and center their work on equity and whole child development. This does not mean they need to be friends, per se – it means they need to be able to function as an effective partnership, and share the work involved in facilitating community school development.

The Role of Role Clarity

Role clarity – when all members of a team understand and complement each other’s roles, responsibilities and priorities – plays an important part of a strong principal-CSC partnership. From the perspective of the “job description,” clarity comes from openly and widely communicating with interest holders about the different roles that principals and CSCs play. This means ensuring that everyone – the principal and the CSC, as well as teachers, staff, families, students, partners and others – has a shared understanding of the different roles involved in community school development. From a practical perspective, conversations around who-does-what (some teams use a **MOCHA** framework) can help make sure people are clear about their individual responsibility for different parts of the work and how it all rolls up together.

It is important to acknowledge that this is a shift from how principals may be used to working. For principals who have been at their sites for a while, for example, the addition of a CSC may mean that your work as a principal changes, and you might let go of tasks or duties that were previously your responsibility. Role clarity also factors into this aspect of shared leadership – and the adjustment that working in this way may necessitate.

How do community school principals do their work? What’s different?

On paper, the role of a community school principal and the role of just-a-great-principal of a more traditional school might seem the same. Both are ultimately responsible for creating, submitting and managing budgets. Both lead instructional teams, and support other school teams. Both are tasked with building relationships with students, families and the community, and both are the “bottom line” when it comes to student outcomes. So a lot of the “what” of the job remains the same. The fundamental difference is in the *how*.

Community school principals know that the secret sauce is trust and relationships.

They know it takes time to build relationships and develop and grow trust. But more than just knowing that it takes time, CS principals actually invest the time. And more than investing time, building trust and relationships also means that CS principals can let go of preconceived notions and embrace humility and empathy. In building trust and relationships, CS principals get to know people – students, teachers, families, community partners – authentically and with curiosity. In turn, people feel seen, valued and connected to one another (for more information on ways to develop skills around building authentic relationships with interest holders, visit the **Resources** section below).

Community school principals know that all members of the school community are responsible and accountable. In the **Beloved School Community Leadership Framework** (Steiner, 2025), Dr. Jennifer Steiner, Assistant Superintendent of PK-8 and Middle Schools at San Francisco Unified School District, describes how principals can create a strong sense of belonging in their schools. Steiner observed that principals who undertake transformative work come to the work from a position of collective responsibility. The principal is

not “in charge” of that work. They are part of a diverse team that co-create places of belongingness. That shift to a mindset of collective responsibility – and the ways of working that follow suit – set CS principals apart.

Bottom line, what would I see in an effective community school principal?

Strong community school principals center their work on equity. They recognize that not every student, family, or staff member needs the exact same thing to thrive. Instead, they lead with an asset-based lens and differentiate their leadership practices – allocating time, resources, and support in ways that respond to the unique strengths and needs of each member of the school community. This kind of leadership demands humility, curiosity, and a deep commitment to justice.

Strong CS principals have a clear vision of whole-child, student success that relies on shared accountability. They know that in order for students to thrive, we all have to take a whole-child approach to our work. All members of the school community share responsibility for nurturing strong relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, and caring for one another. Principals hold themselves, students and other interest holders to high standards, and they communicate clearly and frequently about those standards while also setting a tone of mutual accountability.

Community school principals are fearless learners.

They listen to interest holders and others impacted by their schools’ decisions with an ear towards truly understanding other people’s experiences and perspectives. Community school principals bring a vulnerability to their work – a learning-centered mindset and a curiosity about all that they don’t know. CS principals are also willing to be wrong, and, relatedly, they’re willing to try new ideas. They fail forward – when things don’t go as planned, CS principals view it as an opportunity to reflect, learn and grow. They view missteps – their own or others’ – as learning experiences.

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“In a beloved community, we all own the success, the challenges, and the changes we need to make. We’re all in it together.”

– Principal Drake Kanoa, Canopy K-8

Community school principals are disciplined and focused. Their vision and their shared leadership guards them from being distracted by “shiny new things.” They exhibit a willingness to try new things tempered by an awareness of the weight of the impact of change.

For example, suppose a school leader is considering eliminating morning advisory to make more room for academic instruction. On the surface, the change seems sound: more time for reading or math interventions, improved instructional minutes, and alignment with pacing guides. A community school principal would pause here. They’d know that (or at the very least wonder if) advisory isn’t just a block of time—it’s where trust is built, where students connect with a caring adult, where they learn social emotional skills, and where restorative conversations happen after a hard morning. It might be the only time a student sees someone who checks in on how they’re doing socially or emotionally – factors that also influence student well-being and achievement.

Community school principals find strength in numbers. Rather than make a decision in isolation, a community school principal engages with teachers, students, and families in meaningful dialogue, ensuring that all voices are valued and included in shaping this decision. Going back to our example: together, they might reflect on what’s working in advisory? What’s not? Could the time be adjusted rather than eliminated? They might test a revised model—shorter sessions twice a week, or combining advisory with social-emotional learning lessons—and then gather feedback. Did students feel more or less connected? Did behavior referrals increase? Were learning outcomes actually impacted?

Community school principals learn from diverse perspectives and invite hard conversations. Not surprisingly, when you bring a diverse group of interest holders together to collaborate and work together, they don’t always agree on everything (actually, you *want and need* people who bring many different perspectives and experiences to the table!). Conflict, differences of opinion, and friction are all to be expected. Community school principals know this, and create the psychological safety needed to have difficult conversations. They lean into productive conflict and help others do the same. When the inevitable challenges arise, they use restorative practices to work through conflicts and to support teams’ continued abilities to work together.

Are community school principals born, or made?

Everyone brings innate skills and dispositions to any work they do, and community school principals are no exception. But, as fearless learners, community school principals also maximize opportunities to build new capacities. This means participating in professional development, workshops, conferences and learning labs, but also reflecting on strategies that have or haven’t worked, and naming the learning that came from those experiences. It means learning from and alongside the community, using data – including qualitative data about student, family and teacher experiences – to guide decisions, and being willing to shift course when necessary.

Strong community school principals exhibit curiosity, center students in their work, value the experiences and contributions of all interest holders, listen and learn willingly, and have the energy for transformative work. They use their learning disposition towards to build skills that may not come naturally, like sharing leadership, establishing and maintaining inclusive decision-making structures, building teams, and engaging a wide range of people to make meaning from data.

One caveat: community school principals must bring to the role a “people-centered” approach. They need a disposition towards making connections, building relationships, and caring about others. They see the school as belonging to the community, and value the various cultures that the community, students and families, bring. They must also be willing to check their ego – as school leaders, they need to be reflective and self-critical enough to prevent ego from interfering with their work.



What role do districts play in supporting effective community school principals?

Districts play an important role in supporting and sustaining effective community school principals. Let's refer back to the CS Essentials Framework. See that dark blue, outer ring? It's the supportive infrastructures necessary for community school work to take root and thrive – districts can look to align their practices, processes and priorities with the different aspects of supportive infrastructure to support community school principals and their schools.

Consistent, high-quality professional learning and development opportunities aimed at strengthening principals' community school implementation muscles. Providing space for reflection and modeling shared leadership supports CS principal development. Other strategies include streamlining processes and practices – for example, aligning your district's **Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) with sites' School Plans for Student Achievement (SPSA)** and their community school implementation plans, then providing guidance and structures that enable principals to do the same. **Fostering shared governance structures, collaborative leadership and shared decision-making across your district**, and working to become a community school district also support community school principals and their teams.

Community school principals need timely access to clear, actionable data about their sites and students. They need district-level systems that support sites' use of data - systems that ensure that the data schools provide to the district doesn't disappear into a black hole. They also need clear, functional operational systems so they don't repeatedly return to interest holders to remake decisions they've already made. Streamlining and improving the efficiency of processes principals use to submit data, plans, budgets, and reports (you get the idea) can free up valuable time and resources.

Last, **coherence and alignment across initiatives and programs at the district level, including integrated systems and supports**, sets the foundation for the same coherence and alignment at the site level. When districts forge mutually beneficial relationships “at scale” with municipal agencies, community based organizations, nonprofit partners, institutions of higher education, local businesses (you get the idea) and other “non district” partners, they support similar partnerships at the site level.

What other resources can I use to support my development as an effective community school principal?

Our team at CSLX 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**.

- **Beloved School Community Leadership Framework** (Jennifer Steiner)
- **Making Community Schools a Reality: Harnessing Your Power as a School Leader through Collaboration** (Emily L. Woods)
- **The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves** (Shaun A. Ginwright, PhD)
- **Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities** (Susie Wise)

Parting thoughts: Principals are people, too

Being a principal can be a lonely job, and being a community school principal striving to bring teams and interest holders along to a new way of working together can be even more challenging. Along with professional development opportunities (see above) aimed at building CS principals’ skills, **consistent opportunities for community school principals to connect with each other, get support from peers** and other principals (see what we did there?!), share ideas and resources, and co-create their own community of belongingness (Steiner, 2025) are very important. Professional learning networks, communities of practice, time during principal meetings to connect and network with one another, partnering and peer mentorship – all of these support principals and in turn, the students, families and school communities they serve.

Remember that community school work is developmental, and it’s undertaken against the backdrop of daily pressures – from navigating uncertain and unstable budgets, to functioning as an instructional leader, ensuring staff align school goals and whole-child orientation, and managing the regular conflicts and crises large and small that pop up every day. Sometimes this work can feel like one step forward and two (sometimes maybe three..) steps back, and the same holds true for growing in your role as a CS principal. Engage interest holders in the work. Live the ethos of collective responsibility. Build a community of belonging around you while you transform schools into places where all students thrive. Hold the course. You can do this!

Acknowledgements

This resource represents the work of dozens of community school practitioners, CSLX coaches, and leaders in the field. We would like to especially acknowledge the contributions of:

- Emily Grossberg, Community Schools Coach at the Community Schools Learning Exchange (CSLX). To learn more about Emily’s work, [visit her on LinkedIn](#).
- Emily L. Woods, Director of Education, the Richard K Lubin Family Foundation. To learn more about Emily’s work, [visit her on LinkedIn](#).
- Dr. Jennifer Steiner, Assistant Superintendent of PK-8 and Middle Schools, San Francisco Unified School District and Founder/CEO of Transformative Leadership Coaching (TLC). To learn more about Dr. Steiner’s work, [visit her on LinkedIn](#).

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Suggested Citation: CSLX (2025). The Basics: The Role of the Principal. Community Schools Learning Exchange. Oakland, CA.

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