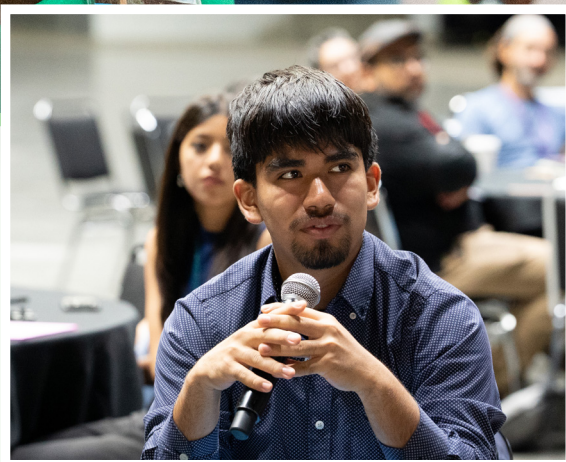




Principal Guidebook

FOR CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



April 2026

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Quick Guide: Principals as Community School Leaders

Vision, Leadership, and Core Responsibilities

A California Community Schools principal collaboratively leads a school community as an instructional leader grounded in a reflective mindset. Community School leadership moves away from top-down sole decision-making type systems, moving toward guiding and co-creating with others to work toward a common purpose. Trust is an essential element to co-create collaborative communities where all feel seen, heard, valued, and are able to reimagine a school that the community hopes and dreams for. One of the four cornerstone commitments elevates the intentional actions to create spaces where shared decision making is a commitment to the school and the practices during steering/team committee and planning teams. Site administrators embrace and proactively engage educators in a collaborative structure that advances the needs of the community and centers student outcomes. This shift from hierarchical to shared and collective leadership redefines the principal's role as a co-creator, connector, listener, and catalyst for change. This vision for Community School leadership is fully aligned with the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL), which emphasizes **“engag[ing] others in a collaborative process to develop a vision of teaching and learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.”**

[Hear from a Community School principal](#) about how he frames his role.

Building on this foundation, the principal facilitates a shared mission and vision and creates conditions for successful implementation alongside the Community School coordinator and teams. This includes removing barriers, aligning resources, and fostering a culture of collaboration. By moving beyond task-based management, principals co-lead with community partners to embed whole-child, whole-community development as a core driver of school improvement.

[Listen to a principal share their thoughts](#) on being a Community School principal.



Community Schools: A California Definition

What Is a Community School? How Is It different from a traditional school?

A Community School serves pre-K through high school students using a whole-child approach that integrates academics, health and social services, youth development, and family and community engagement. As a school improvement strategy, Community Schools enable districts and schools to partner with educators, students, families, and community organizations to understand and respond to local needs, assets, and aspirations.

Community Schools are not defined by their funding; rather, they reflect how education functions in a healthy democracy through shared leadership and collaboration among families, educators, students, community partners, and local government. Community Schools improve outcomes by addressing students' academic, cognitive, physical, mental, and social-emotional needs while fostering strong relationships, a positive school climate, and engaging learning opportunities that prepare students for college, career, and life.

Recognizing that learning does not occur in isolation, Community Schools provide [integrated supports](#) such as healthy meals, health care, tutoring, and mental health services before, during, and after school. By addressing interconnected challenges through coordinated, evidence-based practices, Community Schools strengthen both student success and community wellbeing.



Community Schools: Capacity-Building Strategies

Implementing collaborative leadership in Community Schools requires sustained time and intentional effort. [The NEA Community Schools Strategy School Level Implementation](#) framework illustrates how the strategy is enacted in practice, while California's five Capacity-Building Strategies provide essential support for implementation and transformation. These strategies form an integrated set of goals and actions that build shared clarity, knowledge, skills, and commitment among interest-holders. They strengthen readiness and capacity by equipping communities with the resources and supports needed to translate the promise of Community Schools into effective practice. Aligned with the [California Community Schools Framework](#), its [overarching values](#), and CCSPS statutory requirements, the Capacity-Building Strategies both guide implementation and serve as benchmarks for measuring progress.

California Community Schools Capacity-Building Strategies



**Shared Commitment,
Understanding,
and Priorities**



**Centering
Community-Based
Learning**



**Collaborative
Leadership**



**Sustaining
Staff and
Resources**



**Strategic
Community
Partnerships**

Shared Commitment, Understanding, and Priorities

An essential part of the Community School strategy is establishing a connection between interest-holders and the overall guidance and direction of the school. Deep listening and authentic relationship-building (via a robust Needs and Assets Assessment process) are critical to identifying collective priorities and for monitoring progress towards meeting shared goals.

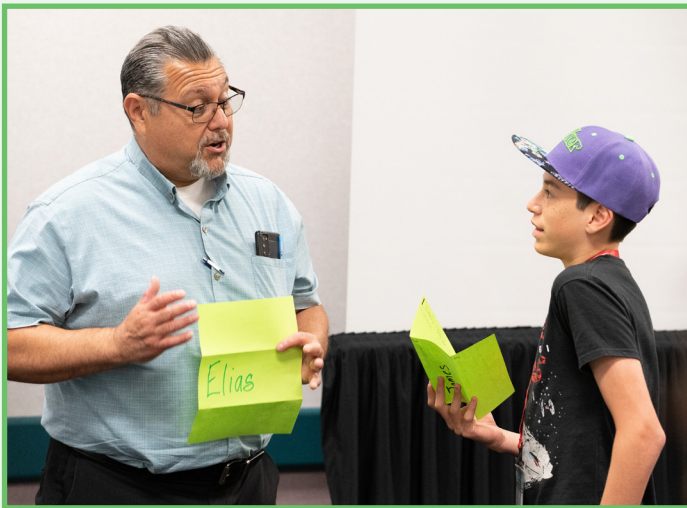


Community School Principals:

- Align the priorities that emerge from the Needs and Assets Assessment with the school improvement plan/goals.
- Align the annual CCSP Implementation plan to the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) or Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA), Student Support Plan (SSP), to Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and systems to increase outcomes. (Definitions of these terms can be found at the end of this document in Appendix B.)
- Co-design and align a collective vision that connects academics, wellness, family engagement, and community partnerships.
- Establish expectations of all activities aligning to the Community School plan.
- Deeply explore and understand your data landscape and investigate quantitative data through qualitative practices to interpret, not only for academics, but also for engagement, health, attendance, and well-being.
- Champion the Community School vision with district leaders and external interest-holders to secure ongoing support, visibility, and sustainability for the work.
- Collaboratively work with the LEA to use all site-level levers to increase funding (Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative [CYBHI], School-Based Medi-Cal Administrative Activities [SMAA], Attendance, Parent-Teacher Organization [PTO], Parent-Teacher Association [PTA], partnerships, etc.). (Definitions of these terms can be found at the end of this document in Appendix B.)

Reflective Questions:

- How am I ensuring that marginalized students, families, and community voices shape priorities and experiences of belonging? [Check out this video](#) to further ground this question.
- How am I advancing a clear community school vision and ensuring plans, initiatives, and daily actions align to it?
- How am I creating structures for students, families, staff, and partners to co-design priorities and decisions?
- How effectively are community assets and partnerships being identified and used to meet student and family needs?
- How am I using evidence to adapt our work and remove barriers that limit collective impact at the school and district levels?



Centering Community-Based Learning

As Community Schools evolve, they recognize that student supports cannot replace strong, community-connected, culturally responsive instruction. Guided by the science of learning and development, effective Community Schools rely on principal-led instructional leadership, community-based learning, and performance assessments that enable students to demonstrate mastery through authentic, relevant learning experiences. [Read more about Community-Based Learning here.](#)



Community School Principals:

- Observe instruction through a whole-child lens and provide actionable feedback focused on rigor, relevance, relational trust, and community-connected learning.
- Integrate community-based learning into the instructional core using local assets, authentic contexts, and culturally relevant challenges.
- Use performance assessment to drive continuous improvement through high-quality tasks and rubrics that support authentic demonstrations of mastery.
- Lead professional learning aligned to the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD), enabling teachers to analyze student work and adapt instruction to developmental needs.

Reflective Questions:

- How are students shaping their learning, and how do their ideas influence classroom, community-connected, and schoolwide work?
- When observing classrooms, how consistently do I look for rigor, relevance, relationships, and real-world connections, and then provide actionable feedback?
- How intentionally are student interests, community assets, and local challenges embedded in daily instruction across subjects?
- How effectively are performance tasks and rubrics used to show understanding and inform more equitable instruction?
- How do I partner with teacher leaders to support analysis of student work, shared practice, and instructional improvement?



Collaborative Leadership

Transformational Community Schools share power across students, families, staff, and community partners. Through collaborative leadership, all members are recognized as agents with collective expertise. This intentional shift in power structure strengthens representation, collaboration, and shared decision-making to drive meaningful school transformation. [Find more information on collaborative leadership, structures, and teams here.](#)

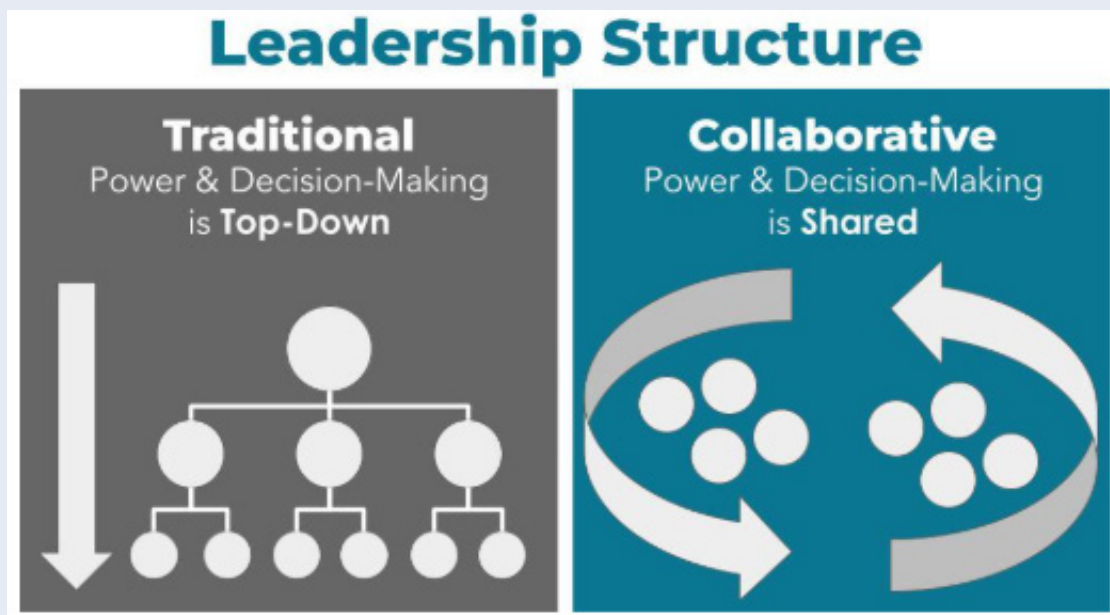


Community School Principals:

- Build systems that support collaborative leadership among teachers, coordinators, students, families, and partners.
- Lead racial equity and relationship-centered, restorative practices across the school community.
- Share leadership through inclusive structures such as a Site Steering Committee.
- Remove implementation barriers and use diverse data sources to align supports and improve equitable outcomes.
- Ensure all voices have an equal value in the process. [Hear more about this from a fellow principal.](#)

Collaborative Structures

For Community Schools to thrive, systems must create conditions that elevate community expertise, agency, and voice. Districts and schools can disrupt exclusionary practices by building collaborative structures that enable shared ownership, multidirectional communication, and decision-making centered on student and community wellbeing.



Reflective Questions:

- How is leadership shared among students, families, staff, and partners, and where does decision-making remain too centralized?
- How well do our leadership structures reflect our school's diversity, and whose voices are still missing?
- How am I modeling equity-driven, relationship-centered practices that build trust, and where must I deepen my own leadership?
- How am I creating space within existing systems, policies, or mindsets in order to not limit collaborative leadership, and how am I continuing to work to remove them?
- What data, examples, or shifts in practice show that power is truly shared and outcomes are improving?



Sustaining Staff and Resources

A focus on sustainability ensures that the necessary human and financial resources are available to maintain the Community School vision and strategy over time, used effectively to ensure coherence and alignment across policies and initiatives, and to sustain continuous progress and improvement. [Explore more about Community School funding using this tool.](#)



Community School Principals:

- Embrace and affirm cultures, student voice, and community identity.
- Create and protect time for teacher teams and staff-partner collaboration. Ensure teams have representation from all interest-holder groups, promoting authentic engagement and voice.
- Align funding strategy to support the work of the priority teams.
- Co-create inclusive decision-making structures that elevate community voice and lead as a connector and systems thinker who fosters ownership, transparency, adaptation, and continuous learning.
- Revisit hiring strategies to include all interest-holder groups and center the shared vision as the anchor.

[Hear more about this from a fellow principal.](#)

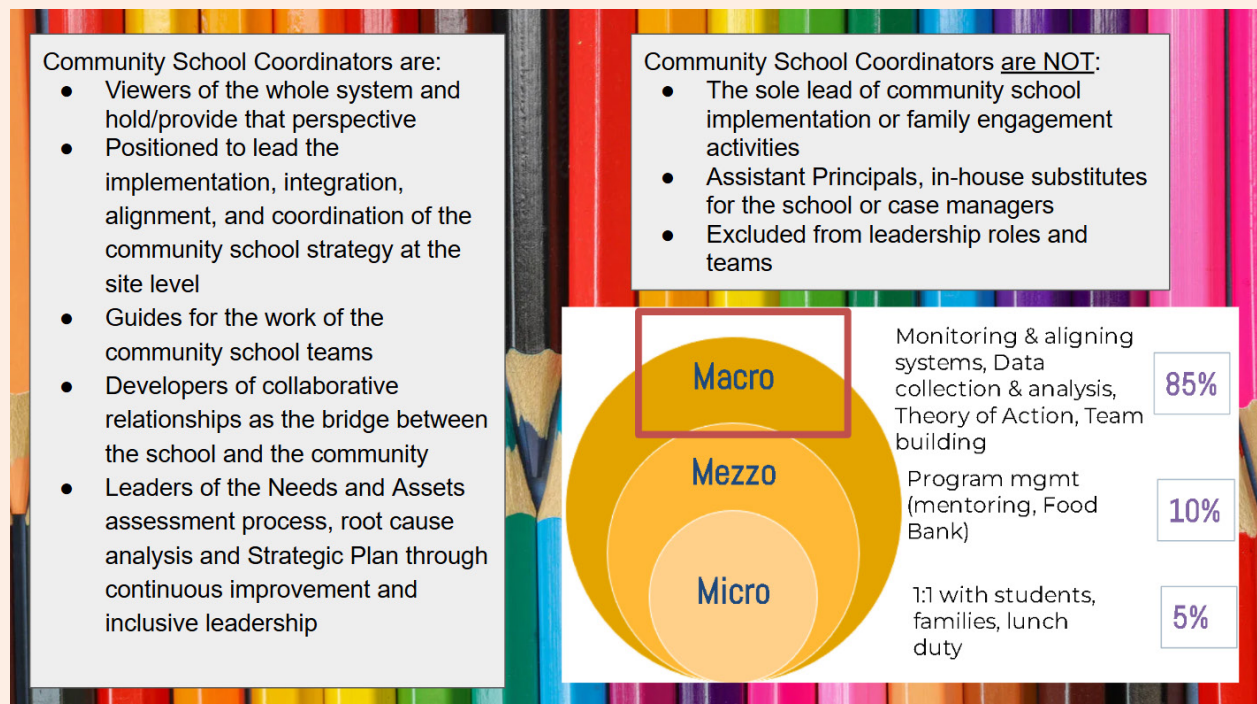


Structures and Everyday Practice

Working with a Community School Coordinator

The Community School Coordinator (CSC) leads site-level implementation and alignment of the Community School strategy. Partnering with school administrators and leadership teams, the CSC assesses community needs and assets, coordinates student and family supports, and helps create a learning environment that advances student achievement, wellness, and strong community partnerships. As a Community School Principal you:

- Recognize the CSC as a co-leader in collaborative design and implementation.
- Include the CSC as a key contributor on all leadership teams and in decision-making spaces.
- Lead strategically by removing barriers while enabling the CSC to move beyond task-based support.
- Identify and eliminate obstacles to integrated supports and authentic engagement.
- Use data with the CSC to inform decisions and drive continuous improvement.
- Champion long-term planning, resource alignment, and a welcoming leadership environment to sustain community school efforts
- **Best practice:** Meet weekly, plan together, and co-lead decision-making teams.



Key Teams to Support Your Work

Based on your LEA or school site size and context, a team is an essential proven practice. Principals are encouraged to reflect on their current structures and employment based on the capabilities of their site.

- **Site Leadership Team** (or Community School Team, School Site Council, MTSS, PBIS, Site-Governance Team, etc.): Ensures diverse interest-holder representation in defining strategic plan and direction for the school.
- **Student Support Team**: Identifies existing needs and alignment of resources to address them for the student body, individuals and families.
- **Family Engagement or Equity Team**: Builds relationships of trust and belonging that reflect culturally inclusive and sustainable practices for engagement to inform and drive the Community School strategy.

Reflective Questions:

- How do everyday practices reflect school culture, student voice, and community identity in decisions and resource use?
- How well am I protecting time and inclusive structures for teacher teams and staff-partner collaboration?
- How clear are teams on purpose, roles, and norms, and how can I strengthen their effectiveness?
- How am I helping teams use data and reflection to learn, adapt, and improve?
- How am I supporting the CSC and aligning resources to sustain community school priorities?



Strategic Community Partnerships

Developing strategic community partnerships allows schools and LEAs to expand their capacity to achieve the vision of interest-holders. Partners can strengthen and support a broad continuum of priorities, from [expanded learning](#) to integrated student and family supports. Partnerships centered on trusting relationships lead to greater support and investment in the strategy.



Community School Principals:

- Ensure all programs and services are [integrated into the Community School strategy, not just siloed wraparound activities/partnerships](#).
- Understand that academics and well-being are inseparable and should support the whole child.
- Support realignment of partners to the Community School plan.
- Utilize influence to support the efforts of the Community School Coordinator and plan. [Hear more about this from a fellow principal.](#)

Reflective Questions:

- How do I regularly assess partnership alignment and impact, and use data or feedback to strengthen or shift partnerships?
- How am I ensuring partner-led supports are embedded in daily school practice, rather than operating as add-ons?
- How do I build trusting, reciprocal relationships with partners that support shared problem-solving and accountability?
- How am I using my role to support the CSC in strengthening and aligning partnerships?



Appendix A: Resources

Topic/Role	Resources	Description
Building and Sustaining Teams	• Launching Improvement Teams • Team Roster Template • Sample Team Launch Agenda • Team Running Agenda Template • Team Launch Checklist	The documents include a roster template with defined roles and responsibilities, a checklist for establishing team structures and routines, a detailed agenda for the initial launch meeting, and a template for running subsequent, recurring team meetings.
Championing Community Schools	• Developing Your Community School Pitch • Sharing Your Needs and Assets Findings Report	These resources provide practical guidance for communicating the Community School strategy. They include a structured framework for creating a compelling “pitch” to advocate for the school’s vision and core pillars, and a step-by-step process for developing a clear, engaging, and audience-tailored Needs and Assets Findings Report.
Collaborative Leadership Guides	• Community Schools & Co-Governance • Collaborative Leadership from STAC • Participatory Systems Change for Equity	These guides provide frameworks and examples for establishing inclusive collaborative structures like site-based and LEA-based advisory councils to drive meaningful school transformation.
Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy	• What are Community Schools? • A Review of the Evidence • Workshop/presentation • Community Schools 101	These NEA resources collectively define Community Schools as an effective, research-based, school improvement strategy that uses a whole-child approach to integrate academics with comprehensive student support and strong community engagement.
Community School Coordinator	• What is a Community School Coordinator and Why a Coordinator? • The Role of a Community School Site-Coordinator/Director • What Does a Community School Coordinator Do? • Community School Coordinator	These documents collectively define the role of the Community School Coordinator (CSC) as a vital, full-time staff member who acts as a community organizer, connecting students and families with essential resources and services to overcome barriers to learning.

Appendix A: Resources, *continued*

Topic/Role	Resources	Description
Continuous Improvement	• Improvement Project Organizer • Project Charter Template • Problem Statement Guidance • Measurement Guidance	This collection of documents provides a structured framework for continuous improvement projects, featuring templates for organizing a team project. It offers guidance on how to craft a specific problem statement and also provides a detailed tool for establishing a measurement system, which involves aligning needs and asset themes to core pillars, defining measurable goals, and developing a Theory of Improvement using leading and lagging indicators.
Deciphering the Magic of Community School Leadership	• Deciphering the Magic of Community School Leadership	This Kaplan Online article argues that what truly defines a community school is its dedication to involving the whole community in the educational process, not just the wraparound services it provides.
Instructional Standards	• 2024 CA Standards for the Teaching Professions (CSTP)	The 2024 California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP) provide a foundational framework for teacher preparation, induction, professional learning, and evaluation across the state.
Principal Job Description	• Sample Community School Principal Job Description	This document provides an example of a Community School Principal job description.
Principal Meeting with Coordinator	• Checklist for First Coordinator-Principal Meeting(s)	This document serves as a comprehensive checklist and guide for the initial meeting(s) between a Community School Coordinator (CSC) and a Principal. It outlines key discussion areas, including role alignment, leadership and communication styles, the school's vision and goals, and reviewing initial collaborative tasks related to benchmarks, budget, and existing leadership structures.
Structures and Systems	• Building Effective Community School Systems • School/Site Level Implementation Roadmap • Steering Committee Guide	These documents collectively outline the essential organizational structures and step-by-step implementation roadmap for building and sustaining a Community School system.

Appendix B: Community School Terms

Acronym	Meaning/Definition
CYBHI	Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative. A statewide initiative focused on expanding access to behavioral and mental health services for children and youth, often through schools and community partnerships.
LCAP or SPSA	Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) or Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA). Planning documents that outline school or district goals, strategies, and funding priorities to improve student outcomes, with required stakeholder input. Community school strategies are often aligned to these plans.
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Supports. A framework for providing varying levels of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support based on student need, using data to guide interventions and monitor progress.
PBIS	Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. NEA resources that collectively define Community Schools as an effective, research-based, school improvement strategy that uses a whole-child approach to integrate academics with comprehensive student support and strong community engagement.
PTO/PTA	Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) or Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). School-based organizations that support family engagement, communication, and collaboration between families and school staff.
SMAA	School-Based Medi-Cal Administrative Activities. A funding mechanism that allows schools to receive reimbursement for administrative activities that support Medi-Cal eligible students, such as outreach, care coordination, and referral services.
SSP	Student Support Plan. An SSP emerges from a Student Study Team (SST) meeting; this plan could be called different things depending on context. An individualized plan is developed to identify a student's academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and/or health needs and coordinate appropriate supports and services.

Acknowledgments

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California Department of Education



State Transformational Assistance Center

Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE),
National Education Association (NEA),
UCLA Center for Community Schooling,
and Californians for Justice (CFJ)



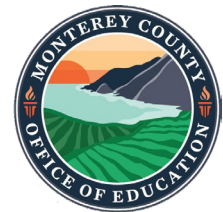
Bay Area

Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin,
Napa, San Francisco,
San Mateo, Santa Clara,
and Sonoma



Capitol Area

Alpine, Colusa, El Dorado,
Nevada, Placer, Sacramento,
San Joaquin, Sierra, Solano,
Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba



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