

PATHWAY ONE: LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

Collaborative leadership is the key to the Ready Schools Initiative success. The Ready Schools Community-District Team (Team) brings together school, district, early childhood, business, and community leaders as well as families to guide the development and communication of a clear vision, mission, and goals of a Community-District Action Plan. The action plan must address the needs of schools/district to help support the transition from home and the early childhood community to the schools/district, recruitment of diverse stakeholders in collaborative efforts to serve PreK-3 children and their families, and education of the community about issues related to early childhood education and what it means to teach all children effectively.

The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.

**-Henry Kissinger,
Former Secretary of State**



Key Understandings

To build a successful team and work toward creating Ready Schools, the members of the committee should have the following key understandings:

- ▶ The Team should share a clear and consistent understanding of the Ready Schools Principles and Pathways;
- ▶ The Team should have a vision of what schools and communities can do together to support student and teacher success;
- ▶ The Team should work as a cohesive Team that engages in honest dialogue built on trust and shared commitment;
- ▶ The Team should include a broad representation of stakeholders who represent the views of families, school personnel, early childhood service providers, and community leaders;
- ▶ The Team should develop, engage, and support the work of all partners;
- ▶ The Team should engage in strategic short- and long-term planning and identify resources to achieve its goals;
- ▶ The Team should use an effective and systematic communication infrastructure;
- ▶ The Team should educate the broader community and advocate for support; and
- ▶ The Team should lead efforts to engage families and communities in children's learning and transitions through school.





The Work

The Community-District Team leads efforts to develop collective leadership with teachers, administrators, family members, and community partners and facilitate partnerships with the early childhood community to improve educational continuity from preschool through the early grades. The Team also coordinates or supports community forums as well as district-wide professional development for school leaders emphasizing Ready Schools concepts. First, the Team collects data using the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment tool, assessments of school and community needs, and the input of diverse stakeholders. Then, the Team develops and communicates a clear vision, mission, and set of goals and facilitates implementation of an action plan that addresses achieving these goals and securing the resources needed to support schools and their communities in smoothing the transition for children and families between the early childhood community and school district. The composition of the Team ensures regular communication between and among the Community-District Team, the individual Ready Schools School-Based Teams, and the broader community.

Steps that lead to success include the following:

1. The Team should create and communicate a clear vision for what you want Ready Schools to look like in your schools and community. This vision should be comprehensive for what the district, schools, and communities need to do both independently and in partnership to support Ready Schools efforts.
2. The Team should use the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment Tool to examine your Team's and community's level of interest, strengths, and barriers to achieving your Ready Schools vision.
3. The Team should determine the role of the Community-District Team in advocating for and guiding Ready Schools efforts. Building leadership, public engagement, and political will is essential.
4. Leadership for this initiative should be shared by the community (e.g., local Smart Start partnership) and the school district. Sustaining Ready Schools initiatives depends upon the involvement of knowledgeable civic, business, and community leaders who understand the value of support for this critical work and can provide leadership to build and sustain momentum.
5. The Team should conduct forums to get broad input into how the community can best support the initiative. Hear what families, teachers, school administrators, early care professionals, and community members have to say. Have them talk with each other to build greater understanding about challenges as well as the potential resources and assets that may be available.
6. The Team should conduct an inventory of community and school assets, resources, and needs.

7. The Team should use the data and input gathered to develop a Community-District Action Plan that includes strategies for integration of Ready Schools concepts across the community and district. Consider including strategies such as:
 - » A community-wide school transition plan;
 - » A Kindergarten orientation process that links with early education and supports both children and families;
 - » A district-wide professional development program that is for families, early educators, and PreK-3 teachers and staff; and
 - » The alignment of the curriculum in the district's early childhood settings across early education and PreK through 3rd grade.
8. The Team should integrate existing and new community resources into this Community-District Action Plan.
9. The Team should use a variety of tools, including the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment, to measure Team progress. Use the data from these tools to update your Community-District Action Plan.
10. The Team should develop the infrastructure and communication plans necessary to ensure regular communication between the Community-District Team, the individual School-Based Teams, and the broader community.
11. The Team should ensure on-going recruitment and outreach by Team members and local advocates and leaders.



Effective Action Plans

- ◇ Align with Ready Schools Pathways and with school and school district missions, visions, and goals;
- ◇ Reflect the views of school personnel, families, early childhood providers, and community members;
- ◇ Include measurable short- and long-term goals and strategies that are consistent with school and district improvement plans;
- ◇ Are driven by continuous gathering and analyzing of data;
- ◇ Clearly identify responsibilities of stakeholders;
- ◇ Include a process for evaluating activities and measuring progress; and
- ◇ Are driven by a well-planned, realistic timeline.

(See Pathway Eight: Assessing Progress and Assuring Quality)



Who is Involved: Why and What are Their Roles?

The composition of each Ready Schools Community-District Team will be unique to the community it serves. It must include a broad and diverse representation of key stakeholders, in leadership positions, with access to resources to help it achieve its goals. The composition of the Team must be tailored to community needs and available resources, but participants might include:



Finding Funding

A consistent concern for Community-District Teams is the increasing scarcity of funds to support initiatives. As state, district, and agency funding becomes scarcer, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain even the practices and strategies that have shown success. Ideas for increasing resources include:

- ◆ Partner with local businesses;
 - ◆ Look outside traditional funding streams to local donors, local businesses, local community foundations, civic groups, and service organizations for financial or in-kind donations;
 - ◆ Pool resources between and/or among partner schools, districts, and agencies;
 - ◆ Identify low cost alternatives and cost saving means of producing materials and planning events; and
 - ◆ Use technology tools to provide and archive professional development opportunities to reduce costs and time away from the classroom for teachers and child care providers.
- ▶ School district-level personnel including superintendents, school board members, curriculum specialists, program directors, and support services staff whose support will be needed and who can help ensure that initiatives align with district improvement planning and resources;
 - ▶ School personnel including principals, teachers, and support staff who work with elementary and early childhood programs and who will inform plans to ensure that they address individual school needs and provide knowledge of the curriculum, learning environment, and effective instructional practice;
 - ▶ Early childhood education professionals and service providers who bring knowledge about early education and the implementation of best practices for young children in school and community settings;
 - ▶ Families of children ages 3-8 who represent critical stakeholders and provide links to other families and insight into their views and needs;
 - ▶ Social service and healthcare providers who work with and support families and children and provide specialized knowledge about the community and resources;
 - ▶ Community, business, and faith leaders who are critical connections to the needs of the community and the resources it can provide;
 - ▶ Local Smart Start and Partnership for Children personnel; and
 - ▶ Higher education representatives who can assist with training and professional development and who have knowledge of research-based practices that support the work of the Team.

Each of these stakeholders serves as a leader among his or her constituencies and helps the Team, the district, and the community know how they can best support the Ready Schools Initiative, identify needs and resources, and provide communication links to enable collaborative efforts.



Sustainability

A successful Community-District Team will plan for continued success by conducting ongoing assessment of needs, developing action plans with clearly defined goals and strategies, educating their stakeholders, implementing activities and effective practices, and monitoring and evaluating the results of their partnership efforts to ensure that they can fulfill their role as a resource for the district, individual schools, community agencies, services providers, and families.

The Community-District Team has in place a plan of succession for the members so that leadership is continuous. Members rotate off the Team in a purposeful manner with new members, in similar leadership roles, taking their place. The plan for replacing members includes the length of time to serve and a staggered rotation plan so few members end their term as new members join the Team. Current members accept the responsibility of locating and securing new members to sustain the work of the Team. Job descriptions are in place so that new Team members are aware of their role and responsibilities, and the Ready Schools effort is sustained through transitions.



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

A successful Community-District Team must engage in reflection and honest assessment of its successes and areas for growth. In addition to utilizing data from formal assessment tools and continued conversations about ways of work, challenges and opportunities, and new possibilities for collaboration; having stakeholders who are engaged and empowered in the decision making processes is critical for continued growth and improvement. Questions that may facilitate some of these conversations are:

1. Does our model of Team leadership support collaboration between the community and school district?
 - » If the goal is developing collaborative leadership, it is important to examine the extent to which leadership is provided by both district and community representatives. A Team whose leadership roles are dominated by representatives of one group may lose valuable insight and buy-in from the other.
2. Are our Community-District Team members representative of the community and in leadership positions within their area of influence? (e.g., early childhood community, business, families, faith leaders, etc.)
 - » Often critical stakeholders are missing from the table, are not the people who can make decisions, or do not function well in a leadership role. Ensuring that the views and voices of a diverse community are heard, even those who may seem disengaged or difficult to engage, is critical to the success of the Ready Schools Initiative. Making sure acknowledged leaders in the community are on the Team is also crucial to success. Active, on-going strategic recruitment of new members is often necessary to ensure broad-based community engagement and support.

3. How do we recruit and attract Team members who are representative of the community in terms of role as well as racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically?
 - » Successful Teams ask themselves what groups need to be at the table to influence the work of the group. Sometimes this means moving outside the usual circle of people who participate or beyond the people who are personal or professional friends of the Team. To establish a diverse, representative group of leaders, it may mean taking a chance to invite someone new into the group.
4. Do we have clear roles and job descriptions for members to help us focus and organize our work, and is there a succession plan in place that ensures smooth leadership transitions?
 - » Focus and continuity are critical issues for most leadership Teams. If Teams are to operate efficiently and protect against the disruption that can occur when a leader moves on to other opportunities, it is important to define roles and responsibilities and ensure that knowledge of the organization and its operations remains with the position rather than departing with the individual.
5. How can we identify and train future leaders to carry on the work of the Team?
 - » The strength and sustainability of the work of the Team relies upon a continuity of informed and committed leadership. Recruiting, developing, and engaging the next generation of leadership is the job of the current Team. It is important to have a rotation plan that allows leaders to move on and off the committee at intervals, allowing the work to continue as a limited number of new members learn what needs to be done.
6. How do we develop the infrastructure and communication plans necessary to ensure regular communication among the Community-District Team, the individual Ready Schools School-Based Teams, and the broader community?
 - » Collaborative efforts and effective partnerships depend upon clear and reliable lines of communications. A Team must examine its internal and external communications and the means it uses to operate to raise awareness within the community. Identifying the appropriate processes and tools is key. A regular, consistent plan for communication will help the committee maintain its momentum.
7. How do we ensure open, honest dialogue built on trust?
 - » True collaboration requires safe space and an open invitation for all participants to voice their values, views, and opinions. Team members should expect to be treated with dignity and respect. Honest and sometimes deep disagreements are inevitable when passionate and committed individuals seek to work together to address difficult challenges. The successful Team identifies strategies to establish the necessary processes, relationships, and environment in which conflict can be addressed and consensus achieved without disrupting the work of the group or marginalizing any of its members.



Taking Action

Key Strategies

Plan for change - A focused multi-year work plan helps a Community-District Team build momentum and provide continuity as leaders, budgets, and other factors change. Like the Ready Schools School-Based Teams, the Community-District Team should:

- ▶ Continuously assess school, district, and community factors that frame the needs and the directions for activities and practices;
- ▶ Use data from a variety of sources including Team, school, and district assessments; data gathered from community forums and surveys; and input from stakeholders to identify and prioritize areas that will drive action planning and link to school improvement efforts;
- ▶ Raise awareness of Ready Schools concepts in the communities and schools by communicating regularly and building ownership of the initiatives;
- ▶ Create work plans that outline responsibilities, resources, timelines, and tools for assessing the success of activities and practices implemented; and
- ▶ Monitor, evaluate, report progress, and use the data collected to refine action plans as needed.

Develop leadership at every level and across partnerships - When leadership is systematically developed and knowledge rests with the position, not the person, it is easier to prevent false starts and loss of momentum during leadership transitions.

- ▶ Identify potential leaders and give them increasing opportunities to lead projects, committees, and activities to develop their knowledge and leadership skills within the Team;
- ▶ Charge each member with helping to identify his or her eventual replacement at least a year before they intend to leave the Team;
- ▶ Go outside the circle of personal and professional acquaintances of the current Team and ask other constituents to recommend potential Team members;
- ▶ Create a leader's handbook and leadership training program to archive the information that will enable a new leader to step in and continue the work uninterrupted;
- ▶ Consider taking a few minutes at each meeting to highlight a program, agency, or issue that impacts children (ages 3-8), schools, or families; and
- ▶ Collaborate with other local agencies to hold leadership workshops.





Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Community-District Team leadership sometimes appears to be dominated either by representatives of the community or representatives of the district. When the chair is a district representative (i.e. Assistant Superintendent, Director of Elementary Education, or other central office administrator), the community involvement may be more heavily influenced or dictated by the school district. Likewise, when the chair is from the community (i.e. Director of a community agency, partnership group, or early childhood program), the Team may have difficulty gaining buy-in and support from the district and individual schools.

- ▶ Selecting co-chairs who represent the district and the community results in greater support from both groups, and provides clearer lines of communication, greater participation in decision-making, and stronger continuity of leadership.
- ▶ Having co-chairs and/or representatives attend appropriate district or community meetings (i.e. reporting at regular Principal meetings or community agency board meetings) increases visibility, awareness, and common understandings.

For more resources see Appendix B, Resources for Pathway One: Leaders and Leadership at the end of the Toolkit.



Ready Schools in Action

Co-chairs as Leaders of the Community-District Team

In Carteret County, the Community-District Team is led by co-chairs: the Director of the Carteret County Partnership for Children (CCPC) and the Director of Elementary Education for Carteret County Public Schools System. The Director of the CCPC is able to engage community members such as Carteret County Resource and Referral personnel and childcare directors and providers. The Director of Elementary Education engages school district members such as PreK and Kindergarten teachers, elementary school principals, and school district leaders.

Additionally, when the CCPC suggested universal Kindergarten registration, the school system was very open to the effort. In turn, the school district has taken on several Ready Schools Initiatives beyond universal registration including housing two model classrooms in a Ready Schools demonstration school site. The collective buy-in that the co-chairs have established results in the continuity of the Ready School Initiative in Carteret County even in light of transition in leadership.