

CAPACITY-BUILDING CASE STUDY
Kent School Services Network (Kent County, Michigan)

All of those involved in bringing this program to fruition and keeping it going should be commended for their willingness to invest in the success of children. This collaborative effort, as it continues to evolve and improve, can only strengthen education. All students are capable of learning, if given the necessary support.

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BRIEF HISTORY

Since 2006, the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools (NTACCS) has provided coaching, training and technical assistance to the Kent School Services Network (KSSN) – a community schools initiative in Kent County, Michigan formed to provide students the services, supports and opportunities they need to eliminate barriers to learning and help them succeed academically.

After conducting extensive research on school reform and integrated service delivery efforts around the country – including visiting a Children’s Aid Society community school in New York City – The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative announced the launch of KSSN almost three years ago. The KSSN Leadership Team includes executives from three school districts, Kent County, the Department of Human Services, Network 180 (mental health services), Spectrum Health Healthier Communities, the Kent County Health Department, the Kent Intermediate School District, DA Blodgett for Children, Grand Rapids Community Foundation, Frey Foundation, Steelcase Foundation, Doug and Maria DeVos Foundation, the Heart of West Michigan United Way, and others. A total of nine schools – seven in the urban Grand Rapids district, one in the suburban Godfrey Lee district and the entire suburban district of Comstock Park – were selected as sites for the first phase of the initiative.

As part of the launch of KSSN, NTACCS was invited to several gatherings of school, community, and civic leaders to present the community school philosophy and discuss lessons learned from Children’s Aid Society schools in New York as well as those from its adaptation sites across the country. Recognizing the developmental nature of the community schools approach and the lack of their own local capacity, KSSN leaders contracted NTACCS for three years to assist with the start-up and sustainability of their new endeavor.

CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Key elements of the capacity building effort in Kent County included the following:

Training & Professional Development

NTACCS staff provided a series of learning experiences to key leaders and practitioners in the KSSN initiative – on a monthly basis in the first year, when the need to build knowledge and awareness of the community school strategy was critical, and quarterly thereafter. Every school was required to assemble a team to participate in the sessions. Each team was comprised of the principal and community school coordinator at minimum and included other members of the school community (parents, teachers, service providers, community members, etc.) whose participation depended on the subject matter of the session. Some of the training topics included:

- Community Schools: A Strategy, Not a Program – Overview of the community schools concept that included an in-depth look at the Children’s Aid Society model, and an introduction to the Developmental Stages of Community Schools, a tool developed by NTACCS

- Collaboration & Vision Setting – Exploration of how schools and community partners can align their work in a coordinated way to meet the multiple and interrelated needs of students through the development of a collective vision and action plan for the community school
- School-Based Leadership – Development of site-based governance teams for each community school that – through the involvement of school staff, existing partners, and additional local community resources such as community based organizations, faith-based institutions, volunteers and others – identifies and meets the comprehensive needs of children and families
- Parent Engagement – Facilitated dialogue within and between school-based teams on the benefits of and barriers to parental involvement, and intensive planning on improving school climate and deepening the connections between schools and families

On-Site Consultation

To reinforce and follow-up on the concepts explored during the monthly training sessions and respond to the particular needs of the individual schools in the Network, NTACCS staff provided on-site consultation throughout the three-year contract period. Principals and community school coordinators (and usually several other key members of the school community) were convened on-site to discuss their community school's accomplishments and set a course to address the challenges. In addition to the NTACCS consultant, who guided the conversation, the KSSN Director and the community school coordinators' supervisor were present so that systemic issues requiring follow-up could be identified and addressed.

Study Visits to New York City

Every principal and community school coordinator was flown to New York City to spend a day in a full-service community school in which The Children's Aid Society is the lead partner. Beyond merely observing and touring classrooms, after-school programs and school-based medical clinics; visitors from KSSN were provided direct access to their New York City counterparts. Principals asked principals, for example, how they used their school budgets to support the community school strategy. Children's Aid staff shared lessons learned directly with KSSN coordinators. Many cited the opportunity to engage and interact with a mature community school in a facilitated fashion as a highlight of the technical assistance provided by NTACCS, inspiring vision for some and providing practical implementation ideas for others.

Systemic-Level Technical Assistance & Coaching

Besides the assistance provided to on-site staff, NTACCS has also guided the management and leadership levels of the Kent School Services Network. Via regular communication with the KSSN Director and participation at quarterly KSSN Leadership team meetings, NTACCS has updated the Network on developments in the community schools field and served as a thinking partner. For example, KSSN was originally conceptualized solely as a service delivery model until NTACCS advised they take a more comprehensive approach that should also include asset-based opportunities such as out-of-school time programming and parent engagement. To support KSSN's sustainability planning efforts, NTACCS assembled a team of experts that, for instance, explored how to access Medicaid funding. Finally, NTACCS has connected KSSN leaders to new research on school reform efforts and to other community school initiatives across the county by linking them to the Coalition for Community Schools and by inviting KSSN staff to the 2007 Practicum, NTACCS's community school conference.

RESULTS TO DATE

A three-year evaluation of KSSN is underway, and while the results of that study have not yet been published, the community school strategy is having a positive impact on Kent County. Many of the schools have seen increased access to services, decreases in suspension rates, improved attendance

(with dramatic decreases in early chronic absenteeism), and greater parental involvement. Teachers in KSSN schools reported that their students are more ready and able to learn and that their schools are more enjoyable places to teach.

LESSONS LEARNED

Collaboration: KSSN has successfully convened many individuals and organizations in Kent County to define and support a vision for helping children and families and developing neighborhoods. The key was to create several tiers of collaboration – at the leadership, management and school/neighborhood levels – and to support those groups through intensive technical assistance, training and consultation.

Comprehensiveness: Leveraging the resources of network-wide resources like the County Department of Human Services and local resources such as churches and volunteers, KSSN has identified and is working to meet many of the interrelated needs of children in its schools.

Coordination/Integration: Beyond merely collocating services in schools, KSSN hired and placed coordinators in every school to organize the schools' and communities' assets in an integrated fashion to avoid duplicity and ensure quality and alignment. A KSSN Director is also in place to coordinate the three levels of partnership in the network and drive changes in policy to support the strategy.

Commitment: Since the start of the initiative, KSSN leaders have allocated significant time and effort to sustainability planning and advocacy to grow the number of schools in the network and ultimately serve as model for other counties in Michigan and beyond.