

Sustaining Complex Reforms: An Investigation of Organizational Routines in Community Schools

Linda K. Mayger, EdD
Assistant Professor
Educational Administration and Secondary Education
School of Education
The College of New Jersey
Ewing, NJ

Abstract

Many school improvement initiatives die out, are implemented superficially, or fail to improve student learning. Drawing from the literature on sustainability and organizational routines, this comparative case study examines the role organizational routines played in fostering stability and improvement in three well-established community schools. Data collection was conducted over three years and included time studies, interviews, and document review. The findings indicated that four organizational routines—leadership meetings, partnership alignment plans, quarterly data reports, and professional development—constituted a system that fostered shared responsibility, organizational capacity, commitment of resources, and collective action. The results highlight the importance of developing systems and structures that routinize beneficial norms, while also acknowledging the limits of organizational routines in prescribing individual behavior.

Key Words

sustainability, school improvement, school reform, organizational routines, community schools

Sustainable school improvement is difficult to achieve, especially in low-performing schools (Gross, Booker, & Goldhaber, 2009; Meyers & Smylie, 2017). Instead of spreading throughout an organization and persisting over time, many school improvement initiatives are implemented superficially or die out, having made little impact on students (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Datnow, 2005). Failed school improvements are costly in terms of time and resources and contribute to a negative school culture, as teachers may become cynical and disillusioned when repeatedly compelled to adopt practices that are later abandoned (Brooks, Hughes, & Brooks, 2008; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006).

The purpose of this comparative case study was to investigate how organizational routines facilitated the sustainability of a complex school reform model. Organizational routines are the processes that structure people's work and can foster both change and stability in schools (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). While the current study uses routines to illuminate sustainability in community schools, prior studies have explained school operations by investigating organizational routines such as instructional rounds (Hatch, Hill, & Roegman, 2016) and data teams (Hubers, Schildkamp, Poortman, & Pieters, 2017; Kallemeyn, 2014).

Community schools are an ideal venue for the current investigation because the community school model is a complex and flexible strategy that can be challenging to develop and maintain (Jacobson, 2016; Lawson & van Veen, 2016). Community schools provide an array of programs and supports tailored to the demonstrated needs of students and their families by capitalizing on community assets and building interdependent partner networks (Blank, Melville, & Shah, 2003; Dryfoos, 2005). Community schools

typically share four characteristics: (a) integrated student supports, (b) expanded learning opportunities, (c) family and community engagement, and (d) collaborative leadership and practice (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam, 2017).

The community school model focuses on the whole child and seeks multifaceted, systemic solutions that reach beyond school walls, therefore stakeholders must hold broad conceptions about what a school is and does (Lawson & van Veen, 2016). However, researchers have found that school leaders have at times struggled to move beyond superficially implementing the structural aspects of the community school model and thus have failed to sufficiently develop the normative aspects required for intensive, interdependent collaboration (Adams, 2019; Adams & Jean-Marie, 2010; de Royston & Madkins, 2019).

The research question that anchored this inquiry was: How did organizational routines facilitate continuity and improvement in community schools? This work is situated in Curry's (1992) theory of institutionalization, which involves structural, cultural, and behavioral elements that are described in greater detail in the next section.

After using the literature to compile a theoretical framework of the factors that facilitate sustainability in community schools, I then applied the framework to identify four key organizational routines that contributed to sustaining the initiative in three focal schools. The findings revealed the importance of developing structures that routinize constructive norms rather than depending on individual actors to behave in beneficial ways. This paper closes with a discussion of the findings' implications in terms of sustaining

school improvement initiatives and the utility of organizational routines.

Organizational Routines

Organizational routines are repeated collective behaviors with two aspects. The ostensive aspect is a formal or informal “script” that provides guidance on how a social process is conducted. The performative aspect of the routine is the enactment of the script in a particular time and place (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Routines reveal shared expectations and norms for behavior, thus shaping and expressing organizational culture (Nelson & Winter, 1984).

Organizational routines promote stability by fostering consistency in behavior (Sherer & Spillane, 2011). By signaling the way things are supposed to work in an organization, routines mitigate the need for each individual to reinvent how to conduct repeated activities (Hansen & Vogel, 2011). Moreover, when desired norms are embedded in the script of a routine, they are more likely to persist (Spillane et al., 2011). In one example, an instructional rounds routine promoted a common language and shared understandings about teaching and learning across a school district by involving administrators in collective classroom visits followed by reflection and feedback (Hatch et al., 2016).

Routines also can support organizational improvement. Some routines, such as data analysis protocols, are explicitly designed to serve as mechanisms for collective learning (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Spillane et al., 2011). Leaders can also promote organizational improvement by creating or modifying routines, as exemplified by the principals who used grade-level meeting

routines to facilitate instructional transparency (Sherer & Spillane, 2011; Spillane et al., 2011).

Despite the usefulness of routines to organize behavior, their potential to prescribe individual actions is limited (Sherer & Spillane, 2011). First, it would be unmanageable to develop an ostensive script with enough detail to standardize every element of a social process. Second, individuals, based on contextual and personal factors, will vary in how closely they adhere to a routine’s script, regardless of its detail (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Hansen & Vogel, 2011). Hubers et al. (2017), for example, found teachers in Dutch secondary schools unsuccessful in using data use routines to promote school improvement. The authors attributed the superficial implementation to the routine’s vague ostensive elements and insufficient teacher capacity to effectively enact the routine, thus suggesting design an enactment of organizational routines have a role to play in the sustainability of school reforms.

Sustainability

Sustainability represents only one potential outcome once an innovation has been introduced into an organization (Curry, 1992; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). Other possible results include (a) rejection; (b) superficial adoption with little influence on organizational functions; and (c) acceptance by an isolated segment of the organization. To develop a theoretical framework of the factors that contributed to the community school model spreading throughout a school and persisting over time, I organized the information found in the community school literature by the *structural*, *cultural*, and *behavioral* levels of implementation offered by Curry (1992). The results are illustrated in Table 1 and described in the following paragraphs.

Table 1

Factors Related to Sustaining the Community School Model

Structural
Organizational continuity
Consistent and sufficient funding
Dedicated time
Personnel with expertise
Explicit goals
Interconnected partner network
Cultural
Interpersonal trust across stakeholders
Internal and external legitimacy
Shared language, norms, and expectations
Shared vision
Collective responsibility for students
Focus on student, family, and community needs
Behavioral
Actions aligned to goals and vision
Evidence of process and progress
Open, two-way communication
Collaborative leadership

Structural

At the structural level, an organization must demonstrate sufficient capacity to implement an innovation and a sustained commitment to support it over time (Curry, 1992). Lack of organizational continuity is a key threat to sustained commitment because new leaders may demonstrate a superficial commitment to pre-existing initiatives and redirect their efforts in other directions (Adams, 2019; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2017; de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Medina, Cosby, & Grim, 2019). This

redirection may deny an initiative of the adequate funding, dedicated time for planning and implementation, and sufficient personnel with appropriate expertise necessary to sustain it (Adams, 2019; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2017; Galindo, Sanders, & Abel, 2017; Jean-Marie et al., 2010). Initiatives are also more likely to persist when they have explicit goals to clarify the endeavor's purpose and align actors in a common direction (Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2016). A few structural elements

are specific to community schools, such as the community school coordinator (hereafter referred to as “coordinator”), who is often employed by a school’s lead partnering organization to maintain programming and the requisite network of community partners (authors, 2019, Adams & Jean-Marie, 2010; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2017; Medina et al., 2019).

Cultural

At the cultural level of sustainability, a critical mass of individuals must support the initiative and espouse its norms and values (Curry, 1992). Although it is vital for all stakeholders involved to accept the legitimacy of a school improvement, it is most critical for district and building administrators to fully understand an initiative and prioritize its integration into the schools (Adams, 2019; de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Medina et al., 2019).

Changes are most likely to take hold in organizational climates where there is strong interpersonal trust and stakeholders develop common expectations for their individual roles and responsibilities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; FitzGerald & Quiñones, 2018; Medina et al., 2019; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). A community school requires stakeholders to subscribe to a common vision that includes collective responsibility for fostering student success and an intentional focus on equitably addressing family and community needs (Adams, 2019; de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Green, 2018; Medina et al., 2019).

Behavioral

Whereas the cultural level of sustainability involves shared responsibility, the behavioral level requires evidence of collective action. In

a sustained innovation, the organization’s constituent members enact the initiative’s key features and work toward achieving its ends (Curry, 1992). Key features of community schools include collaborative leadership and open communication that strengthens relationships, enhances information flow, and coordinates actors across the schools’ partner networks (de Royston & Madkins, 2019; FitzGerald & Quiñones, 2018; Medina et al., 2019; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Successfully integrated innovations track both the fidelity of implementation and the intended outcomes, as individuals are more likely to remain engaged with initiatives that provide evidence that they are producing their intended results (de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Methods

This comparative case study’s design included interviews, documents, and time studies collected over three years to provide information about the viewpoints, formal structures, and behaviors of community school leaders.

Setting

Three schools were purposefully selected from the same school district. Selected schools were fully implementing the community school model for at least two years at the inception of the study, as indicated in Table 2. Adams and Wilson are elementary schools, and Central (pseudonyms) is a middle school. A demographic comparison of the three schools indicated that 79% to 94% of students came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and 75% to 94% identified as students of color.

Table 2

Community School Characteristics, Fall 2017

	Adams	Central	Wilson
Years implemented	13	8	6
Principals (consecutive)	1	5	1
CSCs (consecutive)	5	1	1
Partners	15	19	40
Initiatives	24	39	33
Student supports	13	15	12
Expanded learning	5	11	8
Family engagement	5	7	9
Collaborative leadership	1	6	4

Participants

The study involved 11 individuals who were most able to reveal how the community school initiative was designed and organized. The participants included five principals/assistant principals and four coordinators from the three schools, reflecting frequent turnover in the coordinator and principal positions at Adams and Central, respectively.

I also interviewed United Way's strategic development coordinator, to provide the viewpoint of the coordinating community-based organization, and the school district's chief academic officer, to obtain district perspectives. Seven participants identified as female, two identified as Black, three as Hispanic, and six as White. At the close of the study, two of the school principals had over 15 years of experience, and three had 1 to 5 years of experience. The coordinators' experience levels ranged from less than 1 year to 8 years. The district and United Way administrators had been in their positions for over 7 years.

Data collection and analysis

To illuminate the schools' structures, culture, enacted behavior, and organizational routines, the design required multiple sources of data, including semi-structured interviews, documents, and time studies. The 45- to 70-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2017 for the purpose of understanding the principals' and coordinators' perspectives on how their schools were implementing the community school model, their vision and goals, and their leadership challenges and successes.

The time studies used experience sampling methodology (ESM) to provide a random sample of the school leaders' typical daily activities (Fisher & To, 2012) over a period of 30 days in 2014 and 2017, which revealed how often school leaders engaged in organizational routines. Data collection also included documents that showed the ostensive aspects of the schools' organizational routines.

Data were triangulated and analyzed in an iterative process. At the first level data were coded using a priori codes from the sustainability framework and in vivo codes to represent specific organizational routines. The second phase involved matrices for comparing sustainability factors and organizational routines across sites.

To ensure the accuracy, completeness, fairness, and validity of the descriptions and conclusions, I engaged most of the participants in face-to-face follow-up discussions where I shared my findings and solicited their reactions. Yet, despite my attempts to generate trustworthy results, this study is necessarily limited by its research design, including the

positionality of the participants as school leaders and the contextual features of the specific schools we studied.

Results

The analysis indicated that the schools employed four specific routines to foster the structural, cultural, and behavioral conditions beneficial for sustaining the community school model, as indicated in Table 3. The routines common to all three schools were leadership meetings, partnership alignment plans, data reports, and professional development. In the following sections, the routines are described in detail, including how they contributed to continuity and organizational improvement in the three community schools.

Table 3

Organizational Routines that Facilitated Sustainability of the Community School Model

Facilitating elements	Leadership Meetings	Alignment Plan	Data Reports	Professional Development
Structural				
Organizational continuity				
Consistent and sufficient funding				
Dedicated time				
Personnel with expertise				
Explicit goals				
Interconnected partner network				
Cultural				
Interpersonal trust				
Internal and external legitimacy				
Shared norms and expectations				
Shared vision				
Collective responsibility				
Student/family/community focus				
Behavioral				
Actions aligned to goals				
Evidence of process and progress				
Open two-way communication				
Collaborative leadership				

Note. Shaded cells indicate participants described the organizational routine as incorporating or supporting the element.

Leadership meetings

Leadership meetings were the most important routine and one that showed up most often in the time study data. The United Way designed two types of leadership meetings: the Core Team and the Leadership Team. Both types of meetings were designed to strategically align stakeholders, resources, and programming around common goals and a shared vision.

According to Central's coordinator, the main difference between the two teams was that the Core Team went "a little more in depth, in detail, about the nitty gritty stuff." Monthly Core Team meetings included only representatives of the four major stakeholders: school (principal and coordinator), lead partner organization, school district, and United Way. Core Team meetings focused on strategic planning, checking progress toward goals, and discussing implementation logistics.

Leadership Teams were larger than Core Teams and invited widespread participation from all stakeholders in the school community including school staff, parents, and each of the community partners. Depending on the needs of the school, Leadership Team meetings took place quarterly (Central), bimonthly (Adams), or monthly (Wilson). The purpose of the Leadership Team meetings was to facilitate an exchange of information and strengthen ties with the partners. The coordinators also used leadership meetings to reinforce community school values and norms, as Wilson's coordinator described:

If I get new people on board, I'm able to explain the community school model ... And I always make clear to them, "What I do is that we work

together collectively to make an impact. When there are challenges, we look for your advice."

The other coordinators also used leadership meetings to develop shared understandings about community schools and to reinforce collective responsibility for student success.

Although leadership meetings facilitated continuity by engaging and enculturating partners, these meetings also systematized improvement by explicitly providing a forum for collaborative problem solving. Adams' principal described their Leadership Team meetings as "very interactive."

Central's and Wilson's leaders noted how working with their partners saved their afterschool programs after both schools lost a grant that paid for their afterschool program coordinators. By mobilizing their networks at their Core Team and Leadership Team meetings, the schools found organizations that were willing to fill the gap in services and funding. Two years later, the afterschool programs had more enrichment opportunities and were serving a greater number of children than they were before.

Partnership alignment plans

Each year, the Core Teams developed a partnership alignment plan to strategically guide their work throughout the year and serve as a reference point during their meetings. In the alignment plan, the teams signaled their priorities by ranking seven community school goals, such as literacy, school and neighborhood safety, and decreasing chronic absence.

The plan's template specified quantitative baseline data to be collected for academics and attendance and provided examples of strategies aligned to each goal. Next to each goal were spaces to indicate provider names, financial information, and related programming. The partnership alignment plan created a system for clarifying expectations and aligning stakeholder actions toward shared goals.

The transparency of the process fostered partner commitment. As the United Way strategist explained:

I've gotten phone calls from lots of United Ways that are trying to figure out how to get a corporate partner involved in the work. They just want their money, really. I'm like, well, it can't just be about their money ... It really has to be about building trust and making sure everybody is driving toward the same outcome, or you will have corporate partners that are really disillusioned with the speed at which progress can actually happen in an antiquated school system.

The alignment plan also was a data-informed process for setting priorities for the school and guiding the number of strategies being implemented. The United Way strategist reasoned, "If you are prioritizing basic needs first, and you have no strategies identified for the school year ahead, then you can't say that it's your first priority, or you have a heck of a lot of work to do."

At Adams and Wilson, the alignment plan served as a roadmap for the entire school, with one set of goals guiding both the community school initiative and the schools' core programming. Conversely,

Central's current principal admitted that during its first six years the community school initiative had operated as a distinct entity within the school with separate goals and "nothing was really aligned to anything."

One of the principal's initial actions upon assuming his position was to integrate the community school model into the core work of the school by collaborating with school staff to develop a student- and community-centered vision. According to Central's coordinator, "That's when from a system level it finally seemed to come together."

Data reports

Midway through this study, the United Way developed a routine for the coordinators to submit standardized quarterly data reports, thus coordinator time use related to data went from being undetectable in 2014 to being described in multiple time-study responses for each coordinator in 2017.

The data were used at Core Team meetings to monitor impact and to reveal underperforming strategies. Data reporting fostered continuity and consistency by requiring the same data each year from each school. Notably, the data spotlighted areas in need of improvement. Central's coordinator described how data informed her actions and fostered legitimacy:

In the quarterly reports, we are asked about students who are chronically absent. There's an attendance component, a discipline component, and then the academic component. So, I'm very determined to initiate some more programming and show a decrease in absenteeism and an increase in our academics ... we need

to be showing that this model is successful.

Along with the quantitative academic and attendance data required by the United Way, the Core Teams used a meeting check-in template that provided space for schools to share qualitative impact data for each of the alignment plan goals. Qualitative information, however, was neither standardized nor required in the quarterly reports.

The United Way strategist believed that data sharing fostered partner commitment and continuity by exposing partners to the scope of the school's needs and by documenting successes. The strategist explained, "We've decided to be really transparent," but also admitted, "The data continues to be a challenge." After more than a decade of collaboration, the school district and the United Way were still refining the processes necessary to support data integration between the organizations.

The main barriers to data use were structural and cultural. The first structural issue was the high level of coordination required for the district and United Way to provide the coordinators with access to school databases. Because the coordinators' employers of record were the schools' lead partners, the memoranda of understanding between the United Way and the schools had to designate the coordinator as an official of the school with permission to see individual student data.

Clarification of the logistics revealed cultural differences between the organizations, as the district administrator described:

We used to have all these little nitpicky issues come up, like FERPA, and I was calling it, like, the "issue du jour." Why am I spending so much time talking to my lawyer about FERPA and if we can share data and student information with the United Way? Why is this taking four hours? It was manufactured complexity. It was on our end. We had our procedures locked down so tight. And you know what? So did they. The United Way wanted something written for everything.

After the logistical issues were resolved, another, more complicated, structural issue presented itself in the form of coordinators' lack of data expertise. Training the coordinators required a large commitment of resources. The United Way loaned personnel to the district to make the data more accessible, and the district's Information Technology department supported the coordinators in learning to use the electronic database. Because the coordinators were not educators, they also requested professional development to learn how to interpret student achievement results.

Professional development

In addition to training the coordinators to use data, the United Way held bimonthly meetings for coordinators from the regional area to keep them apprised of changing procedures, to share strategies, and to enculturate new coordinators into the community school model. These regular opportunities for professional learning fostered consistency in implementation and served as a stabilizing force across personnel transitions. The United Way also

formed optional working groups that met regularly to share strategies and information in priority areas, such as attendance, early childhood education, and literacy. This hybrid model of requirements and flexible options disseminated evidence-based practices and innovations across schools.

The professional development routines, however, lacked a means for training school principals in the community school model. The principals claimed that they learned about community schools from “sitting in a meeting, learning as you go” and “a lot of it’s on you to ask questions and the people who are working with you to get you acquainted with the community school model.” The United Way strategist described Core Team meetings as the place where the principals’ primary orientation took place, but she admitted that it was difficult to develop principals this way:

It’s one of the weaker areas, for sure, of how we’ve been doing things, kind of from a legitimacy standpoint. I think it’s going to have to tighten up if we’re going to be able to go to scale or build more capacity or be really clear about who is doing what and in what way.

Having worked with five different principals, Central’s coordinator emphasized the importance of educating principals about the community school model. “I think you cannot do it without a principal that supports the model, understands the model, and supports your effort in the model.”

Discussion

Considering the difficulty that schools experience in achieving lasting change, I embarked on this study to uncover organizational routines that facilitated the

sustainability of a complex school improvement initiative. The analysis identified four organizational routines that constituted a system for sustaining the structural, cultural, and behavioral aspects of the community school model, despite leadership transitions at two of the schools. Leadership meetings provided space for regular collaboration and promoted a culture of collective responsibility for student success.

Partnership alignment plans served as a structure for aligning stakeholder actions and resources with shared goals. Quarterly data reports made evident the outcomes of collective action and the areas in need of improvement. Professional development increased the capacity of personnel, enabled the dissemination of program improvements, and enculturated new coordinators.

This research is significant in its use of time study data to provide a random sample of what participants actually did on a daily basis to sustain an initiative, rather than relying solely on participants’ recollections or attempting to directly observe behaviors that would likely be altered by a researcher’s presence. Through this work, a deeper understanding of sustaining complex educational innovations emerged.

The focal schools exemplified Datnow’s (2005) observation that “sustainability does not come easily; it takes extensive time and effort” (p. 148). It took the three focal schools variable amounts of time to fully integrate the community school model into the core work of the school. While one of the focal schools achieved full integration before year three, the school with the most

turnover in principals only moved past partial adoption during its seventh year. These findings indicate that complex school reforms need to be given sufficient time to take hold and also require intentional, coordinated support for continuous incremental improvement from the district and the other organizations involved (Adams, 2019; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2017).

In selecting schools with frequent leadership turnover, this study reinforced the critical importance of developing systems and structures that routinize beneficial norms rather than leaving it up to individuals to “do the right thing.”

Although there were strong routines to support new coordinators, the focal schools lacked a means to ensure new principals deeply understood the improvement initiative taking place in their schools—a gap noted by other researchers (Adams, 2019; Galindo & Sanders, 2019; Medina et al., 2019). The coordinator at the school with high principal turnover identified this lack of targeted professional development for principals as one contributing factor in the school’s slower integration of the community school model.

Although I originally assumed that organizational routines are producers of organizational culture and behavior, I now believe that effective routines are also the products of beneficial organizational conditions.

This new assumption is based on the emergence and evolution of the quarterly data reporting routine. This routine required a culture of trust between partners and a belief in the legitimacy of the initiative for the school district to grant

non-school personnel access to their student databases. The technical assistance that enabled coordinators to effectively use the district data systems required a substantial investment resources as well as strong cooperation between the district and the coordinating organization.

Without these factors, it is doubtful that the routine would have developed as fully as it did. This finding suggests that implementing a successful new organizational routine requires the same planning, support, monitoring, and adjustment as other organizational change initiatives.

The existence of three sustainability levels indicates that structures alone are insufficient to institutionalize school improvements. Although this study joins other organizational researchers, such as Sherer and Spillane (2010), in declaiming organizational routines as useful tools for fostering behavioral and cultural change, the limits of routines must be acknowledged (Hubers et al., 2017).

No matter how carefully leaders design a routine’s script, the manner in which participants choose to enact the routine largely determines the outcome. Thus, individuals can conduct leadership meetings without engaging in meaningful collaboration or attend professional development sessions without taking action to improve their schools.

With this in mind, I encourage school leadership preparation programs and early career mentors to help emerging school leaders recognize how to both design and use organizational routines as tools for school improvement.

Conclusion

The recipe for sustaining complex reforms includes developing organizational capacity, committing resources, sharing responsibility, and acting collectively.

As this and many other studies have demonstrated, however, widespread and lasting school improvement is slow and difficult work that requires intentional organizational design and an ongoing investment in building school culture. As

one of the participants eloquently articulated:

You need to make sure that the people that you have involved believe in what you're doing with the model. And you need to constantly remind people why they are here. Because if you don't do that, you do the groundwork, and then, all of a sudden, everything falls apart. The real work is to sustain the model.

Author Biography

Linda Mayger is an assistant professor and program coordinator of the educational leadership program at The College of New Jersey. Before joining the academy, she spent 20 years as a teacher, administrator, and school board member in preschool, elementary, and middle level schools in several states throughout the U.S. This laid a foundation for her teaching and research, which focus on how schools can develop systems that meet the holistic needs of each child. Her research primarily investigates organizational practices and leadership in community schools and the effects of state policies on practitioners. E-mail: maygerL@tcnj.edu

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