

CASE STUDIES

TACSI Gets Results

- ▶ Researchers comparing 18 TACSI schools to 18 non-TACSI schools found that students in TACSI schools that had deeply embedded the community school model scored significantly higher than comparable students in non-TACSI schools.
- ▶ The difference was 19 points in reading achievement and 32 points in mathematics achievement.
- ▶ Further, unlike the comparison schools, the 18 TACSI schools had higher ratings in instructional leadership, effective supervisory practices, culture of faculty trust, instructional agency, student trust of teachers, school identification among students, parent trust in school, and school outreach.
- ▶ Results suggest that SUN students with high rates of participation in after-school activities significantly outperform comparison students in school attendance and credits earned toward graduation.



www.communityschools.org

Tulsa, Oklahoma: Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI)

Those inside and outside the education system increasingly view schools that are part of the Tulsa Area Community School Initiative (TACSI) as a vehicle for solving problems and connecting children and families with the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. This view is exemplified by what education leaders in Tulsa call the “natural fit” between community schools and early learning programs. In Oklahoma—a state known for providing access to early childhood education—TACSI’s experience shows how pre-school programs and strong community schools can connect to create a continuum of support and learning throughout the early years.

Early Learning and Elementary Schools Often Start “Miles Away”

Only a chain-link fence separates the McClure Early Childhood Education Center, which is run by the Community Action Project, and McClure Elementary School, part of the Tulsa Public School District. The fence is primarily for safety purposes, though until recently, the two schools might as well have been located at opposite ends of the city, if communication between the teachers is any indicator. “We were right next door, but we were miles away,” says Stephanie Turpin, a McClure Head Start teacher at the Early Childhood Education Center.

But that was before formation of a transition planning team made up of representatives of both the preschool and the elementary school under the Linkages Project, a three-year \$225,000 grant to the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI), which leads community school efforts in the Tulsa and Union Public School Districts, both of which serve the city of Tulsa. Funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Linkages is an effort of the Coalition for Community Schools to connect early childhood education work with strong community school initiatives for three purposes: to enhance the quality of early childhood learning opportunities, to facilitate transitions

“It seems to me that the younger you involve children, the more you’re going to get the parents of those children involved in school. When they see supportive schools, they feel more comfortable.”

—Wayne Bland

Board of Directors,
Community Service Council

TACSI Community Schools Levels of Development

- ▶ **Inquiring:** Acquiring knowledge of the critical elements of community school DNA
- ▶ **Emerging:** Expanding shared leadership, collaborations, and partnerships through engagement and capacity building
- ▶ **Mentoring:** Aligning the community school vision with programs, services, and opportunities around shared results through integrated school/community partnerships
- ▶ **Sustaining:** Embracing the philosophy of community schools throughout the school and the broader community

Adapted from *Four Levels of Community School Development* (TACSI)

between early childhood and school, and to ensure that services for children and families continue as children progress through the grades. Tulsa is one of three sites; the others are Multnomah County, Oregon, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Now, a transition planning team made up of teachers from both McClure Elementary and its neighboring early childhood center meets monthly, providing Head Start teachers with a unique opportunity to inform the kindergarten teachers about the children who will advance into their classrooms and to discuss classroom practices that can make that transition smoother. For example, Meagan Cornelius, a kindergarten teacher at McClure Elementary, has added “centers” to her kindergarten classroom—activity areas that preschoolers typically cycle through during the day; at the same time, Head Start’s Turpin has started to give rising kindergartners longer spans of time in centers to strengthen their ability to persist with a task or project. The Head Start teachers also designate what they call a “safe place” in their classrooms so that students may step aside if they have a disagreement with a classmate or find themselves in other emotional situations. “They choose to go there. It’s not time out,” Turpin says. “It’s self-regulation.”

For their part, the McClure kindergarten teachers are carving out a safe place in their classrooms so that Head Start students will see something recognizable when they enter their kindergarten classrooms. In addition, the preschoolers enjoy frequent opportunities to visit the kindergarten classes.

Before creation of the transition planning team, the McClure Head Start teacher and McClure kindergarten teachers held ideas that were probably typical of most in their positions across the country. “The majority of kindergarten teachers are told that Head Start teachers never tell students ‘no,’” Cornelius says. And, according to Turpin, “Our perception was that kindergarten teachers are mean.”

The transition teams—at McClure and three other sites with both elementary schools and early learning centers—include family support specialists and other partners who ensure that any social services received by a child or family in preschool will continue once the child enters public school. “That’s what is different about a transition committee at a community school and a regular school,” says Janet McKenzie, one of two transition specialists working on the Linkages Project.¹²

In fall 2011, seven Tulsa Public elementary schools, most of which are community schools, will share a site with early childhood education centers, creating more opportunities for joint planning.

TACSI Builds a Sustainable Structure

The opportunity to connect schools and early childhood programs in Tulsa is the product of a strong community-wide, collaborative leadership structure that supports community schools. More specifically, TACSI grew out of a 2005 campaign of the Tulsa Community Foundation, called Step Up Tulsa!, that involved over 300 regular participants who identified priorities and “trendbenders” that would improve the quality of life for Tulsa residents. In the area of education, leaders voiced concern that the impact of early childhood programs receded once children entered school.

Jan Creveling, now program director for community schools at the Community Service Council (CSC), was hired to find a strategy that would have the greatest impact on at-risk children and families.

¹² Since the site visit to Tulsa, McKenzie has stopped serving as a transition specialist and now works in one of the schools.

After reviewing various models, Creveling identified the community schools approach as the direction CSC would take, with the expectation that early childhood education would always be a major focus of the initiative. Creveling's early research included participation at the Coalition for Community Schools' national conferences, where she asked leaders of other community school initiatives around the country about what they had learned and what they would do differently.

In 2007, the Tulsa Metropolitan Human Services Commission officially established TACSI. The commission is a partnership of school systems, local government, and public and private agencies that coordinates funding, planning, and policy decisions regarding human services in Tulsa County. CSC provides staff support to the commission, administers TACSI, and houses its resource center.

TACSI leaders have given careful thought to what makes a community school in Tulsa. They refer to "community school DNA"—those elements that are necessary for the TACSI community school model to function and achieve results. The elements include a coordinator and a school site team.¹³ In addition, each community school is expected to address core components of student success, one of which is early childhood (0–8). Others include health/health education, youth development/out-of-school time, mental health/social services, family and community engagement, neighborhood development, and life-long learning (see Figure 4).

TACSI considers its schools to be at any given point on a continuum of community school development. In the first stage—Inquiring—a school team attends TACSI's "Community Schools 101" training. Schools at the second stage—Emerging—receive \$5,000 to begin creating their school-site teams, which bring partners into the school to address the needs and interests of students and families. The third stage—Mentoring—involves the hiring of a coordinator to provide day-to-day management of programs, services, and opportunities. The Mentoring stage also requires the community school to offer guidance to schools that are beginning the process of becoming community schools. The highest level of implementation—Sustaining—requires the participation of all relevant stakeholders: educators, families, students,

and community and neighborhood partners; all stakeholders have diffused the community school strategy throughout their organizational arrangements and instructional practices.

A community steering committee responsible for oversight, joint planning, and policy development guides TACSI and brings together partners such as CSC staff and representatives of school districts, funders, government, and institutions of higher education. A management team operationalizes the community school strategy, reviews activities and practices, and sets the initiative's direction. The management team is composed of key decision makers from the school districts, Oklahoma University–Tulsa, and CSC and is intentionally small to ensure that the initiative moves forward at a meaningful pace. The management team keeps the steering committee and other partners current on its plans. In Tulsa, consensus and transparency are the overarching characteristics that make the system work. Figure 5 depicts TACSI's organizational arrangements.

Affirmation of TACSI's model comes from community partners across the city. The Foundation for Tulsa Schools recently narrowed its fundraising efforts to only a few specific priorities—one of which is community schools. Other funders say that they are convinced that community schools—especially those focused on early childhood learning—are a good investment. "We are very much impressed by what we see," says Wayne Bland, a member of the board of directors of the Temple Foundation, named for two public school employees in Tulsa. The foundation currently funds the coordinator position at Mark Twain Elementary School. "It seems to me that the younger you involve children, the more you're going to get the parents of those children involved in school," Bland added. "When they see supportive schools, they feel more comfortable."

TACSI's structure and the support from the schools and community enable TACSI to address community needs such as access to food, mentoring, health and mental health services, expanded learning opportunities such as summer programming, and, as this report illustrates, a strong continuum of support for children and their families as children move into elementary school.

¹³ Union Public Schools calls its coordinators Community Parent Liaisons.

Figure 4: The TASC Community School DNA

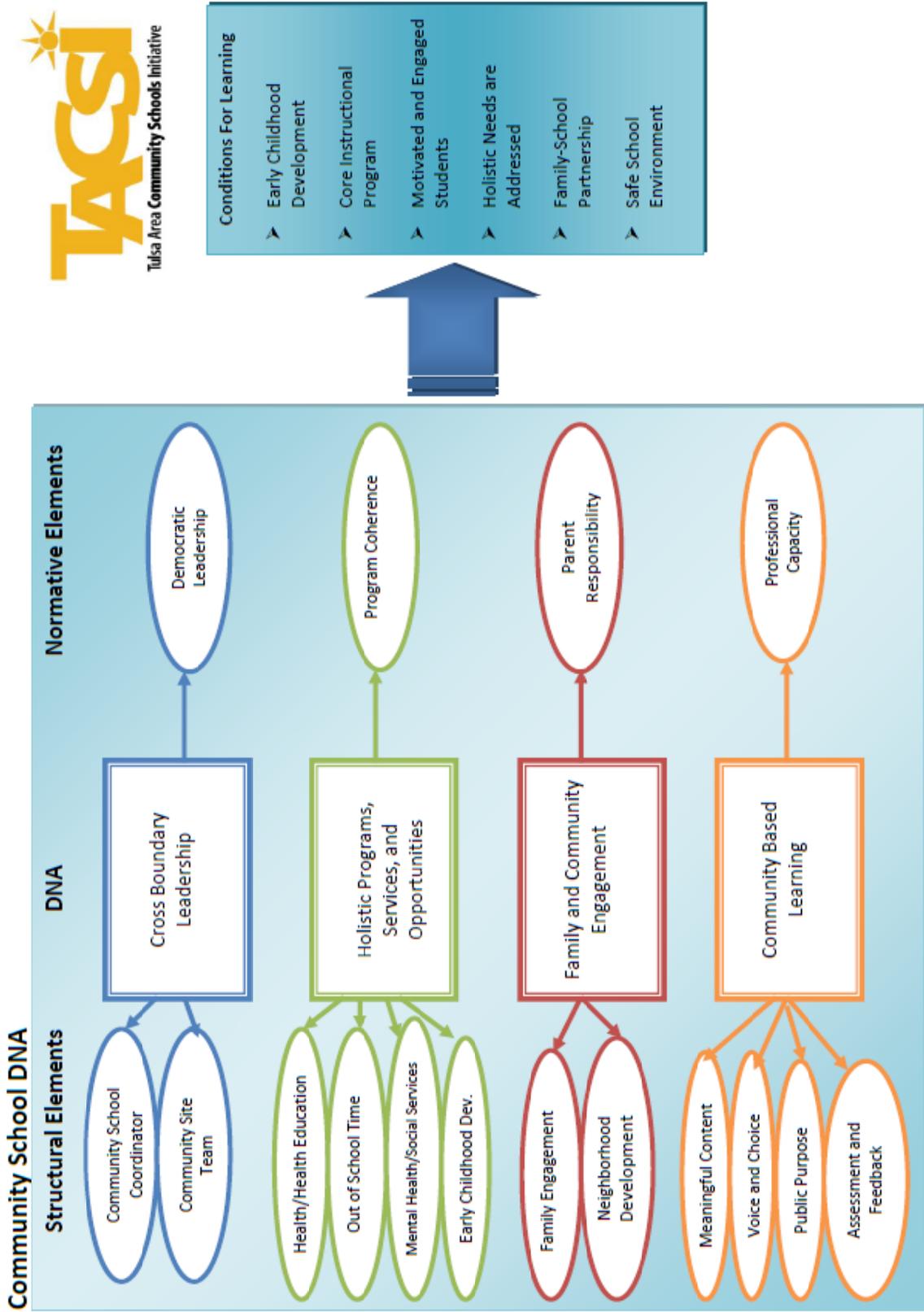
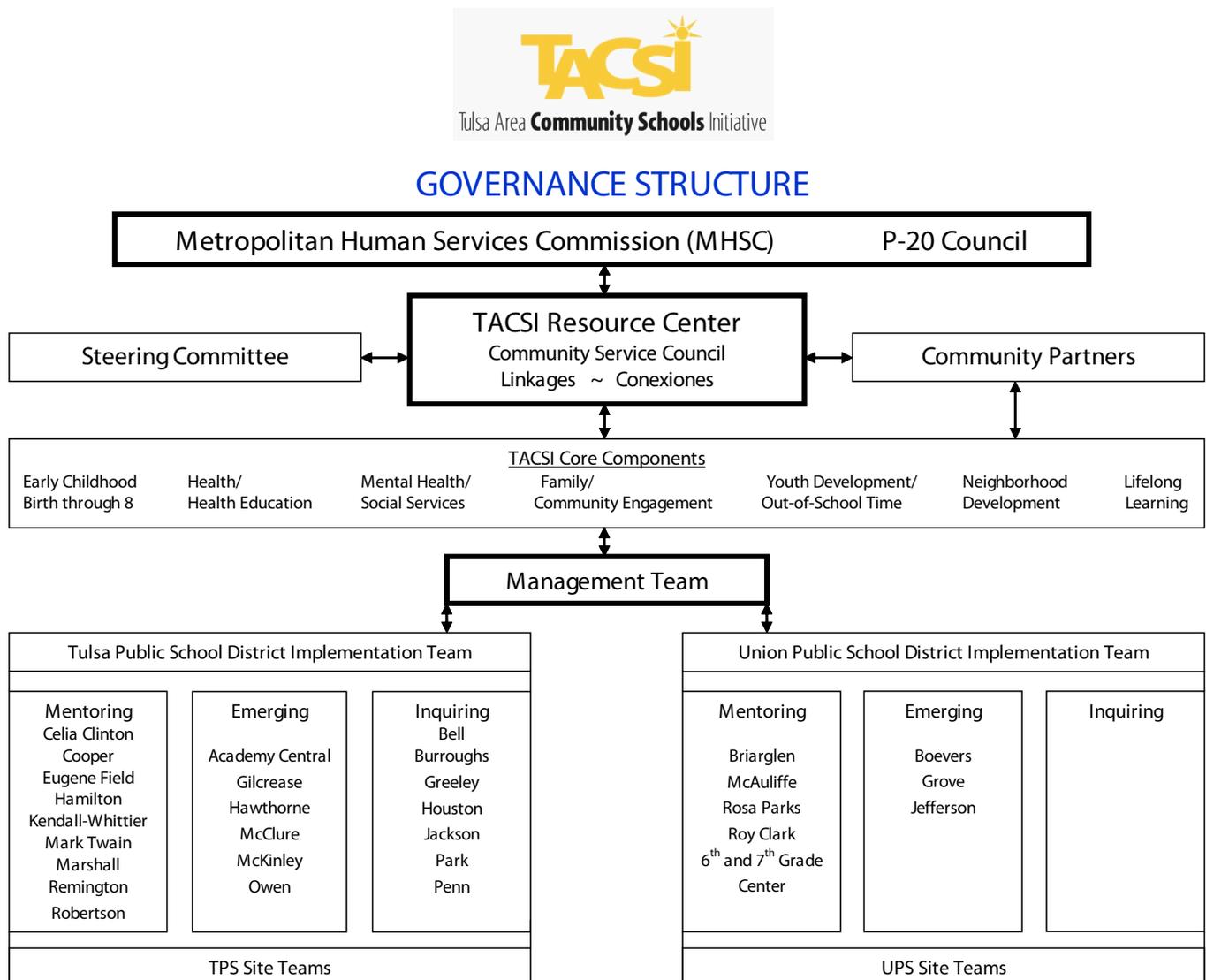


Figure 5: The TACSI Governance Structure



Why Linkages in Tulsa?

To many outside observers, Tulsa—or Oklahoma in general—probably does not seem like a state that needs advice in the area of early childhood education. Enacting a universal pre-kindergarten law in 1998 and requiring all districts to offer full-day kindergarten by the 2011–12 school year, the state has long been considered an early childhood leader. According to the annual State Preschool Yearbook published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, Oklahoma’s prekindergarten program meets 9 out of 10 indicators of quality.

Not only does Oklahoma make prekindergarten universally available, but Head Start programs, like those at McClure Early Childhood Education Center, are operated by the Community Action Project (CAP), a highly regarded 40-year-old social service agency. Tulsa is also the site of two—soon to be three—Educare centers, model programs supported by the George Kaiser Family Foundation that provide comprehensive care and education services for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Nonetheless, even though young children had access to early childhood education in Tulsa, the programs were not always well connected to the schools that children would later attend, as the McClure example shows.

TACSI Programs Help Parents and Children During Critical Transitions

Melissa Villeagas, a mother of four, has experienced the benefits of TACSI's increased attention to children's transitions. She has two children at Kendall-Whittier Elementary in TPS, a prekindergarten–5 school, and two children at the Educare Early Childhood Education Center next door.

When one of her sons, now 7, was diagnosed with autism, the staff at Educare and the elementary school made sure that he had several opportunities to visit what would be his prekindergarten classroom and teacher. Easing each transition has continued as the student moves to each higher grade.

Through the school's partnerships with local agencies and program providers, Villeagas's children have also participated in Boy Scouts, a "Good News" Christian club, ballet lessons, a fine arts festival, and "make and take" cooking classes. "They want to do everything," Villeagas says about her children. "There is nothing compared to what they have here."

The school's clinic is Villeagas's children's primary health care facility, and she is participating in a nurse training program through EduCareers, a workforce development initiative for Educare parents through the Tulsa Children's Project.

Superintendents See "A Natural Fit"

Leaders in Tulsa say that attending to children's education, health, and social needs before they enter kindergarten should be part of the reach of a community school. "It's a natural fit," says Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) Superintendent Keith Ballard, who has made the growth of community schools one of his top priorities. "You have to meet the needs of kids or you won't have sustainable academic achievement."

TACSI also operates seven community schools in the neighboring Union Public Schools (UPS) district. According to Union Superintendent Cathy Burden, the district's other 19 schools are "all engaged in the process of becoming community schools." She echoes Ballard's beliefs about the logical connections between early childhood development programs and public schools. "It's all consistent with our philosophy of

trying to be there for parents, and be there for children," Burden says. These superintendents recognize and understand the importance of connecting young children and their families to elementary schools.

Teachers at the Kendall-Whittier community school make home visits to families of incoming students and organize summer playgroups to help children and parents get to know each other. "They are sensitive to fostering those friendships," says John Cruncleton, the father of two Kendall-Whittier children. He added that the home visit was especially helpful to his daughter Lottie, who had struggled with shyness. "They were interested in making contact with us."

Districts' Increasing Support of Community Schools

Community schools are also playing a role in TPS's efforts to respond to the district's declining enrollment. As part of the process of closing 13 schools and redrawing attendance boundaries—which can cause turmoil for any school community—Ballard said that the district would create additional community schools as one of the "trade-ups" to make the closures more palatable.

For Ballard, making community schools an integral component of the district also means dedicating more funding to their operation. "We should start assuming some responsibility for ourselves," he says, adding that TACSI will remain "our compass and research partner." TACSI has been funding community school coordinators, but Ballard wants the district to begin paying the coordinators' salaries. While TPS's willingness to cover these costs was a welcome prospect, the proposal raised questions for both the existing coordinators and TACSI leaders.

Kristen Granstaff, coordinator at Eugene Field Elementary, wondered whether she would have to assume additional responsibilities if she became a district employee. Amy Putnam, coordinator at Marshall Elementary, added that funding by an intermediary organization such as TACSI "gives us leverage." She also said, however, that if the district becomes more active in running community schools, then she and others should be "proactive" about ensuring that their positions do not become something other than what TACSI envisions.

After discussions between TACSI leaders and TPS, the school board ultimately decided to keep the existing and new coordinators under TACSI's authority. The school district added six coordinators funded by Title I, four of whom were expected to be on board by the 2011–12 school year. TACSI Program Director Creveling said that she needed some “assurances” from the district that the position of community school coordinator would not change because of its Title I support. She said that she wants officials to understand that the coordinators do more than just serve as parent liaisons—that they also network with community providers and agencies and serve on school administrative teams to make sure services and programs are well matched to the needs of students, families, and community members.

In view of the ongoing cuts in education spending, TACSI has been concerned about the stability of the district's funding for the positions. If the funds for those new coordinators are ever threatened, Creveling says, “We'll be ready at any time to step back in.” In UPS, Burden had already made the decision to pay coordinators' salaries out of Title I funds. “It sustains the entire model for our district,” she said. “I feel good about that.”

Finding Someone to “Energize Change”

TPS took another major step when it created the new position of director of community schools. And Creveling couldn't be more pleased with the person tapped for the job—Dr. Diane Hensley, former principal at Mark Twain Elementary, one of Tulsa's strongest community schools and an example of how a community schools initiative can change a school and its teachers. At Mark Twain, Hensley said that she encountered an unmotivated staff but was determined to lead them in changing the school's vision to benefit children. Interest grew in running a year-round calendar and starting home visits—a practice that Hensley brought from the time she spent at Whittier. “People started coming and saying, ‘What is different?’ It's a vision of respect and dignity for all people,” explains Hensley.

She also wanted to work with early childhood partners and invited the Native American Coalition of Tulsa, which ran Head Start classrooms about 10 miles away, to be part of the school. Hensley secured the agreement of the director of the Head Start classrooms to open a classroom at Mark Twain. At the

outset, the Head Start children and their families were largely separate from the rest of the school, following their own schedule and eating lunch in their classrooms. “We wanted them to come into the cafeteria and be part of the community,” which eventually happened, Hensley says. Now, the coalition operates two full-day Head Start classrooms of 3-year-olds and wants to add a third classroom. The early learning classrooms are increasingly integrated with the elementary school while maintaining their own identities and management.

Hensley describes herself as “not a program person.” She did not immediately seek Mark Twain's participation in TACSI until members of her staff kept returning from meetings and reporting enthusiastically about what they were hearing. “I've always liked being on the outside, pushing the parameters of the district,” she said, but added, “I would love to believe that energizing change can come from within schools.” In looking ahead to assuming the role of community schools director for TPS, Hensley is confident that the Mark Twain teachers have developed a strong sense of ownership of the wrap-around services provided at the school. “Most everything in the district is principal-driven,” she says. “But community schools can't be.”

As community schools director for TPS, Hensley will initially supervise four new Title I-funded coordinators along with their principals and TACSI. She works closely with TACSI to maintain unity and fidelity to the TACSI model and at this point reports to the associate superintendent for elementary schools.

Linkages Became “The Connector”

Even before the advent of Linkages, Tulsa had initiated efforts—many of which were housed at CSC—to improve the quality of early childhood programming. The efforts included JumpStart, a community engagement campaign focused on the importance of high-quality early learning experiences, as well as the Child Care Resource Center (CCRC), which helps parents identify programs that meet their needs. CCRC is the only project in Oklahoma that assists early care and learning programs in gaining accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

“This was good fertile ground,” says Paige Whalen, who coordinates the Quality Enhancement Initiative at the CCRC and serves on the Linkages

Selected TACSI Partners

- Tulsa Public Schools
- Union Public Schools
- Broad faith-based partnerships
- CampFire USA Green Country
- Child Care Resource Center
- Community Service Council
- Family and Children's Services
- Global Gardens
- Metropolitan Human Services Commission
- Northeastern State University-BA
- OU Physicians Tulsa Community Health Clinics
- OU Urban Design
- Tulsa City-County Health Department
- Tulsa City-County Library
- Tulsa Community College
- Tulsa Technology Center
- Tulsa University
- Tulsa City Parks & Recreation Department
- Tulsa Children's Behavioral Health
- Tulsa HUB Bicycle Education/Safety
- YMCA

Leadership Team, which is made up of representatives from CSC, Educare and the Community Action Project, both school districts, practitioners, coordinators, and the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. But it took Linkages, leaders say, to bring some of the people working on the various initiatives out of their "silos." "Linkages is the connector," Whalen says. "We have more intentional practices happening."

Creveling adds that, when community school coordinators fill out their time sheets, they have to reflect how much time they spend on each of TACSI's seven "core components." Before Linkages, "Very few were putting any time in early childhood," she says. Now, community school coordinators are increasing their efforts to build relationships between their schools and early learning providers. Harriet Patterson, parent-community liaison at Roy Clark Elementary School in UPS, says that she promotes the Early Head Start program when she meets with

parents of students with younger siblings. Granstaff, at Eugene Field Elementary in TPS, said that she has increased her contact with staff at the adjacent Eugene Field Early Childhood Education Center. Coordinators at the four Linkages sites participate in joint planning and professional development with their counterparts at the early childhood centers next door.

Nonetheless, the coordinators encounter barriers to involving young students in out-of-school-time programs. "There is a perception among teaching staff that little kids can't do extended day," Patterson says. "But they don't vaporize and vanish when school is over." Sometimes the resistance comes from providers that lack experience in working with younger children. She describes one provider, a Kung Fu instructor, who is the "most gentle, peaceful guy, but is shaken by first graders."

Some families face obstacles when a younger child is enrolled in an early childhood center and an older student is enrolled at the elementary school next door. In some instances, the preschoolers are not eligible to attend the elementary school's after-school programs because of childcare licensing regulations. In other instances, transportation is provided for the older child but not for the Head Start child. To extend learning opportunities, TACSI's committee on out-of-school time and youth development is working to create more opportunities for younger students during the summer 2011 pilot program.

Smooth Transitions for Young Learners into Rosa Parks Elementary

A seamless pathway from the early years through the early grades is the hallmark of both Rosa Parks Early Childhood Center and Rosa Parks Elementary School. The two schools sit next to each other on a large lot across the street from a horse pasture where newborn foals may be seen alongside their mothers in the spring. Kenna, the therapy dog, is one of the first to greet visitors to the center, which serves 0–3 children through both home- and center-based programs. "She makes everyone feel comfy," says Lynn McClure, the principal.

Through collaboration with CAP, UPS administers the Early Head Start (EHS) and preschool programs for 3-year-olds at Rosa Parks Early Childhood Center. The home-based EHS program features six parent educators who conduct home visits

and bring parents in for “socializations.” The center-based 3-year-old classrooms follow the Reggio Emilia model of early childhood instruction, which focuses on creating a relaxing and visually appealing environment in which children explore and create work with a variety of materials.

In one of the low-lit classrooms, a hand-made mobile hangs from the ceiling, and children’s identity panels—which change throughout the year as children are able to draw more details about themselves—are posted on the wall. “The things we are seeing our kids doing are unbelievable,” says Kara Lowry, one of the preschool teachers. On this particular day, a class of rising prekindergarten students had just returned from a visit to the elementary school, where they participated in a scavenger hunt and checked off on their clipboard what they had discovered, such as a block area and a P.E. class. “We read books,” announced one girl.

In addition to working with a partnering agency for family support and crisis intervention, McClure says the center reaps the benefits of the partnerships established with Rosa Parks Community School next door. For example, in the Global Gardens community garden between the two schools, children learn how to plant and “go mucking about,” she says, with Kenna resting calmly at her feet. Anyone from the community can visit the school’s clinic, which was built as part of the school and is operated by University of Oklahoma Physicians.

Karen Vance, principal of Rosa Parks Elementary School, makes sure that preschoolers’ first impressions of her school are positive. “I want them to feel comfortable in a big school,” she says. “I send my teachers over there to observe so they can be better prepared.” But the elementary school is also organized to continue providing a nurturing environment—not just during the prekindergarten year. Vance’s teachers loop through two grade levels in order to “have a longer relationship with their students and their parents,” she says. The school also stopped requiring parents to drop their children off at the front door in the morning—a routine that troubled parents of young children. Now, all parents may accompany their children to the classroom—if the children want them to do so. “Sometimes that is the only time that a parent has to talk to the teacher,” Vance says. “We try to remove little barriers.” Kim Roark, a third-grade teacher at Rosa Parks, says the community school helps meet students’ needs that would otherwise get

in the way of their learning. “We could not do all the things we do without the resources,” she says. “We feed them breakfast. We have snacks for them. We don’t have to run all over town trying to find things like clothing assistance.”

The early childhood center serves families from across the Union district, although not every 4-year-old in the neighborhood will just cross the large lot to attend elementary school. Many children enter kindergarten straight from home or childcare arrangements. For that reason, as part of Linkages, TACSI is involving community-based childcare centers. Stacey Mwongozi, the other transition specialist, is working with the childcare licensing agency to plan training programs for center- and home-based providers on how to prepare children for the transition into school and what it means for a child to attend a community school. Licensing staff will also receive information to share with providers on expectations for children when they enter kindergarten. In addition, community schools will receive maps depicting the variety of early learning providers within their school boundaries.

Following Up with Forms

When children move from Educare into Kendall-Whittier or any other elementary school, parents receive a questionnaire designed to provide their child’s new teacher with information about the student. As part of Linkages, Educare teachers are now making a more concerted effort to ensure that the forms reach and undergo review by the receiving teachers—something that has not always happened, according to McKenzie. The lack of attention to those forms at the elementary level has been a frustration for Steven Dow, executive director of CAP, which operates 14 early childhood centers in the Tulsa area. He recalls that teachers carefully filled out forms on exiting children only to have the papers sit for months in a TPS office. The transition process, he says, has not been “as systematic as I want it to be.”

CAP, however, is actively involved in Linkages and recently helped organize a two-day joint professional development workshop for Union Public Schools’ prekindergarten teachers and CAP preschool teachers at Rosa Parks Early Childhood Education Center. “The pre-K teachers [from the elementary school] will come in our building and get their eyes on their children,” says Lynn McClure, principal of Rosa Parks Early

Childhood Education Center. The teachers will also review data and discuss various children in order to be better informed about making classroom assignments.

Linkages is also enlightening those in the public schools about sound early childhood practices and a comprehensive approach to education, says Andrew McKenzie, who leads TPS's Early Childhood Services. "That expertise and guidance is coming from those outside partners, because that is what they do," he says. "Community schools give us a much broader focus of child development."

Continuous Improvement

TACSI is designed for continuous improvement and for creating and capitalizing on new opportunities, such as early childhood linkages. Its community-wide leaders set new directions for the initiative, and community partners are there to assist. Two examples are continuous improvement through professional development and a new summer learning experience.

Professional Development to Strengthen the Initiative

TACSI is structured to respond to the needs identified by the community. To that end, TACSI pays close attention to the first impression many schools make on families, particularly parents who bring in young children to register for school. With the growth of community schools across both districts, TACSI wants to make sure that school secretaries, receptionists, and other support staff are aware of what is available for families and do not merely refer them elsewhere.

In fact, Cruncleton, the dad at Kendall-Whittier, remarked that the office staff often seemed "overwhelmed" and sometimes did not inform parents early enough about activities or deadlines. "People in the office should know what I do. They are the ones touring people around the school," says Joseph Bojang, parent-community liaison at Briarglen Elementary School in UPS. "People in the office usually don't get a chance to have professional development." In response, the staff has been learning some practices from a corporation that is recognized for its friendly customer service—Chick-fil-A.

Granstaff describes herself as a "buffer" between community partners and families, which often have different expectations of each other. For example,

when events are held at her school, the organizers often ask Granstaff to get parents to RSVP to ensure sufficient food or supplies. The families served by her school, however, typically do not follow such protocol and just show up. She sees her job as someone who makes "a good experience happen for people from two different cultures."

Partners Create Opportunities Together

During summer 2011, TACSI offered a summer learning opportunity for the first time. Forty partners, including the American Red Cross, American Theatre Company, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire USA, Northeastern State University, the Tulsa City-County Library, Tulsa Health Department, local individuals with expertise and an interest in working with children, and many others, participated in the effort, which was held at five schools and involved about 400 children. Many of the partners were new to TACSI and were motivated by the opportunity to work with children during the summer. Students in kindergarten through fifth grade were eligible.

Partners say that community schools—especially those with coordinators—enhance their ability to offer services to children and families. "When you have a coordinator, you're better able to build relationships," says Bobbie Henderson, executive director of Camp Fire Tulsa. "They have an appreciation of what out-of-school time can contribute to learning."

On a recent gathering at Tulsa's Junior Achievement building, TACSI's many program partners gathered to hear details about the summer initiative. TACSI counts over 60 formal and informal partners as part of the initiative (see text box on page 54).

"I get energized any time I come to these meetings," says Pam Rask, deputy associate director of the Tulsa Health Department, whose nurse case managers work with schools on issues such as obesity prevention and oral health. In addition, a health department social worker focuses on bullying prevention and conflict resolution. "Standing alone, we can't address all the problems of these kids, but through the community schools we can."

The Future of TACSI

Interest in TACSI's model is growing—there are now 31 schools across both TPS and UPS. Representatives from two additional school districts—Sand Springs and Broken Arrow—will soon begin attending TACSI “academies,” and TACSI staff are supporting initial work in Oklahoma City. But these discussions come as Creveling and Genie Shannon, TACSI's school liaison, are preparing to put TACSI in someone else's hands. “We've said from the beginning that we need a younger director,” Creveling told members of TACSI's management team at a spring meeting.

CSC will conduct a national search for Creveling's replacement, and the expectation is that someone new will be hired by the winter. The new director will then hire a new school liaison. Creveling and Shannon expect to stay until summer 2011 to support the new team. Given that the community partners and schools take ownership for the initiative, the new team will have lots of help.

Focusing on Impact

TACSI has built evaluation and accountability into its sustainability plan. External evaluators have studied how community schools are organized and their effectiveness across several measures. The results indicate that TACSI is on the right track.

TACSI itself has concluded that it is making a difference as previously demonstrated (see text box on page 47). It continues to work with an external researcher to evaluate process and impact and incorporates lessons from the evaluations into its strategy and training. In addition, TACSI is now creating site-based data teams that will use data at the school level to improve community school practice. In the future, TACSI plans to look at the impact of community schools on individual students in the early years.

The “Bottom Line”

There are no signs of doubt about the value of community schools among the first-grade teachers and curriculum specialists gathered in a classroom at Roy Clark Elementary School. Huddled near an interactive whiteboard displaying test scores for individual students, the staff know exactly how services provided by partners have influenced learning and where the gaps remain.

Monthly meetings of the student assistance team regularly focus on how the school's 30-plus partners can support students—perhaps the health department needs to address a head lice problem that is keeping children from attending school or perhaps a particular student would benefit from the after-school Kung Fu class. The team presents student data to partners.

“[Teachers] are communicating with the after-school providers so they know what skills kids need,” says Principal Theresa Kiger, adding that community partners that do not contribute to student growth are sometimes not invited back. “You don't get to be a partner by just giving coupons to kids.”

It is that ongoing integration between the attention to academics and supportive services that led Roy Clark Elementary to be one of three schools in the country to be named a 2011 National Community School by the Coalition for Community Schools. Results include a decline in absenteeism to nearly zero, an increase in reading and mathematics scores, and 100 percent participation in parent-teacher conferences. “At the end of the year, we're looking at the efficiency of the [partner] provider,” Kiger says. “Our bottom line is academic data.”

Lessons

LESSON 1: With its leadership structure, TACSI is able to address pressing community challenges and opportunities. When community leaders, who already enjoyed strong community school partnerships, focused on connecting early childhood programs with elementary schools, they were able to mobilize early childhood providers and schools districts, set a direction, and facilitate increased partnership, data sharing, and learning across the two levels.

LESSON 2: TACSI's story shows that, even when high-quality early childhood programs are located next door to elementary schools, the teachers at the sites still need someone to create structured opportunities to help them step out of their “silos” and share knowledge and practices in order to support children's transitions. Intermediary entities are central to building these bridges. TACSI's position as an intermediary enables it to convene and support early childhood staff in the district and across providers. Its connection to the Child Care Resource Center provides access to a wide variety of early childcare providers and to the school systems.

LESSON 3: Partnerships between early childhood programs and the school system can create a continuum of supports, ensuring that children and families who are used to services through Head Start or state-funded prekindergarten programs continue to receive assistance when children enter elementary school.

LESSON 4: Superintendent leadership is pivotal to the development of community schools and to building bridges between community schools and early childhood opportunities. Superintendents in Tulsa support community schools and are incorporating them into their strategies to improve learning and strengthen the education continuum starting at birth. They are institutionalizing aspects of the community schools structure by hiring a community schools director for the school district and financing community schools coordinators with Title I funds. They and their staff also serve on TACSI's collaborative leadership structures, and the early childhood leaders participate in the community-wide early childhood initiative organized by TACSI.

LESSON 5: As community school efforts grow, everyone in the school must understand the community schools strategy and the role of the coordinator and is mindful of how families with young children are received when they first visit a school. TACSI deliberately guides schools through the stages of development and provides funding and a coordinator only when schools have proven their understanding of the community schools strategy and focus areas (TACSI community schools DNA) at the Inquiring stage.

LESSON 6: TACSI community schools are organized to work with all early childhood providers and create successful transitions, whether children's formal early childhood experiences take place in an elementary school, in an early childhood center, or at home. ■

