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Bright Spots in Practice
Case Studies From the Los Angeles County Office of Education's Community Schools Initiative

Community schools represent a comprehensive approach to education—one that leverages community strengths to address the academic, health, and well-being needs of students and families. By embodying collective leadership and integrating services, supports, and partnerships into the fabric of a school, community schools aim to create environments in which everyone is seen, valued, and supported.

The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) launched its Community Schools Initiative (CSI) in 2019 to disrupt inequities and break the cycle of poverty by transforming schools into authentic hubs of support. The initiative reflects a collaboration among LACOE, county agencies, school districts, and community-based organizations, collectively serving more than 250,000 students and their families across Los Angeles County since its inception.

As part of an evaluation of LACOE CSI, WestEd conducted case studies of three schools identified by LACOE as "bright spots"—sites demonstrating promising practices at different stages of implementation. This collection of case studies includes one school in its first year of CSI implementation and two in their sixth year, with each case study highlighting a distinct theme:

- developing a fully integrated CSI team (Ganesha High School)
- building a community hub through connection and care (Littlerock High School)
- leveraging student and family interests to build engagement (Waite Middle School)

Together, these case studies offer practical insight for administrators and district leaders working to launch or strengthen community schools efforts. The case studies describe strategies to adapt, challenges to anticipate, and examples of what progress can look like across varied school contexts.

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Building and Maximizing a Robust, Integrated CSI Team

Ganesha High School offers a compelling example of what it looks like when a Community Schools Initiative (CSI) team is fully embedded in the daily life of a school. Located at the physical center of the campus and active in core school structures, the CSI team at Ganesha is not a stand-alone entity—it is a vital part of how the school operates.

Rather than creating parallel systems for CSI, Ganesha has prioritized aligning and integrating with the school's existing systems. The CSI team collaborates closely with counselors, administrators, and mental health staff to ensure that student needs are met through coordinated student-support structures like the Coordination of Services Team (COST) and Freshman Focus. District-provided services that support CSI efforts, such as social workers and interns, are woven into schoolwide efforts rather than siloed.

This brief explores how Ganesha built and sustained an embedded CSI team, what conditions have made this model work, and what other schools can learn from their approach to cross-functional collaboration and shared responsibility.

Introduction: A Schoolwide Model of Embedded Support

At Ganesha High School, the CSI team is not a stand-alone entity—rather, it is embedded in the fabric of the school. From its centrally located physical space to its active presence in daily operations, the CSI team plays a visible and essential role in supporting students and families. School staff across roles emphasized the team's approachability, responsiveness, and seamless integration into the broader school community.

Rather than waiting for referrals or operating in isolation, the team participates in key collaborative spaces and maintains a strong campus presence. The team's visibility fosters early intervention, encourages help-seeking, and reinforces a culture in which student and family support is central to the school's mission.

Designed for Integration

At Ganesha High School, embedding the CSI team into everyday school life began with intentional structural design. One of the clearest examples is the team's physical location: Its office sits in the center of campus, highly visible and easily accessible to students and staff. This visibility is both symbolic and practical, reinforcing the team's open-door approach and helping normalize help-seeking behavior.

> "[The CSI team] is in the center of the school, and the kids see them and go to them. Very visible and approachable."
>
> ~ Teacher

The team is not just physically central—it is also woven into key decision-making and support systems schoolwide. The team co-leads the COST and participates actively in Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) planning. CSI team members also help lead initiatives like Freshman Focus, a 9th grade support structure that brings together counselors, teachers, and student support staff to monitor academic and social–emotional needs, provide targeted interventions, and ease students' transition to high school. These are not CSI-specific programs; they are schoolwide structures in which the CSI team is a consistent, collaborative presence. This ensures services are aligned, timely, and grounded in real-time knowledge of student needs.

District-provided supports, such as social workers and mental health interns, are also strategically integrated. Rather than functioning as separate or temporary staff, these professionals are looped into the school's systems and introduced to students and families through the CSI team. This approach reduces fragmentation and creates consistency across roles.

From scheduling protocols to physical layout decisions, Ganesha has made deliberate choices to integrate the CSI team into the infrastructure of the school. These structural decisions are foundational to the school's success in making support services unified, accessible, and responsive.

A Culture of Coordination

Ganesha's integrated structures are effective because they are animated by a strong culture of collaboration. Staff across roles (e.g., teachers, administrators, social workers) described Ganesha as a school where collaboration extends beyond formal responsibilities and where people listen, communicate, and problem-solve together. There is a shared understanding that student support is a collective responsibility.

> "Everyone here plays a role. It doesn't feel like you are on your own. We share the load."
> ~ School Staff

Teachers reported that they know where to turn when a student needs help and that follow-up is consistent and transparent. CSI staff, counselors, and administrators all emphasized the importance of being approachable and following through on commitments. These practices build trust, which in turn sustains the collaborative systems that make the school function smoothly.

The consistency of communication, both formal and informal, is another driver of alignment. From structured meetings to hallway conversations, staff rely on each other to share information, coordinate support, and respond to emerging needs. There is a common language and a set of habits that reinforce teamwork across roles. For example, staff consistently use phrases like "student-first" and "wraparound support" to frame their

shared purpose. Staff also rely on informal check-ins throughout the day to stay connected. These routines help sustain alignment across departments and ensure that students experience coordinated care regardless of which adult they approach.

Even district-based staff who rotate through multiple campuses expressed a sense of belonging at Ganesha. For example, social workers and interns described being welcomed into the school community and quickly oriented to school norms and expectations. That sense of cohesion is not incidental—it is the product of years of intentional culture building, grounded in shared purpose and mutual respect.

More Than a Program: Integrated Support in Action

The real test of any schoolwide system is how students encounter it in their daily lives. At Ganesha, students and staff described support systems as accessible and responsive to student needs. Students described the physical CSI space as somewhere they can go not only for resources but also for connection—a place where they feel seen and supported.

Teachers echoed this view, saying that when they raise a concern about a student, it is met with care and follow-through. Staff suggested that this kind of responsiveness may help reinforce student trust in the adults around them. Through both formal referrals and informal check-ins, students come to understand that a team of adults is invested in their well-being.

School staff emphasized that the CSI team plays a key role in building relationships with families, often acting as a bridge between home and school. They highlighted the team's consistent communication and coordination of resources as key strategies for fostering family engagement and addressing challenges as they arise.

Importantly, these supports are not presented as disconnected programs. Because the CSI team is fully embedded in daily school life, students and staff experience the team's work as part of the broader community, not an external add-on. This integration reinforces the message that seeking help is normal, encouraged, and valued.

Lessons for Other Schools: Building High-Functioning, Embedded CSI Teams

Ganesha High School offers a valuable example of what it looks like when a CSI team is fully integrated into the daily life of a school. While this model reflects years of deliberate culture building, the strategies that Ganesha has employed are highly transferable and offer concrete takeaways for other schools.

One key lesson is the **importance of designing for integration** from the start. At Ganesha, the CSI office is centrally located on campus—a decision that underscores the team's accessibility and visibility. In addition, the team is deeply embedded in the school's student-support systems, such as the COST and MTSS, ensuring that services are aligned and coordinated and are part of broader school operations.

Equally important is the school's approach to collaboration. Staff described a culture in which **communication across roles is frequent, informal, and grounded in trust**. Rather than relying solely on

scheduled meetings, school staff interact regularly in ways that sustain momentum and allow emerging needs to be addressed quickly. This kind of collaboration is sustained not just by protocols but also by relationships.

Ganesha also demonstrates how to **make the most of district-provided resources**. Staff such as social workers and mental health interns are thoughtfully onboarded and included in campus systems, helping ensure that their contributions are integrated rather than siloed. Students benefit from a cohesive experience of care, and staff benefit from consistent collaboration across roles.

What distinguishes Ganesha's approach is a combination of intentional design, relational trust, and shared responsibility for student support. For other schools seeking to deepen their CSI work, Ganesha provides a clear example of how thoughtful alignment between people, structures, and purpose can lead to systems of care that are more cohesive and responsive.

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Building a Community Hub Through Connection, Care, and Creativity

Littlerock High School sits at the heart of a geographically dispersed and underresourced region in northern Los Angeles County. Despite long-standing challenges related to limited economic opportunity, isolation, and limited access to services, the school has steadily grown into a trusted hub for students, families, and community members alike. Through intentional investment in parent engagement, strategic integration of community services, and a commitment to meeting local needs with creativity and care, Littlerock has emerged as a powerful example of how a school can function as a true community anchor.

This brief explores how Littlerock became a hub of community connection and support—examining the conditions that enabled this shift, the strategies used to sustain it, and lessons other schools might draw from their experience.

Introduction: Littlerock as a Community Hub

Since joining the Los Angeles County Office of Education's Community Schools Initiative (CSI) in the 2019/20 school year, Littlerock High School has steadily grown into a trusted community hub. CSI staff have played a central role in coordinating efforts across the school community to expand access to services, foster inclusive engagement, and support student and family well-being.

Through basic needs support, wellness services, and culturally responsive events, the school has become a place where families feel welcomed and supported. The work is grounded in relationships, guided by ongoing feedback from students and families, and shaped by a commitment to meeting real needs with care and creativity. Littlerock's journey illustrates how a school can take on a broader role within its community—even amid systemic and structural barriers—by investing in trust, responsiveness, and connection.

A School-Based Anchor: Integrated Services and Community Access

Littlerock High School has embraced its role as a community access point by offering a wide range of integrated services that reflect the needs and realities of local families. Supports include food distributions, a well-used clothing closet, a parent resource center, mental health counseling, and assistance with public benefits applications. Some services are designed specifically for enrolled students and their families, and others are open to the broader community, making the school a trusted destination even for those without direct ties to the campus.

This work is made possible through creative and strategic partnerships. CSI staff draw on personal and professional networks to bring in partner agencies; coordinate service delivery; and reduce barriers to access,

especially barriers related to transportation, documentation, and stigma. By actively engaging with service providers, including some who had never previously worked in the area, Littlerock has helped ensure that critical resources reach families where they are. Events like Hop Into Spring exemplify this approach, pairing joyful community experiences with onsite access to a wide range of county and nonprofit service providers.

In addition to coordinating external services, the CSI team has helped establish systems for identifying emerging needs and responding in real time. Rather than relying solely on formal surveys, the CSI team reported making regular use of informal conversations, social media engagement, and parent group feedback to stay attuned to what families need. This responsiveness, combined with consistent follow-through, has helped build the trust necessary to sustain service use over time. Littlerock's model demonstrates how a school can serve as a conduit for critical supports while remaining rooted in care, context, and community voice.

Relationships at the Center: Trust, Belonging, and Shared Purpose

Strong relationships are at the heart of Littlerock's identity as a community school. Across students, families, and key staff, there is a consistent emphasis on trust, connection, and mutual respect. Parents described feeling welcomed and supported by the CSI team, particularly through the Family Resource Center and the Wellness Center, which both offer

> *"[The CSI team] are very respectful and always support us. They always listen to us and treat us with love."*
>
> *~ Parent*

services in a warm and culturally responsive environment. Spanish-speaking families highlighted the importance of being able to communicate directly with staff who share their language and take time to listen.

Students echoed these sentiments, pointing to trusted adults on campus—including counselors, wellness staff, and specific teachers—as key sources of support. Some students noted that these relationships made it easier to ask for help or to reengage when struggling. The school's self-referral process for mental health services, along with opportunities for leadership through Associated Student Body (ASB) and student groups, reflects an intentional effort to give students voice and agency in shaping their school experience.

> *"It feels like [the CSI team] actually care. If you need something, there's usually someone who can help, and they don't make you feel bad for asking."*
>
> *~ Student*

Staff in student- and family-facing roles emphasized that these relationships are not incidental; they are the product of sustained, intentional effort. CSI staff are highly visible on campus and in the community, engaging with families at events, responding quickly to concerns, and helping connect people to needed resources. Teachers and school staff highlighted the value of collaboration across roles, noting that informal communication and a shared focus on student well-being help create a more cohesive support system.

Littlerock has made notable progress in building a school culture in which students and families feel seen and supported by the adults who work most closely with them. Relationships are not just a foundation for services; they are a defining feature of how the CSI team approaches community engagement and student success.

Making It Work: Conditions That Support Littlerock's Progress

Littlerock's ability to function as a true community hub is rooted in a set of enabling conditions that allow responsive, community-centered work to take hold. One of the most critical conditions is the visibility and consistency of the CSI team. Families, students, and school staff described the CSI team as approachable, present, and dependable—attributes that have helped build the credibility necessary to connect people to resources and keep them engaged.

Another key factor is the school's intentional use of space. The Family Resource Center and the Wellness Center are located in accessible, welcoming areas of campus and are designed to feel open and inviting. Staff emphasized the importance of these centers being easy to find and easy to approach, especially for families who may be navigating systems that feel unfamiliar or intimidating. These physical spaces support more than service delivery—they function as relationship anchors and entry points to broader school engagement.

Flexibility also emerged as a strength in enabling Littlerock to be a successful community hub. The CSI team described navigating shifts in funding and program availability with a solutions-oriented mindset, working creatively to maintain access to core services. When a partner agency discontinued services or a funding stream ended, the team adapted by finding alternatives, leveraging informal networks, or rethinking how needs could be met with available resources. This kind of adaptability was often supported not by formal structures but by persistence, community knowledge, and a deep sense of purpose.

> *"If you say you're going to do something and then you don't, they won't come back. That's why we always show up."*
> *~ CSI Team Member*

Finally, Littlerock's progress has been shaped by an emphasis on listening. Across focus groups, staff and families described a culture in which feedback to the CSI team is welcomed and, when possible, acted upon. Whether through surveys, informal conversations, or structured parent meetings, the school has created multiple pathways for students and families to share their experiences and shape what happens on campus. This responsiveness reinforces trust and ensures that programs and services remain relevant to those they are meant to serve.

Lessons for Other Schools: Becoming a Community Hub

Littlerock High School's experience as a CSI school offers several lessons for schools seeking to become more connected to their communities. First, the **importance of relationship-centered staff** cannot be overstated. The credibility and consistency of the CSI team has been foundational for building trust with students and families and for sustaining engagement over time. For other schools, this underscores the value of protecting roles that focus explicitly on connection, coordination, and care.

Second, Littlerock's work highlights the **power of adaptability**. Rather than relying on static systems or fixed partnerships, the school has remained responsive to shifting needs, funding landscapes, and service availability. Schools operating in similarly resource-constrained contexts may find inspiration in how Littlerock uses persistence, community insight, and informal networks to meet needs creatively and consistently.

Finally, the school's **emphasis on listening** serves as a reminder that community engagement is not a one-time event. From self-referral systems to informal conversations and structured parent meetings, Littlerock has created multiple entry points for students and families to share their experiences. These ongoing feedback loops help ensure that programs and services reflect what the community actually wants and needs.

Littlerock's journey shows that becoming a trusted community hub does not require perfection or abundance—it requires intention, consistency, and care. Even in the face of structural challenges, schools can build trust, expand access, and foster a sense of belonging within the school and throughout the community at large.

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Leveraging Student and Family Interest to Build Engagement

In 2024/25, its first year of Community Schools Initiative (CSI) implementation, **Waite Middle School** focused on building trust and connection by listening closely to students and families. Interest-driven programming and responsive parent outreach helped lay the groundwork for a more engaged and connected school community. By using student and family interests as a foundation, the school has begun to link engagement strategies with broader academic and school climate goals.

Although Waite is still in the foundational phase of CSI implementation, the school offers a clear example of how centering student and family interests can serve as a powerful entry point for deeper culture building and systems development.

This brief explores key strategies, early successes, persistent challenges, and lessons other CSI schools may find useful in their own implementation journeys.

Introduction: Waite's Emerging Community Schools Story

Waite Middle School serves a diverse student population in a densely populated, working-class community. Waite joined the Los Angeles County Office of Education's CSI as a planning school during the 2023/24 school year and began its first year of full implementation during the 2024/25 school year. Waite's CSI team comprises two key staff, the Community Schools Specialist and the Education Community Worker, who work in collaboration with school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members. In this early stage of implementation, the school's approach has centered on listening closely to students and families and then translating their interests into responsive programs, supports, and emerging systems.

In its first year of implementation, Waite launched a set of interest-driven student engagement strategies—including an eSports club and other campus programs codeveloped with students—that helped foster stronger connections between students and the school. Parents responded to intentional efforts to seek their input and adapt programming to meet their needs. CSI staff became visible, trusted members of the school community, known for showing up, following through, and building relationships across interest holder groups.

Centering Student Interests: Programs That Spark Engagement

As part of its first-year efforts, the CSI team at Waite Middle School made a point to ask students what they cared about and what they wanted to see at school. The team distributed student surveys, held informal conversations, and observed what students gravitated toward during the school day. Survey responses and

conversations highlighted student interests in gaming, anime, and informal social spaces where students felt comfortable.

The CSI team put this feedback from students into action by developing programming aligned with student interests. One of the most prominent outcomes of this input was the launch of Waite's eSports club. Students sign up to play in rotating shifts, engaging with both competitive and casual games. CSI staff are present to supervise and support, creating a space that encourages relationship building alongside recreation. This club serves as both an opportunity for social connection and a motivational tool because participation is tied to academic and behavioral expectations—to be eligible to participate, students must remain off the D/F list and avoid recent disciplinary referrals.

> "[The eSports club] is the coolest thing at our school. I want to have good grades so I can play. It motivates me."
> ~ Student

Importantly, eligibility is not binary. Students who meet all expectations are allowed to participate for the full club session, while those who fall short receive limited participation time. CSI staff provide coaching to help students understand what they need to work on to increase their eligibility for future sessions. In many cases, this led students to connect with their teachers to ask what they needed to improve in order to earn more time and to actively monitor their own progress. One teacher noted that students were motivated to maintain their grades so they could participate. Another teacher reported that the club "completely changed the game" for a student who had struggled with chronic absenteeism. CSI staff reported that the eSports club has become a consistent draw for students who might otherwise feel disengaged.

The Pokémon club, also initiated based on student interests, has offered a similar space for informal connection. Although less structured than the eSports club, it reflected the same approach: Student ideas are taken seriously, and staff work collaboratively with students to create meaningful experiences. These clubs represent early-stage efforts to connect school-based programming to student-defined interests in ways that reinforce broader school goals.
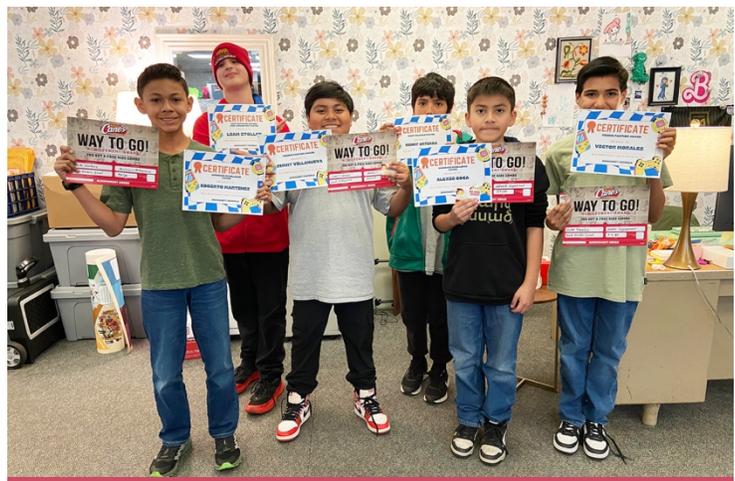
These strategies demonstrate Waite's efforts to integrate student input into programming and connect engagement opportunities with broader support goals—early steps toward collaborative leadership, as defined in the California Community Schools Framework. By gathering and acting on student feedback, the CSI team is fostering a culture in which student voice is visible in school activities.

Family Voice and Input: Lifting Up the Needs and Priorities of Parents and Guardians

Parent engagement at Waite Middle School reflects a similar approach to student engagement: beginning with outreach, listening closely, and adjusting supports based on what families say they need. In its first

implementation year as a Community School, the CSI team focused on building relationships with parents through a combination of surveys, one-on-one conversations, and events designed to be accessible and welcoming.

To better understand parent priorities, the team used structured tools such as a bilingual survey that invited families to select preferred workshop topics and times. This survey provided insight into logistical barriers, such as the difficulty of attending evening sessions, and allowed the school to tailor offerings to better meet family needs. A separate Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) survey gathered feedback from families on school expectations, communication, and behavioral supports. These tools supported the CSI team's efforts to center family voice and to identify specific areas for improvement. Additionally, the Education Community Worker described walking the halls, checking in with families in person, and encouraging informal feedback. The CSI team noted that these efforts helped surface family needs that might not have emerged through formal surveys alone.

Parents consistently described feeling welcomed and respected by the CSI team, identifying them as trusted and approachable contacts at the school. Some shared that they had received personal invitations to events or meetings, which helped them feel included and valued. Others noted the importance of clear, consistent communication and appreciated that staff made the effort to follow up. This combination of personal outreach and accessibility contributed to parents feeling comfortable engaging with the school and offering input.

Waite has made early efforts to act on this input. For example, when parent surveys indicated that evening workshops were difficult to attend, the school shifted to offering sessions in the morning. The CSI team also identified interest in culturally relevant activities and began organizing events and workshops accordingly. Staff noted that these changes were meaningful steps toward showing parents that their time and preferences are valued.

> *"[The CSI team] are very approachable. I feel like I can ask them anything."*
> *~ Parent*

Although parent participation remains modest in numbers, staff expressed that the quality of engagement has improved. They reported that parents are more likely to voice their opinions at meetings like the English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC) or School Site Council and are more willing to reach out when they have concerns. CSI staff attributed this shift to relationship building and to consistent follow-through when parents make requests or raise issues.

These emerging practices align with the Family and Community Engagement pillar of the California Community Schools Framework, particularly its focus on trust, reciprocal communication, and cultural responsiveness. Though still in the early stages, Waite's approach illustrates how direct outreach and responsiveness to feedback can foster a culture that supports sustained parent engagement.

Looking Ahead: Continuing Waite's Trajectory

Building on this foundation, Waite is continuing to respond to student and family interests in the 2025/26 school year. Planned initiatives include new after-school art classes designed to reflect students' communities and experiences, a yoga program led by an African American instructor to promote belonging and representation,

and a gardening program that integrates science and ethnic studies while creating a visible and welcoming space for families. Each of these efforts reflects Waite's ongoing commitment to listening closely to students and families and translating their interests into purposeful programming.

In addition, Waite is expanding academic supports in direct response to student survey data. With funding from the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP), the school is adding 10 after-school tutors and 2 in-day tutors to provide targeted support in core subjects. These resources were secured after students voiced a need for more academic help outside the classroom and at home. Together, these new initiatives illustrate how Waite is deepening its original focus on engagement by aligning enrichment opportunities and academic supports with the evolving needs and aspirations of its community.

Lessons for Other Schools: Leveraging Interests to Build Engagement

Waite Middle School's trajectory as a Community School offers several early takeaways for other sites that are planning or in the early stages of implementing. Although many of Waite's strategies are understandably still in development, the school's experience illustrates how centering interest-holder voice can serve as a powerful entry point for engagement.

One of the clearest lessons is the value of **starting with student interests**. Rather than strictly launching predetermined programs, Waite's CSI team sought input through surveys and informal conversations and then created opportunities—such as the eSports and Pokémon clubs—that directly reflected what students cared about. These activities not only generated enthusiasm but also were strategically linked to academic and behavioral expectations.

Parent engagement at Waite similarly began with **listening and relationship building**. Staff made a concerted effort to gather parent input through bilingual surveys, informal outreach, and follow-up communication. Although participation numbers remain modest, families who are engaged report feeling welcomed and included, and the school has made early adjustments based on their feedback. These efforts show that even small shifts, such as adjusting workshop times or soliciting feedback about desired topics, can signal respect for family voice and create momentum for deeper engagement.

Waite's experience also illustrates the **importance of foundational systems**, even in a school focused on relationships. Tools such as surveys, evolving referral processes, and informal collaboration structures have created early coherence across interest-holder groups.

For other schools in the early stages of implementation, Waite offers a reminder that small, visible wins matter. Programs that reflect student and family priorities and are designed with a clear link to school goals can foster connection, trust, and buy-in. Equally important is the behind-the-scenes work of clarifying roles, strengthening communication, and laying the groundwork for sustained collaboration and eventual shared leadership.