2014

Putting "community" in Community Schools: Organizational and Cultural Contention in a Public-Private Partnership

Kathleen D. Pacyna

Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1296

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2014 Kathleen D. Pacyna
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

PUTTING “COMMUNITY” IN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS:
ORGANIZATIONAL AND CULTURAL CONTENTION IN A
PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY
KATHLEEN D. PACYNA
CHICAGO, IL
DECEMBER 2014
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am a student of life. I have always loved school, academics, intellectualism, and ideas. Writing this dissertation challenged all of my notions about what it means to make a contribution, to have something to say, to a discourse already so rich. This was a long and arduous process and so many people around me over the long course of nine years joined in willingly to support, guide, encourage, and advise that a simple statement like this cannot do them justice. But it can serve as a symbol of the gratitude I have for their tenacity. Though this project was not theirs to pursue, they did make it their own and their image shapes so much of the work presented here.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my graduate program for funding me graciously throughout my years here, presenting opportunities to teach and grow intellectually. I am sorry that I had so little time to study with Dr. Fred Kniss and Dr. Japonica Brown-Saracino. Their work inspired me early and I returned to it often to find my own analytical voice and statement. The support and participation of my committee, Dr. Anne Figert and Dr. Elfriede Wedam, along with my committee chair, Dr. Rhys Williams, cannot be understated. They shaped what began as a hazy vision into a piece that does have something interesting to say. Let’s just say, this work has come a long way under their critical eyes. Finally, although not a formal committee member, Dr. Judith Wittner found herself in the path of my insecurity more than once; when the seas got rough, Judy
gave sage advice and encouragement with just the right amount of “get it done.” Without her, I would still be lost in that eddy of intellectual self-doubt.

In the course of my life, I have racked up a long history of academic success but nothing in my past prepared me personally for this challenge and so my friends and family became the most central lifeline of laughter, compassion, and encouragement on what was a long, uphill road. I sincerely thank all of my coworkers at both of my organizations of employment during this process. Their tolerance for my stories, my questions, and sometimes frustration was incredible. More impressive, their commitment to teamwork and their continuing interest in this project inspired me in moments of challenge. That enthusiasm went a long way. Many of these coworkers participated in my research and for that I am forever grateful. Maya, Miguel, Martin, Katherine, and the countless number of others who worked at the Funder and Lead Partner who humored me as I asked scores of “obvious questions” and “just watched.” This is their story, their work that they love and that forms personally important parts of their lives. I can only hope I have done them and their efforts some justice as their visions for communities and schools are lofty and admirable. They work hard. For that, and for laying bare their motivations, emotions, visions, and approaches to the work, I will always be very grateful as should we all.

A project of nine years becomes a constant in an ever-changing landscape of friends and events, milestones and trials. While I have known many people through the duration of this process, there was and is a small and committed group who closely walked with me through the light and the dark. I leaned heavily on the likes of Dr. Nori Henk, Dr. Sarah Bill Schott, and Dr. John (Thunder) Stover for support and advice from
those who had gone before. They are friends and scholars and completely normal which makes them a rare bunch but a crucial one in cheerleading, commiserating, and encouraging. Though they are strewn about the country, they felt close in the clutch. One year ago, when we decided to do this “for real,” Dr. Chez Rumpf, soon-to be Dr. Kimberlee Guenther, and Dr. Gwendolyn Purifoye became constant, engaged, critical writing partners who consistently helped to push my own thought forward, to better, sharper insights. Many a Tuesday (and eventually Thursday and Friday) night was spent walking the walk together. They were true catalysts in this analysis and its completion. I am so lucky to have been in that circle of intellect. I definitely learned more there than I taught. That was nothing short of a gift.

Finally, there are those for whom my appreciation goes so deep and so broad that words fail. While a great writing partner, Dr. Chez was the best sounding board and listener a wayward graduate student could ever hope to find. I cherish her friendship and also stand in awe of her academic talent and potential. Along the way, Shilpa Bavikatte, Maggie Litgen, and Katie Cangemi proved an excellent committee of listeners who always obliged my need to “talk through” what I was seeing. I was always amazed at their willingness to enter in and give me critical feedback; I was often more amazed at their beer-drinking prowess. That is the way all scholars should undertake intellectual endeavors. They provided much fun and laughter to an often solitary, intense process. Similarly, Jerry Privasky was always good for a chat about whatever I needed to chat about. His wit, booming laughter, and general affability made him an easy go-to for entertaining and also practical problem-solving. One night on which I found myself particularly discouraged, in an effort to bolster my spirit, he also stated his resolve to read
this finished product. This is the formal acknowledgment that I intend to hold him to that and, yes, there will be a quiz.

When I moved to Chicago almost ten years ago, I knew no one and my first friends were through the choir at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, a group that has become a central fixture in my life. I never would have made it through my earliest dissertation years without Kristine and Tim Collins who opened their lives (including their washer and dryer) generously to a new kid to Chicago. Though now part-timers in Chicago, Andreas Waldburg and Susan Shapiro both, in their own distinct ways, leant support and encouragement. They have watched this journey from its early stages through to its completion and I am especially grateful that they celebrate its completion today. More recently, Kelly Dobbs-Mickus has revealed herself to be a kindred spirit and for that I am thankful.

Perhaps the most perplexing part of the experience of dissertation writing is the juxtaposition of utter constancy and fearless risk-taking. New ideas or good ideas rarely spring from convention; thinking beyond what we easily know takes risk but to be developed require care and discipline. I was so blessed to find support from that rare few who embodied these qualities and became inspiration, support, and companions on this long road. My family, as a collective, fits here. About ten years ago when I told my mom, Donna Pacyna, that I was going to quit my job to go to graduate school in Chicago, she and my dad, Richard, did not have to ask why. They invested in my education early and cultivated in me an inquisitiveness and thirst for knowledge that I now consider one of my most-prized assets. Even in the dark days, I knew I could call (or better, visit) and find solace, encouragement, delicious baked goods, and the ever-so-gentle nudge to keep
going. My brothers Andy and Matt, their wives Kit and Megan, respectively, and my nephews, Aaron and Jonathan, never failed to provide laughter, interesting stories, and advice and technical support on demand. There’s also nothing like a little healthy sibling competition to motivate. Together they are an extremely accomplished group; I was on the hook to come up with something equally impressive and for that I do tip my hat and say “thank you.” Excellence was always an expectation in the Pacyna Family household and we have all met that call in our own ways. Thanks Mom and Dad for never backing down on that while also always, always providing the environment for that to flourish.

In this research, I found myself reading a fair amount of dissertations and I always drifted to the acknowledgements in hopes of finding some kind of camaraderie and, toward the end of this process, hope that it actually ends. Most acknowledgements seem to work up to the profound thanks required for those in the author’s own family, who contributed in ways that cannot be repaid: husbands and wives, significant others, children. I am a single woman living on my own in Chicago. I do not have those (at the moment) but I do need to thank someone who contributed so significantly for so long that I am at a loss as to how to capture the most apt thanks. Paul French, a gifted musician, composer, and director in his own right (in addition to several other titles he holds), was one of the first people I met in Chicago. What I did not know then, in 2005, was that he would become a sociologist by hobby and the main source of energy around my success in this endeavor and provide that without fail for nine years.

Outside of my family, he remains the only person I know who “saw this through” from the very beginning to the very end. His sustained interest alone is impressive. But, as time passed, he became a steady rock of support, enthusiasm, encouragement, reason,
critical feedback, cheerleading, laughter, creativity, and in the past several months the bearer of the “get it done” banner. For the past five years, I knew that no matter what was happening, good or bad, that on Sunday afternoon we would go to lunch where successes would be celebrated and problems figured out. Just as I found myself running out of steam or drowning in discouragement, the phone would ring and it would be Paul checking in, pressing me to keep going, to dig a little deeper. When I found myself in the eighth hour of writing, getting tired and bleary-eyed, an email would pop up to push me along. He would often say, “I’m just giving you that kick you need.” He knew and convinced me, time and again, that meeting this challenge would be worth it in the end. Most recently, he took to the road with me, walking along during the most intense stresses. I cannot be more appreciative. We are cut from the same cloth, I am lucky that he is one of my closest and most enduring friends, and should I ever find a way to equal in my life the generosity and kindness he has shown me, I will consider that a true gift. As someone once told me, when presented with a compliment or deed that seems impossible to repay, the most graceful response is to simply say “thank you” and never forget it. So that I may not forget, I saved this for last: Paul, thank you.
It always seems impossible until it’s done.

—Nelson Mandela
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii  
ABSTRACT xii  

CHAPTER ONE: COMMUNITY, COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS 1  
The Funder Collaborative and the Community School Model 2  
Research Questions and Theoretical Framework 10  
Multi-Stakeholder Collaboratives: The Backbone of Community Schools 11  
An Overview of This Dissertation 17  

CHAPTER TWO: THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL MODEL IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE BRIGHTON PARK NEIGHBORHOOD 19  
Schools Divided by Race 21  
Chicago Public Schools: “The Worst Schools in the Nation” 22  
The Era of Reforms: Accountability and Achievement 26  
   The Storm Before the Storm: Inefficiency and Ineffectiveness 26  
   The School Reform Act of 1988: Decentralization 27  
   The Chicago School Reformatory Act: Recentralization and Accountability 31  
   The Post-Reform Era in CPS: Arne Duncan and Collaborative Corporatizing 37  
The Community School Model in Brighton Park 50  
Forming and Reforming: Patterns in Chicago Public Schools and Brighton Park 51  

CHAPTER THREE: STUDYING A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP 55  
Ethnography: A Mixed Methods Approach 55  
Data Boundaries and Limitations 60  
Data Collection Methods and Sampling 63  
   Semi-Structured Interviews: Sample and Recruitment 63  
   Participant Observation 69  
   Descriptive History 70  
Data Analysis: Coding and Organizing 72  
“Carte Blanche Permission”: Ethical, Political, and Personal Implications of Blending In 74  
Embedded Ethnography: A Mixed Results Approach 81  

CHAPTER FOUR: COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTED 83  
The Community School Enterprise in Chicago: An Atypical Community of Purpose, An Atypical Community of Place 84  
The Collaborative and Their Places 92  
   The Funder’s Space 97  
   The Lead Partner’s Place 99  
Meaning In Context: Community as Place 104  
   The Lead Partner: “It’s Where We Live.” 104
The Funder: Community “Envisioned” 110
Community of Intention: United by Cause 121

CHAPTER FIVE: BUILDING THE COLLABORATIVE 127
A Data-Driven Collaboration? 130
Culture, Contests, and Collaboratives 132
On Shaky Ground 136
Necessary Collaboration Contested 142
The Measure of Success: “It Just Ain’t Workin” 143
Ambiguity in Strategic Vision and Purpose 150
Leadership, Expertise, and Trust 158
Making the Unworkable Work 170

CHAPTER SIX: MIDDLEMEN 174
Strategies of the Middle: Negotiating Relationships 178
Activity in the Middle 181
Bridging School and Neighborhood 182
Bridging Funder and Lead Partner 190
Bridging to the Board 201
Centrality of the Middle 208

CHAPTER SEVEN: SCHOOLS ABOUT COMMUNITY 212
A Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative and the Community School Model 213
Opportunities for Future Investigation 221
Closing Thoughts 226

BIBLIOGRAPHY 228

VITA 242
ABSTRACT

Public-private partnerships as a new organizational form for delivering health and human services to those who require them remains an under-studied but important topic of research in an era significantly influenced by the weakening of the traditional civic welfare infrastructure. Based on two years of ethnographic research including in-depth interviews and participant observation, this research aimed to understand better how the concept of community held by members of the public-private partnership influenced their collective attempts to create a full-service community school program in the Brighton Park neighborhood of Chicago. Research revealed that members of the partnership negotiated and contested the idea of community which then had direct effects on their expectations and implementation efforts in the neighborhood. A small group, representing different organizations and leadership levels within the larger partnership held a similar idea of community which united them in their shared strategies to respond to traditional organizational authority structures. Research also revealed that neighborhood voices and those of school officials played little role in the partnership's efforts to imagine and implement the community school model, suggesting that public-private partnerships like these might be more likely working on "behalf" of the neighborhood as opposed to with the neighborhood in efforts to create community-level change.
CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNITY, COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

“We’re getting into the business of Community Schools,” my boss said as she turned the corner back to our cubicles on the east side of a loft office space in the West Loop in Chicago. I looked up from my desk quizzically. “It’s one of those deals where different agencies offering different services offer them at schools, you know, before and after school.” “For the students?” I asked. I had never heard of this before. “Well, yeah...but the idea is they should be there for everybody. Like, the community should also come into the school you know, for health screenings, to get glasses, for cooking classes, to learn about healthy food. It’s like building up community resources from inside the school.” “And we’re going to do this?” I asked, somewhat confused. We worked for a philanthropic organization known for its long-standing history as a funder, an investor not a service provider, in communities in Chicagoland. There was neither staff dedicated to this nor anyone who brought any experience of community schools to this organization. My boss sat down at her desk, sighed, and replied, “I guess so...that’s the word on the street. I don’t know how...we have a meeting at 3 to start trying to figure it out...You’re in that meeting, by the way.” Thus began my professional and personal foray into learning about, thinking about, and trying to understand what a community school really is in the context of an actual neighborhood in Chicago and how a dedicated group from across sectors of nonprofit services and education would attempt to build a
community school, led by a philanthropic organization with no history or experience of

directly serving people in neighborhoods.

The Funder Collaborative and the Community School Model

My employment with this well-known philanthropic organization, to which I will
refer in this document as the Funder, began in early 2011. Hired into a new position,
Measurement Manager, my presence there as a social researcher (as opposed to a
financial consultant, of which they had many) marked what Funder leadership saw as
another step toward shifting the conventional wisdom about the organization’s
relationship to the community. Started as a community trust-style organization nearly a
century ago and known for its “community funding,” the Funder now sought deeper
inroads into communities, hoping to become more known as a “community partner.”
Ultimately, the senior leadership (including members of the Board of Trustees) wanted to
begin to make claims to “changes” in communities brought about by Funder dollars; they
hoped to concretely demonstrate, through data, the social impact (which they assumed
would be positive) achieved by pouring concentrated financial resources into specific
places—cities and particular Chicago community areas—known to be faltering. My task
was to develop and analyze “outcome metrics” that could show how and to what ends our
charitable dollars worked in the programs provided by our funded nonprofit agencies.

This impact approach represented just another step in what was a significant shift
in the way they, as an organization, understood their role in communities around the
region (Barman 2006). The beginnings of this identity shift had taken root years before
when they had moved away from broad funding of populations (i.e. children, youth,
senior) to issue-area funding (i.e. health, education, income). In an effort to remain
relevant in and to communities, the Funder continued a shift from the broad, unfocused
disbursement of many small grants throughout the region (a mode many called “fairy
dust funding”) to funding that was intentionally “narrow and deep.” This meant directing
more dollars to fewer locations in the region, favoring those “hardest hit,” as they would
define that, by an enduring cycle of poverty and violence.

The pinnacle of this shift came in the Summer of 2011 when Funder leadership
decided to create and implement a community school of their own in a neighborhood in
Chicago. This decision deeply impacted Community Building, the department at the
Funder traditionally tasked with grant-making. Now, the home department for this
community school work, at the time called “the Learning Launch1,” Community Building
hired two new staff. Maya, formerly the director of a domestic violence program, would
bring the new dimensions of strategic planning and grant writing to Community Building;
her job was to research and write grants to garner additional funding, and help plan how
this Learning Launch would develop within the context of the Funder. Maya joined the
team in June, 2011. In October, the Funder hired Miguel as the Director of Community
Engagement, a new position intended to create Funder connections deeply in whatever
neighborhood the Learning Launch would be rooted. A seasoned community organizer,
former founder and Executive Director of a nonprofit, direct service agency in Cicero,
and with deep knowledge and connections in the political landscape of Chicago, Miguel’s
first task was to identify a Chicago neighborhood that would provide a favorable mix of
1) a strong lead partner agency, 2) cooperative neighborhood schools (not charter or

---

1 This was a title coined by the Vice President and Senior Vice President of Community Building at the
time and chosen to highlight the fact that this was a brand new kind of venture for this organization, one in
which learning about this kind of relationship to the community would be central. Prior to this it was called
“The Pilot.” To introduce it publicly to donors and agency partners, the name of this project eventually
changed to “Neighborhood Network” which remains its official title now.
magnet schools, and 3) community “need” and “capacity\(^2\). By the Spring of 2012, Brighton Park emerged as the best neighborhood candidate. Through a review process fully discussed in later chapters, a neighborhood-focused organization dedicated to and located in Brighton Park would serve as the Lead Partner for the Funder. Martin, the young and energetic Executive Director of the Lead Partner, became part of this nascent cross-sector team begun by Maya and Miguel. Together, with the intermittent help of several Funding staff, including the four Issue Area Funding Leads\(^3\), me as Measurement Manager, and several of the Community Building Operations\(^4\) team, this trio began to tackle the challenge of figuring out what a collaboration between a Lead Partner and a Funder would become in the context of the community school model already in place but on a very small scale in two of the four neighborhood schools located in Brighton Park.

Officially underway by the summer of 2012, the work of the collaborative started making noticeable progress in formalizing the partnership agreements and scripting

\(^2\) “Need” in this case was a multi-dimensional measure of community need that included variables like median income, educational attainment, unemployment rates, and general population numbers as reported by the American Community Survey. “Capacity” referred to mostly unquantifiable attributes that would indicate how well the neighborhood was positioned to absorb Funder fiscal resources. Because the Funder did not provide programming, they relied solely on the presence of established agencies, schools, churches, and other social organizations to take the funding and turn it into programming. Often referred to here as “social infrastructure,” they needed both organizations who could offer high-quality programs and political and educational resources to make the service integration work. So, in measuring capacity, the Funder considered current relationships with aldermen, CPS officials and principals in the schools, school stability (i.e. were neighborhood schools chronically on the “closing” list or already marked for closure), and other funding sources already “in” the community. Using the 77 Chicago Community Areas as the definition of community, the ideal scenario would be a community that displayed moderately high need, moderate to strong capacity, and would have no other major private funding sources already in the neighborhood.

\(^3\) The Funder supports funding in four issue areas: Education, Income, Health, and Safety Net. The idea for the collaborative was ultimately to provide these four kinds of services, in an integrated fashion of the CSM in the Brighton Park schools. Thus, each issue lead who governs the grant-making and grant management in those areas was included in the planning of the collaborative from the beginning.

\(^4\) Community Building Operations staff governs the process of grant-making and regulation including agency outreach and application management, application collection and evaluation, and basic research and data collection. Relatively, issue leads determine the strategic direction for grant-making while the Ops team runs the “nuts and bolts” processes involved with grant-making.
specific projects just as the massive CPS strike of August 2012 vaulted the discussion of neighborhood schools back to the front pages of newspapers throughout the city. The time was ripe to renew the discussion of the value of the CSM, its presence in Chicago, and the potential it held for improving the conditions of both the schools and the neighborhoods that the schools served. For a city that formally adopted the model citywide in 2009 under Arne Duncan’s leadership as CEO of CPS, discussion of the model by CPS in 2012 surprisingly lacked. The team at the Funder scrambled to learn as much as possible about this “alternative model” for schools, relying heavily on Katherine, the Executive Director of the Federation of Community Schools, an Illinois-based organization formalized out of several community school advocacy groups in 2006 and dedicated solely to the support and champion CSM work.

Though not a formal member of the Funder’s team, Katherine regularly provided guidance and advice regarding the implementation of the CSM. She also championed the Funder’s effort to embrace the model because the Funder, though new to the implementation game, was well known for large-scale advocacy efforts in Illinois. Katherine saw this as a clear opportunity to leverage that influence to engage high-level state politicians regarding support for the CSM, namely the renewal and re-consideration of policy around the 21st Century Funding dedicated to community school initiatives. Only years later, at a Community School Annual Conference, did I realize that Martin and Katherine knew each other well: Martin currently sits as the Vice-President on the Federation Board of Directors.

Though the sum of the practitioners of the CSM, self-identified as the Community School Movement, is impressive and their work well-established among each other, the
CSM largely remains publicly unknown. Prior to this work, I had never heard of it, despite its official presence in Chicago since 2009. Broadly, the community school model calls for organized sets of health and human services—counseling, tutoring, health and developmental screens, healthy eating and lifestyle programs—to be offered at the school before and after classes by licensed providers other than educators. These “wrap-around” services can create opportunities for growth and an environment for students that practitioners and educators observe to be more conducive to academic achievement and growth. Unlike charter or magnet models that provide alternative models for administering a school, making them alternative models for the business of education, the Community School Model presents an alternative model the relationship of schools to their neighborhoods. In this way, the CSM focuses almost solely on culture rather than business or, frankly, education.

Despite an indirect argument regarding academic achievement, the changes brought about by programs typical to CSM lie largely in the environment or culture of the neighborhood. Usually offered completely outside the school day and targeting more than just student groups, programs serve to “level the playing field” for students living in families and neighborhoods who lack critical support services. The theory suggests that, by offering a holistic set of services needed by all in a neighborhood—academic, health, employment and job readiness, adult education, and counseling services—in schools to students, their families, and residents of the neighborhood, the effort will reap more enduring results. Not only are previously lacking services made available and convenient, but locating them in the school will build a new kind of collective investment and feeling for that place as a place of “community” and not just for students from 8am-
3pm, September through June. The school becomes a new place for the neighborhood and, potentially, a new symbol of identity for the neighborhood that gathers there to find what they need. This works to replicate the “feel” of civic or recreation centers often found in more economically stable places. The CSM utilizes the existing CPS infrastructure of neighborhood schools to, ideally, create a much-needed “hub” for flagging neighborhoods.

Given this, the relationship between this model and academic outcomes is also distinct. Unlike interventions rooted in the classroom, during school hours (i.e. STEM or STEAM curricula, the “turnaround model” for schools) whose outcomes lie in academic metrics like test scores and grades and whose expectations for success are immediate, the CSM aims to show achievement in the classroom but as part of a longer-term change in the environment of the neighborhood. This, proponents say, makes the CSM’s effects more sustainable. The logic of the CSM assumes that, in order for classroom achievement at any grade level to be realized, vital out-of-school support structures must be in place to provide the student with environmental and contextual supports that bolster classroom performance. Studies have shown that factors like eating healthy food throughout the day, having parents engaged in homework (especially reading help) at home, awareness of physical needs like vision and dental correction, and “home” existing for a student as safe and loving place all exact effects on classroom performance. (Epstein 1991; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Powell 1991). Thus, the model addresses those early, providing a variety of resources to essentially build and fortify those structures—home environment, school environment, and neighborhood environment—at the same time that in-school time addresses learning-specific needs. With this holistic approach to students’
lives, classroom achievement can only improve while also improving the lives of their families and the neighborhood. The experience of other major cities implementing this model, including Harlem, NYC, San Francisco, Omaha, Miami, and Cincinnati, bear this out to various degrees. But it is for this exact reason that the CSM requires a host of diverse financial, political, and social resources, expertise in community organizing, deep knowledge of the neighborhood, and a commitment by the parties providing these to work together. The CSM does not aim to change the school environment for students. The CSM aims to change neighborhood environment through the school for the community.

From my desk as the Measurement Manager, an involved but not central position in the group at the Funder tasked with this project, what became clear was the cultural nature of this work: implementing the CSM means re-writing what people know about school and community. Opening school doors to people other than students and parents ultimately changes what that building means for the people associated with it, especially for educators. The role of the teacher is defined by the presence of students in a place that is school; if school now means a place where neighborhood folk can get vision screenings and cooking classes, does the teacher become something new? Principals in CPS must be in the school building while there are people in it; if neighborhood clubs and sports leagues use the gyms and classrooms until midnight, does that change what the role of “principal” means? And does the title “principal” hold any meaning for those neighborhood people in the school building who are not students? To change the purpose for a building traditionally dedicated to “school” and its meanings is to potentially change everything about it.
Similarly, inviting the neighborhood into a traditionally exclusive space requires some kind of definition of who that is. Is a neighborhood defined by streets or zip codes? Do you have to have kids attending the school? Do you have to live in that place or just work there? The bounds of school traditionally create a “safe” place for a particular group to accomplish a specific goal. If the bounds change, how does that original goal change? And how do the players change? And if the goal is creating a place for “community,” who is that? And how does that differ from “the neighborhood”? All of this definitional work signifies essentially cultural work—the negotiation of meanings among groups with different perspectives—which, at its core, can be complex, slow, and even disruptive. It also can hold great potential if undertaken mindfully. This is why proponents of the CSM claim that this, more than any other model, can create sustainable results.

The research presented here officially began early in 2012 and over the course of the next 2 ½ years, as the involved but not central Measurement Manager, I observed a growing set of meaning-focused conflicts and contests appear. As difficult as meaning work can be, implementing a process based on meaning-work appeared much more difficult. In this cross-sector context, over and over, seemingly straightforward and shared concepts and ideas became less clear and more contested: community, neighborhood, need, impact, school. Hours at meetings were spent trying to usher group agreement on what appeared some of the most basic ideas. The more we tried to answer, the fuzzier the answers grew. Increasingly evident was the difficulty of attempting to collaborate across sector and industry lines: the Lead Partner “way” and perspective often challenged that of the Funder and vice-versa. Individuals working for their respective organizations often experienced both personal and professional conflict in negotiating
issues of loyalty, authority, and credibility. Work ground to a halt regularly, sometimes for weeks (and once months), due to inter-organizational disagreement or inefficiency. While on paper, the CSM appeared so packed with collective possibility, in reality it seemed to present an endless array of meaning lines and boundaries that divided and fractured just as much, if not more, than they united.

**Research Questions and Theoretical Framework**

The analysis to follow highlights the points of meaning negotiation and contest that arose in this collaborative’s work to create a community school and examines to what ends those debates moved. Though mutually committed to the idea of creating a community school, this collaborative spent significant time and energy debating and challenging fundamental concepts like “community” and “neighborhood.” In turn, these debates held implications for the process of strategically determining programming and setting expectations for what this “community school” could and would actually become. This research aims to answer questions around the effects of the meaning of community on the implementation of a service model dedicated to “strengthening community.” In other words: who are the members of the collaborative and how do they, from different organizations and personal contexts, conceptualize community? How do members of the collaborative negotiate and contest their understandings of community? Finally, in what ways and to what ends do these contested meanings effect this cross-sector collaborative and their attempt to “build a community school” in Brighton Park?

These questions are complex in several ways, requiring a theoretical framework that can most effectively draw out the salient points of a very complex story. Thus, this analysis draws on and draws together several different sociological literatures. At its core,
this is a story of different kinds of contests of meaning and the contexts in which those contests occur. While members of the collaborative espouse and use varying definitions of community, they also use them to formulate the fabric of these new, sometimes difficult partnerships within the context of different organizations. Here, the interpretive approach to culture provides a lens within which to understand how the meanings come into play, specifically through the negotiation of central concepts and the development and policing of symbolic boundaries that they use to determine and define who community is, where it is, and what it means.

**Multi-Stakeholder Collaboratives: The Backbone of Community Schools**

Examining literature on the Community School Model and its application in neighborhoods requires a parsing of several literatures not typically intersecting. Existing academic work on community schools specifically tends to skew toward program evaluations of particular school-focused interventions, examining questions of impact on academic performance. While the UIC evaluation of the CIS in CPS, similar evaluations from other cities, and the evaluation work for the smaller collaborative studied here all similarly reported no relationship between CSM programming and classroom performance, there were other conclusions that seemed to get lost in the noise of the data regarding academic achievement.

All evaluations agreed that significant progress had been made in developing the stakeholder partnerships that would serve as the foundation for the programmatic work to come (Adams 2010; Castrechini and London 2012; Dryfoos 2000, Robison 1993). More importantly, the evaluations agreed that among the students who received the programming coordinated by partners in the CSM collaborative, there was improvement
not only in behaviors but also modest improvement in the more subjective aspects of academic performance, specifically grades and participation and behavior in the classroom. However, these evaluations largely agreed that the CSM likely would eventually show positive academic gains on a large scale if partners were given time to 1) fully develop the collaborative and 2) make the programming from the collaborative available to all students in a school rather than just subsets of the lowest achievers. The more fully formed and cultivated over time, the more the model may have an effect on student academic performance. Practically, there was agreement that focus on the strength of the collaborative was imperative. More expansive literatures in education and organizational management with pertinent growth between 2000-2010 seem to support the idea that more than one sector was beginning to realize that cross-sector, multi-stakeholder collaboratives were becoming more common organizational entities.

From an organizational standpoint, literature developing the concept of community-focused collaboration and the enterprise of creating and sustaining multiple stakeholder collaboratives expanded quickly in the 1970s and continues grow as community change through multiple-stakeholder collaboratives have emerged as a popular way to address community-level problems and identify strategies that hold potential for creating sustainable change (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997; Mandell 2001; Rethemeyer 2005). This is especially true for cross-sector collaboratives or “partnerships involving government, business, nonprofits and philanthropies, communities, and/or the public as a whole” (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone 2006). The considerable breadth and depth
of this young literature illustrates the interest in exploring the capabilities and challenges of this method while also refining models for its practical application in communities.

The literature agrees that a strong, focused, organized collaborative built through fostering collaborative capacity or, “the conditions needed for coalitions to promote effective collaboration and build sustainable community change” (Goodman et al. 1998) is central to the success and efficacy of collaborative community work. Though different scholars across different disciplines define the components of collaborative capacity slightly differently, reviews of their approaches reveal conceptual agreement in identifying the necessary pieces and processes for which a multi-stakeholder collaborate must account to be on the path toward cohesive, effective work (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, and Allen 2001; Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone 2006; Dryfoos 2000). The literature also agrees that each collaborative is its own experiment in organizational relationships (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Roussos and Fawcett 2001). There is no “right way” to form these complex sets of organizational partnerships that aim to cross and overlap several organizational and industry cultures into one shared experience.

The organizational and community schools literature provides analyses from applied standpoints but sociological literature also provides some discussion, albeit fairly recent, on the topic of what scholars call “comprehensive community initiatives” or targeted efforts by cross-organizational groups united in a unison effort to revitalize particular neighborhoods, typically very poor neighborhoods in a given urban area (Silver

---

5 Community psychology, urban and organizational planning, economics, and social work each have a separate but related literature on this topic. Each literature uses taxonomies and terminology internal to each discipline to in their discussions but essential the broad components and processes they identify as central and basic to the discussion are similar enough that one can recognize they refer to similar or the same phenomena but in different ways based on their academic situation.
2006). The majority of these studies locate themselves as emerging from a deeper existing literature examining the relationship between philanthropy and class interests. Many studies demonstrate the ways philanthropists act to protect and support or replicate the presence of an elite class: by giving to institutions that serve their interests while subverting those of other classes (Bombardieri and Robinson 2004; Odendahl 1990; Ostrower 1995; Jenks 1987; Jenkins 1989); by gaining access to elite networks and social opportunities thereby strengthening elite solidarity and identity (Ostrander 1984; Daniels 1987; DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Karl and Katz 1981; Zolberg 1974); and in co-optation of the interests of communities and community based organizations (Fisher 1983; Roelofs 2003; McAdam 1982; Haines 1984, 1988; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1997). My research affirms that when it comes to the collaboration between neighborhood, CBO, and philanthropic organization, those with the purse strings often control a majority of the discussion, though not necessarily the action.

The sociological study of comprehensive community initiatives aims to delve further into the interactions between the collaborative parties and the effects of those interactions. Some examine the structural implications of residents, evaluating the notion that such initiatives create “ladders of opportunity and mobility” and opportunity for residents caught in persistent cycles of poverty (Fishman and Phillips 1993). Others examine the relationships between community based organizations (CBOs), philanthropic organizations and neighborhood residents in creating a centralized decision-making process built on a collaborative action plan that changes the way each of these groups “does business” (Collwell 1993; Nielsen 1985). Studies have found that this atypical arrangement of these three groups in a collaboration enables CBOs and neighborhoods
residents to have much more say in planning and policy arenas as well as indirect effects on grant-making processes often reserved to philanthropy alone (Brown and Garg 1997). Like the community partnerships created by universities emerging at the same time (Boyle and Silver 2005), comprehensive community partnerships, scholars argue, reflected and drew attention to the broader political climate of the time, one in which the responsibility of attending to the needs of the poor became a local issue and one tackled by private, and not public sources.

To date, Ira Silver’s study of the Chicago Initiative (2006) remains closest in dialogue with the research I present here. It is in this niche of studying the day-to-day interactions between the CBOs and philanthropic partners that I root my analysis but plumb perspectives largely unmined, namely the perspectives of the CBOs and the neighborhood residents as players in what is ultimately meaning-making work that involves the merging and negotiation of multiple kinds of existing cultures, their development, and work. I believe this to be one of the main contributions of the analysis presented here. Community schools and the collaboratives that form to create them remain largely unknown in terms of their contributions and effects on the meanings of the neighborhoods in which they are planted. The longer my tenure at the Funder extended, the more I saw the utility of the spectrum of cultural analysis that could lend insight into the negotiations happening every day around the work of the Collaborative as individuals and organizations brought their own ideologies into a designated shared space, negotiated the boundaries and meanings of them, and then used those meanings as tools and resources to seek the ends they saw fit. From my seat, the entirety of this enterprise was cultural but had not yet been examined from that angle.
Broadly speaking, the culture literature examines the effect and use of meaning from three standpoints. We use culture as a means to 1) categorize and bound, 2) to determine and negotiate new meanings, and 3) as a set of resources and strategies to guide meaningful action. In action-oriented scenarios like this one in which the intended outcome is the implementation of “something,” we tend to jump to the end: did the Collaborative succeed? The question I ask instead is, “How did the Collaborative come to understand who they are and what they want?” The analysis to follow relies on the first two approaches to culture, using that perspective to examine the points of friction that arise in the “merging” or overlapping of two existing institutional cultures: that of the Funder and that of the Lead Partner. These points of friction give rise to a series of contests around meanings that have a direct impact on how the Collaborative is to develop and function and to what ends.

While these two literatures situate the data analysis most aptly, it became apparent that the organizational components of the collaborative, particularly the overlapping organizational structures apparent in the working group itself, required attention. My analysis, rooted in language, values, and meanings, benefits from the interpretive approach to culture and community. But the “home” organizational contexts and structures played significant roles in the ways in which these meanings became the stuff of implementation; individuals’ ideas about community could exist independently of these structures. However, when the discussion turned toward implementation, organizational structures and channels through which ideas like legitimacy, expertise, and influence flowed became sites and sources of negotiation and contest for other concepts. Through them, the collaborative negotiated what expertise, legitimacy, influence, and
power became for this community school. Because organizational culture does not appear in community literature, the need to examine these organizational structures as “community places” arose. While the community literature typically does not treat organizational culture as a community space, smaller niche literatures of the sociology of collaborations and economic behavior, much more organizational in focus, leant valuable concepts and structure to the implementation discussions.

The conundrum of having such different literatures coalesce around these research questions represents what I consider the potential contribution of this work to sociological literature. Understanding this cross-sector, cross-organizational collaborative that extends into a neighborhood requires the overlapping of several literatures that typically do not cross.

**An Overview of This Dissertation**

In the chapters that follow, I examine the process this Funder-initiated collaborative undertook to “build a community school” between 2011 and early 2014, highlighting the points of friction, contest, and resolution they discovered in their collective attempt to determine what community means for the Brighton Park now and in the future. In order to provide a bit of backstory and “scene setting” that I found helpful as I assimilated specific details about the CSM and its presence in Chicago, Chapter Two fully introduces and explains the Community School Model and provides its history in Chicago and Chicago Public Schools. While CPS does not take center stage in this analysis, a dissertation on this alone could be possible. This chapter establishes the city-level meta-context for the specific work under consideration here. Chapter Three focuses
on my methodologies and clearly establishes the group of people and organizations at the focus of this work.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six present different facets of contests and negotiations regarding community as the Collaborative worked to determine what that means and how it should be implemented. Chapter Four examines in depth the multiple meanings of community at play within the Collaborative. Focused on the different articulations of the concept of community held by individuals from a variety of positions in the partner organizations of the Collaborative, the discussion examines the constructions of symbolic boundaries around the concept that establish “in-“ and “out-groups” within the Collaborative itself. Chapter Five builds on that analysis by tracing the ways in which the differing ideologies of community influence the plan for implementation. While individuals and their experiences tend to establish the various articulations of community, implementation moves those individual ideas into the realm of organizations. Chapter Five examines the points of friction and contest that arise as the idea of community becomes something to be implemented and evaluated organizationally. Chapter Six examines the role of a group I call Middlemen. This sub-set of the collaborative specifically shares the task of actually making the “community school” happen in Brighton Park. In this chapter, I examine their experience and how they enact a series of strategies, collectively shared among their group, aimed at ameliorating the organizational challenges they face while also maintaining the ultimate goal of implementing the CSM in a real school in Brighton Park. I conclude my analyses of these data in Chapter Seven with questions of impact and potential points of further sociological study in this world of Community Schools.
CHAPTER TWO

THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL MODEL IN
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE BRIGHTON PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

In the late Summer and Fall of 2012, as this research began to gain momentum, I felt distinctly aware that my location as a researcher was prime; I was in the right place, at the right time, and with the right people to stand on the crest of a new partnership. This was also a key time in the tumultuous life of Chicago Public Schools. I, with the rest of Chicago and the nation, watched the chaos of the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) strike with rapt attention as Karen Lewis became a household name and her public duels with Mayor Rahm Emanuel became the stuff of legend. Though many (myself included) found Lewis and her obvious disdain for Emanuel entertaining, the strike laid bare in a new way in Chicago an obvious, deep-running current of institutional unrest and dysfunction in the schools. Just a month after the strike ended, Emanuel named a new CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Barbara Byrd-Bennett, an education administrator with a documented history of massive school closures. Nothing about the events of Fall of 2012 conveyed confidence or smooth sailing for Chicago Public Schools. But what my research began to uncover for me, a transplant to Chicago, was that this unrest in CPS was anything but new. Chicago Public schools never sailed smoothly.
Though the course of my research would veer away from CPS as an active institutional partner in this Collaborative under consideration, I found tracing back into the political history of CPS necessary in order to understand how this could be the case. The more I learned about CPS as a “home institution” or context within which the CSM continues to live and develop, the more I understood how and for what purpose non-profit partners, especially funders, came into the educational fold in Chicago. This provides both context and credence for this study; collaboratives focused on CSM implementation play an important role in the education of children in Chicago. Understanding what I found to be curious arrangements of service providers and funders in schools requires some review of the political history of CPS as the educational institution in Chicago.

The rest of this chapter provides highlights of the political history of CPS. Though plentiful academic sources exist to summarize the history and policy trajectory of CPS in the “modern era” (1980s-present), the digital archives of the Chicago’s mainstream and niche news sources allowed me to mine news stories and editorials as they happened in real time. The account to follow combines stories that ran in The Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun-Times and the major television outlets, CPS press releases and official publicly available documents from the CPS website, and niche news outlets such as Catalyst (an education reform-focused magazine for Chicago) and a long-running education series in The Chicago Reader. By piecing these sources together, noting what were often obvious allegiances, coding, and comparing them, I was able to construct a multi-faceted account of the major turning points in CPS administration. This allowed me to most clearly situate the work of the Collaborative as well as the political
and institutional challenges they faced as they worked with CPS as an implicit partner in the effort to make community schools work in Chicago.

**Schools Divided by Race**

The early history of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) follows a story similar to any institution in this city that was taking hold in the mid-19th century: it was a story of race and segregation. I found it interesting as I was researching this that finding an agreed upon “beginning” to Chicago Public Schools was a challenge, although most agree that a centralized, organized system of schools took shape somewhere in the early 1860s. It is telling, then, that the first documented “colored school” was opened on June 15, 1863, thus confirming that as long as public schools in Chicago have existed, they have been racially segregated (Bogira 2013). It was prompted by legislation passed two months early demanding that separate schools be provided for black and mulatto children and so that, “the city's white children would henceforth be spared ‘the degrading necessity of associating with the negro”(Ibid). Two years later that law would be repealed but it wouldn’t really matter—the cultural expectation of the segregation of white and black students in school would hold firm until contested by Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. For one hundred years, public schools in Chicago would be segregated by race and, in a city literally divided by race lines, it meant that schools would be segregated by race and place. Schools in neighborhoods would reflect the race of the people living in the neighborhood.

Through the avid, hard-fought protests of parents and all Chicagoans in the 1960s, a de-facto adoption of Brown v. Board of Education ignited several attempts at systematic integration plans in the mid-late 1960s in CPS. These included familiar strategies of the
time like bussing and quotas but were largely failures like many of their counterparts
across the country. A lawsuit in 1962 brought by against CPS by 20 parents demanding
desegregation was dismissed on procedural grounds. At the same time, whites fled the
city in droves over the course of the next two decades, leaving the student population in
CPS to become increasingly minority anyway. In what seems like a slap across the face
for all minorities in Chicago, court-mandated desegregation would not happen until the
1980s; arguably by then, permanent damage had been done as a long, well-documented
history of a lack of resources to minority schools had mounted over 150 years. As a
columnist in the Chicago Reader noted:

A century and a half later, Chicago does not have a separate school for black
children, of course. It has scores of them. Forty-one percent of the city's public
schools—277 of 681—are at least 90 percent black. Sixty-eight percent of the
black students enrolled in the Chicago Public Schools are in these schools. The
vast majority of these students are from low-income families; many are living
below the poverty line. Non-Hispanic whites account for 32 percent of the city's
population, but only 9 percent of CPS's enrollment (Bogira 2013).

While the segregation of Chicago Public Schools has been well-documented and
analyzed, its importance for this story is that, whether officially desegregated or not, race
continues to play a significant role in the neighborhood schools of CPS to this day. And
it carries with it a legacy of institutional poverty and multiple barriers to academic
success that have plagued the minority population of Chicago for as long as CPS has
existed.

**Chicago Public Schools: “The Worst Schools in the Nation”**

On November 8, 1987, the education section of the New York Times led with a
story blaring the headline “Schools in Chicago Are Called the Worst By Education
Chief” (*New York Times* 1987). At an education forum in New York City the day prior,
William Bennett, then Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, commented that it would take a "man or woman of steel’ to clean up Chicago's school system,” noting that, "forty-six percent of Chicago teachers send their children to private schools…The people who know the product best send their children elsewhere." This commentary was prompted by the release of ACT scores across the nation for that year, on which, after averaging, half of the high schools in Chicago ranked in the bottom 1% of all scores nationwide. The flaccid response from the Chicago school board plead a case resting on the fact of a student population riddled with “problems”. A spokesperson for the board of CPS at the time responded to Bennett saying, “We have an overwhelming minority student enrollment, two-thirds come from low-income families, and we also have a higher-than-normal rate of limited proficiency in English."

A similar article appearing in the Chicago Tribune on the same day much more clearly emphasized the acknowledgement on the part of the School Board and Mayor Harold Washington that the system, more than any student problems, was the problem and in need of reform. Though angered by Bennett’s comments and highly critical of the Reagan administration’s clear endorsement of privatizing schools by promoting the idea of voucher systems and selective enrollment, a stance Washington said, ‘literally dismantled public education in this country” (Chicago Tribune 1987. Both Washington and Chicago Board of Education president Frank Gardner admitted that the system was broken and sorely in need of reform. While acknowledging the hard work of teachers, who had ended a 19-day teacher’s strike just weeks prior, of Bennett’s comments Gardner conceded, “Unfortunately, they are true,” pledging, “we’re going to make a change.” In the midst of heightened parental pressure due to the CTU strike which had
endured from September 8 to October 2 that year—the 9th strike in 18 years and the longest on record at that time—Washington and the School Board hoped to while the harness the ignited enthusiasm of parents, teachers, and administrators in a series of community meetings to brainstorm and build consensus around possible reforms. Gardner named the administrative structure of CPS as the first priority in reform planning, promising “We are not going to put it on the shelf.”

Secretary Bennett’s comments, while serving to galvanize the public acknowledgement of a system in distress, did not introduce anything new to the city of Chicago, Mayor Washington, or the School Board. Months prior to this commentary, Washington convened a summit on education in Chicago, inviting business and civic leaders to begin to draft a reform plan. Modeling the Boston Compact, Washington had hoped to spur academic achievement by gaining buy-in from school and business leaders alike. Following the successful plan scripted and implemented in Boston (hence the name), CPS personnel would pledge to improve academic achievement and job readiness while the business community would pledge to hire more CPS graduates (Catalyst Chicago 2013). Aside from angering Washington who worried the teachers, who had just struck for two weeks at the beginning of the school year, would bear the brunt of the blame, Bennett’s commentary vaulted the work of this summit from the formative, preliminary “back room” stages directly into the public arena. Washington used this groundwork already laid to fashion the series of public, town-hall style meetings to be focused on consensus building with parents, teachers, administrators, and residents of the city of Chicago. What could have been a new chapter for CPS in truly engaging parents properly, setting measurable goals for student success to which administrators would be
held accountable, and creating a trajectory for employment would unfortunately have to wait. On November 25, 1987, just three weeks after Bennett’s incendiary (but admittedly accurate) remarks, Harold Washington suffered a fatal heart attack during a meeting in his 5th floor office at City Hall. Chicago’s first African American mayor and the symbol of hope for so many Chicagoans who knew too well the structural oppression of race and class in the city was not to be the “man of steel” for the Chicago Public Schools.

To conclude his comments at that press conference on November 7, 1987, William Bennett asked a pivotal question point-blank: “How can anyone who feels about children not feel terrible about Chicago schools?” (New York Times 1987). It was a call to action of the most infuriating and heartbreaking kind. Already staring down the barrel of the national Republican privatization agenda for education, a slap in the face to a city proud of its home ground industriousness and self-made, “boot straps” scrappiness, Chicago—specifically the Mayor, the City Council, and the School Board—had had to admit that its schools were literally failing its children. “The City that Works” was not working when it came to education and it wasn’t the students, but the system, the third largest in the nation behind New York and Los Angeles, that needed serious, rapid repair. Though the Chicago public schools obviously have a history that extends into the past well beyond 1987, the commentary by William Bennett on the national stage and the response in Chicago was a galvanizing, pivotal moment in determining the course of what was to come over the next three decades in public education in this city. Picking up Washington’s mantle of reform, a small group of his devotees in local and state government retained his goal and plan for rebuilding CPS into a system that did not just function, but that delivered, although on what and how would become the fodder for
heated debate before too long. While a “Chicago Compact” would never come to pass, the era of reform was underway for Chicago and its schools.

**The Era of Reforms: Accountability and Achievement**

By all accounts of educators and Chicagoans alike, 1987 was the nadir for Chicago public schools and the same traits that led Chicago officials to feel the sting of shame on a national stage for failing their students also led them to take up the mantle of reform with incredible, business-minded efficiency. Never again would they be caught in the spotlight—national or otherwise—for negative reasons. And in the decade following, major pieces of state legislation and overhauls of the administration of Chicago Public Schools’ front office would change the way schools did business, literally. The Reform Era, often discussed in three acts or phases, would play out over the next twenty years and completely change the way Chicagoans thought about, received, and evaluated a public school education.

**The Storm Before the Storm: Inefficiency and Ineffectiveness**

Prior to the reforms beginning in the late 1990s, CPS was a centralized city government agency, displaying all the symptoms of a dysfunctional bureaucracy: disorganization, ineffectiveness, and inefficiency to name just a few. Because of this, the administration was no stranger to organizational tumult. For a decade preceding the sweeping reforms, both city and state government attempted several stop-gap measures to address a limping system. In 1979, after a fiscal crisis in CPS that required all staff including teachers and principals to endure a series of payless paydays, the Illinois legislature mandated that the School Finance Authority be created to monitor spending and budgeting in CPS and replaced the entire school board. In the mid-80s, then mayor
Harold Washington organized first the Education Summit, originally comprised of 35 civic leaders he identified from across industries in Chicago to draft a new “contract” for education in the city. And yet, while there was effort, there was little effect. While stop-gap measures were planned and new strategic thinking spurred, parents and advocate non-profit organizations grew increasingly impatient with the lack of progress made toward a functional school system, let alone an achieving one. The 19-day teachers’ strike in 1987 was the tipping point as anger and frustration led way to protests across the city, culminating in a march on City Hall. This is was sparked Washington to begin the second iteration of his Education Summit, cleverly entitled Education Summit II, which would swell to 50 members and this time include parents and community members to serve as an advisory committee to the School Board. Washington passed away before he could see the work of this group come to fruition but they forged on without him and, with the help of dozens of business leaders, went on to nearly completely draft one of the most influential pieces of school reform legislation that Chicago and its public schools would see (Catalyst Chicago 2008).

**The School Reform Act of 1988: Decentralization**

Drafted largely by the remnant of Harold Washington’s dedicated business and grass-roots leaders, the School Reform Act of 1988 focused on the decentralization of the authority in public schools into communities. Its largest move was to create Local School Councils (LSCs), which are “elected, empowered parent-majority local school councils...at each CPS school” (Woestehoff and Neill 2007). Structured to necessarily include the school principal, 6 parents, 2 teachers, 2 community residents, 1 non-teaching
staff representative and, in a high school, 1 student\(^1\), the LSC’s main responsibilities are to approve the School Improvement Plan, approve the school’s budget, evaluate the principal and, when necessary, hire the principal. This one adoption created two important changes in CPS: first, it moved authority for a school’s functioning and potential success to the local level where invested stakeholders could oversee and be accountable for the use of funds and their own plans for improvement. It also created an environment of accountability, making the principal immediately accountable to the people who, in theory, know the most about it and can see and vouch for the effects of it.

In addition to LSCs, the 1988 Reform Act pushed the decision-making about how state Chapter 1 dollars would be used to the local level, making these discretionary funds intended to provide educational support and services for low-income students who need them the purview of the LSC and not the “central office,” or CPS bureaucracy (Chicago Tribune 1993). Finally it mandated that School Improvement Plans for Advancing Academic Achievement (SIPAAA), focused on maintaining and updating both the school’s mission and vision as well as the collection and analysis of school data designed to report on student success outcomes, be written and approved by the LSC every three years by each school in the district (CPS Website). In addition, the LSC is to evaluate each principal yearly and determine the course of action, either to continue the principal’s contract or not renew on the grounds of lack of achievement of the goals stated in the SIPAAA.

---

\(^1\) Each category has its own rules for eligibility (maybe include in an appendix?). Historically, these have been controversial. At one time, the rules for being on an LSC included being a US citizen which caused all manner of debate regarding the inherent racism involved for immigrants who were living in the city legally but who were not citizens yet. Currently, CPS does not list this as a requirement for any of the LSC categories.
While the decentralizing of the authority onto local ground not only quelled the immediate furor over a system in deep disrepair, it also positioned Chicago Public Schools to begin the climb toward improving academic performance that could be sustained and on which parents and students could count. With more control of what was going on in each neighborhood school, local decision-makers could be much more responsive to the particular material and strategic needs that community conditions—tangible and intangible—might demand. And while time would disprove the nay-sayers who worried that the members who made up an LSC might not be trained or educated enough in business, management, or education to ensure solid oversight of schools, before LSCs really had a chance to get off the ground, let alone prove their efficacy, a new sheriff rode into town bearing an amended school system agenda. In 1989, just a year after the Reform Act was signed into law, Chicagoans elected Richard M. Daley as the next mayor and thus, unknowingly laid the groundwork for the next step in major school reforms in the city within the span of 10 years.

Richard M. Daley took office with the focus of a business leader who wanted to pull Chicago out of the mismanagement characterized by former mayoral administrations and he treated the schools no differently. Under the Reform Act of 1988, Daley, as mayor, was given the right to appoint an interim school board which he loaded full of business and civic leaders, notably leaving educators and educational administrators out of the equation. As the next several years passed, “as LSCs were voted in, went through ‘training’ and began to carry out their responsibilities, there was substantial variability in their effectiveness, their level of participation, and the degree to which they sparked change” (Lipman 2004: 35). The interim School Board and the Mayor, now heavily
influenced by the business ethos of accountability, found this scatter-shot performance of LSCs unacceptable and in many ways it was a lose-lose situation for all. While the LSCs did empower the community in authority, the Reform Act of 1988 gave LSCs no additional resources—money or supplies—thus making their empowerment one that was more symbolic than functional. Furthermore, due to a lack of new resources, the same disparities plaguing under-resourced schools in the poorest, minority neighborhoods of the south and southwest sides of the city continued to spiral downward while schools on the wealthier north and northwest sides flourished. This, of course, only highlighted the disparities among neighborhood schools in this one school district.

Reforms introduced in the Reform Act of 1988 were admirable; Alfred G. Hess, one of the architects of the law and a veteran researcher and expert on Chicago Public Schools described the construction of the reforms as “geared to be the perfect blend of local decision-making” (Hess 1999). The problems, however, were very practical and, most agree the reforms missed the mark in several ways (Haney 2011). First, the gains in shifting the locus of authority to the local levels were modest at best; the LSC model did not substantially increase parent involvement. In addition, CPS continued to face massive budgetary woes that actually delayed the opening of school in 1995. Third, the school board had failed to regain public trust in the system and administration continued to prove highly questionable in public opinion. Finally, Daley was growing increasingly restless at the lack of control he had in appointing permanent CPS board members, a move he saw as integral to making necessary changes to the reforms that, according to conventional wisdom, had largely failed over the past seven years (Wong and Sunderman 2001).
The Chicago School Reformatory Act: Recentralization and Accountability

In 1995, the Republican-led state legislature passed several amendments to the Reform Act of 1988 called the Chicago School Reformatory Act of 1995 and, in doing so, essentially reversed the former attempt at decentralization of the school organizational structure in the name of accountability. First and foremost, the amendments called for a brand new, corporate, organizational structure headed by the Mayor. This included the striking of several top advisory positions including the Superintendent position. Retitled “CEO of CPS,” the head of schools would be hired by the Mayor as would a chief financial officer, chief educational officer, chief operating officer, and chief purchasing officer. None of these top-level positions require any educational credentials.

Additionally, the School Financial Authority was suspended and the Mayor and School Board were given sole managing control over CPS finances. The School Reformatory Act also vastly limited what the Chicago Teachers’ Union could bring to the negotiating table (including teacher assignments and class size) and placed a moratorium on strikes for 18 months.² Finally, the School Board structure was overhauled completely. Following the corporate trope, the fifteen member board, previously nominated by an independent commission, shrunk to five members who would be appointed solely by the Mayor and who would operate as corporate boards do: with the intent to grow the company. Gary Chico, another eponymous Chicagoan and close friend of Daley’s would become the first CPS Chairman of the Board (Haney 2011).

² It should be noted that Daley knew full well these controls over CTU would create strained relations but it seems they were necessary to create a certain amount of stability in the earliest, formative days of these new reform amendments. To avoid massive outrage, he convened the leaders of CTU and actually ended up revoking all of the controls of CTU written into the amendments.
The meta-story of the School Reformatory Act is clear: Daley took back the schools and made them a business, with the intent of appealing to the forces that would actually solve some of the organizational problems that had been literally crippling the system for years. When underperformance, disorganization, irresponsibility, and stagnation seem to drive the ship, reason dictates that the best way to clean house is to usher in a culture of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and transparency—the credo of corporate America. Not only could this kind of radical transformation quickly answer and show progress away from a broken, bureaucratic system that was quite literally failing Chicago students. It could also deeply engage the tremendous corporate presence in Chicago in a civic institution, securing the possibility for more independent sources of funding, both for the city and for Mayor Daley’s own political agenda. Friends appointed to high places will continue to be donors at high levels. From whatever angle we might be wont to criticize this move, from a managerial standpoint, it made sense. And this was not a novel approach; with the move to a CEO/Corporate Board structure, Chicago joined the likes of other notably urban, notably challenged school systems including Boston, Washington DC, New York, Baltimore, and Cleveland. Whether or not it would work in Chicago—and more importantly what effect a business approach in education would have—was the question of the hour.

The Daley era in CPS was characterized by several high-profile administrations that would become the standard by which the new, corporate model of business in schools would be judged. The first administration, that of Gery Chico and Paul Vallas, would become the gold standard for accountability measures in Chicago, although measures that were distinctly business-like. Although approached initially for the CEO
position that he turned down, Gery Chico became the first President of the Reform Board
of Trustees\(^3\) which actually afforded him more power than the CEO position. Daley
asked Paul Vallas, the former Chicago Budget director to be CEO, which he accepted.
With a reputation as a keen manager focused on cutting costs, Vallas seemed like the
perfect fit for a new position designed to reign in an unwieldy, bloated, and inefficient
system. In the early days of his tenure at CPS, Vallas himself framed both his role and
his responsibilities in decidedly corporate terms. Of his own task ahead he said, “This
district has got to evolve and become more like a corporation. This is essentially a $3
billion dollar business, and we have got to learn how to leverage our buying power”
(Heard 1996). When asked about his place in this seemingly new, possibly foreign,
world of education, Vallas commented:

> I'm in a great position. I don't want to be a lifetime school superintendent.
> I don't want to be an education consultant when I'm done here. I'm not
> setting the stage for a political office. If I physically survive this job and
> accomplish what I hope to accomplish and what the mayor hopes to
> accomplish, then my ticket is written: I'm going to heaven. I can go back
> and become a normal person and try to raise my kids and spend time with
> my family. (Mathews 2001).

Vallas framed the CPS “issue” as an organizational one that did not require experience in
education or even an interest in education. When asked about his lack of experience in
an urban school district, he responded, “If having that kind of experience was important,
how come there hasn’t been more success before now?” (Heard 1996). Under the
Vallas/Chico administration, Chicago Public Schools became a business, the leaders of
which assumed that a corporate culture and mindset would create success.

\(^3\) The Chicago School Reformatory Act actually disbanded the “School Board of Education” and with the
structural changes also introduced this language—arguably much more aligned with a corporate board
structure—as the new title for this advisory group. The Board maintains this title today.
Vallas was serious about reform. Within the first year of his tenure, he cut $150 million dollars from CPS operating budget by getting rid of “organizational waste”. He shuttered the central office warehouse and cracked down on the perks administrators had been enjoying without accountability: cell phones, cars, and travel for administrators were all but completely curbed. While these initial measures quickly freed up money that he used to negotiate a favorable contract with CTU and gain back some trust in Springfield, his policies regarding the operations of actual schools were highly controversial.

In 1996, Vallas introduced the idea that underperforming or “troubled” schools would be put on probation—a move equivalent to what would be a hostile takeover by CPS central office. If a school was deemed in trouble by Vallas and the Board, with Board approval, as CEO he would be able to remove the principal and other administrators, remove members from or dissolve completely the LSC for the school, put a business manager in place to govern day-to-day functioning or potentially completely reconstitute the school if that was deemed necessary. In September of 1996, the Board placed 109 of the 556 CPS schools on probation (Haney 2011). Additionally, he fought for more stringent standards for principal selection; the Board collaborated with Chicago Principal and Administrators Association (CPAA) to create a leadership training academy through which prospective principals would have to go in order to be considered for administrative duty in schools. LSCs could only hire from those individuals on that list.

On the student side of life, Vallas ended the social promotion policy that allowed students who failed a grade to be promoted to the next grade after one year regardless of academic ability. Instead, he funneled failing students into mandatory summer school and required
that grade promotion be on the basis of academic ability only. With the passage of an Illinois state $485M funding increase to the poorest school districts in the state, the Vallas/Chico administration was able to expand preschool, afterschool, and summer school programs while also working to reduce class sizes, renovate old buildings, and build some new ones.

Though reform groups in the city strongly protested these moves, from an organizational standpoint, it was hard to argue about the effects of implemented accountability measures. Though recentralized, CPS was a better, more stable organization than it had been in a long time. Over the course of the next four years, CPS would continue to show steady gains on the Iowa test scores, would continue to implement and improve out of school time programs and enrichment opportunities as well as more actively engage parents in the educational process. On the other hand, some problems did persist: violence in and around schools was growing, discontentment with stronger teacher evaluation standards was increasing, and the social promotion problems remained unsolved which increased the dropout rate. Perhaps even more problematic was the growing tension between the Mayor’s Office, Gery Chico, and Paul Vallas themselves. While each of the three men admitted to occasional tension between them, prior to 2001, they maintained a unified public front. However, despite praise from then President Bill Clinton for the positive efforts made within CPS and their obvious effects, beginning in 2000, Paul Vallas and Mayor Daley began to butt heads over what constituted success in CPS and to what degree.

The 2000-2001 school began with a rocky start. Despite a major back-to-school campaign, first day attendance was the lowest one on record with a whopping 100,000
students absent. Daley and Vallas publicly disagreed about what may have caused this and, unlike past disagreements, Vallas publicly held his ground. Then in November of that same year The Chicago Tribune ran an article titled, “Another Bad Year for City Schools,” which detailed the low performance scores on the new ISAT and the plateauing scores on the Iowa basic tests (Martinez 2000). Vallas responded angrily to the criticism, clearly frustrated that this one metric would determine the success of the sum of the initiatives put into place—many of which addressed major organizational problems, the remediation of which student test scores would not immediately reflect. Daley, on the other hand, was frustrated at the slow pace of academic progress in CPS and lack of imagination in curricula-driven programming. In a press conference on this topic Daley said, “When you go into a school, you see kids who deal with technology faster than any of us, who can sing a rap song better than anyone else, but they have a problem reading…With every child there is ability. How do we get it out of them? ... I think we have to go outside of the box.”(in Washburn 2001) While rumors of reconciliations and newly formed agreements between CPS and the Mayor abounded, they were abruptly laid to rest when Board of Trustees President Gery Chico resigned suddenly. Two weeks later, Paul Vallas followed suit. Though obligatorily supportive and complimentary toward the administration, particularly Vallas, Daley hinted at the fact that he thought leadership might have grown too complacent, saying ”When you committed to change, you risk failing. But unless we’re willing to change, we’ll never succeed. I also hope no one has fallen into the trap of believing we’ve already done the best that we can. If you believe that, then you’ve given up on our children. And I, for one, will never give up on any child in Chicago” (qtd. in Martinez and Quintanilla 2001). Vallas seemed just as
frustrated. On the heels of Chico’s resignation, when asked by reporters about his own future, Vallas flung back:

Am I going? Yeah, I’m going, OK? Simple as that. I don’t want to play these games for another year. … I’ve tried not to respond to the anonymous this and the anonymous that or the high-level sources close to the mayor this and the close to the mayor that…So you want to know if I’m leaving? Yeah. I’m leaving. Yeah, I’m gonna be gone. End of story. So put it in the paper tomorrow. (qtd. in Haney 2011).

Generally speaking, many were sympathetic to Vallas who had worked himself to the bone to implement what were six years of consistently performing organizational reforms. Unfortunately, they were not performing in the right way; they were not academic performance improvements. Most felt Vallas, as a keen business manager, had done exactly what he had promised he would do—turn CPS into a functioning corporate body—and he had done it well. In his six years he had balanced six budgets, managed a $2.65M construction project, gained consistently improving reading and math scores, improved teacher and principal accountability standards, ended social promotion, and vastly expanded summer school, after school, and pre-school programming (Ibid). Given that, his departure raised much speculation as to who, exactly, would be up to the seemingly impossible task of improving an overhauled corporate system by “thinking outside the box.”

**The Post-Reform Era in CPS: Arne Duncan and Collaborative Corporatizing**

The two school reforms of 1988 and 1995 drastically changed the organizational milieu of Chicago Public Schools and, arguably, made the system run differently: with authority centralized in the mayor’s office, central office could be more easily held accountable to necessary professional standards while the maintenance of the Local
School Councils allowed for continued engagement (or the perception of such) by parents and community members. Many would say this amounted to a perceptible improvement. It did not, however, drastically improve education nearly to the degree Daley had hoped. CPS students continued to underperform on standardized tests and attendance rates sagged. Daley was obviously frustrated, almost surprisingly so. It’s almost as if he attributed students’ underperformance solely to the inefficiency and lack of accountability in CPS. The fact that drastic improvements in those areas did not seem to move student performance was a conundrum for Richard Daley, one that seemed to require more direct educational intervention to take place in the classrooms. This would be a decided departure from the theory that the CEO of CPS needed to be a keen manager above all else and was the “thinking outside the box” Daley envisioned.

But instead of appointing an educational expert—Dr. Barbara Eason Watkins, a highly successful, beloved, and seasoned principal in CPS’ Woodlawn schools, comes to mind—Daley chose to appoint from within the central office and in 2001, swiftly named Vallas’ Chief of Staff, Arne Duncan, as the next CEO of CPS. Duncan, a Chicago-born, Harvard-bred, 36 year-old former professional basketball player in Australia, was less interested in the management of the business of education and much more invested in student performance. To his credit, and with the support of Eason Watkins who he named his Chief Education Officer, Duncan immediately trained his focus on creating reforms that would take root and show improvement directly in the classrooms through academic performance. This emphasis would prove to be both his shining success and his Waterloo; it required that students start performing more consistently and at higher levels on standardized testing than ever before but within the constraints of the new No
Child Left Behind policy that would be extremely punitive for Chicago’s underperforming schools.

Having gone to CPS himself and acknowledging the problems of race and place in Chicago, Duncan clearly had a better grasp than his predecessors of the problems hindering so many students and a disproportionately high number of poor, minority students and expressed his dedication to a goal bigger than organizational restructuring. “First,” he said, “you have to change the culture. Students have to want to come to school and stay in school, and that is happening. I’m confident the academic achievement will follow” (qtd. in Olszewski 2006). Duncan clearly espoused ideas about cultural, environmental changes that should take place to create an school environment appropriately suited and structured to usher all students to higher academic achievement and his early choices rang with an enthusiasm—and possibly naiveté—about what his administration could accomplish.

In the early years, Duncan’s administration introduced a pre-K curriculum that would be standard, bolstered an existing system-wide tutoring program, garnered more federal funds to build out and enhance the sports program across city schools, and introduce an expanded report card that, he argued, would provide necessary perspective to standardized test scores as well as additional metrics that could be applied on an individual level to create a more holistic assessment of a student’s progress. These initiatives, however, were perhaps tamped down by the limitations and frustrations brought on by the shoddy implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in Illinois which included provisions that essentially destroyed any progress that could be made to boost performance in failing schools in Chicago. NCLB contained provisions that
allowed for immediate transfers to schools of choice for students in failing schools and it drastically limited and prescribed how Title I funds, particular to tutoring programs, could be spent. These provisions directly negated reforms Duncan had already put into place and would continue to prove a burden for the next three years, as Duncan fought with the U.S. Department of Education to allow that federal money be spent on the tutoring program he instituted and not the one mandated by the federal law. Eventually he would win that fight and be vindicated, proving that the CPS tutoring program was more effective than any private tutors endorsed by NCLB (Jones 2009), but would continue to lose the war of decreasing federal and state monies for education reforms.

NCLB also indirectly supported the growing trend toward privatizing schools in Chicago. Prior to his appointment as CEO, Duncan’s work in CPS was around developing the magnet school clusters, an initiative that made certain high-performing schools in CPS, both elementary and high school, selective enrollment schools: students would apply to go there, be accepted or denied based on merit, and often travel away from the neighborhoods they lived in to attend the school. Though still publicly funded and a part of CPS, these schools operated as private schools would, emphasizing advanced curricula, often focused on math and science, and designed to prepare competitive students for college. While serving students who, based on academic performance ability, could realistically expect to go to college, magnet schools also cannibalized the neighborhood schools by attracting away the high performers that could raise the performance rank, and thereby the increased funding, of their own neighborhood schools. With its mandated provision for student choice via student transfers (albeit limited choice: transfers in CPS could only occur between certain schools and did not
include the selective enrollment schools), NCLB latently made a case for movement away from the most underperforming neighborhood schools, found in disproportionately high numbers in the poor neighborhoods in Chicago.

In what be considered a counter-balancing move, Duncan unveiled a new plan for education in the 2002-2003 school year called *Every Child, Every School* which would re-focus and re-energize efforts toward broad-based classroom reforms that would allow all students the chance to get high quality, consistent instruction in any school in the district. Known for his collaborative style of leadership, Duncan assembled the plan with considerable input from all parties involved in the educational process: administrators, teachers, parents, students, LSCs, civic and social service agency leaders, community members, and from representatives of foundations and other civic and educational groups in the city (Chicago Public Schools 2002). The plan focused on teaching and learning strategies and the integration of these into all neighborhood schools. The accountability platform on which Paul Vallas’ tenure was entirely based was listed as the last priority in the new plan. Barbara Eason Watkins would be the owner of this document; her job would be to implement this new classroom-focused vision across the district. Unfortunately, as politics would have it, she wouldn’t have much time to get work done before another major change swept through CPS.

Just a year after launching *Every Child, Every School*, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago published a report critical of the modest advancements CPS had seen since Duncan assumed his post just two years prior. The Civic Committee describes themselves as, “a private, not-for-profit organization of senior executives of the region's largest employers. We work hand-in-hand with public officials and other civic
organizations for the social and economic well-being of our region” (Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago website) and throughout the history of CPS has exerted considerable influence on policy decisions for schools. However, their standpoint resonated strongly with the already corporate-minded Richard M. Daley. Despite Duncan’s view that culture, ensconced in both neighborhood and school in Chicago, played a tremendous role in determining the success of students, the Civic Committee’s 2003 report refuted that, using disaggregated data to make an argument that while poverty and low achievement are correlated, the correlation is essentially meaningless, claiming that teaching is the sole hinge on which educational success rests. Their report states:

Poverty and ethnicity are not educational straitjackets. No credible evidence exists to support the notion that children from poor families or from particular ethnic groups are, on average, less capable of learning than others. On the contrary, a large body of evidence confirms the capacity of all children regardless of poverty or ethnicity to learn in good schools staffed by excellent teachers. Children from poor families and from minority families can and do succeed when they receive the advantage of consistently good teaching. The most important factor of all in determining student performance is the quality of teaching that students receive. (Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago 2003).

Furthermore, the rest of the report argues strongly for choice on the part of parents; children, the report argues, should not be forced into neighborhood schools that do not perform run by teachers and administrators who do not perform. Choice would create competition and, thus, drive up the performance of the lower-achieving schools (Haney 2011). The solution presented in the report was an expansion of charter schools throughout Chicago, specifically the addition of 100 charter schools in the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods.
Just a year after the Civic Committee published their report and only two years after Duncan’s Every Child, Every School initiative took effect, Duncan and Daley announced the launch of Renaissance 2010, a plan to open 100 independently-owned and operated charter contract schools and CPS-run “small schools” in inner-city Chicago. Working on 5-year contracts that included shared metrics by which their success would be measured and the freedom to completely control classroom environments, curricula, and school year timing, these “Ren Schools” would focus on all of the goals Daley originally set out to achieve when he became mayor: high test scores, attendance rates, low student and teacher mobility rates, high parent engagement rates, high graduation rates and high college attendance (cited in Haney 2011: 184). These schools would also be free to hire non-union teachers and, of course, in order to literally make room for these charters, low-performing existing neighborhood schools would have to be shuttered—although they could be slated for technological overhaul and re-opening as a Ren School. True to its name, this was a plan of literal rebirth; schools would be closed and made into something completely new, then given free rein to be what the charter organization deemed it could be, whether or not it attended to the neighborhood in which it was located.

In the summer of 2004, CPS revealed the plans to close approximately 20 neighborhood schools on the south side and replace them with Renaissance 2010 schools. Of course, the community—primarily parents and representatives of civic organizations—were outraged as they saw it as a blatant attempt to attract middle class students into what was primarily a mixed-income area that had just started to emerge from a tumultuous period caused by the move away from the high-rise projects for which
Chicago was infamously known. The public response to community concern was interesting and divided. While, in the press, Daley pushed ahead with the promises of the future these new schools held, Duncan at least acknowledged the community, claiming that this would give a fresh start for communities that had been forever subject to a system badly broken. He called the plan, “a historic opportunity to rebuild the community from the ground up,” stating further, “There is always going to be fear. But we really have the luxury of time here. We can be thoughtful and deliberate, learn from our mistakes and make mid-course adjustments” (Dell’Angela 2004b) Later that same year, when CPS announced it would spend federal money to invest in 5 new Ren Schools, Duncan commented, “We want to make every neighborhood school a school choice. We have some good schools here, but we want them to be great schools. We need to invest in schools across the board (Dell’Angela 2004a) At the time of that statement, 35 magnet schools had already begun operating. The plan was moving swiftly and it would continue to gain speed.

By 2008, enough charter and small schools would have been opened that a new Renaissance 2010 goal of 150 schools opened was established. At the same time, the magnet schools developed by Duncan under Paul Vallas were re-purposed as specifically themed technology magnets whose purpose was to prepare students for entrance into engineering and science programs in more prestigious colleges. For all intents and purposes, Duncan had made good on making Renaissance 2010 happen, though the actual results of the schools in terms of achievement were mixed. There was no doubt the charter school model was effective in some places. Many of the charter schools showing success took hold in predominantly white, middle-class neighborhoods where educational
achievement was already higher in all schools—neighborhood, charter, and magnet—than in schools in the poorer, minority neighborhoods. In some of the transitioning and gentrifying neighborhoods, the results were complex. In 2008, a magnet school in Bucktown\textsuperscript{4} reported 44\% of students passed the state exams but of the 310 students who attended the year-round school, only 45\% came from the neighborhood (Dell’Angela 2004a). This was a typical finding for charters in transitioning neighborhoods while charters in poorer neighborhoods reported more violence and behavioral problems due to a mixing of cultures than educational achievement. This trend would prove to be perpetual and increasingly problematic but it would not be Duncan’s to solve.

While eventually the city would open 110 charter schools across the city, Arne Duncan was destined for a bigger officer. In 2008, President Barack Obama tapped Duncan to be the U.S. Secretary for Education, a post in which he remains today. And it was only after assuming that broader post that Duncan began specifically discussing full-service community schools—a platform for which he would become a champion in the upcoming years. In an interview with Gwen Ifill in 2010, Duncan clearly articulated the concept of the full-service community school:

If children are hungry, they need to be fed. It's hard to learn if your stomach is growling. We need to take that on. If students can't see the blackboard, need eyeglasses, we need to do that. If students need a social worker or counselor to work through the challenges they're facing at home in the community, we need to do that. And so I -- my vision is that schools need to be community centers. Schools need to be open 12, 13, 14 hours a day six, seven days a week, 12 months out of the year, with a whole host of activities, particularly in disadvantaged communities. And when schools truly become centers of the community, where you have extraordinary teachers, the best teachers, the best principals, great nonprofit partners coming in during the non-school hours to support and do enrichment activities, social services, then those students will beat the odds, will beat poverty, will beat violence in the community, will beat

\textsuperscript{4} This would be a pre-gentrified Bucktown.
sometimes dysfunctional families, and be productive citizens long term. They will go to college. (Ifill Interview).

This is the vision that Duncan continues to support and stump for in impoverished communities across the country today, although his legacy in CPS would be questioned. While he did leave a system that was running, poised for improvement, and with better curricula and training standards, the measurable results were just not there. In 2009 when the first math testing report cards came in, Chicago students continued to trail students in other major urban centers including Miami, Houston, Boston, San Diego, Atlanta, and Washington DC. One of the analysts from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think tank in Washington DC remarked, “Chicago is not the story of an education miracle. It is, however, the story of a large urban system that has made some gains and has made some promising structural changes” (Anderson 2009). That was exactly what folks in Chicago were seeing with their own eyes.

Though as unqualified as the next to serve as CEO of CPS (he holds just a marketing degree from Harvard), Arne Duncan did create both structural improvements and ignited a rhetoric around education in Chicago that, for the first time, was focused on advancements in the classroom. The efficacy of his reforms would be contested for years after his departure and the charter school movement, nationwide, has garnered seriously criticism for basic lack of performance. But, Duncan at least seemed to honestly care about students and their ability to succeed whether or not his reforms were the right vehicles for delivering that change. Unfortunately, the parade of CEOs to come for CPS would stunt or completely halt any kind progress, no matter how questionable, Duncan had made.
To the surprise and consternation of all in the central office, upon Duncan’s departure, Mayor Richard Daley appointed Ron Huberman, the former President of the Chicago Transit Authority (and previously Daley’s own Chief of Staff) as the next CEO of CPS. By passing over Dr. Barbara Eason Watkins, Duncan’s Chief of Staff and the only person in senior leadership at CPS who was an educator, Daley clearly retrained the focus of the position on management. In the press conference announcing this appointment, Daley said, “Ron has a strong history of service to our city and Chicagoans know him to be a devoted public servant who can accomplish any task he is given. As the next CEO of Chicago Public Schools, he will bring an understanding of the importance of good management to the system.” Of Eason Watkins he said, “I want to thank Barbara Eason-Watkins for all she's done and will continue to do on behalf of our students. As the educator on the team she is responsible for much of the progress we've seen. She has been outstanding in her lead position as the city's Chief Education Officer. She has both my gratitude and ongoing support” (CPS Press Release 2009). Daley emphasized the dynamic partnership that Huberman and Eason Watkins could be but it wouldn’t materialize. Just 15 months later, Eason Watkins resigned as Chief Education Officer, her post of 9 years, to become the Superintendent of the tiny Michigan City school district. Catalyst, a Chicago publication devoted to the schools, reported, “those left at CPS shuddered at the news” (Karp 2010). This announcement was four months prior to Daley’s own bombshell that he would not seek a 7th term as mayor. CPS continued into a free-fall when one year later, in Fall of 2011, Ron Huberman resigned as CEO of CPS.
Terry Mazany, president of the Chicago Community Trust was appointed the interim CEO and admittedly, “made it clear he's pretty much just holding down the fort until the next mayor figures out who he wants to hire” (Jarovsky 2011). This was in addition to Huberman’s lackluster legacy, of which the Chicago Reader commented tongue-in-cheek, “Huberman served less than two years at CPS, so it's hard to say he left a legacy. Well, he did fire a bunch of people—over 500 at the central office—on the grounds that he had to cut the budget. But then he and his top aides got raises, so when all was said and done he didn't really save the system much” (Ibid). After Huberman left, all eyes turned to mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel with anticipation to see how he might right the ship that had been sinking for so many years.

Despite his pledge to “reshape” CPS, Emanuel not only carried on the Daley tradition of corporatizing and privatizing CPS, he intensified it. First he stacked his School Board full of high-profile education and business heavyweights including Jesse Ruiz (resigning head of the Illinois Board of Education), Penny Pritzker (head of the Chicago Public Education fund and finance chairwoman of Obama’s 2008 campaign), and former Northwestern President Henry Bienen (Hood 2011). In April of 2011, Emanuel appointed Jean-Claude Brizard, the former Superintendent of the 32,000 student Rochester Public Schools (at the time, CPS claimed 400,000 students), as CEO of CPS. Brizard who had both teaching and administration on his resume, was highly touted as a reformer in the mold of Arne Duncan and a move away from the “managers” that both Paul Vallas and Ron Huberman had been. However, he had much more of a reputation as a union breaker and his appointment immediately stoked a steadily burning fire with the Chicago Teachers’ Union. Brizard was known for “making hard decisions” when it came
to teachers and openly praised and endorsed the continued expansion of CPS charter schools (who were free to hire non-union teachers) and the concept of linking teacher pay to student performance. Word from Rochester seemed to focus on his lack of collaboration with school staff and his fiery relationship with the teachers’ union there who, in February of 2011, just months before his appointment in Chicago, gave him a vote of no confidence (Ibid). Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis, was ready for a fight—and she got one.

CTU teachers entered into negotiations with CPS in November of 2011 and after six months of reductions in pay, rescinded raises, a call by the Mayor for longer school days, and legislation designed to curb teachers’ ability to strike, actually went on strike for a week in September of 2012; it was the first teachers’ strike in 25 years. It also created one of the more entertaining and lasting feuds between public officials—Karen Lewis and Rahm Emanuel continue to duke it out to this day. Jean-Claude Brizard, however, practically disappeared into thin air. Nearly silent throughout the contentious months of negotiations with CTU in early 2012, JC Brizard announced in October 2012 that he was resigning as CEO of CPS; the next day Emanuel announced his appointment of Barbara Byrd-Bennett as the next CEO of CPS. Though many suspected Rahm as the true puppetmaster behind the events that had unfolded during Brizard’s tenure, it was confirmed in an August 2013 interview published by the Thomas Fordham Institute. In it, Brizard sheds modest light on Emanuel’s power-hungry style commenting, “I appreciated his leadership, but his one challenge is to learn to let go and allow his managers to lead” (Parker 2013). He also cited the fact that the Mayor announced his own Education Cabinet on the same day as he announced Brizard’s position; this, in
effect, ensured that Rahm’s, and not Brizard’s, agenda would remain front and center. In a most-telling statement, Brizard shared:

    We severely underestimated the ability of the Chicago Teachers Union to lead a massive grassroots campaign against our administration. It’s a lesson for all of us in the reform community," he said. "The 'how' is at times more important than the 'what.' We need to get closer to the people we are serving and create the demand for change in our communities." (Ibid).

This was just a year ago. So far, this message has gone unheeded.

**The Community School Model in Brighton Park**

Chicago, as news sources and public officials tout often, is “a city of neighborhoods,” comprised of what are now recognized as 77 distinct neighborhoods stretching across the city-scape. Initially created by Robert Park and colleagues at the University of Chicago to analyze the settling patterns of the array of ethnic and racial groups, over time these neighborhoods came to mean something very real for residents and non-residents alike (Sampson 2010). Studying the “insider/outsider” dichotomy in Chicago becomes a study of community areas and neighborhoods and vice versa. Brighton Park, nestled in the central southwest side of Chicago, most recently has become a focal point of study and social service provision. One of the last central neighborhoods to resist gentrification, Brighton Park was settled first by primarily Polish and Lithuanian immigrants working in the stockyards. Within the past thirty years, the population rapidly shifted to what is now a predominantly Spanish-speaking, Mexican settlement; as the home to a diverse group of primarily blue-collar families, Brighton Park recently became a new focal point for social service deliverers seeking to “make a difference” for people who need a boost in financial, educational, and employment arenas.
Though an unassuming, mostly, residential community with street after street of single-story, single-family housing branching off of Archer, Brighton Park feels like a “hardworking” place. Cars on blocks in driveways and seasonal yard decorations convey a lived-in sensibility. For many, a move into Brighton Park is a move up from crowded apartments shared by multiple generations of families in dangerous parts of Chicago; people work hard to live there and make it a place that families can grow. For this reason, the four CPS schools in the neighborhood represent some of the greatest assets the community claims. Experiencing steady growth both in population and achievement over the past fifteen years, the two elementary, middle, and high schools reflect the diversity, assets, and needs of the community at large; while welcoming and friendly, the schools have become a symbol of the health of the community and twelve years ago, as the CSM was beginning to take hold in Chicago, Brighton Park was one of the first to adopt the model that resonated so strongly among the family-centric culture of its Mexican residents. For many, the idea of “school as family” not only made sense but reflected the values they held dear. Brighton Park and the CSM were a natural fit for each other and remain central to the mission and ensuing success of the schools.

**Forming and Reforming: Patterns in Chicago Public Schools and Brighton Park**

Though detailed, the organizational history of CPS and a glimpse into Brighton Park allows us to better understand the historical and political contexts of community schools in Chicago. Taken in broader strokes, several turning points in the evolution of CPS continue to resonate in CSM work today and, thus, can help explain some of the circumstances his Collaborative continues to encounter presently. Not only political and historical, many of the changes introduced throughout the evolution of CPS, as different
individuals attempted to “fix” a troubled institution, had cultural implications. This aspect makes them relevant and active forces in this work today.

As Chapters Four and Five will address, the move from a traditional student-focused method of accountability to a more business-oriented approach completely changed the expectations for schools and students. The tenures of Paul Vallas, Ron Huberman, and now Barbara Byrd-Bennett clearly represent a business approach in which in-classroom entities—curricula, staff, students, and learning—become accountable to a business-minded ethos of performance and efficiency. By endorsing the CSM, Arne Duncan created a shift back toward reforms in the content of education and not necessarily the business of education. This created a new tension, though. The more business-oriented approach to defining student and school success resonated more clearly with the corporate community, including corporate philanthropy, who had the resources and desire to support local education. We continue to see this dichotomy of defining neighborhood and school success continue in CSM implementation work under way today.

This history also highlights significant organizational confusion for CPS that made partnerships between business and agencies seemingly advantageous. Since 1972, there has been little stability in leadership and vision for schools in Chicago. As each successive administration took over, sometimes hostilely, the number of “course corrections” on day-to-day business in schools compounded. Loose ends remained loose. Programs changed or disappeared without much warning. Expectations for students, teachers, and principals changed often. This created a system that was centralized but disorganized and already out of agreement on basic operating philosophy (business vs.
education) by the time Arne Duncan introduced the CSM. Though he found funding for the initiative in the early years, his own cycling out of CPS leadership created another lack of stability for this city-wide initiative that he introduced on already organizationally tenuous ground. This context left the development and eventual sustainability of the CSM in Chicago almost completely up to the original lead partner agencies. For them, this context was both a blessing and a curse: while they enjoyed freedom to develop the partnerships and programs as they saw fit without intervention from CPS, they also became completely responsible and accountable to “root” the model properly. This eventually made partnerships with private funders especially attractive. While they shored up plans for sustainability, they also inadvertently created partnerships between entities that approached the CSM differently. This would only intensify the friction for partners in terms of goals and success.

Finally, this political/historical analysis demonstrates what the city-wide approach to public education in Chicago. This seems obvious but for a system of schools embedded in very different neighborhoods throughout Chicago, CPS demonstrates very little attention to the reality of local forces on schools. Education policy, whether reform or operating, tends to completely ignore the “neighborhood factor” or any of the demographic factors that could contribute to academic performance and success however these outcomes are defined. Furthermore, the promotion of the Charter School movement and more widely used “creaming” technique of selective enrollment only seem to create more diversity in the “types” and quality of education a child in Chicago may receive. This presents a particularly inhospitable organizational climate for a model like the CSM whose ultimate goal is one of transforming unfavorable community
conditions into conditions more favorable for education in neighborhood schools. While the CSM aims to directly address neighborhood inequalities, the CPS trajectory of privatization and movement away from neighborhood schools ignores or, some say, exacerbates neighborhood inequalities. This not only provides a difficult political climate for the CSM but a school landscape that allows CSM work the time it requires to start to show results.

These institutional factors make the CSM implementation in Chicago Public Schools distinct from that of other cities. While other major cities have undertaken this work, few can claim the size, diversity of neighborhoods, and diversity of education partners at the district level that Chicago does. Add in to that a legacy of education policy makers who are not educators and an aggressive teachers’ union and the landscape of education in Chicago rises as one of the thorniest environments for wide scale educational improvement or reform. And in this context, the Collaborative works to create changes that will last and benefit not just the schools but the neighborhood as well. If navigating CPS is an uphill battle, questions of success and defeat emerge and it is for that reason that this thorny institutional ground proves an apt place in which to study the conflicts and tensions that arise around CSM implementation. People desperately want to create change in the schools and that will not come without a fight.
CHAPTER THREE

STUDYING A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

Ethnography: A Mixed Methods Approach

When I accepted a full-time position at the Funder in February 2011, I had already proposed and begun research on a different project. But the course of the next four months would eventually convince me that my focus should be on this collaborative work, at the time in its earliest stages of inception. First, the work was *interesting*. In those earliest days of the collaborative, the meetings that spanned whole work days were nothing but sitting around a large table in the conference room with a core team from Community Building and hammering out the details of what we thought community meant for this organization, what it should be, and how we would “make it.” The debates would sometimes last hours, would be heated, and very rarely had much resolution. I could see that *something* sociologically interesting was happening and that analytical focus and structure could reveal more about what that was; then and now, I remain convinced that something interesting is happening in those conference rooms over Potbelly’s lunches. I often thought of Dorothy Smith’s reflection:

Finding out how people are putting our world together daily in the local places of our everyday Lives and yet somehow constructing a dynamic complex of relations that coordinates our doings translocally means that the project of inquiry is open-minded. It must be always subject to revision, as attention to actualities imposes corrections, takes us by surprise, forces rethinking and works toward some better statement of what we have found. (2005: 3)
Second, the practicality of the situation became undeniable. Not only was I already there at least forty hours a week, but my role as Measurement Manager gave me a justifiable reason to be near the center of the work. More importantly, having been a Fellow at the Funder previously, the entire Community Building department knew me already, trusted me, and saw me as an “academic” among the sea of “community organizers” and “grant makers.” When I asked permission to conduct this research at the organization, I was granted *carte blanche* permission “for as long as I needed it,” as the department Head said at the time. When I asked her to clarify the scope of permission, she said, “Everything…as long as you’re not tapping the phones [laugh]…all of this should be documented. We’re doing good work here.” Third, as Measurement Manager, I also had the amount and types of access I would need to fully consider this cultural work of meaning negotiation across institutions and sectors of work. Martin at the Lead Partner knew and liked me. The same was true for Katherine at the Federation. Both proved to be valuable resources in casting light into the dark corners and unlit paths of the Community School world in Chicago. So, perhaps my greatest insight in this project was recognizing in 2011 that I was in the right place at an interesting time.

Similarly, because of the circumstances, the method made itself evident as well. My method most closely resembles what Dorothy Smith calls an institutional ethnography (2005). This approach aims to explore the experience of actors in a given social space from their perspective. She says “the emphasis is always on discovery rather than the testing of hypothesis…” (1) and this was the spirit with which I approached this exploratory project. While already positioned “inside” the organizations comprising the collaborative, I could see something interesting was happening but I did not have a
specific theory as to what it was. Given my position, ethnography was possible and I saw it as an opportunity to understand what I thought was largely cultural, meaning-related work. This particular approach emphasizes that the social is “happening,” even within institutions that embody organized systems of power that often appear only to “act upon” those within (67). With an emphasis on discourse and shared texts, institutional ethnography takes into account the deep knowledge of the participant observer gained through work. Smith writes, “Participation engages the ethnographer in the institution complex, and if the ethnographer is also an activist, dimensions of the institutional process come into view to which the ethnographer is alerted by his or her activism (150).” Though I did not consider my participation at the Funder to be activism, it did involve interaction around a topic (community) that all participants considered personally important and undertaken with the intent to create change in a neighborhood.

My methods of data collection were common for ethnography. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to hear participants make sense of their experience and express their understandings of these concepts under contest in their work. I could also add the valuable participant observation component to the study and capture the dynamics and “flow” of the development of the Collaborative and CSM implementation efforts. Interaction is central to any meaning work; as a participant observer fully integrated into the CB team and its work, I was able to see the negotiation of meaning in interaction in a particular site. The result was a fairly detailed, rich batch of data.

As I began to realize the important of historical context, both to understand why people in Chicago continue to find the CSM compelling and why those at the Funder find this form of partnership attractive, I also conducted basic content analysis of public media
and accessible organizational documents. So much of the story involved the idea of organizational “shift” or “drift,” both on the part of the city of Chicago and the Funder, and these methods allowed me to establish and support the evidence of “transition” that continually appeared throughout the participant observation and interview data.

As many ethnographies do, this study evolved throughout its course. Though my point of access was my seat as the Measurement Manager at the Funder, I knew that was not the center of the “universe” for this kind of work in this city but that was the extent of my knowledge at the time. I approached this research in the same way I approached my role as a fairly new employee coming to know life at the Funder; I pieced together tidbits of information I gathered throughout my workday from different sources and merged those into what I observed happening around me in the moment. Katherine from the Federation and Martin from the Leader Partner were excellent resources in helping connect me to several CSM veterans holding key positions in CSM implementation throughout in Chicago. The first ten months (February 2011-December 2011) of my total time in the field, capped at just over two years, felt more exploratory than the rest and one of the key findings in that exploratory phase was just how far from the center of the CSM “universe” this Funder’s Collaborative actually was. The more I talked to knowledgeable, experienced Community School people, the more I realized that the work of the Collaborative was just one example of many very local CSM efforts happening throughout the city. This surprised me but also led me to reconsider the role of CPS in this study.

Originally, my understanding of this Collaborative was as a new venture that would take its place in a well-coordinated landscape of Community School efforts led by
CPS’ Office of Community School Initiatives. Instead, what I came to find was a completely decentralized landscape of disparate, uncoordinated efforts to continue CSM implementation that had begun in 2002 under Arne Duncan’s administration but was now only nominally supported by this Office of Community School Initiatives. This meant that studying the Funder’s Collaborative would involve much less “city as context” work; the Collaborative work in Brighton Park was almost entirely “on its own.” Additionally, through interviews, I discovered that CPS’ Office of Community School Initiatives was much less involved in implementation than the rhetoric around the office leads one to believe. In fact, that office, staffed by two people, serves primarily as the fiscal and administrative office for the distribution of 21st Century Funds awarded to Duncan and CPS in 2002. But since Duncan’s departure to Washington D.C., the office has floundered and many I interviewed considered more a nuisance than anything else. CPS plays an administrative role for some providers but in terms of meaning-making through interaction, I found many considered it a non-player.

This finding directly influenced the trajectory of the project in a couple ways. First, it drew attention to the role that organizational framing plays in Collaborative. To this day, people at the Funder believe, as I had, that the Funder’s Collaborative is much more centrally known and respected in Chicago than it might actually be. Similarly, without knowing better, many who don’t interact with the Office of Community School Initiatives consider it a “leader” in the work. This was an early lesson in learning to differentiate rhetoric from action and only underscored the value of using both participant observation and interviews in tandem to gain the fullest story possible. Additionally, particularly the findings regarding CPS and its lack of centrality in the day-to-day
implementation work shifted focus of the work much more “locally” to the intersection between the Funder, the Lead Partner, and Brighton Park. Had CPS been a driving and equal partner, the analysis would be organization-focused in a much broader way. Two large, corporate entities interact in much different ways than the partnership on which this study eventually came to focus. Though a different analysis today because of the methodology, use of ethnographic methods uncovered the real opportunity present in this situation; following the story as it really unfolded in the day-to-day led me to focus on the negotiations surrounding the core partnership of these two organizations, their cultures, and that of the neighborhood they both aim to serve.

**Data Boundaries and Limitations**

Though immensely beneficial given the circumstances, the choice to use ethnographic methods does pose challenges and creates concerns for the research and the researcher. While I have substantially reflected on the latter and will directly discuss the political and ethical implications of this method in light of my employment later in this chapter, approaching this research as an ethnography does bound this research and analysis in particular ways. I knew the data would have limits and speak specifically to the dynamics of the group presented here. They are a sum of personalities; their interactions and the work determined by them largely depends on those personalities and so the data represents only them. Similarly, in choosing to allow the story and players to emerge from the group of contacts I acquired personally, this sample represents primarily the work specific to Brighton Park. Though I interviewed several CSM practitioners from four other schools to better understand the context in Brighton Park, and their data is presented here, all of the schools serve predominantly Latino neighborhoods on the
southwest and west sides of the city. From anecdotal data, I found that the way life “works” in Latino neighborhoods differs greatly from other low-income neighborhoods in Chicago, particularly the African American neighborhoods that span the central, south, and southeast sides of the city. While the findings in this research beg for comparison on a neighborhood level, especially including a race-based analysis, this data cannot speak to that. Similarly, because this was a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling, I had no control over the sample in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, or age. These factors do not appear to contribute actively in this analysis. Nonetheless, the data cannot speak to them. I cannot claim that the sample represents the community school world in Chicago in demographic makeup. This sample does represent the particular sectors of this work in these specific neighborhoods in Chicago and so I know firsthand that the data and the story it tells is genuine and real.

The flexibility of the design and the degree to which it evolved over the course of the project is another method-related concern. As soon as I realized that the more organic, grounded theory approach better suited this project than a more controlled design, I allowed the context and people in this world to show me this story. Because of that, I consider this research completely exploratory. I continue to learn about the machinations of the CSM, the intended and unintended effects it has on education and neighborhood in Brighton Park. For this reason, though, I cannot make broader about the grand scheme of community schools or education across the entire city. Just based on the differences I saw between the few schools I observed, it makes sense to assume vast differences and idiosyncrasies across neighborhoods, the schools within, and how those little educational microcosms work.
Possibly the one disappointing, unintended limitation of this data is as a study or illumination of a “model” for CSM implementation. Because I entered this research assuming that CSM efforts in Chicago were organized at the district level, I expected that this exploration might reveal some kind of “typical way” that implementation efforts occur; I expected negotiations to be guided by a certain amount of shared format or structure. However, without central institutional governance, standardization does not exist in Chicago CSM work. While individual efforts may resemble each other, those resemblances are basic and not guaranteed. This makes the world this data represents even smaller than I originally imagined. As my participants showed and told me, there is no standard “way” to implement the CSM and each effort, directed by different pairings of organizations in different neighborhoods, takes on the flavor of the personalities and place involved. On its own merit, this is an important finding. Few people seem to realize just how fragmented these efforts are. For research, this implies that each collaborative should be approached as a distinct social entity, operating in its own way. At the same time, those research findings cannot speak to anything other than the reality of that one collaborative. This is the case in this study. Though a limit of the data, I do consider this a concern about the veracity of the story it tells us. Even though it represents one effort at CSM implementation, the detail it provides can serve as part of the body of knowledge we have about how these efforts work in real life, in real neighborhoods, in Chicago.
Data Collection Methods and Sampling

Semi-Structured Interviews: Sample and Recruitment

In total, I interviewed 45 people for a total of 54 interviews; the 8 people interviewed twice turned out to be “hubs” of information that opened up questions or facets of research that required more time for follow up. These conversations ran roughly an hour in length and all were recorded on a digital recorder that I then transcribed for coding and analysis. I began by asking how each individual had come to the position they currently filled in the community school world. Generally, this discussion would give me key personal details: educational and professional backgrounds, personal interests, involvement and experience in CSM work, and role within their organization of employment. From there, I would ask them to walk me through a day in the position they currently hold; this part of the interview might be peppered with questions for clarification from me, both technical and more meaning-related.

Though mostly unstructured, this line of CSM questioning seem to uncover a significant amount of information regarding: 1) their interest and investment in community schools; 2) what value or component retained their interest and investment over time; 3) how community schools work in neighborhoods; and ultimately 4) the sense in which they used the word “community.” I closed the interview with a third broad question about challenges and rewards they got from their work. It was usually this question that revealed “the good dirt” about the rubs between the ideal around education in neighborhoods and what it meant and the implementation of a practical educational model. I saved this question for the end because it was the most conceptually complex and really useful answers relied on a considerable amount of trust on the part of the
respondent. If I had not gained that trust at that point, getting it seemed unlikely. As we were wrapping up, I always asked if they knew of anyone who might also be interested in having a similar conversation with me about this topic. This wasn’t particularly successful in the number referred but those who were referred to me ended up being excellent additions to the sample. This also served to validate my own observations of what the “saturation point” was for the field. As the same names began recur in these recommendations, I knew I had found a reasonable limit.

The community school world encompasses several “sectors” of work and this sample represents people from as many of the sectors of community school work as I could find and to which I got access. The distribution falls categorically in this way: 13 funders, 12 agency/direct service providers, 10 parents, 5 consultants in community school work, 3 CPS employees in community school work, and 3 Federation for Community Schools employees. When laid out categorically, it’s a small but accurate representation of the field in broad strokes; in no way is this sample comprehensive. It must be understood as a convenience sample that developed as I followed trails of inquiry throughout the community school landscape.

The best way to understand my method for recruiting interviewees is to think of creating “inroads.” Working at the Funder gave me a “bird’s eye view” of CSM work in Chicago. I knew the broad strokes of the work and players. What I required for this analysis were “inroads” that would lead me into the areas of work typically unseen by funders: direct service programming, agency life beyond meetings, schools. My position did not afford me direct access to people who lived and worked in the community

---
1 Funders in this sense should be understood as individuals working for organizations who provide financial resources to community schools.
particularly service providers, school staff, and parents. Based on what I knew as the Measurement Manager, I began at the places I thought interesting, central, and potentially revelatory, interviewing friends and colleagues I already knew who could then steer me towards other contacts who could also be helpful. In this way, I wove my way “down” into the finer grains of the fabric of communities and schools.

Because this approach relied almost solely on a network of contacts, some places and people, both organizationally and geographically, were unreachable. Any current direct contacts in the Mayor’s office were tough to find. Emails to contacts of contacts went unreturned. In May 2013, the Funder hired a new Director of Education who personally knew several of Rahm Emanuel’s “right hand staff,” having worked with them at CPS during Arne Duncan’s tenure. She provided useful, deep insider information regarding CPS which I typically used as contextual support for my collected data. Similarly, requests for meetings with teachers and principals usually went unreturned. In some cases, I was told their schedules were too busy. Coincidentally, I was asking for meetings in the thick of the 2012 CTU strike and the school closure turmoil. While time was tight and tense for school personnel, multiple service providers shared that many CPS employees simply did not want to take any chance in “stepping out of line.” While direct contact was not to be had, I did talk with many Resource Coordinators who work in schools and who could at least give me the context I needed to understand basic school culture details.

Access to the neighborhood also proved challenging. My access to neighborhood residents solely depended on my contacts and their networks that, in this case, tended to flow into only several neighborhoods, primarily Latino, on the West and Southwest sides
of Chicago. Some trails of inquiry proved much more fruitful than others and this also
determined, in the end, who I talked to and how deep those conversations went. For
example, there are a handful of agencies in Chicago who solely focus on implementing
the community school model in public schools. I had contacts in eight of those agencies,
all of whom I contacted for interviews. Five agreed to an interview but two of them also
directed me further to contacts of their own which proved to be very informative.
Because of this, I know much more about the work of these two agencies than I do about
the others. One of the five interviews went so poorly that I did not pursue any further
connections to their work. Furthermore, though I noted characteristics like race, ethnicity,
and age to name a few, those characteristics played no role in determining my sample.
The goal was to allow the landscape of community school work to unfold inductively and
then look more closely. This sampling method proved conducive for that process.

Just as my organizational research frame evolved, my conceptual frame also
evolved over time. The original design for this project focused mostly on the idea of
“community” and my original interview structure reflected that. I wanted to know what
people thought community meant, how those ideas had developed, and how their
understanding of that idea shaped their work in community schools. In a way, I expected
community schools to be the context—the receptacle—for a study about community.
Early in my data collection, I realized a much more reflexive relationship between
community schools and the concept of community; they informed each other. My initial
script included many questions like, “How would you define community?”; “what is
community to you?”; “How do you see community in your everyday life?” These, in
short, proved unsuccessful. The first two interviewees struggled significantly to respond
thus convincing me to find a better way to seek these answers. We spent a considerable amount of time breaking down semantics in those first interviews. What did succeed was framing the conversation in terms of community schools. Talking about the CSM led interviewees to answer these conceptual questions of community. The key seemed to be allowing them to come around to discussing community in their own way. Thus I often put the script down completely and instead approached the interviews as directed conversations in which I cast myself as the “curious learner”.

I would introduce the conversation as one in which I was hoping to learn more about their experience in the world of community schools. I learned quickly that this “softer” approach was advantageous in a couple ways. It positioned the “conversant” as the expert, as it was their own experience we were discussing, and put them at such ease that most let go of any pretense and very freely discussed their experience. In doing so, they identified for me the key topics and themes that should ribbon throughout all of the interviews. It also “warmed them up” to be steered toward more pointed questioning about community. Given the pool of people I targeted for interviews, inevitably each mentioned community at some point and when they did I used that context to springboard into more probing or pointed questions about what they meant when they said “community.” If bounded in a concrete context—their experience in community schools—I could guide a much more productive structured conversation about the concept of community itself. If an interviewee did not cover the concept of community thoroughly enough, I would probe further, asking how their work fit into the neighborhood. This would typically draw out some of that concept; in rare cases, it
seemed they wanted to stay away from it, were stumped by concept of community, or it just had no interest for them. In those cases, that response became data unto itself.

In the evolution of the content of the interviews, I also stumbled upon and adopted a data-related idiosyncrasy regarding the use of my script that created a new category of data. I had been interviewing a colleague of mine and as the interview was beginning and he was signing the waiver of consent, I set my printed set of “themes” on the table in front of me just as a reminder for me. Even though I had introduced this as a discussion and it had flowed as such for about an hour, at a point in the conversation that was getting really interesting, under my breath I said something to myself like, “Okay, this is getting good, I don’t need this anymore...” and moved the paper away from me. My colleague responded immediately “well, since you’re putting that away, now I can be really honest.” I was stunned as he proceeded to give me “the good dirt” even though the digital recorder had been sitting in between us and obviously on the whole time. It was as if that paper was a signifier of formality and once I had set it aside, he felt “free” to tell me how things really were. I tested my theory about this on the next few interviews and found this to extend beyond just that one case and so I used my script as a prop for the rest of my interviews. It allowed me to see immediately how interviewees separated out in their own minds the difference between what information—topics, details, names—were “acceptable” to reveal and what had to be revealed more covertly once we were “off-book.” This behavior was patterned in that I got “more covert” knowledge from a particular group of respondents more than others. I discuss the analytical relevance of this more fully in Chapters Five and Six. Let me re-iterate that all interviews were
recorded on a digital recorder in full and participants fully acknowledged that was the case.

**Participant Observation**

I conducted my interviews over the course of about 18 months beginning in January 2012. While I count a finite number of interviews in a basic time frame, that count seems arbitrary due to an almost perpetual participant observation effort that continued until June of 2014. Upon IRB approval in October 2011, I began formally watching and listening. At the time I was directly involved in our funding work in Education which is solely focused on community schools throughout a six-county region in the Chicagoland area which gave me access to meetings and events that were technically public but privileged. At work, I would take notes at department meetings relevant to community schools and “stop over” and chat with our education lead or other interested staff any chance I got. I recorded how our marketing and public relations materials were developed in relation to community schools. More so than anything else, I just witnessed how community school work was framed and by whom and how decisions stemming from that were implemented or treated.

When I was with coworkers at external meetings, I would observe without taking notes unless I knew the people there and had established my relationship as a researcher as well as a representative of my funder. In all of our agency partners, I was enthusiastically welcomed to take notes, ask questions, and participate in conversations to the fullest extent. The only real limitations defined were those in the city institutions. If, because of my employment, I attended a public event, I felt free to take note of the ongoings. If I was in a higher-level, “closed door” meeting, to act as a researcher there
would have been a serious breach of confidentiality and thus, I excluded the content of those meetings from any field notes or memos. That said, I was a participant in those meetings, as an employee of an organization working within the realm of community schools in Chicago. I cannot “unknow” things I know. But I did not directly quote anyone from those meetings or reveal information privileged to those confidential conversations. By and large, those were extremely rare occasions; most of my participant observation activities from the past two years was approved, sanctioned, and almost incredibly encouraged. The most basic finding of this research is that community school people, for the most part, want to be studied.

Descriptive History

Because Chicago holds a rich history of Community School work, understanding the broad historical context of CPS and its relationships to neighborhoods was central to understanding the motivations for CSM practitioners to continue to “swim upstream” today. For this context, I relied primarily on online archives of newspapers and the CPS website to follow how a publicly resonant story—like the evolution of CPS—unfolded in real time. I consulted several news sources liberally to get a sense of each major move in CPS history, especially with regard to education reform, administration changes, and political tension with the Chicago Teacher’s Union, usually cross-referencing all of the relevant stories produced by these news outlets to discern to the greatest degree all of the details involved.

The amount of publicly, readily available sources proved to a luxury in that the community school model was part of a publicly contested set of reforms in a city-run office plagued by politics; this story appeared in at least one newspaper or news source
daily for two years. So piecing together a working history particular to community
schools was the detailed albeit simple work of re-assembling the puzzle pieces of
information already there. Both major newspapers in Chicago, the *Chicago Tribune* and
the *Chicago Sun-Times*, maintain easily accessible electronic archives as do the three
major television outlets in the city. I consulted these sources liberally for the day-to-day
accounts of the progression of education reforms in the city. Because this was a highly
contested debate often waged in the public arena, CPS and other city government
agencies responded in print in the form of press-releases and special statements, most of
which are archived on CPS’ own website. Often, I was able to access videos of speeches
or public comments made by many of the major “players” in CPS and the Mayor’s office.
In an organizational narrative in which tone and culture plays such a foundational role in
the story, the amount of visual data available for consideration was incredible.

Furthermore, independent sources focused on specific pieces of the debate—the
teachers union, the parents, and neighborhood interests—also popped up and provided
another angle from which to consider any one event. *Catalyst*, an e-magazine
specifically devoted to education reform in Chicago, appeared in the early 2000s and
provides a huge archive of stories and reponses, including letters to the editor, for the
years in which the community school model and charter schools were being adopted *en
masse*. This source, a significant supporter of the community school model (and most
progressive educational reforms) produced many stories extolling the virtues of this
model which helped me understand the model better from the standpoint of educators and
those involved in the neighborhood schools. Additionally, *The Chicago Reader* ran a
series of “special sections” specifically on Chicago Public Schools that focused on many
of the important turn-key events throughout Richard M. Daley’s mayoral administration. This column provided not only a value op-ed angle in which the commentary about schools was deeply couched in the wider political context of the times but also provided exhaustive history accounts of the issues in schools, particularly racism and segregation, throughout the life of CPS as an institution. Similarly, I also had a wealth of printed materials from different sources across the city discussing the promotion, support, or programming around community schools in Chicago. Almost all sectors of community school work in Chicago—funders, direct service providers, CPS, and the Mayor’s Office—produce a substantial amount of written communication regarding every stage of development and implementation. Taken together, these pieces evidence the differences in role and approach to this work in communities. By including these in my analysis, I was able to more fully fill out the picture of meaning and use for the community school model.

Data Analysis: Coding and Organizing

A mixed-methods ethnography renders a significant amount of data. Because so much data became available all at once and in a steady stream for the better part of two years, I consciously made some data management decisions that color this analysis. Had I made other choices about data collection, this project could look different. I transcribed and code interviews as they came in, allowing me to situate them in the breadth of observational data also coming in. Employing a grounded theory approach, I allowed the contextual information gained through participant observation to inform the basic codes that would serve to categorize the data into sensible themes. Broadly, I used three working themes to inform what I would specifically focus on in my observation and
interviews: negotiations around the support and implementation of community school work, strategies adopted by actors to get the work done, and the interaction of organizational boundaries and cultures in the midst of these other interactions. These themes emerged early and appeared frequently throughout most of my data and so I applied them to the analysis of all data, not just the interviews. When I was able, I used these initial themes to dig deeper and establish secondary codes that further focused the investigation and added depth and clarity to the analysis. Using Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis tool, I coded the interview transcripts according to these codes. Additionally, I applied these codes to the series of memos and observation log I had kept throughout my participant observation period. I used both “sets” of codes to cross-cut the data in several ways, thus providing a thorough, multi-dimensional analysis of a complex and broad set of ethnographic data.

This describes my process that was fairly straightforward. What was not straightforward was the amount of data I had after just over two years in the field. Annette Laureau described her own similar situation about her field notes as “a hodgepodge of observations made on the basis of shifting priorities” (1996:222) and that’s what mine were. I originally worried that I would not have enough data. In the end, I had so much data, particularly observational data, but little sense of a grand narrative or obvious trail of inquiry. Over time my original research questions, already loose, became fuzzier. Making sense of the expansive, fragmented data I had and setting it back into theoretical frameworks required considerable work that often felt like “starting over.” It took considerable time to recognize the meeting of the story I wanted to tell and the stories that appeared in my data. I also had to make choices about which
story in the data on which to focus for this analysis. I could have gone in several
different directions based on the data I collected. Though in some ways a luxury, this
was also a lesson in the need to balance theory and experiential data as a regular practice.
In the end, the process of data analysis forced me to do what I should have done in data
collection: narrow my interests. (Laureau also notes this step in her own experience.)
Even with an “exploratory” intent, more focused data (or even a more intentional process
of beginning to “hone in” on a focus) could have aided data analysis. As it was, I
struggled to theoretically make sense of the data and that struggle is evident here to some
degree.

“Carte Blanche Permission”: Ethical, Political, and Personal Implications of
Blending In

As discussed, the ethnographic approach presents both benefits and concerns to
the kind of data it will render—rich in detail but limited in scope, apt for capturing
meaning in interaction but limited by its specificity, descriptive but biased. Though
prepared for the limitations of the data, I was less prepared for the challenges this method
would present as a researcher, deeply embedded in the context and able to blend in
seamlessly. Where some of the usual points of challenge for a researcher may typically
appear—gaining access, building trust, establishing boundaries—and create a kind of
regulation of the research, I had only free and open access and “carte blanche
permission.” Without a doubt, this allowed for witness of very valuable moments and
interactions central to this research. On the other hand, it also created a series of
challenges with which I continually wrestled, especially as my data collection period
ticked into the second year and participants grew increasingly forgetful of our office, our
team meetings, and department space as places in which sanctioned research was still taking place. As much as participants’ honesty and natural patterns of interactions were research opportunities, I found myself worrying about my own unintentional exploitation of them and the opportunity. What surprised me was the degree to which “complete access” became a burden; I, as the researcher, found myself establishing and policing the boundaries for what constituted ethical, political, and personal. Also surprising, I was the person most concerned about these boundaries.

First, I wrestled with the CB department head that not only gave such broad permission but did so with such enthusiasm. From her perspective, research on the process could only be beneficial. Thus, I spent a significant amount of time “shaping” some set of appropriate boundaries. I discussed with her my intention to “bound” my data collection to conversations specifically regarding the Collaborative and not the rest of Community Building work. I would not directly quote conversations in meetings unless I asked permission from the individual after the meeting. I would not take field notes during meetings, instead writing memos to myself after the meeting finished. Since she saw no need for any boundaries, she agreed to these but as time went on, policing them myself became a challenge. Some were not practical, some limited too much, and some annoyed the staff. Eventually “working boundaries” emerged for me; the more I observed, the more I was able to see what conversations really pertained to the research and which could be parceled out but I was the sole determiner of those. These boundaries were my own choices and I believe they are justifiable. But because they were my choices, they must be considered as points of bias.
These “landscape boundaries” posed fewer problems than a more subtle, more difficult ethical boundary. As the period of participant passed the year- and two-year marks, Funder staff appeared to increasingly “forget” the fact of my research. To others from partners involved in the Collaborative, I remained an outsider to their organizational context and so, even though we did not discuss this research, a “business casual” understanding of organizational partnerships dictated their behavior. Though our teams worked closely across organizational lines, we were never as casual as “friends.” This was different for Funder staff who knew and worked with me every day. The CB team was very casual with each other to the point that we would often be asked to “tone it down.” I was embedded not just professionally as a team member but as this kind of team member; there was an implicit sense of trust and comradery among team members. I realized this could be problematic when the same team members, in interviews, showed uneasiness about formality. They were the same ones who often balked at being recorded or who visibly relaxed when I set the script down. Thus, I worried that their candid moments might reveal behavior or discussions that, in a more structured research setting, they might withhold.

This was a very tricky line to navigate. If something “good” was happening, I went with the culture of the team and took to announcing my presence as a researcher who was listening. This usually happened while around our desks in the “pods,” at which point I would say, “For research purposes, can you tell me what you mean by that?” Almost always, they would. Though sloppy, I knew the method was ethically sound as a couple times, an individual who said yes in the moment circled back to me later and asked me not to use that or not to quote them to which I gladly agreed. In this sense, my
team and I negotiated how their unstructured time and the content of those informal conversations would be used. Similarly, sometimes I would just need specific kinds of information I could not glean from the context and I would go to a specific team member and ask them to weigh in, specifically mentioning up front that this was for research. While this became my practice, I did continually question whether or not it was necessary. Like the landscape boundaries, this occasionally felt like over-correction on my part but I did not feel comfortable risk[ing the alternative.

Though my ethics concerns lie mostly around the participants at the Funder, where relational lines could be so easily blurred and I could wear researcher and Measurement Manager hats simultaneously, there were political concerns that extended beyond Funder staff. The biggest ethical and political dilemma I faced in observing the partnership between the Lead Agency and the Funder was my position, as part of the grant-making team, at the Funder. It was part of my job responsibilities to determine which agencies would get funded and at what levels. Martin and the Lead Partner agency were not outside of that funding consideration; I was on the team that chose that agency for general funding and for the specific Collaboration money. Thus, in no way could my research appear connected to that mechanism; Martin and agency staff could not feel coerced to participate because of their funding nor feel pressure to participate in fear that lack of participation could affect future funding. I made sure to settle this issue well before proposing the study and Martin was in full understanding from the very beginning.

What I did not anticipate, however, was the pressure I brought as part of the evaluation team. Non-profits typically practice a kind of “impact inflation” in reporting results to their funders; no funded non-profit wants to be completely honest about their
results for fear of losing funding so they typically inflate report numbers or white-wash evaluation narratives to “give the funder what they want.” Martin can be incredibly straightforward but it took time for him to buy-in to the idea that his honesty would not backfire on him in some way. It was only after two years of knowing and working with him that he began to show frustration with the Funder or discuss challenges without some hesitation. Though we eventually reached a level of trust that he could let go, others who saw affiliation with the Funder as advantageous never “let go.” I took to being very clear about the nature of this research, explaining that it was personal, for my PhD in Sociology, and not supported or even necessarily encouraged by the Funder in any way. For this reason, working through my contacts to get interviews worked better than me reaching out to people. My contacts would frame the project as a personal endeavor and would not include any official Funder connection which helped in moving past any inkling that I was a grant-maker for the largest distributor of private dollars in the State.

So far, this discussion has outlined in different terms what are basically sources of bias that my status as employee and researcher introduced to this data gathering method. I saved the biggest challenges for this method, the personal challenges, for last. In hindsight, they appear biggest because I was least prepared for how centrally they would impact the data collection and analysis. If my ability to blend in seamlessly represents the opportunity present on one hand, these challenges represent the cost of that degree of “invisibility” as a researcher. There were definite costs. First and foremost, my professional activity colors everything about the data collected; I was not just an observer but also a participant in the exact activity under observation. Though aware of this conflict and committed to vigilance in choosing when to “research” and when to
“participate,” in some regards, there is no way to separate out one from the other. I cannot remove myself from the data. My experience as an employee and member of this team adds to the data just as any other team member’s does. Nevertheless, as the storyteller of that story, I also have an obligation to strive for a balanced, neutral presentation of data. I have found certain strategies helpful in neutralizing this bias to some degree. I discovered early a kind of “double-blind” identifier system in transcribing that allowed me to code interviews as though two individuals were conversing, rather than an interviewer asking questions and the interviewee responding. Because there was time in between my transcription and analysis, this technique allowed me to distance myself from my own commentary in the interviews and approach it from an analytical standpoint. It was not failsafe but it helped. To check myself in participant observation, I would often ask other team members to comment on a particular situation or meeting just to enter other opinions into the mix regarding what I had observed. I tried to minimize the points at which I provided the sole commentary or input on interactional situations.

Though this remains a concern, it is a small concern compared to that regarding my analytical voice and power. This particular challenge surprised me the most. As I sat down to analyze the data and make sense of it, a task that I assumed my closeness to the data would only aid, I found the same difficulties and concerns regarding my presence in the data, only magnified. It was difficult to “see” the story analytically, especially because the story I hoped to tell was one of meaning-making. Attempting to see and make sense of symbolic and meaning-focused in which I participated posed real problems. I spent a long time fine tuning balance between observation and reflection. This was further complicated by my investment in the work. My team was, in many
ways, solely “on the hook” for making the Collaborative project work. I cared about it and spent months’ worth of overtime on it which added an element of ownership and investment in the data about it. Though committed to capturing the real story, that kind of proximity to the topic changes what seems “real.” Early drafts of this work, written in the fall and winter of 2013, came back to me with commentary about “snarkiness” and tone issue regarding leadership at the Funder. My initial attempts at analysis were too emotional and not analytical enough. My schedule also contributed to this problem. Typically, I would work 8-10 hours each day and then go home and try to write or work on this for 3-4 more hours. I was engulfed in the Funder. I was just too close.

Circumstance saved me there. In late May 2014 I accepted another job and left the Funder. Only then did I appreciate how different and more productive attempts at analysis became. A new place provided physical distance that also translated into analytical distance as well. This effectively “closed the project.” The burden of perpetual observation ended which allowed me to draw analytical bounds around the data that had eluded me prior to that. As an “outsider,” I could see the bounds of the meaning-making work more clearly and could see also see the field of data more accurately. For example, it was only after I left the Funder that I realized CPS was not a very central player in this study because I could finally see clearly the difference between the rhetoric and reality. I also could approach my own participation more objectively. With my team membership over, I could distinguish between my action in those moments and my thoughts about them. I could begin to see the utility of certain theoretical frameworks over others. I could approach discussion of the data without personal attachment to it. This translated into a much more even tone in my written analysis. Every problem that appeared
“solved” by this move seems to indicate a point of challenge arising from my ability to blend so seamlessly into the world of the Funder and the Collaborative.

**Embedded Ethnography: A Mixed-Results Approach**

This chapter serves as a discussion of the data collection methods chosen for this study aimed at understanding meaning as it develops through interaction in the context of a cross-sector collaborative. Despite lengthy discussions of both the opportunities and challenges of this method, I still conclude that ethnography produced the best kind of data for this type of analysis. It produced very detailed, rich contextual data along with specific, individual interview data that could interact to produce a clear story of how meaning is negotiated and contested across organizational contexts that can prove difficult to study because of lack of access and mobility for outsiders therein. What proved surprisingly most problematic was the negotiation of my position as a researcher and employee there. Though seemingly a great opportunity for the level of “insider” information possible, this arrangement manifested unintended but important ethical, political, and personal issues that influenced data collection and, by extension, the data itself.

This array of strengths and challenges makes me wonder about the mode of undertaking institutional ethnography. The value of this participatory methodology lies in capturing the deep, contextually-dependent interactions that allow life, and in this case culture, to happen. Entering into the field as participant-researcher grants the perspective of standpoints, which is valuable. At the same time, this causes the participant-researcher to lose sight of the bigger conceptual or theoretical picture. My experience proved to me
the difficulty in wearing both these hats simultaneously. What saved me, time and again, was talking with my peers about what I was seeing. On a regular basis, sometimes daily, they helped me to “pull back” into conceptual territory and make sense of data that on a day-to-day basis appeared disparate. In fact, I have heard them summarize this project better than I have on occasion. For this reason, it seems like approaching participatory ethnography as a team, a collective effort, that allows for the collection of deep, context-rich data by a participant-researcher and its analysis by those outside of the context itself may be valuable overall to the method. If data collection is participatory, then it seems logical that interactive data analysis that re-introduces a more objective standpoint might be fruitful. This would allow for the capturing of the story while holding in check the ways and degrees to which the researcher in the field becomes embedded or entrenched in the site itself.
CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTED

One of the greatest mistakes made about the community school model is that it should be a “simple fix” for community problems. Though experiential knowledge continues to increase as more and more cities and school districts jump into the fray, there remains a common misperception by those not steeped in implementation about the ease of putting it into practice. This is understandable if we take the model at face value: offer “wraparound” health and human services at school. From the standpoint of programming, this is not terribly difficult. Models for out-of-school time activities and services exist, many already in schools. It might even appear that usual hurdles of space and interest are cleared since the programming slides right into school buildings in schools begging for extra academic support. The only piece left involves bringing the community in. That should be easy, right? But practitioners of CSM programming, new and seasoned, will tell you implementing this model is one of the greatest challenges of their careers. Many last only two or three years before finding less taxing work; the veterans will tell you they hung in out of sheer stubbornness. Teaching during the day is hard but CSM work is harder.

Although scores of evaluations have combed through the details of programmatic content to understand why, not one adequately addresses the demand the CSM makes for redefinitions of common, central social structures whose meanings are so embedded we
do not often really think about them. No evaluations have explored how the CSM rewrites the meaning of “community,” redrawing community bounds to extend into the schools in new ways and relying on new kinds of relationships to create a new community environment. If embraced wholeheartedly, the CSM will transform communities in that those involved will understand themselves differently than they did before. For those at the helm, the ways they conceptualize “community” matters.

The following discussion aims to explore the differences in the ways members of one CSM Collaborative understand what “community” means. Examining perspectives, situated within different organizations and bringing to this work different experiences and ideas of community, provides an opportunity to explore the creation and negotiation of the boundaries of meaning for “community” generally and for Brighton Park as the neighborhood in which the work takes root. Ultimately, the collaboration’s stakeholders agree upon the need to work together to reach a shared goal: sustainable community. However, as they come together to implement the CSM, they bring an array of ideas about that end goal that they must eventually reconcile. Future chapters will explore in detail how and to what degree they negotiate these meanings. My purpose here is to establish the array of working understandings of community held throughout the core organizations in this CSM Collaborative.

The Community School Enterprise in Chicago: An Atypical Community of Purpose, An Atypical Community of Place

Just as the misconceptions about the implementation of the CSM skew toward the simple, thinking about “community” and “neighborhood” also often appears a simpler task than it is in reality. We seem to talk about community all the time especially in “the
city of neighborhoods.” Rhetoric often interchanges the two, creating confusion and miscommunication in terms of meaning. Sociological discourse regarding community demonstrates that we, in fact, can and often do mean very different things by this one word. There is no solid agreement on a definition of community. However, the recurrent themes of structure (the way people arrange themselves in and are arranged by boundaries) and social bonds (the qualities and strengths of different types of social relationships) apparent in the sociological discourse regarding community lead us to see that, at its core, community regards people sharing space, related by something they hold in common. While both affect the other, the literature disagrees on which factor determines the other more: does space sculpt the bonds or do common bonds draw similar people into the same space?

Two contrasting perspectives drive the sociological debate about community. One approach emphasizes the structural influence of place, specifically physical location, on the project of developing a shared culture. This literature, resting on a conception that Emily Barman calls “community of place,” (2006: 5) refers to a particular geography, bounded and limited (Park 1959; Suttles 1972; Hummon 1990). It was this idea upon which the seventy-seven Chicago Community Areas were developed: that each bounded location contains individuals physically and socially near to each other in space, time, and in social relationships (Tonnies 1957). It is both the sharing of the place and the nearness of individuals that creates conditions for community, or a shared sense of a collective existing as something greater than just the sum of individuals. Community emerges when interactions of residents are to various degrees affective and exchange-
based (Durkheim 1970 [1987]; Williams 1983; Paxton 1999). This network of residents must also share what Barman summarizes as a “community of the mind” (2006:6) consisting of “a set of shared values, ideals, and expectations that exist outside the specific and oft divergent interests of individuals” (Ibid). This is reinforced by a communal history that establishes common narratives and shared sets of ways of acting (Bellah et al., 1987; Selznick 1992). Once developed, the social bonds serve to support community members in their own personal endeavors (Coleman 1988) while simultaneously ensuring a sense of belonging upon which trust and reciprocity grows (Etzioni 1995; Paxton 1999). This trust, gained through involvement in networks often embodied in institutions, effects the development of trust in others (Putnam 1993, 1995, 2000), and is associated with the development of civic skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and effective relationships with authorities (Lareau 1987). Within these networks of structured relationships, the development of “special occasions” and celebratory rituals serve to strengthen a sense of group identity and symbols (Warner and Lunt 1941; Warner 1959; Mumford 1970; Collins 1988) and personal confidence that arises from such perceived group membership (Goffman 1967).

It is from this perspective that a concern for loss of community arises. If community requires propinquity (Tonnies 1957) and shared physical location, the perceived disconnectedness brought on by the mechanisms of modernity—industrialization and urbanization—created conditions ripe for the steady decline of community (Barman 2006). Some scholars suggest a heightened pursuit of individualism (Tonnies 1957; Durkheim 1964 [1893]; Weber 1978; Habermas 1989; Putnam 2000)
caused a breakdown of the social ties upon which trust, reciprocity, and the common good rested. This not only caused a loss of social capital that prevented groups from achieving or even recognizing common goals (Wirth 1938; Stein 1960; Bellah et al. 1980; Putnam 2000) but also created a trajectory of increasing distance between people and the loss of meaningful ties (Slater 1970; Putnam 2000). As the technology revolution and social media worlds continue to grow, the most essential traits of community from this perspective, nearness and shared space, continue to allow people to drift further away from each other into loneliness and disconnectedness.

The other scholarly perspective, seemingly a reaction to what many saw as an over-emphasis on structure, understands the challenges posed by modernity not as a loss of community but as a transformation in the ways people related to each other, thought about their own membership in a collective, and undertook collective action (Webber 1963; Fischer 1984 [1976]; Bender 1982; Calhoun 1994; Minkoff 1997; Schudson 1998; Wuthnow 1998; Wellman 1999; Brint 2001). Barman calls these kinds of collectives “communities of purpose” (2006:7) or groups that create new opportunities or methods for bounding meaningful relationships based on shared characteristics other than propinquity and location. The New Social Movements of the 1960s and 1970s are examples, creating “new sources of identification based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, and other characteristics” (Ibid) which can include simply shared interests and hobbies (Bellah et al. 1980; Harvey 1989). Instead of focusing centrally on structure, this perspective rests on the interpretive approach in which community is a meaningful collective organized around members’ shared characteristics.
or interests (Cohen 1985; Gamson 1992; Lamont 1992; Wellman 1999). Boundaries are symbolic (Lamont 1992), created and controlled by individuals seeking to establish both inclusion and exclusion. Thus they delineate a shared sense of who is “in” and “out” (Weber 1978; Bourdieu 1984; Epstein 1992) and help members to make “make sense” of the collection of meanings leading to a shared purpose (Levi-Strauss 1962; Douglas 1966; Zerubavel 1997). These boundaries also serve to delineate between unified groups (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Lamont 1992).

More recent literature has attempted to offer integrated analyses of community of place and community of purpose, examining their relationships to each other as independent/dependent variables. Robert Sampson’s recent book *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (2010) aims to understand the “neighborhood effect” in Chicago that examines the influence of long social histories tied to place on collective efforts to reform or challenge those entrenched neighborhood narratives (many of poverty and crime) and vice-versa. He theorizes that these transformative forces, united by interests and thus more fluid across the landscape, (violence prevention, civil rights, and suffrage movements are all examples) as “cross-cutting” the more “stable” structural forces of what he considers the institution of The Neighborhood, creates opportunities for innovation and social change that otherwise did not exist within the structure of relationships tightly woven over generations. Emily Barman’s work “*Contesting Communities: The Transformation of Workplace Charity*” (2006) similarly aims to explore the intersection of community of place and community of purpose by exploring the contests around shifting ideas of community in the workplace
giving campaigns of United Way and Alternative Funds. Through this context she demonstrates how the concept of community, primarily defined in that context as tied to *place*, becomes contested ground for establishing legitimacy and gaining limited resources. Both work toward an understanding of community as the intersection of the dynamics of place and the dynamics of shared interests and chosen collective action, or purpose.

It is within this “integrated” understanding of community as a social construct of networks of relationships that happen in a location embued with meanings that resonate differently depending on the actor that the CSM implementation work seems to fit. What my work will build out further is the exploration of symbolic boundaries and the social construction of shared purpose as it pertains both to place and purpose. While both Sampson and Barman convincingly argue that the intersection of both place and purpose provides new ways to understand the meanings of community, they both utilize traditionally bounded spaces as the location in which to examine the processes of construction and negotiation of purpose or intent: Sampson studies neighborhoods as they are known in Chicago and Barman undertakes an organizational analysis of United Way, one of the most recognized, corporate workplace giving organizations in the world. My analysis, while also seeking to explore the intersection of community of place and community of purpose, does so within the context of the creation of a new kind of organization, the cross-sector collaborative, dedicated to creating and ultimately executing a shared vision of community within local neighborhoods in Chicago.
These collaboratives, new in the explicit cross-sector mission, blend the enterprises of communities of place and communities of purpose. Given that the collaboratives, by virtue of their shared neighborhood-focused intentions, span multiple organizational lines, cultures, and ideologies, they are unlike other communities studied in that they must construct boundaries and meanings around themselves as a collaborative and their relationship to place and purpose simultaneously. They work to create, negotiate, and bound the shared purpose of “creating community.” To engage stakeholders in long-term commitments to their goal, they also work to create and bound a new meaning for a neighborhood known for its troubles (gangs, unemployment, low educational achievement) as a place of flourishing and success. To do this, the collaborative repurposes “school” as the new face of the neighborhood, containing all of the people and organizations who share these larger goals of neighborhood revitalization. The uniting factor is not place alone or purpose alone. That which brings them together is the intention to transform a neighborhood, a project in which existing meanings of membership and relationships to that place will be re-scripted. The Collaborative looks to transform a group of people bound together only by a shared school into a group able to create membership for themselves in a community that does not currently exist meaningfully in Brighton Park. For this reason, Steven Brint’s definition of community as a generic concept largely applies:

I will define communities as aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together *principally* [sic] by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern (i.e., interest in the personalities and life events of one another). Motives for interaction are thus centrally important in this definition…however at least one outcome of these motives is also important (2001: 8-9).
In this collaborative, the idea of intention serves as the motive for community. Community will be built among people in Brighton Park because that’s the goal, held by those living in Brighton Park and those with other vested interests in that end result. Almost every facet of this work relies on the building of symbolic boundaries and meaning construction, largely by those “outside” of Brighton Park. While the idea of meaning as a fluid and constructed dimension of social life has become a fairly accepted understanding though a well-developed discourse utilizing the interpretive approach to culture, the idea of symbolic boundaries of place seems counterintuitive. Especially in urban spaces and especially in Chicago, life happens on a grid, literally. In terms of meaning, we come to rely on space as an orienting dimension to life; we need the grid to make sense of the rest (Zerubavel 1997). This is why things as simple as telephone area codes changing, redrawing of ward or voting district lines, or even structural changes like closing roads and demolishing buildings can be so upsetting. It is common for us to use space, perceived as mostly static or unchanging, to orient ourselves and understand our “place” among many in the world.

The idea of a place or location as fluid and able to be constructed or negotiable poses much more of an intellectual challenge. It seems that might be why symbolic boundaries often apply to groupings for which place is a secondary consideration: social movements, support groups, knitting circles. Space might matter, but not as much as the intent and so symbolic boundaries become a source of classification. In this case, a re-negotiated meaning of Brighton Park Schools, as a “community place” re-bound and re-
define what this community is and, therefore, what Brighton Park is to a certain degree. School becomes a place where community happens.

The Collaborative and Their Places

The risk one runs in naming a group or collective that actually does not have a formal name is that of overstating the level of formality involved in the organization. The truth remains to this day that the group I will call the Collaborative here remains nameless to themselves and others. I have found this a curious level of informality given that those who comprise it cross several sectors of business and industry, most of which are highly formal. Although I will progressively refine its description throughout the subsequent chapters of this work, the Collaborative *in toto* involves several kinds of stakeholders, defined here as people or organizations entering into the agreement to work together toward the shared goal of sustainable communities via the community school model.

The “web” of relationships surrounding the implementation of the CSM in Chicago today can be intimidatingly broad we consider every organization and every city office and every funder, public and private, involved in some form of CSM work as equal partners. This likely stems from the fact that the model was originally introduced at the city level and so the span of original stakeholders could run the gamut all the way from the Mayor himself to a parent working as an aide in a classroom. However, implementation efforts of the model across the city are decentralized enough that what exists today is a network of different collaboratives, each with its own specific set of stakeholders, using different methods to attempt CSM implementation. This analysis
focuses specifically on stakeholders in one particular collaborative working largely in
Brighton Park and spots across the West Side.

Furthermore, I consider specifically direct stakeholders, meaning that all play
some form of direct role in determining the strategic direction, implementation planning,
program provision, or program maintenance with regard to this specific CSM effort. This
distinction is important because indirect stakeholders do play an important role for the
work of the Collaborative but, as the category suggests, are not part of the day-to-day
decision-making and operations of the work of the Collaborative. These indirect
stakeholders would include individuals in the Mayor’s office, several city officials like
the aldermen of the neighborhoods involved, the director of CPS’ Office of Community
School Initiatives, the CEO of CPS, and other individuals or groups from funders or other
agencies who control parts of the context within which the Collaborative does its work. I
consider them indirect stakeholders from the perspective of the Collaborative because
they support the work either actively by using their position and resources to aid in
“smoothing the path” for the work to take place or passively by not working to thwart the
enterprise effort of the Collaborative.

Organizationally, the Collaborative centers around two non-profit organizations
who, together, form the epicenter of direct, day-to-day CSM work: one a large, well-
recognized philanthropic organization in Chicago and the other a community based
organization (in the industry, the term for this type of organization is CBO), situated in
Brighton Park. The philanthropic organization, to which I will refer here as The Funder,
employs about 120 people organized into departments (Human Resources, Finance, MIS,
Relationship Management (Fundraising), Marketing and Communications, and Community Building). Titles follow a corporate structure (Associate, Manager, Senior Manager, Director, Senior Director, Vice-President, Senior Vice-President); Senior VP and above are considered “executive” and have privileges like expense accounts, parking, more vacation, and substantial salary increases. A typical salary for an Associate (entry level) position is between $35-39,000 while SVPs and above make six-figure salaries. In 2013, the CEO made $350,000. Most employees hold 4-year degrees relevant to their field. In Community Building (the home department for the Collaborative), staff tend to hold degrees in Social Work, Sociology, and Liberal Arts. More than half of the ten department members have a masters or above.

Unlike most philanthropic ventures, the Funder is not a private or corporate foundation. This means that every year, the organization raises money via several fundraising mechanisms to be distributed to health and human service agencies throughout Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. Their mission as they state it reads, “We envision a world where all individuals and families achieve their human potential through education, income stability, and healthy lives…Achieving this take a broad movement of people, leveraging our time, our collective voice, and our resources” (per the website). In an average year, the Funder distributes roughly $20M in charitable dollars to these ends. One of their investment interests is in the area of education. This means they purposefully direct charitable dollars to agencies employing CSM-style

---

1The websites for both the Funder and the Lead Partner reveal their identity and, thus, cannot be directly cited here.
programming. In 2013, approximately $5M went to CSM programming in Chicago and the suburbs plus an additional $300k to Collaborative-specific programs.

In 2010, the Funder began the process of creating its own Collaborative to deliver the CSM to one community in Chicago, beginning with the identification of a Lead Partner Agency, which for these purposes I will call the Lead Partner. After a lengthy vetting process (run by consultants), the Funder chose a CBO situated in Brighton Park whose mission as they state it is to “create a safer community, improve the learning environment at public schools, preserve affordable housing, provide a voice for youth, protect immigrants’ rights, promote gender equality, and end all forms of violence” (per the organization’s website). They follow a basic “neighborhood council” model, offering a range of advocacy programs from legal assistance, housing and foreclosure advocacy to adult learning (ESL, financial literacy), they coordinate the community school programming in two middle schools serving Brighton Park. They support a paid staff of 27, 22 of whom are Latina women from the neighborhood. Many of them have kids who go to Brighton Park Schools. Job titles in the organization include counselors and resource coordinators in the four Brighton Park schools (2 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high school), youth organizers, and directors of the different types of programming (housing, youth, clinical, and administrative). The Lead Partner is led by an exuberant Executive Director, Martin. Interesting to note that Martin, a very Irish-looking, fluent Spanish-speaking 40-something with freckles, moved into Brighton Park nearly fourteen years ago with his wife who, he is quick to tell you, is a Latina. They now have two school-aged kids who attend Brighton Park Schools and a newborn daughter who, he
assures everyone, will be bilingual like his boys. “I was a white guy who knew how to speak Spanish and knew I wanted to do something meaningful. So I’ve been here for fourteen years doing that. Brighton Park kinda took me in and now I’m one of their own. My own. You know what I mean.” After having worked as the assistant to the executive director, upon his predecessor’s retirement seven years ago, Martin was named the executive director. “I don’t anticipate going anywhere else anytime soon,” he says. “This is my home. I’m working for my family and my neighborhood.”

Together the Funder and the Lead Partner form the structural core of the Collaborative, having entered into a formal agreement in 2010. Each brings with it a group of stakeholders representing different but related or interested parties from across civic, corporate, educational and philanthropic sectors. Before examining their individual roles, it’s important to consider each organization’s contribution to the working knowledge and understanding of “community of place.” Because both command ownership of the Collaborative as organizations, one of the first aspects of each that must be understood in examining their contributions to the meanings and boundaries of space are their distinct spaces. Where they are located in relationship to the Neighborhood, Brighton Park, and how space formulates their approach to the Neighborhood does matter. Like visiting someone’s home can reveal a lot about how an individual approaches the world, the office of an organization can reveal a great deal about how they understand themselves in this collaborative venture.
The Funder’s Space

Because the Funder was the genesis of this particular Collaborative we begin at their home base on the 30th floor of the CNA building, the red steel high-rise anchoring the south east corner of the Loop. In the lobby of the security-protected bank of elevators on the 30th floor stands a yellow accent wall with this quote:

“I don’t want to live in the kind of world where we don’t look out for each other. Not just the people that are close to us, but anybody who needs a helping hand” ~Charles de Lint.

Through the pane glass doors, past the white, circular, etched reception desk and another yellow wall encouraging the onlooker to “empower,” “inspire,” and “flourish,” along with other directives like “collaborate,” “convene,” and “volunteer,” a wide-open floor plan cleverly disguises in plain sight what employees call a “cubicle farm”—rows and rows of “pods” of 4 desks arranged in squares with a circular table in the middle. With the typical office accouterments of laptops flipped open, picture mugs on desks, and ergonomically correct desk chairs, a sense of “corporate” is apparent. If not for the fact that this office is the home an organization that refers to itself as “a community funder”, it could be mistaken for an insurance company, a bank headquarters, a law firm, an architectural firm. Employees wear uniforms of khakis, polos, and oxford shirts for the men and blouses, skirts, and slacks for the women. Only the Senior Team and executives wear suits except for Board Meeting days, on which all in attendance are expected to wear suits: ties for the men and heels for the women. Offices running along the interior of each side of the building, with coveted “four walls and a door” are for Vice-Presidents and above. The CEO has that plus her own executive conference room.
The most striking features of the office are the panoramic views of the Loop to the West and North, down Lakeshore Drive, the Museum Campus, and Soldier Field to the South, and across Millennium Park and Buckingham Fountain and the Lake to the East. This degree of magnificence, for an organization that had previously occupied a loft-style office prior, was not taken lightly when seating was determined. Prior to the move to this space in 2013, two months of intense Senior Team debate determined the seating arrangements for the departments. The CEO herself expressed the need to put the Community Building Department front and center to each visitor, Board Member, and volunteer who would visit the office and so directly past the front desk, on the East side of the building, CB sits strategically positioned to demonstrate the organization’s commitment to “the community.” From this placement, Community Building looks out on Millennium and Grant Parks and the lakefront; from that height, especially at night when the perfectly equidistant, circular streetlamps lining Columbus drive, the parks, and the Field Museum illuminate, it looks like a diorama showcasing a paper-mached version of a perfectly executed urban park: planned, populated, and quietly, urbanely perfect. This stands in contrast to the view from the “old office,” a loft space in the West Loop nestled under the Green Line el tracks from which the organization moved just a year ago, in May 2013.

With its exposed beams, stained carpet, and second-hand office furniture creating a “lived in” feel, the West Loop location felt like the office of a an agency who had people coming in to get free health screenings, tax prep services, or go to tutoring after school. Lining various “accent walls,” painted in bold blues, oranges, and yellows were
quotes of Mahatma Ghandi (*Be the change you wish to see in the world*), Margaret Meade (*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has*), and Jane Addams (*The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life*). While the Funder never offered programming of any kind, the space was both geographically and culturally positioned closer the west and southwest sides of Chicago, places that traditionally absorbed a majority of Funder charitable dollars. Agency partners often expressed ease in coming to the office, a trip that for many could feel foreign. Since the move to CNA, the visits by community partners dwindled to almost zero in 2014. In the move, attempts were made to “carry over” some pieces of the former space so that, as the CEO announced, “we won’t forget where we came from.” Reclaimed wood from the loft space was fashioned into a bench that now sits in the reception area and the yellow quote wall harkens back to the use of inspirational quotes as wall art.

“I don’t want to live in the kind of world where we don’t look out for each other. Not just the people that are close to us, but anybody who needs a helping hand.”

I thought it somewhat telling that, unlike the other humanitarians quoted on the walls of the loft space, this quote come from Charles de Lint who is “the modern master of urban fantasy.”

**The Lead Partner’s Place**

In sharp contrast to the 30th floor office, the Lead Partner lives at ground level, in a concrete-block, one-story building on West Archer just south of the Stevenson.
A massive 4-lane swath of potholed pavement running east and west, Archer serves as the major conduit between the neighborhoods of the south and west and downtown. Driving the entire 9 miles that span the distance between the 30th floor of the high-rise office in the Loop on this road makes the transition between the “planned model” of downtown and the lived-in slouch of the neighborhoods so clear. Traveling westbound, the rearview mirror reflects the falling away of the geometric symmetry of the parks, and the expanse of the lakeshore and towering spires of high-rises while ahead the road, measured in stop lights every three blocks, bears the wear of decades of transitional history. Strips of small stores one can imagine have turned over more than once in the life of that building intersperse with two-flats and single family homes lining the street. Fast-food drive-thrus appear on each block and a drive-thru Starbucks, the true modern-day symbol of suburbia appears awkwardly planted on a corner.

This is Brighton Park. Building signage appears increasingly in Spanish, advertising more industrial spaces: warehouses, small manufacturing plants, and labor-oriented companies line both sides of Archer. With rows and rows of neatly arranged, small, brick, single-family homes lining snaky streets that divert off of Archer, Brighton Park feels almost suburban; unlike the apartment buildings and car-lined streets of other neighborhoods, each house has a driveway, many with one car parked in them at all times. Kid’s toys and bikes often clutter the postage-stamp front lawns. The small front windows of houses display a variety of stringed lights: small Christmas lights, large Christmas lights (all year round), chili peppers. It appears as a working-class neighborhood and it many ways it is.
Brighton Park is a place of mixed ethnicities and social histories. Predominantly Polish when it recorded its largest population in the 1930s, deindustrialization caused the population to decline by 1/3 between 1930 and 1980. Though some infrastructure, primarily churches and museums, contain the record its Eastern European immigrant history, today it is home to just over 44,000 people, 84% of whom are Hispanic or Latino (primarily Mexican) and 8% of whom are White. The median income is $37,593 for an average household of 4 people. Roughly 40% of the population over 25 years of age have less than a High School diploma. Just over 1/3 of residents are not in the Labor Force, meaning they are retired or not seeking employment. Those working mainly hold jobs in manufacturing, food service, and retail\(^2\). This is the neighborhood for whom the Lead Partner Agency works.

Their office, a one-story concrete block building with a flat roof, and painted in a colorful palette of yellows, blues, and oranges that masks the protective wrought iron bars on the window, sits on the corner of Archer and a side-street almost exactly in the epicenter of Brighton Park. With a gravel-lined open lot to its east wringed in a chain-link fence, it stands removed from the rest of the buildings on the long block. My first visit there was memorable. Walking in to a small reception area, the staff person behind the counter invited me to have a seat in one of two metal folding chairs sitting next to the door. As I gazed at the posters in Spanish, populated with mostly young Latino faces, discouraging drug use, advertising domestic abuse hotlines, and providing information on healthcare insurance coverage, I heard the din of a group of tweens in the conference

room in what was, I was later informed, their weekly homework club. At the counter stood a small, white middle-aged woman with permed, platinum blond hair wearing faded jeans and a fleece with a young man wearing a red baseball cap, t-shirt, and worn jeans. Speaking with Russian accents, the pair (mother and son) sought advice regarding a housing situation currently plaguing them; they were in the midst of the bank foreclosing and were arranging legal help through the Lead Partner’s program. Roughly 30 minutes past our appointment time, the executive director, Martin bounded from his office.

In a plaid collared-shirt, sleeves rolled the elbows, and jeans with a pair of worn brown boots, he radiated casual comfort which balanced the seemingly boundless energy that obviously carried him through his day. Speaking in perfectly fluent, rushed Spanish he poked his head into the homework club as we passed, got a laugh, and then led me to his office, a room the size of a closet and outfitted with a light, laminate door that hung crookedly. Just outside, the “office” space for the rest of staff extended toward the back of the building: one row of cubicles, about 15 cubes, each with a desktop computer, phone, and stack of post-it notes. This is where “the work got done” as one of the program directors quoted on cue for me as we passed. On one of the short book cases sat a Mr. Coffee coffee maker with an inch of coffee in the bottom. “You want coffee, let’s get you some coffee. Don’t touch that…let’s make you the good stuff in my office” Martin commanded.

His office, complete with bulging desk of merging stacks of paper and a swivel chair obviously grabbed from the conference room, his space felt well lived in. “Sorry
about all of this crap,” he said, motioning me to the chair he carried with him into our meeting. “We’ve got a pile here of these fucking computers with nowhere to put them until our MOU’s come in so of course we have to keep ‘em here. Free computers…they’d be awesome if we could actually put them into the schools.” A stack of Dell computer boxes, from floor to ceiling, stood next to his desk. “There’s a window back there…I probably won’t see the light until November.”

This was not the first meeting I’d had with Martin; in a work capacity, we knew each other well enough to have a casual discussion instead of the starchy awkwardness of an interview with someone brand new. During the interview, 3 different staff members poked their heads in to ask specific questions about programming to occur that night, meetings for tomorrow, and to announce that an unhappy parent just called and “they might have a problem.” The transitions were seamless between long, feverishly fast answers to my questions in English and answers to the staff in mixed English and Spanish fragments. At one point he answered a call from his wife. “Yeah, I’ll be home in 30 minutes…I know, I know…it’s an early one today.” It was 7pm and when I asked if this was normal he said somewhat apologetically, “Well, she’s like 12 months pregnant right now so I’m trying to keep it reasonable.” As he talked and swiveled, he raked his hand through his hair casually to incrementally reveal graying at his temples, the only indicator that he might have more years under his belt at this job than you’d expect—that and the complete confidence and breadth of knowledge evident in his stories and understanding of his almost 15 years in the community. Though we started 30 minutes

3 A Memorandum of Understanding is a formal document prepared to spell out the partnership agreement between two or more organizations.
late, our scheduled interview for one hour ended 2 ½ hours later. When I told Martin I
was turning off my recorded he looked at me with concern, “Are you sure you got
enough…because I can keep going.”

**Meaning in Context: Community as Place**

**The Lead Partner: “It’s where we live.”**

These descriptions are really vignettes of place and provide not just a peek into
each organization’s world but also an indication of the way space matters, comparatively,
in these contrasting organizational settings. In both, the space and place mean something.
Consider the proximity to the neighborhood chosen for Collaborative work. In the case
of the Lead Partner, the meaning of space and place actually converge; they are one in the
same. That was part of the criteria for the Funder to choose them as Lead Partner. “This
office is like an extension of my home,” Martin says. “I spend more time here than there
which doesn’t sound great but it’s all the same to me. Here I’m working for my family
and kids and other’s families and kids. And then I go home which is down the street. It
feels the same. I never really leave.”

The “homey” feel of their offices appears to support that others feel the same.
Everyone wears jeans, sweatshirts, t-shirts always. The conference room multitasks as
the place to eat lunch, hold board and community meetings, host homework club, and any
other project that requires space. Staff walks in and out of offices freely. Music plays in
the background. Everybody wears jeans and tennis shoes everyday. A colorful mural,
painted by a local artist, stretches across the entire wall behind the front desk. “The
whole point is to make people feel like they can walk in here and get answers or help
with a problem. This should feel like the most comfortable place for them to be. They need to know they’re safe here. We need them to trust us so we can help them,” Martin says. Now, the focus is on building on that.

We’ve been here…well, I’ve been her for fourteen years now. People know us, they get that we’re here for them…so now we’re trying to do the same thing in the schools. Parents should feel like that school is an extension of their home. That they have some control of what happens there and that they can go there, comfortably, and get what they need for their kid. And we’re slowing getting our principals on board with that. And we’re starting to see it work…finally.

Martin’s vision ends up sounding like several circles that, as their radii grow, will eventually cover as much of Brighton Park as possible. His goal is to build this kind of environment in all four schools plus maintain it in their office so that everyone in Brighton Park can feel close, literally, to a place that can provide them with what they need whether it’s educational or not. Martin and the Lead Partner are Brighton Park and Brighton Park is them.

This relationship to their space means there’s little need for articulating what “community” as a concept means for them. I did not talk with many parents but those I did chat with generally responded to my questions about community with puzzlement.

“Community?…You mean the neighborhood? It’s where I live.”

“My community is Brighton Park.”

“Brighton Park…and maybe the people at Kelley…the school I think.”

These represent the most common kind of response to pointed questions about community for parents; it was answered like a demographic question. So I started asking more about the community school work which many clarified as “the programs at school.” These answers seemed to reach further conceptually. Moms I talked to said:
Many mentioned getting their kids onto a “path to success;” that always meant going to college. One mom elaborated on this noting that she has her kids involved as much as possible at (middle) school now so that they can go to college and come back to the neighborhood and “make it grow” after they graduate from college. For this group, the success of their children, usually defined as a college education, established the foundation for success of the future community of Brighton Park. They sacrifice today, often working multiple jobs on split shifts (mom works while dad’s at home and vice versa) to literally invest in their kids’ educations. This, they hope, will translate into a return to Brighton Park “to give back.”

The parents’ responses to this question were different than Martin’s and some of the people working in the schools or directly in the programs. Many of them either explicitly said or implied that community meant a kind of collective identity. In our long interview, Martin addressed the topic of community before I had to ask, “I mean, there was no such thing as community. There was no sense of identity…and so the schools became a great place for us to be able to connect families and, you know, to start building a sense of identity.” One of the resource coordinators said, “The culture of a neighborhood changes block by block…it’s like they can’t see how they’re similar until you show them…but once they do…once you show them…they get excited about it.” The responses from Lead Partner staff appeared really similar on this point and so at a
point in my research, I spoke with resource coordinators in schools outside of Brighton Park who were implementing the CSM to see if there was variance in their experience on this. There really was not. The idea of community as an awareness of the neighborhood as one collective with not just a shared place but shared experiences of the schools and troubles particular to the area pervaded. This locally-bound idea of relationships and experiences in context also rendered another theme regarding that collective awareness: its introduction had to be from the inside. A resource coordinator in Cicero described it this way:

I can't train you on how to work in some of Chicago’s most challenged neighborhood. I can't train you to have empathy. I can't train, you know, those are things, we don't have time for… we need people who, already have that and you know, that can be adaptable and they are more flexible when coming from the community, from our community, you know?

Martin re-iterated this several times, always noting how long it took to establish the trust necessary for people to take him and his ideas seriously, “I came in under a director that people loved and when he left I had to keep working to show that what I was doing was good for them. I lived here and everything but it still took some early wins to convince them. It took a long time.” Another staff member added:

A lot of the staff we live in the community; we grew up in the community so it’s almost like a staff tendency that you get community people in a professional level trying to get back and support. Then you have people that don’t live in the community telling us what they think is the right way to move on…so it’s hard because, you know, we know...we’ve been here and you haven’t.

I particularly like this response because it captured what can be a palpable tension regarding the “outsiders” who have come in and made demands. When I asked who the outsiders are: “Funders. Cops maybe. Some of the school administrators.”
Although all of the resource coordinators at the Lead Agency live in or very near Brighton Park, in talking with resource coordinators working for other agencies in CSM work throughout the city, this “insider” status is not a guarantee and often not criteria for hiring these positions. I spoke with several resource coordinators from outside, sometimes far outside, the neighborhoods in which they worked and the emphasis of their work was very different. For them, “community” was the people they served. One resource coordinator working in East Garfield Park, consistently referred to the community as “the people who live around here…you know, the ones who send their kids here and, you know, the older folks too.” He spoke a lot about the challenges of engaging the community, “It’s tough to get the parents in here. You know, I try and I try but they just look at me like, ‘Who are you?’ or ‘Oh, you’re the after-school guy.’ So I’m trying to put myself out there more. You know, make my face known to people so they know what I’m doing here.” When he talked about his goals, they were primarily educational and character-building goals, “I consider myself a mentor. So I’m trying to start up these groups for the 7th and 8th grade boys…but you know for the little ones too…so they learn how to have respect, they learn good behavior, they learn how to work hard. That’s what will make them succeed.” Another resource coordinator working in the South Loop was more blunt: “My students are my students. I want them to succeed. I do everything in my power to do that and that includes working to get the parents in here. But at the end of the day, I’m a resource coordinator and there’s only so much I can do.” This is a very different story than the previous one but my conversation with a former resource coordinator who worked for both a neighborhood-focused agency and
now works for a school-based agency broke it open. I asked her about this difference I saw in these approaches and she explained it this way:

I think the neighborhood agencies are positioned so much better to actually address community needs because they see the holistic picture of all of the problems people face in that place. And that seeps into the planning for their CSM work. They literally bring the neighborhood into the school in a way that makes sense. And they know all the neighborhood resources and the schools know them. Working for an agency that is education-focused can be completely different. If they haven’t worked to really establish their place in the neighborhood, it’s a constant climb up a mountain to help people understand how what’s going on in school should be seen as something relevant to everyone in the neighborhood. And if they don’t see faces they know, you’re going to just constantly work toward getting the buy-in…and while that’s going on, and it could take years, you just focus on what’s going on in the school and hope for the best.

I thought this was an interesting distinction. Of my interviewees, it was true that the notion of a neighborhood collective identity correlated to those who also worked for a neighborhood-based organization and who lived in or near the area. While the RC above saw it as a function of trust, there also seems to be an element of self-awareness and investment: those living in that place can not just see the potential for building a collective identity but can also benefit from the collective becoming an advocate for itself.

The responses from those in the neighborhood, living and working, tended to show a deep meaning connection to the place. For parents and those receiving services, the notion of community as an idea was mostly foreign; if there was one, it was a future, more successful version of the neighborhood. Martin and those working at the Lead Agency and in schools in other places tended to describe community as realization of a neighborhood collective identity that was still in process. In this idea, they cast
themselves, as the guides to this collective formation for those in the neighborhood, the agents of empowerment in that way. In this same role, they serve as advocates for the community to outsiders, especially those outsiders who can bring necessary resources into neighborhoods that have great need for them. Though it sounds complex, Martin is quick to simplify it: “This isn’t rocket science. At the end of the day, I’m doing what I know how to do to make this a better place. And we’re getting there.”

**The Funder: Community “Envisioned”**

Compared to The relationship of place and space for the Funder is completely different and requires much more abstract meaning work. For the Funder, moving to the 30th floor in a high-rise owned by an insurance company in the Loop from a loft space in the West Loop was created several points of disjunction from the neighborhoods they serve, one of which is Brighton Park. Both the atmosphere and physical location of the West Loop location was closer to that of the Lead Partner and Brighton Park. In fact, the “transitional neighborhood” appeal of the West Loop, where small slaughterhouses and warehouses share blocks with boutique restaurants, gave the Funder some credibility as being “of the neighborhood.” Many noted just the literal change in physical distance. “At least at 560 [the street address and name of the loft space], I felt like I didn’t have to be so buttoned up,” said a long-time member of the CB department. “I could feel like we knew what was going on with the people we’re serving. But now we’re so far away.”

One of the newer CB staff people very earnestly said, “Well, now that we’re Loop I feel like we’re out of the loop, you know?” When he heard his unintentional play on words he
laughed, “Well, *that’s* ironic, huh? Sad but true…” Pressed for an explanation he continued:

“I don’t know how to say it…when we were at 560 I didn’t have to work so hard to remember what life in the neighborhoods is like. But you come up here and see the view and you’re taken in by it and problems seem less pressing. But I know they’re not. It just isn’t right at your doorstep any more.”

Another, coming in from a meeting in Brighton Park where they had discussed the possibility of having parents in to discuss programming designed for them, exasperated, said, “Well, if there was ever any hope of getting BP people in here, we should give it up now? No one wants to come here.” When I asked Martin about this he just plainly said,

Katie, there are people who have lived their whole lives in Chicago, in Brighton Park, that have never been downtown. And a lot of our parents speak only Spanish. Can you imagine them coming in here? Even if they could get here which would be a whole day of work off and figuring out transportation, you need an ID to get in…that makes a lot of them very nervous. It’s better that you guys come out to us. That’s their home turf and they’ll welcome you but that’s how that’s gotta go.

When I asked about whether he thought they would’ve been more likely to visit 560 he shook his head, “Mmmm, I don’t know…the chances were definitely better but why should they have to come here to discuss their life over there? You know?”

Some staff, primarily CB, focused more on the distance “up” than the distance “away.” Many expressed this move as satisfying the discomfort that many non-CB staff felt in being faced with the reality of the neighborhoods, particularly the executives and particularly the CEO. The CB staff directly involved with developing the Collaborative partnership became increasingly exasperated with what they saw as a disregard. “Do you know she has yet to step foot in Brighton Park? We’ve rescheduled the same meeting, like, four times. Like she’s gotta talk herself into it and then she can’t go through with it”
said one. When I asked another about this she just laughed. “Um, never.” When I asked the person largely in charge of the Collaborative work from the Funder side she actually laughed out loud and then added, “She only goes there if there will be media or a prospective donor who could potentially write a big check.” While many were critical, one CB staffer agreed but added, “Oh…I wouldn’t expect her to…the work we do is way further into the weeds than she should get. She’d be pissed if she sat in those planning meetings.” Most responses fell along those lines with one CB staffer adding, “well, you know, Richard [former SVP of CB] tried to get the CEO and the Board to hold a meeting out there in Brighton Park. It didn’t happen. I think the idea did not sit well with any of them. Can you imagine all those bank executives rolling in to that chaos? I’d pay to see it…but it’s not gonna happen.”

As much of the idea of going into Brighton Park was a challenge, many considered the 30th floor as evidence of symbolically moving farther away from the people traditionally served by the investments of the organization. Echoing the idea of distance between reality and the 30th floor a CBer said, “It’s a great view but we’re not as accessible as we used to be…now it’s going to be much harder to ask agencies to come here. I’m almost embarrassed. If it were me, I’d wonder how [this organization] affords this office but can only afford to give my agency $10,000.” Another noted, “[this organization] started as a community trust…it’s hard to believe that when you look around here.” And then there was this exchange, on what was like any other Tuesday, that really captures several of the points of contest regarding this space and its meaning to
the organization. I had been talking with a fellow CB staff member about the challenges of this space and she commented:

“We live in a bubble here now—you can literally choose who you surround yourself with, the people you want to be here…and then you go out in the real world and it’s disappointing that what you talk about up here is not how it is out there”

“Yeah but we also have the advantage of an eagle-eye view,” her podmate added as he wheeled his chair over to where we were sitting. “We can see the big picture that you just can’t see when you’re on the street in a Lawndale or Brighton Park.”

“How can that be an advantage?” she asked. “If we can’t see the details clearly?”

“That’s not our role. We put a lot of money out into the community, not just one place. We need to be able to see the broader trends so we know we’re doing the most we can with our investments.”

The original commenter was in no way happy with that. Shaking her head she shot back, “People are not trends…we make a lot of cracks for them to slip through with that attitude.”

“Okay, okay…maybe what I’m saying is we need both…and we at least have a good view to see the broader perspective…that’s why people like Martin are so important…because he helps fill in the finer points.”

“I liked it better when I could see the finer points myself,” she responded.

A third podmate jumped in, “Guys…you know we moved here for the donors, right? It has nothing to do with the community.”

While the exchange from the first two podmates illustrated one of the more prevalent internal conflicts staff felt within the organization—what it means for this organization to be a funder now including how close to the neighborhoods they could and should be—the
third podmate reveals another emergent theme in this data regarding place within the sector: a move toward “corporate.”

“I’m sure the Board is more happy here. I think they always thought 560 was a little beneath them. This looks a lot more like their own offices,” a non-CB employee said. “Oh let’s face it: 560 was ugly. You can’t bring fancy people there and ask them for money across crappy office furniture and stained carpets with the El running past you every 10 minutes. You couldn’t even take a conference call there,” said a communications staff person. When I mentioned the conversations with others about the distance away from the neighborhoods she responded, “Well, how are we supposed to serve them better if we can’t raise money. It’s in their [neighborhooders in general] best interest that we moved here because at least we know we have a better shot at making good on our promises to them.” One of the SVPs said something similar, “Our duty is make sure we can give communities the resources they need. And if we can’t get those resources then what are we doing? Nothing.” When I asked how the CNA office affected this ability she quickly replied, “Oh it’s better here…they take us seriously here…and we still have you guys [in CB] to do the community stuff so everybody wins.” When I asked for a clarification on who’s taking us more seriously, “the Board. And probably any of the Corporate Donors they feel like they can be pulled in.”

---

4 This issue makes this particular Funder unique from other philanthropic entities. Because they must raise at least $50M to carry on as they have, there is a constant push to engage past donors for more money or engage new major donors. Given the state of the economy since 2008, personal major gifts form a small portion of their charitable revenue while they’re actively looking to increase the number of corporate donors (corporate philanthropies) and the size of their gifts. As an example, their newest gift and the largest in their history happened in Spring 2014: a major financial institution pledged $1.5M specifically to fund Collaborative work. Competing for these donors was the main focus of Emily Barman’s 2006 book, cited here.
This discussion of space and place is complicated for the Funder. First, it reveals an internal argument about what some might call “mission drift,” or the moving too far away from the original intent of the organization as a community trust. The move to a more corporate space in look and feel drew new attention to an old crisis: that of organizational identity. For years, those who know the organization well have argued to varying degrees “the business model isn’t viable.” Heavily reliant on small, payroll donations from individuals and an ultra-local charitable model\(^5\), both of these fronts proved increasingly problematic in a recessed economy. The answer to this problem lay in increasingly seeking corporate philanthropy dollars, often more tied toward impact initiatives (like the CSM) and largely agnostic to the location of the work. However, to attract a corporate audience, the Funder realized they needed to “play the part” which includes looking, sounding, and working corporate. That creates the appearance to donors that their money “is in good hands.” So, the change in space actually punctuated a philosophical shift for the Funder that started years ago. However, the immediate change it created jarred employees and created a renewed debate about what “community” meant to the organization.

This change also “laid bare” the strategic priorities of the organization thereby creating a new site for contest around the work of the Community Building department.

\(^5\) The public “tagline” about giving for the organization is “What’s raised local stays local” meaning that donors used to be assured that if they lived in Arlington Heights, for example, their donation would go to agencies in Arlington Heights. However, in Chicago where poverty is geographically bound, this model doesn’t work; people who can afford to give typically don’t live in the same places as those who need charitable dollars. Thus over the course of the last several decades this message has softened considerably to mean the money will be reinvested into “Chicagoland.” What happens is money raised largely from the Northern, Northwestern, and far Western Suburbs, is granted to agencies in Chicago and the South suburbs. Donors generally do not like this but corporate donors, more interested in investments targeted toward impact initiatives (like the CSM) are agnostic to geography. This and the larger sums they offer make them more attractive donors.
staff. This was especially true for the small team tasked with the work of creating and developing the Collaborative. Where once it had been thought that a commitment to “community” formed the central purpose for the organization, the move to CNA actually appeared to directly contradict that; while it would aid in fundraising, it only moved Community Building farther away from the communities of investment and particularly magnified the “outsider” status of the CB department as it tried to makes its way meaningfully into Brighton Park. This appears a long conversation about office space and symbolic representations of distance but their conversations about “community” reveal how this symbolism and representation are important. In the same way that the parents living in Brighton Park had such a close relationship to the neighborhood that the concept of community did not exist for them, the Funder’s experience of community is so abstract that the only reality they have is their organizational commitment to it.

Similar to the situation in Brighton Park regarding the concept of community, ideas of community existed on a scale of abstraction. In fact, in the early decision-making regarding the neighborhood to be chosen for Collaborative work, it was thought that having staff reside in the neighborhood might represent a conflict of interest. Typically, staff not in the Community Building Department tended to have a much more “ideal” view of community. One of the executives described community as “this one really special place be it physical or metaphorical.” When I mentioned the broadness of this description, he said, “Yeah I’m much more comfortable with the idealistic part of it than the realistic part…I just like to envision things larger than they are sometimes.” Although I never interviewed her personally, the CEO described community several
times to staff in all-staff meetings as “a place where necessary services are seamlessly integrated to holistically meet the needs of all its residents.” I noted the definition several times in my notes and it always appeared almost exactly the same. Many understood community as a geographical location that had needs. One staff member explained, “the way we decided what to address in the community was by having the local agencies in their communities come to us and say to us “Here is how we can best use money, here is what we need to help us meet this need.” Many staff, some CB, used the phrase “on the ground” to describe this need-based “community” but when pressed for particulars, they could not articulate them. On the organization’s website, a map titled “our community” lists almost every municipality and Chicago Community Area in an almost 50-mile radius, designating 58 “partner communities” described as “communities of greatest need.”

While running the gamut, all of these are clearly place-based ideas. What surprised me was the struggle to get to them. The same people who held deep conversations around the move away from “community,” when pressed for more detail floundered to articulate something more specific. I did begin to notice that, while all staff lived within the territory designated by the “our community” map, almost no one described the place they lived as their “community.” When I began to prompt people to identify what they consider their community to be, the answers were very revealing:

“I think my Temple is my community. It’s where I feel most at home.”

“I have a really tight group of friends I know I can count on and we laugh together. They’re definitely my community.”
“My yoga studio…especially this class on Thursday nights…I’ve been taking it so long and you never have to worry there about what people think of you.”

“Well, I live in Lincoln Park. Wait, are you talking about who I hang out with because that answer is totally different. I don’t even know one of my neighbors.

“Oak Park. I love my block. We’re a really proactive block…we have block parties and the kids can all hang out in a friend’s back yard and we don’t have to worry about what they’re up to because I know someone’s watching them. I do the same when they’re over here. Sometimes it can feel a little overwhelming but I’ve really grown to appreciate it.

This is interesting for two reasons. First, all of these are essentially communities of “purpose” or those based on affinitive bonds (Wuthnow et al), describing community as a set of relationships that provide comfort, safety, trust, friendship. The Temple would be a clear example of a community of meaning. Additionally, all except for the CB member who shared the last example showed a distinction in the way they conceptualized community in their personal lives and at work. Within the context of the Funder, community is a place of need, while in their personal lives community is predominantly a set of meaningful and satisfying relationships.

Maya, the woman who spoke of her block in Oak Park, happens to be a co-director, one of a handful of staff, who work directly on the Collaborative work in Brighton Park. She went on to say about community:

Some hold the belief that somehow communities will magically come together through educating children and I’m like, “No that’s not magic.” Creating these networks and making these decisions about the communities in which we see community schools taking root in is not magic…it’s different… capacity development that has to take place where people feel valued and feel like they have a right to a place at the table like, ‘Yeah, my voice matters, I have assets to contribute to the school development,’ to their child’s development and the development of other children of their community, that they can connect to their neighbor… like that is not magic. It honestly requires collaboration.
This is a fair summary of the approach to the idea of community held by the team working on the Collaborative. Their expression of community differed from everyone else’s. Miguel, the other co-director of the Collaborative for the Funder consistently referred to “being in community.” When I asked jokingly if that was a state of being he responded in earnest, “Well, yeah, I guess it is. You know you’re going to a place you’re not from, you’re a stranger there, and you’re asking them to share that with you and be honest with you about their experiences so yeah. You have to be careful there.” Another described it this way:

I feel like there is a lot of power with being... you know... a decision maker and a recommender and there has to be a some sensitivity to what it takes to actually be on the ground and if you have been on the ground then you will be more sensitive towards how things are really.

The members on this team especially tend to show a certain amount of regard for community as something that is important to them personally as a collaborative project. It involves place (Brighton Park), it holds potential, it includes a collective experience but ultimately whatever they help to create is something to which they do not belong. This is important, first, because they indicate some relationship to it; they might be outside, but they acknowledge that it’s there and requires collaborative effort. They also consistently acknowledge their status as outsiders sometimes to an extreme. “I’m not going to tell people how they should do what they’re gonna do... or what they should do. I just know I have resources I think they should have and wanna work together to figure out how to use them so that everybody wins,” Miguel said. “This mentality of thinking we can march in and tell people what they’re gonna do because we’re going to give them money is so... just wrong.” Miguel and Maya, a tag-team for the Funder on this project were
sitting there together as we talked about this casually one day in the office. “My one regret,” Maya started, “my one regret is not engaging the community [in Brighton Park] earlier. It’s mitigated by the fact that we are working with a community partner that has deep roots in to the community. That’s helped me feel a little less bad but I still don’t feel that we’ve engaged the community and it’s something we need to be doing.” “But we can’t really do that right now because of you know who,” Miguel piped up. “I don’t care,” she said. “We should’ve done it anyway. We know we’re right.”

The team from the Funder working on the Collaborative shares one significant trait: all have experience working for a community-oriented or neighborhood-based direct service provider. This trait, more than any other, seems a plausible explanation for their similar perspectives regarding community. Their experience of working in neighborhoods provides them something other than “visions” of what community could be or sounds like it should be. Their experience of working in, observing, and in some cases honing techniques for fostering some kind of collective sensibility or empowering neighborhood voices, lends reality to the concept of community. They see it not just as a place with particular traits or set of relationships, but as both. Moving this on a trajectory toward a collective sensibility, they agree, requires commitment to a collaborative process. And, try as they might, as long as they work for the Funder, they acknowledge they will be outsiders. Though they concede this, they understand their role for the Funder as valuable. When I asked Miguel, who obviously loved his days at the CBO he founded, why he left, he said, “I knew I’d be able to make much more of difference here.
I miss them everyday. But we’re talking about millions of dollars here that we have the power to put out the door in a particular way. I know exactly where that should go.”

**Community of Intention: United by Cause**

Obviously, for community schools and their neighborhoods, the idea of community matters. But contrary to what we might expect from an intentional collaborative effort dedicated to this work, there is little agreement on what community actually means. While the partner organizations, the Funder and the Lead Partner, agree that a sustainable, successful community is what both desire, what that means for the people who live there, work there, and coordinate and invest resources there differs. But the differences are not entirely without pattern; organizational contexts can serve both as a structure for tracing the different conceptualizations of community and also as a possible source for informing the development or refinement of those ideas.

In this framework, both dimensions of place and space matter. Those living in Brighton Park and sending their kids to the community schools there treat community and neighborhood as the same idea; they are focused on the success of their children first in the here and now. This will lead to a future Brighton Park that is better than the one in which they live now. Meanwhile, those working to provide services through the Lead Partner recognize the potential for a collective identity that has yet to reach maturity. Based on the vantage point of their work, as advocates for the neighborhood but also residents of Brighton Park, they see that, with organization, a collective sensibility is not far from reach. Thus, they direct their work toward helping those in the neighborhood
both recognize that their individual experiences, stresses, and troubles in Brighton Park are actually shared experiences and feel that their voice is strong enough to be heard.

The experiences of those living in and working in Brighton Park differ dramatically from The Funder staff works most physically and symbolically removed from Brighton Park and other neighborhoods. This physical distance of the office space in a high rise in the Loop in conjunction with a perceived organizational drift away from community as an organizational focus removes non-CB staff from the need to “run in” to neighborhood conditions that might otherwise keep thoughts about community at the front of the mind. However, the organization itself offers a vague, conceptual version of community expressed both as a place, Chicagoland, with a shared experience of “need.” Many non-CB staff have no experience of Brighton Park. CB staff differs from the rest of Funder staff in several ways relevant to the community discussion. First, they tend to share previous work experience in direct service in neighborhoods; though removed from it now, this experience continues to resonate for them and informs their ideas of communities as places but also as a kind of shared experience.

The idea of community also interests them. Rarely a day goes by that several CB staff, often gathered in a Pod, debate and discusses community both as an idea and the reality of what it could be in the neighborhoods served by the Funder. They also share concern at the Funder’s move toward a more corporate, fundraising-focused mission; the increasing physical and symbolic distance from the neighborhoods worries them. Since Brighton Park and the Lead Partner were named as parts of the Collaborative, their conversations now include the specificity of that place. Furthermore, most CB staff play
some role in the Collaborative work in Brighton Park. They came to know Martin well and several work with him and other staff at the Lead Partner regularly. They also tend to agree with Martin’s sensibility the specific goal of the Collaborative should be community empowerment, making neighborhood voices heard. Essentially, the CB staff working closely on the Collaborative tends to hold an idea of community that resembles the Lead Partner’s view more so than anyone at the Funder. This particular detail allows the boundaries of a community of intention to emerge.

In this analysis, the presence of several clear organizational bounds muddies the waters. Both the Funder and Lead Partner bring their own set of stakeholders: board members, funders, consultants, and educators. Add that into the context of a city broadly committed to a community school initiative and it becomes easy to assume that a community of intention includes anyone who shares the goal of better communities. This casts a wide, abstract community net. Instead, I argue, a community of intention is the opposite and it begins with a shared expression of intention that is inherently meaningful. Though most of this discussion focuses on different understandings of community, there was an intersection at which people from different organizational locations articulated a shared goal for the Collaborative work: Martin and Lead Partner staff and Maya and Miguel from the Funder talked about empowering community voices. This shared intention is also meaningful in that it is grounded in the reality of Brighton Park, holds real implications for those living and working there, and represents something valuable and important to work for. This group shares its value in relationship to the experience of Brighton Park.
These similarities lead us to recognize the emergence of others. These same people share an intention to “go after” or create specific change, agreeing that empowering community voices will positively change social, and possibly material, conditions in Brighton Park for its residents. The fact that they work closely and regularly on forwarding this goal by fully implementing the CSM cannot be ignored. This close working relationship allows for a bridge to form between the neighborhood and Funder; while those from the Funder regularly find themselves in Brighton Park, increasing their awareness of the particularities of the neighborhood, Martin spends time at the office of the Funder to the degree that Funder staff consider him as a colleague. In essence, each gets pulled into the community of the other and thus has a holistic view of the work. They share the advantage of the eagle-eye view as well as what those ideas up there look like as they take root in Brighton Park. While these comprise largely instrumental relationships, this team also over time has formed very close social bonds to each other.

This presents the only challenge I have to Brint’s definition of community mentioned earlier in which he goes on to explain that “work-related group and voluntary interest organizations…are not communities in the technical sense…because the orientation of at least the leading members is ultimately tied up with issues of rational interest” (2001: 9). Though the relationships among the team began as project-related, they have grown outside of the bounds of those rational relationships. Martin, Maya, Miguel and several of the team members socialize regularly on weekends. They know each other’s kids and their activities. Over time they began to share their lives over lunch
meetings and shared rides to the office for early board phone calls. The idea of Brighton Park as a revitalized place, encapsulated in this project, united them and allowed them to transcend the bounds of work and become a network unto themselves in which they found most of the elements of community that Brint mentions. In his mind, communities are drawn together principally by shared meanings and value and relationships built on those; I would argue that certain motives including work motives, like the intention highlighted here, can function as an initial social binder so long as they seed the building and maintenance of common ties and bonds that root communities.

As they work together, the community of intention forms strong ties to each other, rooted in their meaning work and shared experience of it while also gaining credibility in their respective communities, pooling their expertise, and increasing resources to start building the change in a way that will endure. Led by the nucleus of Martin, Maya, and Miguel, and involving others at the Lead Partner and Funder who share their vision and desire to work for this specific community change, the community of intention is a small but cohesive group. All are first-line stakeholders in this effort, the ones for whom much is on the line, and their work could be described as an ultra-local, community-based and community-focused social movement.

From an organizational standpoint, the community of intention exists within the Collaborative of the organizations bound in formal partnerships and including those stakeholders who do not play day-to-day roles in the development or decision-making surrounding the community school work. With their multiple, sometimes competing visions of community and different organizational cultures, the Collaborative poses a
structural conundrum for this community of intention contained within. While they rely on the partnership between the Funder and the Lead Partner to provide material resources, influence within the City offices, and an appeal to the largely untapped pool of potential corporate donors, the organizational cultures and expectations often create conflicts of meaning and expectation that must be addressed. The next chapters will address these points of conflicts that arise in implementation of the CSM and the strategies the Collaborative and the group forming the community of intention each undertake to advance the goal they believe to be best for “community” in Chicago.
CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING THE COLLABORATIVE

“We need to start talking about results.” The CEO of the Funder, a tall, thin, white woman in her early fifties, a native of the suburbs of Chicago with a degree in Economics from Johns Hopkins University and who listed “a member of Mensa” in the “hobbies” section of her work profile rarely found her way to my desk. But on that day in August 2012, with a red-fringed shawl wrapped around her neck and shoulders and peering over her glasses frames to match, she stopped (swooped) over to see “how we’re doing in Brighton Park.” The truth was the Collaborative work in Brighton Park, primarily lying on the desks of Maya, Miguel, and Martin, had no direct tie into the schools yet. It was mostly organizational. “We’re doing well,” I said. “I think they’re working on figuring out the details of the partnership at this point.” “Right,” she responded, “But what’s going on in the schools?” I sighed and paused, “Well, Martin’s already got programs in the schools but they were there before we got there, so I think we’re still in the planning phase at this point.” The CEO was obviously annoyed. “The Board has been asking about how we’re moving the needle in Brighton Park. Telling them we’ve been planning for a year will be a hard sell. I’m going to need you to start getting something we can report to them. We need to start talking about results.” I nodded my head, “Sure, sure. Let me go talk to Maya and see what we’ve got.”

She had already started moving before I finished so that her response was a nod from the back of her head. My coworkers at their desks nearby who had heard the
exchange rolled their eyes as I got up to walk over to Maya’s desk. My supervisor at the
time shook her head, “She just is never going to get it. It amazes me. I’ve tried to have
this conversation before. Does. Not. Get. It.” Another coworker just laughed. This results
conversation had been a problem before. The desire for leadership at the Funder to
attempt to show direct results (increased grades) from indirect means (investment in after
school programs) had permeated grant-making discussions before. In terms of the
Neighborhood Networks, however, the disconnect between reality and expectation
seemed even larger than usual and the pressure to report “results” was more intense than
for any of the other investments the Funder made. This was a new venture, a risk, and
anxiety, especially in the executive offices, ran high. When I told Maya about the “drive-
by,” she laughed. “Yeah, she said the same thing to me yesterday. And I reminded her
that the Lead Partner hasn’t even gotten their first check from us yet so, yeah, there’s
nothing to report except we haven’t made good on our side of the deal yet. We won’t be
moving the needle on the graduation rate any time soon.”

Both “moving the needle” and discussions about how the Funder could change the
graduation rate in Chicago had become running jokes in the history of the Collaborative.
“Corporate speak” was part of the office culture of the Funder. It was common in
meetings to hear co-workers talk about “seamless integration” of services, “closing the
loop” and “circling back” on task lists, and even “maximizing synergy” and “thinking
synergistically.” But “moving the needle” had become central to the Funder’s ethos and
stood for impact, specifically distinct impact. That is, Funder executives and the Board,
ultimately sought to know exactly how Funder money was positively changing Chicago
neighborhoods. To move the needle was to show that Funder money was *measurably improving* community conditions against specific strategically determined indicators. The joke was in the disconnect between the size of the grants the Funder made and the investment it would take to *actually* create the kind of change they sought. Grants put out into neighborhoods “of greatest need” were relatively small compared to neighborhood need. For instance, it was typical for a grant of $25,000 to go to an education agency in Lawndale with the expectation that it would measurably change some kind of community condition in Lawndale. Almost 40,000 people live in the 3.2 square miles of Lawndale, whose median income is $25,000. Practically, there’s no chance of changing the deeply embedded economic and social ills of Lawndale with a grant that size. But this kind of expectation was common and in Brighton Park it manifested as the spoken goal of some to increase the graduation rate in Brighton Park by implementing the CSM there.

Several times in the Neighborhood Network’s earliest development, the CEO of the Funder stated to different audiences—the Board, corporate donors, and to our internal team—that her intention with the Neighborhood Networks was the increase the number of Brighton Park students who graduate from high school. This became a running joke because the CSM on which the Collaborative would work to fully implement was in the middle schools. Realistically, this meant that any change in the number of students graduating from high school would appear in four years and not one year into implementation. Furthermore, Maya, Miguel, I, and others consistently discussed the difficulty with increasing a rate, especially in a neighborhood with more than 3000
students in the high school. Though eventually she would soften the language about this particular “needle move,” both the CEO and the Board continued to insist on “tracking” these kinds of measures to be shown on a “dashboard” that could display, in real time, the Collaborative’s “progress.” In August 2012, without any Funder dollars yet in the neighborhood, they wanted to see progress. They wanted results.

**A Data-Driven Collaboration?**

This particular demand—the demand for results—became the central debate and divisive force in the life of the Collaborative and the community of intention introduced in Chapter Four. In that regard, the Collaborative was not new. CSM initiatives tend to drive for data that will show some kind of improvement; it is common that the CSM be framed as a radical departure from what are usually failing public schools, either one school or a system of multiple schools. So when school districts attempt CSM implementation, it is for the stated goal of improving academic performance. This was true in Chicago when Arne Duncan introduced them formally into CPS in 2004, hoping they would improve grades and other cities—New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco to name a few—did the same.

The Funder’s Collaborative officially took this a step farther by intending to use the CSM to improve “community conditions.” They hoped not just for improved grades but sustainable grade improvement over time that would lead to graduation. That kind of sustainability would indicate a change in the fabric of the community, ushering in sustainable community conditions. A certain logic dictates this motive. From the perspective of leadership at the Funder, whose understanding of their business was to
show impact, the thought was that if we introduced a new method for educating,  
something more alternative and less tested and that included a comprehensive approach 
 to multiple social ills in the neighborhood, that it would amplify impact quickly. In other 
words, they saw the CSM as a “quick fix” for neighborhoods that were struggling so 
profoundly that any amount of focused good had to work. What confounded me was this 
assumption despite studies in Chicago at CPS that had proven otherwise.

In 2007, Duncan commissioned researchers at UIC to conduct an initial 
evaluation of the CSI, then three years into implementation. The study found negligible 
gains in academic performance. The evaluation discovered that while behavioral 
measures of involvement (overall enrollment in out-of-school-time programs, homework 
completion, classroom behavior, and overall classroom performance) showed weak 
positive improvement, grades in reading and math and standardized test scores in each of 
those subjects were comparable to the district averages. Furthermore, the evaluation 
found no causal relationship, positive or negative, between participation in OST 
programs and grade or test score performance (Whelan 2007). These findings concurred 
with those in similar evaluations on community school implementations across the 
country (Adams 2010; Castrechini and London 2012; Dryfoos 2000; Robison 1993). 
Despite this, leadership at the Funder pressed for impact data early and often.

The fact that Funder Leadership pressed ahead with this approach signaled that 
something beyond practicality or even analysis might be at play. Something about 
“measuring impact” struck a nerve with all involved. Emotions ran high on this topic. 
There were fights in meetings and whispering in huddles around desks. More so than
determining the mechanics of partnership, this measurement issue made people angry. Questions were frustratingly simple and answers elusive. What was obvious was there was disagreement on what, exactly, would and should be measured. How would we define, in concrete terms, what community was and should be. What should we hope for this “community building” enterprise? What would success mean? The definitional nature of these questions also signaled that the analysis of this situation should involve a consideration of culture. Over time what became clear was that the fight about measurement was really a fight about what community should be and what sort of organization would be best positioned to realize their vision. This was an ideological fight playing out in and between the contexts of two partner organizations and the neighborhood of Brighton Park, each with their own understandings of power, authority, and legitimacy. At stake was ownership and decision-making ability in this Collaborative endeavor. The measurement question really provided the arena in which these larger issues would be negotiated.

**Culture, Contests, and Collaboratives**

While the literature on multi-stakeholder collaborations is small and tends toward the organizational standpoint, the situation in which I sat at the Funder leant itself much more clearly to a cultural analysis than a strict organizational analysis would. The organizational literature was helpful in establishing a context within which to understand how cross-sector collaboratives tend to function (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone 2006), the potential they hold for creating community level change (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997;
Mandell 2001; Rethemeyer 2005), and pitfalls of this kind of organization ((Foster-
Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, and Allen 2001; Bryson, Crosby and
Middleton Stone 2006; Dryfoos 2000), including the novelty of this kind of
organizational arrangement (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Roussos and Fawcett 2001).
However, their focus on the collaborative as the end unto itself limited this literature’s
usefulness here. While it does provide some food for thought regarding the structure of
the Collaborative itself, its contribution is limited to examining that structure, whereas the
purpose for the Collaborative lay beyond just establishing itself. In fact, the
Collaborative as an organization was purely secondary to the work of figuring out how to
implement the CSM in Brighton Park.

As I watched this story unfold, it became clear that cultural work was underway
and that several concepts from different portions of the expansive culture literature could
help to understand it. Dealing with two established, distinct, organizational entities
required some consideration of the normative concepts around “rules” (Giddens 1984) or
schemas (Sewell 1992; DiMaggio 1997) as social constructs that establish expectations
for “acceptable” ideas, actions, and prescriptions for action that, though are observable
and normative, are ultimately mutable in the hands of individual actors with various
resources available in various scenarios. Schemas are contained and generated within
larger meaning systems, including language, symbolic codes, and the development of
codes (the rules and expectations) of public discourse (Alexander 2001; Alexander and
Smith 1993)—which we understand to be real and efficacious (Alexander and Seidman
1990; Alexander and Smith 1993; Bellah et al. 1985; Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986;
Wuthnow 1984, 1987, 1991, 1992). They actively form and organize the ways in which individuals, as members of many and varied social groups, produce and reproduce the social world. Often, these systems employ categories we often overlook because they seem so basic and natural. Ethnicity (Lipset 1990; Marx-Ferree and Gamson 2002), race, gender (Leiberson, Dumain, and Baumann 2000), nationality (Anderson 1991; Meyer et al. 1997; Orgad 2006) and community (Sampson 2010) become important and used markers to categorize people in aggregate but meaningful ways. Both the Funder and Lead Partner bring to the table two distinct “ways of doing business” that play a role in the contests around the Collaborative work.

Part of the challenge of imagining what the Collaborative could be involves work that could be described as boundary work, specifically symbolic boundary work. Symbolic boundaries are often used by individuals or groups to make themselves distinct from others and define who they are in relation to others. This happens in a variety of ways: the types of clothes they buy and wear (Crane 2000), the values they espouse as important, thus establishing moral boundaries (Lamont 1992), the identity politics and activism in which they engage (Armstrong 2002), and simply the lines they draw in conceiving of themselves as something particular, like “American” (Hewitt 1989) or “living the good life” (Kefalas 2003) just to name a few. These symbolic boundaries appear on an aggregate level; in each of these cases, the symbolic boundary comes about because individuals sharing a common social trait—class, gender, sexuality, or nationality—use a symbolic boundary to more distinctly define who they are.
On an interactive level, cohesive groups often forge distinct identities based specifically on the types of interaction in which they engage within a bound social space. Residents of Chicago neighborhood Beltway (Kefalas 2003) and small-town Appleton (Varenne 1977) developed distinctive local cultures based on local meanings of broader realities of social life and bounded by shared meanings of ideas like “America,” “home,” “friends,” and “love.” Boys in Little League, via the interaction with their teammates and coaches, learned what it means to be “fair,” “hardworking,” and to “hustle” (Fine 1979). Idioculture, defined by Gary Alan Fine defines as “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction” (1979: 734) are evidence of local negotiated and shared meanings that serve to identify and distinguish groups of people who consider themselves meaningfully connected and, thus, symbolically bound (Kefalas 2003). Boundary objects (Gieryn 1999) often serve as the site or object of negotiation around which symbolic boundaries are either maintained or re-drawn. For groups interactive enough to have defined idiocultures, social location whether physical (Beltway, Appleton) or organizational (Little League) plays a role in drawing up symbolic boundaries as definitions of self.

Consideration of both the organizational schemas and the negotiation of symbolic boundaries allows us to “deconstruct” the level of formality brought to the negotiation table by these two partner organizations. The work of the Collaborative represents an agreement by both partner organizations to attempt a partial transformation. That is, neither the Funder nor the Lead Partner agreed to completely change the way they do
business generally; their commitment was to part in the CSM implantation in Brighton Park. For this reason, their organizational “ways” not only remain largely intact but remain uncompromised for the most part, thus playing an active role in what is negotiated and how. Meanwhile, imagining the organizational Collaborative work as symbolic boundary work allows us (and them) the freedom to tap into the potential of the CSM to bring about something altogether new. In this way, two old dogs try to come together to figure out a new trick.

**On Shaky Ground**

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, the context of CPS cannot be understated as a player in the formation of both the Collaboration and its product. Chicago, as a city and both the social and geographic location of this community school collaborative, is an environment of collaborative opportunity but also challenge. This can be attributed mostly to Chicago Public Schools as a “situating institution” for this work. In short, because of the tumultuous relationship between the Mayor’s Office and the Chicago Teacher’s Union that plays out in CPS, creating an undercurrent of instability that runs throughout the public schools in general. Scholars would call this a “turbulent environment” (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone 2006), one in which “the ground is in motion” (Emery and Trist 1965). However this is not the only source of instability.

Conversations around the limitations of CPS seemed to begin with discussion about the lack of funding. I was struck by the lack of rhetoric around the fact that, as one program director said, “Funding has been a challenge. There is no money…..” But it was never as simple as “no money.” Each discussion that started with “no money,” revealed
other environmental challenges that contribute to the “shifting sands” of this work. One seasoned program coordinator commented, “I think there’s opportunity in crisis…there is no money… And as tax payers we don’t have the stomach any more for funding that feels good or for disjointed, disconnected programs.” Another added, “No one can afford to be siloed or territorial anymore. You have to work together. Principals [cannot] just layer program on top of program. There’s no money…something has to change for this to work.” Almost a mantra among stakeholders in community school work in Chicago, it is true. There’s no money. And with changing eligibility requirements for the Federal 21st Century Funds that Duncan used to launch this work in Chicago ten years ago, it seems that there will be even less money available to providers.

After they state the most central reality, that there is no money, the providers above touched on another source of instability that magnifies the effect of no funding: lack of central coordination, vision and guidance at a district level. Disjointed programming, service delivery silos, and territorialism speak to a lack of seeing the broader picture, assessing it, and making strategic moves to course correct; all of these are tasks for which a central organizing party or “backbone provider” (as industry lingo would have it) are typically responsible. Katherine from the Federation for Community schools he summarizes the problem this way:

The district uses [the Community School Model] as a program, right? And it’s not. It is a strategy and they don't use the strategy because they are very stuck in “we have a community school initiative”… The other thing is [that] the district does not view this as a district wide strategy and it is, it is happening in a ton of places. The midway Network: that to me is an entire network of community schools because the chief there thinks that is important. So that kind of understanding needs to happen at the district leadership level we… are working
on that… transitions have been a challenge. Funding has been a challenge. There is no money…

This resonates particularly because she proposes that the district itself has an essential misunderstanding of the CSM on two important fronts: it’s purpose and it’s scale. Both of these were fairly common themes, especially the issue of scale, in my other interviews but never articulated quite as succinctly as Katharine managed. Both issues carry major implications for undertaking the work and determining its outcomes.

In this type of work, typically, programs address a specific need; the degree to which the need is addressed determines the “success” of the program. Strategies, however, are understood as courses of action that will address bigger social problems; “successful” strategies are those that have created sustainable changes or enduring paths to sustainable changes. Though a full discussion of this point will follow in the next chapter, suffice it to say here that disagreement about whether the CSM is a program or a strategy will create a constant source of discord among partners who share the work. Though the point remains up for debate, practitioners and CSM experts tend to agree that the CSM is a strategy. Thus, whether or not they realize it, the District approaching its implementation in the city as a program creates another constant source of instability among stakeholders in this work. Whether directly discussed or not, it creates a fundamental point on which the cross-sector partners must negotiate agreement along with all of the other organizational debates. The same logic applies to the issue of scale. If the district understands this as a program only for those schools who house the “neediest” children, it will never involve enough schools and partners to make discernable changes to community conditions.
Like funding, the other most often repeated theme perhaps lends some insight to both of the types of issues mentioned before. As one director of programming put it, “I know that every single person in any initiative or strategic program, big or small, has said that the amount of turnover [at the District level] has had a huge detrimental effect on community school work.” A resource coordinator added, “I think at this point any kind of stasis in leadership that can happen, whether or not we love them, would be positive…it would be a positive move.” This appears to hit direct service providers the hardest as a resource coordinator notes, “One of the challenges to creating a strong initiative is that the amount of turnover [at CPS]…and I think a lot of other people in our [provider] boat agree.” Arne Duncan rolled out the Community School Initiative in CPS in 2003 under Mayor Richard M. Daley. Since then, there have been four CEOs of CPS (one was an interim) and a new mayor, Rahm Emanuel, who brought with him sweeping changes to the way CPS would ultimately run. This lack of stable leadership not only presents itself as another source of environmental instability but could also, arguably, account for some of the problems substantial funding gaps and city-wide understanding and coordination of this work. A colleague of mine focused on advocacy work around community schools noted, “It’s hard to make a solid case to [state] lawmakers about opening up more public funding streams when local leadership looks so haphazard.” It also creates a lot of back-tracking for providers seeking necessary buy-in and support at the district level. Katherine at the Federation for Community schools describes this particular frustration:

I remember being in a meeting with [former CPS CEO] Ron Huberman and I thought, “He’s getting it. Bingo.” He was getting it and then a week later he steps
down. Terry Mazzaney [interim CPS CEO] got it too. He got involved in it from the beginning but he was basically, in fact he was, a seat warmer. I thought he put a tremendous recommendation in front of Brazzard that, I think if Brazzard had been more strategic, he would have basically taken a lot what Mazzaney and Dr. Payne put together and let go. But it never happened. So we lost a lot of time and continuity.

Every time the CEO of CPS changed, community school providers had to re-argue their case for viability in Chicago. While it made them good at their argument, it also took a lot of time and created considerable frustration among practitioners who could not get any real work done. Additionally, this high-level of district leadership turnover put the office of the Community Schools Initiative in CPS, the district office for distribution of the 21st Century money and the assessment of the programs receiving it, in a terrible position. A community school coordinator explains, “Adaline Ray and the Community School Initiatives office have done a tremendous job in moving that work forward in the state of, ‘she’s in this department, now she’s in this department, now someone new is her boss…now it’s someone else’” also noting, “there is so much turmoil and unrest that anybody who can stick around and get that ship to stabilize… even if it's not forever can make a big strides… it's sad to say that…it's pretty uneven right now.”

Although the challenges they pose are clear, these three sources of environmental instabilities caused predominantly by instabilities in CPS create an environment ripe for cross-industry collaborative work. In fact, it is this type of environment that often spurs collaboration. The need to “decrease uncertainty and increase organizational stability” (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone 2006) exists in tandem with the acknowledgement by stakeholders that they cannot achieve the outcomes they want without each other (Hudson, et al. 1999; Roberts 2001) in this environment suffering from what scholars call
“sector failure” or “the situation [in which] single-sector efforts to solve a public problem are tried first and found wanting” (Bryson 2006). Examples of sector failure tend cite the stepping in of government after a particular sector of the market fails (Brandl 1998; Weimer and Vining 2004). Here, I would argue that the City of Chicago and CPS, local government, actually perpetrated the sector failure. In this case, their own implementation of the CSM fell short in providing the financial support, guidance, and stability the initiative required. With the threat of loss of any progress made on positive changes in neighborhood schools, this unstable environment required service providers to seek independent, largely private, funding sources and additional service partnerships across several industries to keep the work afloat on their own in an educational environment that remains unstable. Thus the idea for collaboration became increasingly attractive, although it was not new.

As discussed above, environmental instability can be detrimental to community school work. However, it also presents an incredible opportunity for collaboration. While they deal with the “shifting sands” of CPS, direct service providers have built over time several of the “linking mechanisms” (Waddock 1986) necessary for strong collaboratives. First, they have established relationships with potential conveners, local funders, who can facilitate the high-level coordination they need to further their work (Gray 1989; Waddock 1986) and garner the interest of diverse potential stakeholders (Crosby and Bryson 2005a). There is also high-level agreement among the conveners and stakeholders regarding the educational and community needs in neighborhoods value of community schools as the strategy to address those. This “initial (albeit general)
agreement on the problem definition” (Gray 1989; Waddock 1986) is essential for the
buy-in required to seed a multi-stakeholder collaborative. In Chicago, because of the
persistent dysfunction of CPS and turnover it leadership, there is nothing but opportunity
for a multi-stakeholder, cross-sector collaborative to make significant change. Seizing
that opportunity, however, proved harder than it seemed.

**Necessary Collaboration Contested**

Though the larger social context of CPS provided opportunity for cross-sector
collaboration, it also leveled the playing field in terms of how collaboration might
happen. The fact that the “lack of money theme” ran so deeply throughout my data and is
supported by the observation that many private foundations currently work within the
community schools world. However, most funders accept the role of “investor,” working
to find money to give to agencies who are assumed to provide the expertise in
implementing the model. This was not the case in the Collaborative. From its birth, the
Neighborhood Network was designed to allow the Funder more “direct access” into “the
Community.” Stated throughout the marketing materials for this initiative were phrases
like “taking community change to the next level” and “working deep in the community.”
The leadership and Board of the Funder understood this as a chance to go where other
funders had not. The dire straits of the school district made this desire more palatable for
agency partners and community workers who, programmatically, had no need to
collaborate *except* that there was no money and no leadership at the district level. And so
the partnership would be mutually beneficial to both but would make each partner
organization vulnerable to points of contest to their “way of doing business.” These
contests occurred around three points of ambiguity in the work of the Collaborative: measures of success, leadership and vision, and disagreement about legitimate expertise and trust.

**The Measure of Success: “It Just Ain’t Workin’”**

Stories about the CSM usually begin with “it’s hard.” Everyone, no matter how seasoned, owns an arsenal of stories about the various road blocks that make this particular kind of “community engagement” work hard. But the honesty of one of our staff one day struck me. Normally upbeat and buoyant, one day he got back to his desk, dropped into his chair, and when I raised my eyebrows as if to ask, “Troubles?” he just said, “Sometimes things work…I was hopin’ it’d work, but generally things ain’t workin’ here.” By the Spring of 2014, staff involved with the Collaborative were feeling low. Our department had just weathered a string of staff who sought other jobs. It was a frigidly cold winter. But aside from the environment, he was right. We had, at that point, very little to show for the effort expended on this Neighborhood Network Collaborative. But this, I would argue, was not a fault of the programming or lack of effort. It was due to the stalemate that had been reaching in the continuing debate over how to measure success in the Collaborative. Though “stuff” had been happening, there was an ongoing debate over whether or not we should count it as “success.”

This was particularly unfortunate for morale given that, In the case of the Collaborative, success and a sense of achievement were not just socially constructed expectations but were also brand new; there was no need for them to reference any kind of organizational rules. There was an opportunity to define success in whatever way
made sense. However, there was little agreement between stakeholders regarding what it meant to be successful in this new venture. As a resource and context, CPS provided practically no guidance on this matter but the reporting for the 21st Century grants awarded by the district required reporting on academic performance scores. Thus, many principals seemed to expect that the CSM should deliver on improving grades. In that same vein, as the opening vignette demonstrated, the CEO and Leadership at the Funder expected the same kind of “measurable” results: largely quantitative numbers that might show improvement against a baseline. This was not a new tactic for the Funder. As one long-time staff member quipped, “You know how it is around here…if you can’t measure it, it didn’t happen.” The Funder’s definition of success, however, was much more ambitious given their hope to change neighborhood conditions through the implementation of the CSM. For the entire Neighborhood Network enterprise (which includes Health and Financial interventions for family members of students as well) they stated the following indicators as the measurement framework:

- # of pre-school children ready for kindergarten
- # of middle school students promoted to the next grade level and on track to graduate
- Parent engagement indicators
- # of people placed in jobs and job retention rates
- # of people improving their financial position (income, net worth, credit score)
- Dollars generated through tax return assistance
- # of people connected to a primary care provider
- # of people who reduced barriers to access health care (Funder’s Website)

Success meant improvement on these same indicators against a baseline. While being highly quantitative, they also span far outside the purview of the planned implementation for the CSM in several middle schools in Brighton Park. I should also note that, as
Measurement Manager, the determination of these indicators was my job. This list represents months of negotiation with the CEO and SVP\(^1\) of Marketing who both fought for “community level indicators” for months that included median level income, graduation rates, kindergarten graduation rates, and improvement in obesity rates in Brighton Park. Though I eventually prevailed in talking them out of the community level indicators, these still remained as the standard of success.

The Leadership, many of whom work in either economics or finance, found these to be marginally acceptable and would regularly push for more detailed, aggressive measurements. I vividly remember a conference call with a Board member who, in exasperation at what she felt were rudimentary measures just asked, “How are we supposed to stay relevant if we can’t show that we’re making some kind of change?” “Yes, I know,” responded the CEO, “but apparently community change doesn’t always map well onto a graph.” That was a line that I had used to explain why trying to change the poverty rate in Brighton Park was too ambitious a goal. It was obvious the CEO did was not happy but she could not say for sure that my advice was skewed. While the Leadership was unsatisfied, others invested in the Collaborative work saw this framing as completely inaccurate and doomed to fail.

Many of the staff at the Funder critiqued this “quantifiable” approach to success, taking issue with an over-reliance on “measurable impact” as a standard for assessing work that sometimes does not translate into improved, quantifiable results. The fact of my position of Measurement Manager, established in 2011, tipped off many “old timer”

\(^1\) Senior Vice President
staff to the fact that measurement was going to become even more central than the old logic models that essentially created a brand for the Funder in its early days. One of the CB staff told me in an interview, “We’re friends now so I can say it, but I knew when I saw you coming and I saw what they were asking you to do that we were all in trouble.” When I asked for further clarification she said, “Well, at least before we could talk a good game…but then you showed up and it meant we were going to have to actually prove stuff. They just got serious about making the motions around their impact.” “Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

Well not if you’re actually doing something no. Look. We give unrestricted dollars to agencies and tell them that it’s fine if they use it to keep the lights on and then we turn around and want to claim that we made some kind of direct change in grades or income levels. We can’t say that…it’s a long stretch between ‘your lights were on and your grades went up so our money must have helped improve grades.

Most CB staff were concerned about the logical leap required for the Funder to “claim” impact results achieved by funded agencies. “It’s not like we’re on the ground feeding the homeless people and knocking on doors to find jobs. Agencies do that. We just allow them to get their work done,” said one. “It feels like we’re in the business of buying outcomes.” Very few staff agreed with the push toward more quantifiable impact statements.

Though the majority of CB staff, in varying degrees, considered this “impact measurement” approach dishonest, staff involved deeply with the Collaborative also felt it was misguided in that it downplayed the central challenge of the CSM which was the development of cross-sector relationships. Katherine of the Federation explains the problem with this “educational progress” approach to success:
I’ve heard principals, all different kinds of people say, “We have all these programs at our school I don’t understand why we are not making progress.” Well, that is like half way, right? Like you throw all the ingredients in the bowl then sit there like, “I don't understand why I don't have a brownie.” [Laughing] Well, you don't have brownies because there’s still other stuff that has to take place. So, you may have in a regular school all the programs, maybe, in place or the fundamentals of what kids need may be in place but if they are disjointed from each other or uncoordinated and not integrated with an overall vision for students’ success and for positive development they are not going to be effective. It will be…like you have all the ingredients for a really great pan of brownies but have you mixed it together? Have you turned the oven on?

For Katherine and many others deeply embedded in community school work, the key to measuring success lies in acknowledging the building and maintaining of new kinds of relationships that are new and deep. Martin often said, “It’s all about the relationships.” In his interview he expanded, “It has to be about the relationships. Parents talking with principals but not just about discipline. Teachers texting parents if there’s an issue. I walk into that school everyday and people know me. I know them. They should know you guys [Funder staff] too. It’s a join effort.” Maya also concurred, “This is some of the hardest work I’ve ever done and yet I have nothing to show for it because we’re not counting the ‘touchy-feely’ stuff. We’re out there connecting people, bringing in volunteers, making things happen, I’m leveraging shit everyday, but none of it is gonna add up to better grades this year.” At the request of my supervisor at the time, a seasoned direct service veteran named Richard, I spent the better part of a year developing an entire matrix of what we came to call “social indicators.” Hoping that we could begin to quantify some of the “touchy-feely” stuff, if only for the acknowledgement that that work, too, directly led us to some kind of success. This matrix focused primarily on the development of new partnerships (programmatic and funding), the number of resources
brought in to Brighton Park (human and financial), existing partnerships leveraged, and included some of the parent engagement that would show parental presence at school and engagement in academic activities outside of school. That bait and switch failed in two ways: while the Leadership liked it and approved it as an addition to the existing framework (fail #1), they wondered what kind of progress we were making on the graduation rate in Brighton Park (fail #2). There was an unwillingness on both sides to let go of their own ideas of what we “should be counting.”

It may not be surprising that the division into these groups corresponded to the division in the way people understood community; while the leadership at the Funder tended to conceive of community in an abstract way, those who were brought onto the team as having experience working in community tended to resist “counting” at all but, when pressed, favored the approach that focused on the quality and effects of relationships. Time also plays a role in these expectations. Those favoring marking progress in ways that hint at the large-scale, neighborhood level changes believe this can happen immediately possibly because they lack the day-to-day knowledge of Brighton Park. My field notes make repeated mention of the observation that “the Board makes decisions about neighborhood investment as though they are managing portfolios. They live and decide by a market mentality.” From this financial mindset, this schema, they approach the work of community with similar expectations for “reports on progress.” Maya and I would often discuss this as a limitation. “There is very little tolerance for anything but black and white. And they’re completely risk-averse. AND they want it right now. So it’s a constant struggle to translate our work into their terms.”
Meanwhile, those working in Brighton Park felt firsthand the lag and sometimes the mess that happens in moving from ideas to plans. My field notes also reflect the frustration around this point, “I constantly find myself reminding people around here [Leadership] that just because you give agencies money and people go to programs, you are not guaranteed results.” Furthermore, it was well-established by those working directly on the Collaborative that to achieve the ultimate goal of creating sustainable neighborhood change, relationship building had to happen and it just took time. And strategy. Katherine and Martin both would often say, “this [partnership] is a marriage. It’s not just a date.” Both between organizations and with the neighborhood, the relationships that would create the kind of change people wanted would take time and commitment and would be difficult. It also required strategy. Miguel had a more colorful way to describe relationship building:

   It’s okay to get in bed with people [organizational partners], as long as your clothes are on. The minute your clothes come off that’s when all the subversive, slimy shit that could go wrong and make you look bad can happen, because you are naked in bed with this person. When I worked in Cicero, “You know in Cicero we were in bed with the town. If I recall I was fully clothed…I had my shoes on in that bed, you know, like, there was not snowball’s chance that I was ever going to be caught with my pants down or anything thereafter and so that says to all parties, that we will never … ask anything crazy of the other and thats not the relationship we have.

Those working on the Collaborative were steeped in this kind of relationship-building everyday. The process that Miguel talks about describes what “leveraging partnerships” meant to the Funder and it meant often bringing unlikely partners to the table and getting all parties to agree on a common agenda. For many on this team, that was the most important, central work of the Collaborative, the results of which would never render
success based on the definition put forward by Funder Leadership. While they had a case for arguing (and they did) that the “impact metrics” of the funder targeted goals over which the Collaborative had little control or direct influence, their frustration was also fueled a bit by sour grapes. The meat of their work was not recognized and, therefore, they felt they would never be successful in a way that Funder leadership acknowledged.

**Ambiguity in Strategic Vision and Purpose**

One of the more confounding characteristics of this collaborative is that several years in, many people continued to struggle to understand the purpose of the Collaborative. My Measurement Manager position required that I attend many meetings to make sure the “messaging” around the work of the Collaborative was correct and clear and that any questions from staff not in CB were answered correctly. My field notes from those days reflect this disconnect:

> Just sat through another all-staff and listened to the CEO completely mangle a question about the Learning Launch. She can sit in meetings for hours and talk about how much this will make an impact but I think, at the base of it, she has no idea what this work looks like in reality.

> Today a fundraising manager asked me about our community work in high schools. She was shocked when I told her we don’t do community work in high schools. “Really?!...that’s what I thought the Learning Launch stuff was...” People are confused.

Maya said it much more succinctly: “The thing about this project [sighs and laughs]… this project has been one where, you know, let’s just say there are 5 of us around the table working on it and each one of us has a slightly differently nuanced understanding of what it is that we are doing. “ The real problem stemmed from the fact that we had the general agreement across the partners that this would essentially be implementing the CSM in
Brighton Park and that it would be for generating community-level change. This was enough for our funder, as credible “boundary spanning leader with credibility in multiple arenas” (Kastan 2000) to bring together the initial set of stakeholders (Gray 1989). But after Leadership negotiated initial stakeholder buy-in among the agencies who would be lead partners, major donors, and other foundations, the meaning of things like, “community impact” the “community school model,” and “integrated wraparound services” were handed “down the chain” primarily to Maya and Miguel to “figure out” with the other partners. In other words, once the “sell” was done, there was a handoff of the project for implementation.

As the strategic direction of the work evolved (“hub-and-spoke,” “web of providers,” “neighborhood network”) the CEO retained only the “old” high-level conceptual understanding she had originally used to pitch to the stakeholders and communicate that to others, despite changes or advancements the team had made to the concepts. My field notes show this:

There’s a consistent disconnect between the understandings of what a “hub-and-spoke” model is and how it relates to community schools. When the CEO talks about the “hub” she continually says “we’ll be in there.” I don’t know if she means physically or just as an investment. I’ve heard her say both. And she’s the only one still talking about “hub and spoke” which is more an organizational arrangement—a service delivery model-- and not a strategy.

So there was always a kind of “iterative” confusion where those on the pulse, the team working to develop ideas that could be implemented and goals, were sometimes one and two steps ahead the conventional wisdom of the meaning of the work.

To attempt to address this, Sally hired a group of consultants to work with the team. Though she framed it as “building team capacity,” the team found them difficult.
Although the issue of the consultants will reappear in more full discussion later focused on the issues of trust and legitimacy, they actually contributed to the confusion surrounding the strategic purpose conversations because they created division among the “worker bees” by not getting in line with what the workers understood the purpose to be. In reality, the consultants put forward the opinions held by many of the senior leaders and the board of the funder that contradicted the workers’ understanding of purpose.

This strategic confusion existed because there was a transition from the “old way” of thinking about the work as “holistic integration of services” to “community impact” work. Early on, fights in Neighborhood Network team meetings were common. Passing the conference room you could sometimes hear them happening. When I asked about these disagreements that become somewhat infamous around the department, Maya noted:

I think [the Neighborhood Network plan] was so vague and so conceptual that as it went from loose concept to a more fine tuned concept to implementation, like, something got lost in that translation. Or everyone took a slightly different interpretation of the concepts and so there were points where you know I get into these debates. Especially with the consultants.

The disagreement itself was part of a larger task of convincing leadership that the Neighborhood Network plan should be about “community impact” and not “holistic service integration.” Briefly, the difference lies in the end goal: integrating services refers just to a concerted effort to coordinate services in one place so that residents have access to a holistic set of services that can meet their present needs. The goal is need amelioration. But as a strategy for making true differences in neighborhoods, it’s not effective because it creates only the illusion of anything collective and the team,
including our agency partners, knew it would not be enough to get the results Sally had
promised to other stakeholders. Maya would get particularly annoyed with the
consultants who were not “making the leap.” She said, “I’d sit in those meetings and
everything, everything was a high priority…and I started saying “this is just an
assortment of programs. I don’t see how this…all ties together. What are the community
level impacts we want to make?” And we were like, well ultimately we need to define
that and ideally we would’ve done that first and then ‘here are the strategies.’”

One of the critical problems in the leadership she identifies is the tendency for
them to get caught in some middle-ground conceptually. Of the CEO, she said, “She very
much agreed that this assortment of programs is not what we were trying to go with. That
said, she was not as bold as I wanted her to be about really tackling a community problem
or about the idea of really honing in.” So while she said she agreed, the CEO hesitated to
move toward a community-level mindset, despite the fact that by embracing the work of
implementing the CSM, she would eventually have to or the work would fail. Miguel
took a harder line with her. He recounted a “come to Jesus” meeting they’d had:

I told the CEO, if [our funder] is serious about being in community and really
rolling these things out, then we have to be invested differently in community.
That means being at their meetings, at their special functions that they have, you
know coordinating where it counts, bringing other people to the table where it
makes sense and really helping to give thoughts and not just bring resources, but
to really be sort of embedded if you will, in community.

Katherine of the Federation was well aware of our situation had an interesting perspective
on those stakeholders more distant from the day-to-day life of community-impact work.
She routinely deals with funders or donors who struggle to understand what it is they’ve
actually signed on for. She says:
Some hold the belief that somehow communities will magically come together through [service provision] and we’re like, “no that’s not magic.” Creating these networks and making these decisions about the communities in which we see community schools taking root in is not magic…it has to take place where people feel valued and feel like they have a right to a place at the table like, “Yeah, their voice matters, they have assets to contribute to the school development, to their child's development and the development of other children of their community, that they can connect to their neighbor”… like that is not magic. It honestly does require a facilitator.

What causes confusion is that traditional conveners or facilitators, like the Funder here, believe the kind of convening they have become experts at is what is required here when, in fact, a community school facilitator (or “backbone provider”) must not only know the community very well, have trust and legitimacy established there, but also consider the community voice as an equal stakeholder. They want to retain the convener role as a director of the work and they find the CSM attractive because of the high yield impact it could have but to fulfill either of these, a reimagining of themselves as part of the neighborhood and community is essential. As Miguel describes above, this means a much more embedded, intimate presence and collaboration with the community than many have now. At one point he expounded on this:

I’m sure there is a lot of mental masturbation before you finally decide “let’s do it,” right, like for someone to say, “Let’s just jump out there and be me in community and get it started and do this. I think there is a lot of, “Wait, you don’t know us, you can’t just do what you are used to doing yet… we don’t really know you, truly enough yet, and you don’t know our systems really enough yet, so lets not do that, just yet.”

Although he was always more critical of the leadership of our funder than many, here he captures the essence of the hesitation to jump into the community impact work head long. It is a very new ball game for many organizations that have been operating “as usual” for decades. Katherine critiqued the approach this way: “I think on, maybe funders parts, or
whatever, when we talk about services that are offered or programming it is like, write
your resume or learn how to open up a savings account or something…that’s so gross.
What change can that actually make?”

But this kind of change goes deeper than just affecting the role of a funder as a facilitator. It requires change on every stakeholder’s part. Many of the resource coordinators or program staff in schools discussed how much of their jobs require brokering mindset changes for all the stakeholders. As a resource coordinator says, “in order for a community school to really function, the principal has to change how he or she functions…the partners have to change how they do things…there is a lot of territoriality that has to be let go.” Another comments:

Entrenched partners have to change how they do things. I think families change how they do things when they are part of a strong community school because there is that development of like, “Hey wait a minute. I matter. My voice is important. I think communities change how they do things, you know like once you get really those partnerships going, everyone changes how they are doing things. like the cleaning crew changed their schedules because we had the gym open until ten o'clock on Tuesday nights, but we all change how we do things. So I see that is like one of the fundamental components which strong community schools that their willingness to change.

Both Miguel and Katherine espouse the community impact focus of the CSM that, in its newer approach to thinking about exactly how to change neighborhoods, “recasts” the role of convener among partners and neighborhoods. To fully embrace that role, leaders of those organizations who have grown comfortable with their “beneficent distance” have to begin to “let community in” to their work and honor the knowledge of the neighborhood. This change was not one formal leaders in this collaborative (including executive board members) were fully prepared to make. At the same time, these self-
appointed leaders of the collaborative who do not know how to do this work also stare into a sea of required changes by every stakeholder involved. This became an overwhelming task very quickly and because of this, there was hedging that started happening. While the upper echelons of management in stakeholding positions, mostly this central funder, scrambled to fully understand the broader implications of the real changes that would have to occur to make this work, they sat in between these two strategic standpoints.

Meanwhile, the work of strategic planning pushed forward. Except that without a very solid strategic direction, and in the midst of high-level questions that remain unanswered, the workers left to the tasks at hand find themselves in the scenario Maya describes here:

But there is point where I was trying to say that whole purpose of this or a big part of this was to move towards achieving community level impact. And I felt that the direction we were going was not moving us in that direction, that we were continuing to kind of talk about programmatic, individual impact on individuals. And I was trying to say you need to think about what community level impact is and what moves us in that direction. And others were like, “No that is not what we are trying to achieve, you know we are trying just to integrate parts of it.

Another member of that teams talks about the weekly Neighborhood Network meetings in this way:

So there was a lot of back and forth like, “In my understanding it’s this, and what I’m saying is that” and then someone else would chime in and be like, “Well, it’s my understanding that it’s something else.” It was chaos. [The consultants] would be like, “you know, your [funder] just needs to make clear for out X, Y, Z and we would be like, “No we feel that it is pretty clear.” We just butted heads for an hour every week.

This high-level fence-sitting on strategic purpose has an effect across the entire Collaboration. First it creates the inefficiency and redundancy of trying to create strategy
while the end goal is yet determined. But from the relational standpoint, it sets in motion two different sources of constant negotiation. First, the fact that the strategic purpose remains a source of questions sets off a continual undercurrent of strain as the work of convincing the stakeholders who are yet convinced must continue. This is a kind of internal power struggle: those with the resources and authority to make a clear decision refuse to clearly do because they are uncomfortable with the risk associated with changing their relationship to the neighborhoods. Second, the introduction of external consultants to the mix not only added to the strategic purpose work but also introduced the perception of mistrust throughout all participants in this stage of the process. Power imbalances, often a source of mistrust, become magnified especially when finding agreement on shared purpose (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Furthermore, they magnify the perceived illegitimacy and lack of legitimate or acknowledged expertise on the part of the staff who was hired specifically to do this work including agency partners same due (and neighborhood members were uninvolved altogether). The process of determining the strategic purpose, which was already lacking, only made the scenario worse once consultants were brought in to “assist.” Indecisiveness in strategic purpose, which read as ambiguity to those involved in the process of coming up with a plan, uncovered an undercurrent of mistrust in the expertise and legitimacy of staff and agency partners assembled around the table. This only added to a general sense of confusion and frustration.
**Leadership, Expertise, and Trust**

The literature on collaboratives agrees that building leadership (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Crosby and Bryson 2005a; Crosby and Bryson 2005b; Gray 1989; Waddock 1986) developing a base of expertise to establish internal and external legitimacy (Suchman 1995; Human and Provan 2000), and establishing trust (Chen and Graddy 2005; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Ring and Van de Ven 1994) are central process points to creating a functional organization. As processes, the literature on all three emphasizes that these must be ongoing initiatives; there should be no assumption that the project of building these three is ever complete, as all will fluctuate depending on the dynamics of the relationships between partners and stakeholders at any given time. There is also an assumption that, in a new organization, these are newly negotiated and built. While current or former relationships can provide some early structure for a new collaborative (Gulati 1995; Ring and Van de Ven 1994), the prior relational components need to be rebuilt from the ground up within the context of the new collaborative for them to work positively in the new organization.

Although the literature does not overtly focus on the interaction of these three, the interactional dynamic is what makes them really act as one inter-connected set of variables in the context of a new organization. When we think about leadership, we tend toward characteristics and examples of formal or informal authority. Leadership, as a concept, often is embodied; we can all cite examples of “good” and “bad” leadership. In this context, though, leadership is defined as characteristics necessary to create a collaborative that have less to do with structure or power than they have to do with
relationship building. These include “vision, long-term commitment to the collaboration, integrity, and relational and political skills” (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Crosby and Bryson 2005a; Crosby and Bryson 2005b; Gray 1989; Waddock 1986). Leadership in practice here is much more about “buy-in” and creating one, focused, collective motion than about traditional positions of leadership. The degree to which leadership exists has a direct relationship to expertise and generating internal and external legitimacy. If leadership can recognize, attract, and use legitimate sources of expertise, it will foster trust among partners and stakeholders, citing that expertise when necessary to “shore up” the vision and purpose. This will make the collaborative grow in external trust and legitimacy; people will perceive this group as doing something important in the right way. This trust in what is perceived to be a legitimate vision and plan to get there will continue to foster buy-in by the necessary experts and stakeholders who will continue to lend guidance and purpose toward the shared vision. There is no real primacy in any of these components; they all must exist together and be developed simultaneously. As soon as one begins to erode, the others will follow. This erosion is evident on all three fronts in this collaborative.

While the prior discussion unearthed some of the leadership issues, specifically with regards to vision and perhaps knowledge of the CSM, there are deeper issues running along leadership lines. First, echoing some of the previous discussion, a general sense of confusion existed about who leads this work. A Neighborhood Network team member, upon returning from a meeting with our lead partner and several community stakeholders completely was completely exasperated and as she passed my desk said,
“You know, I wouldn’t mind spending hours preparing for and attending these meetings. I’d just like to know what’s going on. I hear one thing here. I hear something else there. Who is driving this ship?” When I said that this could be seen as an opportunity for her to step up she replied, “I don’t want to be responsible for that mess…it’s like too many cooks in the kitchen not cooking.” This was such a common theme among the team members designated to work on the Neighborhood Network initiative. One after another would talk about these meetings with Martin at the Lead Partner or the resource coordinator there and say similar things:

“I’m not sure what we’re doing but we’re meeting a lot.”

“Nothing gets done at those meetings.”

“There’s agreement in the room on what we’re going to do but then we leave and the next thing I know, something different is happening.”

“I don’t know what the initial agreement was but it seems like we’ve gone away from that.”

All of these team members admitted to being frustrated on a regular basis by, what to them felt like a stalemate that had eventually happened among partners who all sensed they were equally unempowered to make meaningful decisions. They discussed this in several ways.

First, leaders of the funder insisted on a very formal, hierarchical chain for decision making. Essentially the “worker bees” team of Maya and Miguel from the Funder, sometimes other funders, Martin from the Lead Partner, and the resource coordinator would meet about various operational items, plan a course of action, and take
that back “up the chain” to leadership at our funder, specifically the CEO. Plans rarely got sign off immediately. Once at that stage, often the SVP of CB (Community Building) and Maya would go to meet with the CEO and discuss tweaks and revisions. This would happen frequently and the meetings would be long and would often double-back on decisions that had been made in prior weeks. Maya’s desk was right next to mine and she’d return from those meetings intensely frustrated. Sometimes this was because decisions had been completely changed. This meant work that was already happening needed to be stopped mid-course and explanations for this had to be scripted which took time.

At the implementation level, this amounted to a “stop-start” dynamic that over time turned into treading water. At one point, I expressed surprise at the lack of progress on what seemed like a simple programmatic development and she said, “Well, it’s been over three months and I still can’t get them their initial payment that we owe them, so I can’t really crack down on stuff they owe us.” When I asked about the hold up she replied, “It’s been sitting on the CEO’s desk waiting for a signature…I’m not sure why she’s waiting.” “Do you think it’s just oversight or is it something more?” I asked. “I have no idea. I never have an idea.” Miguel was even more critical, “It’s a total nightmare getting anything done. A complete fucking nightmare. No one will ever make a decision because they’re afraid to be wrong.” Passing everything up the chain only added to actual implementation time. So by the time something filtered back down it could have been weeks or months that work had stalled, requiring that the “worker bees” just tread water. So to make it look like work was happening, on which their own
professional performance would be judged, they often just did “report outs” on “where things were.” This turned those meetings mentioned above into time wasted. This also lead to the same kind of “iterative disconnect” that happened in the strategic purpose work; no one knew exactly “where the work was.”

Second, staff were felt professionally stifled regarding their own expertise. In 2011, both Maya and Miguel had been hired specifically as experts to work on the collaborative: she for her strategic and grant-writing experience and he for his deep community organizing experience. However, they had to run every decision “up the chain” through the CEO (past the SVP of CB on the way up). For budgetary and strategic planning decisions they had to present those first to Sally and then to the Board of Directors, none of whom had community organizing experience. Both felt the weight of a very corporate style of communicating decisions that usually involved a “deck” or a powerpoint presentation that spelled out in detail how the plan would lead to quantifiable impact. Miguel said of this plan he had presented regarding youth work in the neighborhoods, “I can’t see the CEO saying ‘yes’ without having a deck with five slides and exactly how it’s gonna work…what it’s gonna do…it’s impact…and all that. So, I get a sense there will be more resistance that way…I wish I could just do what I was hired to do.” He also described a particular meeting with the CEO that illustrated his growing frustration at being questioned:

There was this one an issue [about community outreach] reported to the CEO and she said, “Well I don’t think you should do that yet.” So it’s like, “Be community engagement but don’t engage community yet cause we are not sure how we wanna engage them and I you know I respect that.” I don’t. I do not agree on some level but there was this other piece was like, “well go get Sarah [the marketing director] to message what you should say in the community.” That was
a really huge slap on the face. Like really?! Sarah does not know to talk to community. I’m the community.

Over a span of just several months, it was obvious that leadership had lost faith in his ability to “lead the work” and began including Maya in all Neighborhood Network meetings. Eventually, she was called on to present to the Board instead of him. About Miguel, Maya admitted that “his style caused friction” for funder leadership. He was too “casual” and “radical.” When I asked her about Miguel’s apparent “loss of faith” by leadership she said:

I definitely think it’s a source of friction for him and the organization. I think he feels that this was taken from him. And I don’t think he completely agrees with it or understands why. And so he’ll say that, “You know I’m not sure I should comment, you’re doing the learning launch now…he makes side comments…

Though, she tolerated the style issues better, she did “vent” by carrying on a running commentary about this “cluster” as she often called it that was usually critically wry and funny. She, more than anyone, would do the translating that had to happen to get decisions made. But after one particularly arduous series of “decks” that she had to revise (there were 10 iterations in all) she came back from one of her meetings with the CEO and just said, “The lack of knowing what the fuck is going on is starting to scare me.” She felt they had no idea what this work actually entailed. She was on the hook for this project but had no real power to do anything effectual about it.

This was only enhanced by a perception of CB staff and agency partners that the community had not been appropriately engaged in the process. Staff was pretty blunt on this point:
“A lot of senior leadership has not been to the community we’re talking about…I mean I assume they haven’t…

“I really felt that we needed to come in on a community change that we are looking to accomplish and then to work around that. And that we really needed to be more engaging of a community earlier on in this process than I feel like we really were.”

“I dont feel like we have really engaged the community and I feel like that is something that we need to be doing.”

“We have fairly longer term goals about building the homework in Brighton Park and just really nothing going on there….and that’s a kind of “ground-up” build and not to have any sense of what we’re going to do and how we are going to do it is…that’s probably where we’re going to need more community engagement to figure out what that’s going to look like…there’s work to be done…”

“I mean honestly, we did not go out there and say, ‘Let’s hear about what you think the needs are in income, education and health what some of the strategies you might employ towards those’… we not done that…or say ‘what is the priority here?’ But instead it was just overlaying of analytics.”

Staff seemed to agree that the place to find answers for some of the questions of need and priority lie with the neighborhoods in which the work was developing. The issue here was one of time; leadership at the funder was pressing for “impact work to begin” and in light of Miguel’s struggles to maintain his legitimacy among the leadership, two things happened. First, Martin was appointed to “speak on behalf” of Brighton Park. As Maya explains:

[Not engaging the community earlier] is mitigated by the fact that we were working with the community partner that has deep roots in to the community that has helped a little bit not feel too bad about [lack of community engagement]. We did utilize a lot of Martin’s knowledge as a proxy for community,

At the same time (late 2011), The Consultants were hired. The Consultants were a team of three, one of whom had an extensive professional background with CPS. Their task
was to “beef up” the credibility of the planning by providing research and an analysis of the community based on publicly available data. This is what the team member means when they cite “overlaying of analytics.” This created a furor among staff already feeling that their own expertise had been trampled. More so, it appeared a strategy to circumvent actually talking to the community.

Although many of the staff will express annoyance with The Consultants, their hire was not intended to create malcontent or as an affront to internal expertise. It did represent, however, an “old school” mechanism for validity clashing with “new school” expectations. Especially because they were so divisive, I specifically asked Gretchen the former VP of CB about the consultants and she and Maya both agreed: hiring consultants is normal in the corporate world as a way to demonstrate validity. It’s the same rationale for hiring third-party evaluators for programs or auditors to look at tax returns. The intention for their presence was to lend credibility to the Board and funder leadership.

But Maya, Miguel, and staff saw it as an affront to their own expertise about community. Maya explained, “they have kind of been thrust upon us and I don’t really know why…I have a lot of conflict with them…we’ve had some of uncomfortable moments between mainly me and one of the consultants.” One team member summed up what many said which was, “I’m not entirely sure what they’re value add is considering only one of the three has an experience in anything having to do with education.” Another, “We have these consultants come in and do this analysis and they end up coming to the same conclusion that we would come to sort of intuitively or based on our own knowledge of the work in the field but somehow it has that bold feel because it’s not
us.” Miguel, who worked most with the consultants, admitted, “I think [one of them] is just scared...he’s caught in the middle. It’s not fair.”

It did not help that the junior member of the consulting team who was most involved in the outreach to the lead agencies was as one staff member put it, “extremely WASPy.” Often wearing tweed jackets with button-down oxford shirts and loafers to agency visits where jeans and tennis shoes were the norm, this young man was painfully not “of the community.” Miguel in particular used to complain that he would ask questions in a way that would appear “snooty” or “off-putting.” One time I asked how one of their meetings in Brighton Park went and Miguel said, “Well, it was great until I had to stay after and talk Martin down off the ledge...[the consultant] asked him a question about ‘organizational viability’ and he flew through the roof. I’m SO GLAD they’re babysitting me.” For Miguel, Maya, and Martin who not only knew how to engage the community in discussions about what they needed and who also wanted to privilege that style of work which is ultimately collaborative, the consultants represented everything wrong about the corporate “outsider” approach to community organizing.

Finally, Funder staff tasked with the Neighborhood Network project also were frustrated by a lack of focus or buy-in by the leadership of our department. Without exception, CB staff and partners involved in the collaborative work will tell you “lack of leadership” has hindered motion on this work. What they mean is the amount of turnover in the VP position in Community Building. In my three-year tenure (the same three years in which the collective was under construction), the leader of the department turned over three times. Each time was painful to staff and halted progress. Gretchen’s departure,
just months after the “Learning Launch” took off, was a particularly striking blow. The
original author of this idea and the visionary for situating it within the work of our
funder, Gretchen did not leave of her own accord. Staff were stunned but also hurt and
scared. A CB staff member seemed to speak for everyone when she said, “I couldn’t
believe they let her go. It’s actually a little inhuman…this was her baby…and she can’t
even see it through now…does anybody know why? I can’t imagine anyone being able
to step in and pick this up. And if they can let her go now, they can let any of us go…she
was a workhorse.” Another was really distraught that day and her response became a kind
of panicky mantra in our office, “What are we gonna do?...How can we make this work
without her?” Maya describes the work atmosphere after that: “There was kind of a
regrouping period where everything went [sound of grinding to a halt]. It was interesting
because we kind of made the appearance we were continuing with the work but in reality
we had meetings that just didn’t move anything forward.”

The replacements in that position were not nearly as committed as Gretchen had
been to advancing the collaborative work. Richard, a seasoned CEO of a large non-profit
in Chicago who had no experience in building collaboratives, came in next with an
interest in pursuing violence-related work. Ultimately, he hoped to just layer the violence
work (which was similar to the Safe Passage work already coming out of City Hall) into
the CSM implementation work. This only accomplished creating even more confusion
and ambiguity in the collaborative work that had yet to recover much speed. After 9
months, Richard chose to depart, leaving Maya as the Interim Director of CB. She held
that position for seven months and after officially applying for the VP of CB and being
turned down, Maya eventually returned to full management of the collective work. George, who assumed the helm in April of this year, came with high-level credentials and connections within the Department of Education but he has yet to make headway on the collaborative work. One of the “worker bees” said to me the other day, “man, he’s got energy…and like a million ideas…which is horrible for one direction.” Another said, “I just feel like I’m scrambling all day long…the projects I’m working on have changed three times just this week.” When I asked about whether she feels any progress is being made she just shook her head, “I’ve been in six hours of meetings with George two days this week. I’m not even thinking about progress right now.” CB continues to struggle with shifting sands of leadership.

As might be expected, the problems in leadership that ultimately eroded a sense of internal and external legitimacy of the collaborative also created a breeding ground for mistrust among partners and staff working on this collaborative initiative. As the literature notes, “Collaboration partners build trust by sharing information and knowledge and demonstrating competency, good-intentions, and follow-through; conversely, failure to follow through and unilateral action undermine trust (Arino and de la Torre 1998; Merrill-Sands and Sheridan 1996). In this case, the hierarchical structure of decision-making greatly contributed to actions that appeared unilateral, especially the hiring of consultants about which there remains very bad blood. Maya says:

It felt like they had this relationship with the CEO and that sometimes, when we would butt heads—that was a lot of events—they would call her. So it felt like almost like, I also heard through the grape vine that they had perceptions of our work, like how our staff are doing managing the project that was feeding back to the CEO; so there was a definitely a trust thing there…pretty much it’s been awful…but we did manage to divorce them from the next launch.
Miguel adds, “We have hired huge cost consultants that are not experts and not community to tell us how to do community…which they ask us how to do. It’s completely insane.” I also asked him about the resistance he felt personally in trying to get this work done. He said:

Yeah. If you are trying to do something you have never done before, and the person you’ve hired is completely comfortable doing it, I understand why there would be some hesitation, and I understand also that, you know the levels and layers of committee meetings and impact boards and actually have to make a decision, like, that is a lot, you cant just, go out there. You have to really go through this. It’s a process. So I can respect that, you know. It’s not what I’m used to but that’s fine, and you know, I think that once we’re at the end of what we got to do, you know… I’ll be older then. I think I’ll be able to demonstrate my capacity and until then, no one really knows. I’m untested, here certainly.

He put a lot of faith in his ability to “stretch his legs” once the consultants were gone, seeing them as the sole reason he was in the position of being discredited that he was. Furthermore, the perception of micromanagement on the part of the staff read as a lack of goodwill. Not only did it chip away at their sense of expertise and sometimes reduce them to “deck writers,” but it also read as “shifty.” There perceived very little trust or support from those in leadership positions and as this sense grew, any sense of good-intention withered. This was almost completely nullified by the resistance to involving community in the strategy-making process, an activity staff deemed as vital and one ultimately quashed by leadership in favor of consultants who, they believed, could do the same job with analytics.

The Consultants became a marker of the symbolic boundaries between Funder Leadership and the Collaborative; those who “sided” with the Consultant were basically written off by the Collaborative as obviously not really knowing or respecting anything
about their community expertise. This sense of mistrust and a lack of acknowledgement of expertise had consequences. The issues with the consultants and the loss of leadership in CB, both internally and externally, had an effect on the collaborative work. First, almost all of the Community Building staff from the funder left the department in just under two years, one of whom was Miguel. Frustrated by increasing micromanagement and lack of support, he “jumped ship” in November 2013, leaving Maya as the sole team member who had been there since the beginning. Well known in Chicago for his community organizing work, his departure created waves of doubt throughout the collaborative but also for Maya who saw him as the real anchor for this work. His departure also changed the dynamics of the meetings. Martin, although very enthusiastic about the collaborative, often had to be “reined in” by Miguel in terms of staying engaged on a collective path and not advancing work for the agenda of his agency. Maya was left to re-establish that relationship, one that has become more contentious since then. She is also the sole team member who has been there since the beginning and assumed all of Miguel’s work when he left creating a significant backlog for her of work. Her work days which used to be 8-10 hours, averaged 12-13 hours in Spring 2014. On top of that, the lack of department leadership contributed to the work stalling once more. The team continues to meet every two weeks for “report outs” which they continue to report, “are frustrating.”

Making the Unworkable Work

From a structural or organizational standpoint, what we have analyzed here cannot be considered a collaborative. Instead, it is an initiative launched by the Funder
whose leadership was interested in types of models and interventions designed to create community level impact. Organizationally, it misses the mark on nearly all of the central processeses of collaborative organizing: it did not have a focused or convincing sense of strategic purpose; leadership was weak and unfocused; recognized experts felt de-legitimized; staff worried for their jobs; mistrust, confusion, and ambiguity ran high. The building of brand new relationships, even with prior partners, that I argue should be considered as a strategy equal to the implementation of the CSM in the Neighborhood Networks was instead replaced by an assumption that the terms of existing relationships could just be parlayed into a new work paradigm. This created what were ultimately contests between Funder Leadership and those working on the Collaborative. The points of resistance hovered around a disagreements about the measures of success, trust in the expertise of staff, and ambiguity regarding the strategic purpose and vision for the Collaborative. While there was a qualified group of professionals able to address all of these problems, Funder Leadership insisted on maintaining ultimately authority. The sheer need for money devoted to the CSM in Chicago granted them a certain amount of authority to play the game “their way.”

What appears evident is that leadership at the Funder considered the implementation of the CSM as just a new kind of community investing and not a brand new way to work or as a set of new relationships with current partners that would need renegotiation. The relationship-focused approach of the Collaborative workers was one that would require a rebuild of all of the relationships, and the power within, even with existing partners. Instead the assumption was that it would be the same kind of
partnerships, fitting into the same kind hierarchical style of work, with more of a focus on community. This focus on community was not an assent to bring community into the equation in any real way but was instead accomplished through dedicated “community-oriented” staff and direct work with agency personnel as experts who could stand in as “proxies” for the community voice.

This logic coincides with the distant conceptualization of community that so many, especially the leadership, in philanthropy tends to hold. The idea seems to be that since prior work in community was undertaken from such a distance that these more concerted efforts should lead to community outcomes. At such a distance, this amount of concerted work toward community specifically should have done the trick. But both of these logics evade the messiness and reality of both what neighborhoods and communities actually look like, what the problems they have feel like, and what kind of organizing it takes to address those. If the community and its problems were ever only theoretical, then why wouldn’t the structure that has worked for over a century as a community-oriented foundation still hold? Obviously, this organizing philosophy caused a rift with those who know the reality of the neighborhoods in which this implementation would really take place. The community-oriented staff, some of whom were hired as experts, specifically for this purpose, could see the disjointedness of the plan, especially when it involved too little involvement or input from the community. This is a battle they have yet to fully win nor have they yet convinced leadership to move toward a true collaborative that would strategically better position everyone involved to address real community needs. When they did push back or assert their knowledge, they experienced
resistance, skepticism, and in some cases felt completely discredited as the experts they had been introduced as.

It seems one of the major conclusions drawn from this story has to be that a community impact model, like the CSM, requires a true, functioning collaborative characterized by an emphasis on relationship building and maintenance as a strategy equal to the implementation of programming models. The lack of that structure can either be a signal of trouble ahead and a catalyst for sites of contest around the organizational schemas of the partners. In this case, the reflection of community ideologies enacted through organizational schemas served as the real points of negotiation regarding what community should be, what a successful community venture would be, who was most qualified to determine those questions, and what they hoped to accomplish.

Though this discussion highlights the points of ambiguity and the sources of tension among Leadership at the Funder and the workers in the Collaborative, the real boundary work, some of it transformative, came in the strategies members of the Collaborative enacted to respond to the contests discussed here and to negotiate the challenges of working with a neighborhood that seems to lack a sense of themselves as a collective. The next chapter focuses on the strategies members of the Collaborative used to tap into their own sense of “community building” work toward accomplishing the goals they deemed most central: building and strengthening community relationships. Though the community of intention struggled to establish their expertise formally in the Funders organizational scheme, they did anything but sit idly by.
In the late summer of 2011, Miguel was still fairly new to Funder but he was already known around the office as a “wildcard.” His youthful-but-ragged, preppy appearance anchored by a casual uniform of a standard pair of khakis, a button down shirt, and the occasional puka shell necklace, stood out among the monochromatic business casual attire of most men in the office. He looked like a kid just out of college and with an Ipod dock booming salsa music throughout the open office floor plan and a “Buddy Christ” doll (a tongue-in-cheek representation of Jesus in the movie “Dogma”) giving the eternal “thumbs up” every time you might walk past his desk, Miguel often acted as though this was the first office job he had ever had. He called me routinely to “make Excel work” or asking how to get his voicemail messages. The corporate setting was new to him. What was not new was his background in community-focused work.

Miguel came (was recruited) to the Funder incredibly good reputation and 15 years of experience in community organizing in the primarily Latino neighborhoods of south and west Chicago and the cities of Addison, Berwyn, and Cicero. This Mexican, 40-something dad of three, a graduate of the University of Chicago and an MSW from Loyola University Chicago, who proudly announced he bought his “first suit ever” for a Funder board meeting knew more than anyone else in CB ever had about how to do community work. He was the first Director of Community Engagement at The Funder
and had been hand-picked for the job by senior leadership. High on my list to interview for his centrality in Collaborative work, he had actually become a controversial character at the office for both his method and message. Within just weeks, he had already ruffled feathers with his straightforward questioning regarding the lack of neighborhood voice in Neighborhood Network planning.

Although it was the culture of The Funder to eat lunch at your desk or, at the very least, eat “in,” Miguel insisted on going out for this interview saying he “wanted to speak freely.” I was more than happy to oblige for that reason so we went across the street for pizza. But when I turned on my recorder, Miguel discussed maximizing synergy, performance metrics, and leveraging assets for over an hour. This “corporate speak” was typical for Funder staff but Miguel had always played the role of conscientious objector about this style of communication. I had watched him openly mock this kind of talk at the office, once in front of the CEO, so a solid hour of it on tape was unexpected and, frankly, frustrating. Personally, I found this abrupt change in his personality confusing.

On the way back to the office he transformed back into the Miguel I recognized and as we chatted he said, “There’s something I want to tell you but it’s way underground right now…I didn’t want you to record it.” “Okay,” I nodded, thinking he was going to quit his job. Instead we stood for an hour on the corner of Jefferson and Lake Street while he told me about this event he was planning with the Mayor’s Office, our community school partners, and their partners to bring kids together in Millennium Park to do an anti-violence rally that would kick off a series of anti-violence campaigns in the neighborhoods that housed our community schools. At one point I asked if our CEO or
the VP of Community Building, his boss, knew anything of this. “No,” he said matter-of-factly, “if they knew, they’d kill me...kill me...they’d just ruin everything.” “Aren’t you worried what’s gonna happen when they find out?” I asked with a mix of incredulity and sincere concern.

Naw...this thing’s gonna be so awesome and I’m doing all the legwork now so it’ll all be done...it’s gonna be so amazing for this place and our reputation in the city, they won’t fire me...they’ll thank me. I mean, maybe things will be fucked up for awhile but they’ll come around...I’m not worried about that at all. And we’ll actually get something done.

As we both turned back to the office, he stopped me and sincerely, honestly looked at me, his usual frenetic energy completely subsiding and said earnestly, “Please...we gotta keep this tight...no one can know right now or everything will be completely fucked...and people need us to do this.” Both working directly with the Mayor’s office and on a “secret project” would be grounds for termination if anyone found out about it at the Funder, as he was already skating on thin ice.

I knew this illustrated a very real series of negotiations and strategies in community school work. In that very moment, something important both for Miguel and for the people who he knew would benefit from his work, despite his employers, was at stake. When I asked Miguel why it took an hour to get to “the good stuff” he said, “It wasn’t the time. It’s that you were recording it. I’ll give you the straight shit, Katie, but I don’t need the wrong people knowing about it, you know.” When I asked why he didn’t tell me about this the first time we had talked officially, about four months earlier, he smiled easily and said, “Well...I needed to know I could trust ya not to run back and tell Mom [the CEO].” “So I’m trusted now?” I asked. “Yeah. I can see you’re one of us...”
Perhaps the most straightforward, this story illustrates what was a real divide in the work of the Collaborative regarding who “really belonged” or “could be allowed” to call themselves truly “of the community.” The last chapter illustrated the sources of ambiguity that arose when traditional organizational structures created friction around enacting “community.” Though presented there as schemas, or established ways of thinking about certain resources like power, legitimacy, and expertise, the organizational structure of the Funder also acts as a boundary, dictating who the “in” crowd is according to those rules. Largely, the group working in the Collaborative, especially Maya and Miguel, found themselves at odds with structural limitations that prevented them from acting on their own expertise and community know-how. Many tasked with implementing the CSM feel a sense of constriction or disconnect, often finding themselves straddling multiple organizational cultures that often must be negotiated in the moment. These people who sit “in the middle” enact a variety of strategies to make the CSM and, in this case, the work of the Collaborative develop into something effective despite the often clashing expectations of partnering organizations. These negotiations, brokered differently and often strategically by those “in the middle,” do not necessarily happen in the neighborhood, but they usually happen for the neighborhood or for community and this shared intention, though enacted different, creates a kind of collective response around the CSM that allows progress to be made. This chapter will explore the variety of strategies those working on the Collaborative, often in “bridging” positions, enacted to keep their work progressing and meaning something to them and to Brighton Park.
Strategies of the Middle: Negotiating Relationships

There are two main conceptual approaches at work in this analysis. I struggled for a long time determining how to handle the action of the Collaborative which looked and felt different than the action of the Funder Leadership or that of other stakeholders. The longer my observation extended, the more I was convinced I was seeing a new emergent organization, with its own culture, developing. Lichterman and Eliasoph’s concept of “group style” (2003) or the “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting” (2003, p 737) gave good theoretical structure to what I witnessed. Studies that show room for innovation born of different “styles” or kinds of participation in large organizations and civic institutions (Schudson 1998; Edgell Becker 1999) and that even point to a particular way in which group members interact that distinguish it as a collective (Bender 2003) further lend to the theoretical frame. But in these cases, participation in the collective and, therefore, the ensuing group style was voluntary. That is, in all of the cases cited above, participants sought out the collective experience. This made further discussion of other elements of culture available as a “toolkit” resources (Swidler 1986) for their collective use (Kniss 1996; Williams 1995). More specifically, the idea of a “cultural repertoire” or “a set of boundaries to what is considered legitimate” (Williams 1995, 1996) helps to focus the lens of that which is under construction by the Collaborative. In the case of the Collaborative, I would argue that they employed a series of actions or strategies that resonated less in the “public sphere” but more directly in relation to the specific position they occupied within a multi-stakeholder, cross-sector
collaborative. The formation of a group style had much more to do with a shared experience of a specific organizational position than an experience in which they, interacting with each other, forged a shared identity.

This led me to consider one of the few traits they shared: their organizational position as straddling one or more overlapping boundaries. Aside from a stated commitment to a community vision that was ultimately empowering to neighborhood voices, the only characteristic all Collaborative members shared was the experience of having to navigate across at least one boundary, be it neighborhood/partner, funder/lead partner, funder/neighborhood, or partner/school. So many echoed themes of “straddling” or “bridging.” Literature on the challenges of being “betwixt and between” (Turner 1967) cultures, beginning with Simmel’s essay “The Stranger” (in Levine 1971) in which he describes the Stranger as the stranger is near and far at the same time” (148). Robert Park referred to a similar phenomenon as “man on the margin” was what he called a “cultural hybrid” who could physically exist in one cultural sphere while simultaneously maintaining or holding onto parts of the previous or “home” culture (1928). Existing in a transitional space, those “between” held a distinct position in a distinct social space: neither here nor there.

These early concepts gave rise to literature focused on ethnic entrepreneurship or the “stranger as trader” idea which explores the notion of “dual ethic” introduced in Park’s marginal man grew and can be found as one trajectory of “the stranger” concept (Park 1950a; 1950b; Wirth 1928; Stonequist 1937; Becker 1956) as it relates literally to relationships rooted in business (Simmel 1964; Toennies 1971; Park 1950b; Foster 1974;
From this economic starting point, the idea of “middleman trading peoples” (Becker 1956), “marginal trading peoples,” and “permanent minorities (Stryker 1959) developed to explore the business practices and economy of ethnic enclaves (Cahnman 1957; Rinder 1958). This literature tends to look at the business structures and practices of those in the “ethnic labor force” and examine both interpersonal dynamics, mechanisms, and structures that comprise “ethnic enterprise” (Aldrich, Jones, and McEvoy 1984; Bonacich 1987; Wong 1977; Palmer 1984; Zanner 1987; Portes and Bach 1980; Boissevain and Grotenberg 1986; Portes 1987; Werbner 1984; Light 1972; Waldinger 1986).

The most recent use of the Middleman concept seems most useful here. Drawing on the theory of “middleman minorities” (Bonacic 1973) which establishes middlemen as static “outsiders” to an insider world, she imagines the middleman minority as necessarily “sojourners” who intend to be part of a system temporarily and who demonstrate this as thrift or “a willingness to suffer short-term deprivation to hasten [a] long-term objective” (1973:585). Though highly critiqued on capturing the complexity of contemporary economic systems (Hill 1977; Light 1979; Portes and Bach 1985; Waldinger 1986), race scholars appropriated the middleman minority theory minority experience in systems that do maintain traditional arrangement of power and status. Race scholars have utilized this theory to study especially the Latino (Sanchez 2006) and Black experiences in urban spaces that embody traditional understandings and expressions of power, status and authority (Sanchez 2006; Patillo 2007) in which the middleman becomes a “broker” (Burt 2004). As Patillo describes it:
the men and women who successfully occupy the middle… put people together, they negotiate subsidies and concessions, they run interference, they relay information, and they mediate disputes. As brokers, they also take a cut, which may come in the form of a consulting fee, a salary, a program grant, a board appointment, votes, verbal accolades, or, if they are also residents, a share in the benefits that flow from the local investments they have brokered (2007).

This structural position, though confining, also provides an opportunity to interact with both structures in an innovative way. Just as Williams says, “There is a dance between the structuring properties of the rhetorical forms themselves and the innovative agency of practical political actors using them” (1999 pp. 4), similarly in the Collaborative there is a dance between the members of the Collaborative and the responses they craft relative to the liminal position they hold between governing organizational structures; in that space, the Collaborative as a distant collective takes shape.

Activity in the Middle

My original plan, based on the breadth of my observation, was to examine the strategies members of the Collaborative undertook to navigate these “spaces in between” in which contests of meaning and ways of doing business occurred. But a closer look at the data revealed not just strategies but a wide variety of actions related that appeared to be related to the “straddling” or “bridging” they described. While they shared the experience of working across multiple organizational boundaries, members in the Collaborative acted in various ways in reference to their organizational position of “hub”. But they did not only act in relation to the middleman position. When in a social space they considered not “middle ground,” they had other ethos’ regarding action and ways of embodying those. This last category of action and attitudes about that action I consider “Collaborative work” as it is that which is “unbounded” by other intervening
organizations. The most common were the reactions and strategies enacted in relation to this “middle” status

Although everyone involved in the Collaborate “bridged” at some point, those who did not have to perpetually negotiate did not see it as a burden or understand their actions as strategic at all. They simply did what they were told in terms of Collaborative work; they attended meetings, they followed-up as necessary and basically fulfilled task-oriented functions. However, the experience for a core group, whose main job responsibilities required them to constantly negotiate one or more “overlaps” in institutional or organizational boundaries, had to take a more strategic approach to their work. Their position demanded it but they also could see advantages to what otherwise was constant series of inter-personal negotiations. This group emerged as distinct from the rest of the Collaborative in describing their challenges. While the majority of the Collaborative cited “not knowing anything” or “not being able to keep up with what was going on,” those in the middle had the opposite experience: they saw too much, knew too much, and felt as though they needed to know everything about the work. This trait was shared among resource coordinators who delivered programming to kids in schools, primarily Maya and Miguel from the Funder, and Martin from the Lead Partner. But even among this group, their experiences of reacting to and strategizing in the Middle were different.

**Bridging School and Neighborhood**

Generally, this “everywhere” trait, as much as it challenged them, was integral to the way they saw their own work. Practically, it was true that their jobs required multi-
tasking. But they also collectively understood themselves as “negotiators” who were on the hook to make the CSM work. Resource coordinators, in particular, understood themselves to be the fulcrum for the success of the programs. “The Resource Coordinator [RC] is the key to success in the community school model. They’re the ones that can make or break you because they connect everything together,” one program coordinator told me. Another program coordinator said, “I do think this resource coordinator piece is the one that appears to be such a lever in terms of are you going to be more successful. The potential for success really rests in that person.” When I asked why she simply replied, “because they keep it all together.” Katherine at the Federation, a former resource coordinator, talked for over an hour about the centrality of this role, defining it as the “epicenter for a good full-on community school” because “a strong resource coordinator can bring in a lot of resources into one place and tie them all together to make something really exciting happen.” She added, “they absolutely have to know the developmental nature of the work.”

Resource coordinators themselves add clarity to some of the more aspirational language about what an RC should be. One RC explained:

One of the resource coordinator’s jobs is to make sure that parents are happy and administration and teachers are happy and community members are happy…so it’s very much about being to resolve conflicts. It was difficult for me at first. You have to learn to take criticism. You know, we’re the point person for parents to come and complain to. I mean, it gets easier. It got easier but it’s something you have to get used to right away. Because, you know, that happens a lot.

Another added,” A resource coordinator is meant to get buy-in and foster relationships with all of the people who should have interest in community schools but it’s really hard for them to that when they’re running, like, 3 different programs afterschool.” One
former RC who is now a manager of several RCs noted the amount of freedom that the position affords: “We tell them we've got the money and they we give them carte blanche to do their own budget and to work it out in the school and if there is not a problem, then that’s ideal [Laughing].” She goes on to say:

So they're managing part-time employees [who help with program delivery], are the ones that are, you know, actually working directly with students. There also managing, like, the sick leave, the programs, the space, the relationships with the parents and the students, and the administration. So they're kinda juggling you know, all of those things that are going on.

Maybe the most telling response came from a resource coordinator who seemed to realize the depth of her job as we discussed it. When I asked her to describe who she sees during a day she paused and then started listing things off, “I work with the students…and the teachers…and the principal…and the parents…and I try to get community in here. I coordinate all of that. I do a lot, actually.”

While RCs tend to experience frustration at the sheer amount of relational work they do, they seem to regularly put this into a larger context. So while circumstances might be difficult, there are bigger reasons to keep on. Consider the following comments from RCs:

We just got a new principal in here last year and, I mean, she’s great…but it’s different. It’s like starting all over again. But, you know, it’s worth it so I just keep doin’ it.

It’s like the military in here now [because of an administration change], but at least I know the principal from an earlier life. She was a sorority sister of mine…so I’ve got an in there and I’m just tryin’ to use that as much as I can.

It’s a long process…it just takes time to make inroads and then you pray to god that you can keep them…and a lot of times, you can’t…you just do the best you can.
I spend so much time building relationships, especially with the principal…but it pays off in helping me get my programming in so I know I have to do it.

One of the most telling findings regarding RCs specifically was that their challenges were immediate. They often found themselves in situations requiring immediate reaction but that could also likely have quick resolution: parents were upset, the principal was annoyed, students needed something particular. The resolutions in these situations were through negotiation but the negotiations were often fairly simple. The job of the RC, while relationship-focused and often about “solving a problem” that they ultimately had the power to solve. Theirs was a test of endurance; RCs problem-solved all day, every day. And they accepted this role because there was something “worthy” to go to bat for: better programming for parents and students.

The biggest sources of negotiation for RCs was how to get buy-in from the principal, teachers, and parents in the school and their most-often used strategy involved “meeting them where they’re at.” They told stories that often involved realizing “easy fixes” that could make their presence appear more legitimate. This often involved appealing to practicality. “We knew that in order to get parents understand the legitimacy of this, trying to get them to see what we’re doing, we started were offering parent programs in the evening from like 6:30 to 8:30 at night at school. That had never been done before.” Another who also moved parent classes to evening hours, added “and we realized that we needed free childcare because other places would offer childcare with costs attached, so if we made ours free, we thought they would come. And they did.”

Many RCs realized at some point that parents had hesitation about coming into the school building. An RC further explained:
We serve a primarily Mexican neighborhood and there’s a cultural barrier there about coming into school; in the Latin countries as a parent you only go into schools when something terrible has happened. And there is a real fear, an intimidation about dealing directly with the principals. So we started planning more social events, in the evening…you know, bring the family, and the principal would be there and would provide the food. So it was like a party. And the parents could see the principal in a new way. Then when problems did come up, that fear of the school building and the principal was dialed back a little. It didn’t work for everybody, but it did work.

Many of the strategies to engage parents involved activities that appealed to the parent more than they were child-related and this began to re-draw the boundaries around who was “allowed to be at school” and for what purposes. Because Brighton Park is a primarily Mexican neighborhood, RCs found creating programming for parents that drew from that (or some) cultural identity worked well in gaining parents trust. One of the RCs noted:

One day, one of the moms was talking with a small group of others about this kind of pottery that is homemade, I guess you bake it…it’s a Mexican craft. The other moms wanted to learn how to do it and I overheard this conversation going on, so I told them we should do it at school. So, the one mom came and kind of did a workshop for the others and now they get together at school on a regular basis and teach each other crafts.

When I asked if this had any effect on his student outcomes he said, “If parents feel like they belong in the building, then they feel like they own what goes on there too.” I was talking with another RC about Zumba. As a grant-reader, I saw more and more programs adding Zumba to their list of activities. She knew exactly what I was talking about, “There is some kind of magical force Zumba has on people. They will show up for Zumba. And in my mind, if it gets them in the door, we can figure out a way to connect that to their kid’s education. It might take some creative thinking, but I’ll pretty much do whatever I need to to get them in here.”
Parents were actually the easier of the two groups with whom RCs negotiated. Principals and teachers could be more territorial about their space and their role within the building. RCs strategies for “winning them over” often involved working quietly and consistently to gain their trust. Katherine, an RC in the earliest adoption of the CSM in Chicago, talked at length regarding her experience with winning her principal over:

I was one of the lucky ones to actually get a desk in the administrative offices of the school but for the first six months, the principal didn’t get that I wasn’t an admin. So whenever I was sitting at my desk, he would ask me to call people for him, call a parent whose kid was sick. Run notes to teachers. That wasn’t my job. But I did it while I also began talking with him directly about my programming. As he came to understand more about what I was doing, he was also starting to trust me with bigger and bigger things at school. I eventually became kind of his right-hand-man and he totally got where I was coming from and what I was trying to do. And we had a great working relationship for a long time. But that process took years. And I had to be an admin as well as an RC.

Another seasoned RC told a similar story regarding a new principal who started off hostile about her presence in the school.

Well, the principal didn’t like that I had couches in my room. She thought the kids were just goofing around in here all the time. But I never changed how I talked to her no matter how rude or angry she seemed to be with me. I was always polite. I was firm and steady. I asked her for what I needed and let her decide if she would support my efforts. If not, I would find other ways to get the support but always let her know what I was doing. One day, she came into my room and asked if she could just sit on my couch for awhile. I said absolutely. I gave her a cookie. And she started telling me about her stress. And I listened. And from that moment, I knew I was in. And now I can’t get rid of her. She comes in here every day asking my advice about something. But I’d rather have it that way than the other way around.

In addition to these more personal strategies, RCs often seek external sources of credibility than may resonate with principals. Many hold advanced educational degrees and certifications. In an interview, one specifically mentioned, “When I decided to go back to grad school, I purposely chose to get a Master’s in curriculum development. I
have no intention of being a teacher but I knew that when I got challenged by a principal or teacher about program choices I was making I’d be able to say, in their language, ‘Here’s why I’m doing what I’m doing. And I can be a resource to you.’” Another agreed, “It’s obvious that a Master’s in Education takes you up a peg in their estimation. It makes it easier to stand on the same playing field when you’re arguing your case.” The Federation for Community schools is currently developing a certification process for RCs for this reason. “Principals and teachers need to know that you’re not a classroom aide. You’ve got skills, you’ve got know-how. And it has something to do with education,” Katherine told me.

For a variety of reasons, RCs did not always win the principal over. Sometimes they chose not to commit and left after a year. Other times, their challenge was circumstantial. One told me, “Oh yeah…[the principal] was terrible. She gave me a different classroom everyday and I had a cart for an office. My office was the hallway of the school.” When I asked how she dealt with that she said, “I was livid on the inside but this is not about me and my ego. If I have to have a cart, so be it, just as long as my programs stayed in the school. Another also mentioned her office space issue, “I had an office…it was quite literally a converted broom closet. It had a drain in the middle of the floor. There were two of us sharing that space. But an office is an office. You make due….because the value you’re bringing to the kids is worth it.”

Not all RCs succeed at this job. In fact, the turnover in this position is very high and the endurance in patience, level-headedness, and resourcefulness does not come easily for all. One RC talked about this: “I’m just really tired. It’s constant grassroots
stuff…going out, knocking on doors, calling people daily…sometimes you wonder if it’s working. But I believe in the end, so I’m hangin’ in the best I can.” I asked all of my interviewees whether some response other than patience and flexibility got the best of them. Most said no but one explained this answer particularly well, “There’s really no room to get angry. You’re already climbing up a huge hill to get people to get what you’re doing. You’re carving out your place in their school, in their community. You’re asking them to accept what you’re bringing there. If you’re gonna get angry you might as well quit because you’re not coming back from that.” Quitting the position happens frequently. In fact, almost every RC interviewed here no longer holds the position they did at the time we talked. Most have moved on from the CSM completely.

RCs experiences of the middle hinges directly on their ability “bridge the gap” between the school and the neighborhood. This requires central focus on building relationships inside the school that resonate in the neighborhood and “rewrite” the neighborhooders understanding of their relationship to the school building. Successful RCs employ a vigilant observation of those details, practical, cultural, and personal, that can become opportunities to invite parents into the school or win over trust from the principals. They gain trust by consistency, insightfulness, initiative, and will. This ultimate goal means also convincing the principals, as owners of the traditional understanding of school and the authority they command there, to buy-in to a more “empowered” or open version of a functioning school. This experience is quite different from that of Collaborative members who straddle the boundaries between the Funder and the Lead Partner.
Bridging Funder and Lead Partner

Unlike RCs, who negotiate the neighborhood and schools, those directly involved in the Funder Collaborative found themselves in the overlap between Funder and Lead Partner. Sometimes, they also crossed over into the Neighborhood, often represented by Lead Partner staff or stakeholders. This particular “Middle” referred more to persons than the jobs they held at the Funder; Maya, Miguel, and Martin were middlemen.

Martin, as the ED of the Lead Partner, held a particularly tenuous role. Leadership at the Funder identified him as a legitimate “proxy” for Brighton Park. They particularly liked him because he could converse fluently in “corporate speak” while at the same time (they reasoned) represent Brighton Park in a way that was comfortable to them. This meant Martin was a regular presence at the Funder office.

“Oh he’s like a quasi-staff person here now,” one of my coworkers from the marketing team told me once. “I have him on speed dial.” The CEO introduced him in an all-staff meeting by saying, “We couldn’t do this without Martin…he just knows how to keep these pieces moving in the right direction.”

As work was underway at the Funder to launch a second network in West Chicago, Stephen, who was Maya’s equivalent on the second site said of the ED of the lead partner they had acquired there, “She’s just amazing. She’s about 4’10” and has enough energy to do this thing practically by herself. She’s got her hand in every pot we need to have on board and she makes it happen.” It was generally believed by senior leadership at the Funder that the executive directors were the right people to help “sell” the model; both mentioned here were gregarious people who both resonated with
corporate board members while maintained their ability to appear grounded in the community and were, in fact, trusted in the neighborhoods they served. Even Maya who worked with him closely in the past year and who personally found him difficult at times conceded, “Martin is a great proxy for that neighborhood [Brighton Park]. He works hard to make sure they’re heard. And the CEO loves him, so that’s convenient.”

As it happened, Martin and Miguel’s roles mirrored each other in some significant ways. Everything the CEO loved about Martin, she had once loved about Miguel too: she hired him at the Funder to be a “voice of the people,” experience he had gained through his ten years at a neighborhood organization he founded in Cicero. One of the former VPs of the Department discussed his value for the Funder saying, “His connections in the community were just outstanding. We knew getting him in would really heighten the work here and connect us to the right people. And he’s known for this stuff…he’s a community guy.”

This “community guy” status both men held was a middle ground at the Funder, amounting to being “a slice of community in a corporate world” which afforded them a particular “tool kit” of resources. At the Funder, this “community voice” held weight and afforded them the ability to act according to what the Funder, especially Leadership, considered “community rules” regarding dress and behavior. Both wore more casual clothes at the office (remember Miguel famously bought “his first suit ever” while working for the Funder) and Miguel’s desk was covered with trinkets and pictures that were mostly against company policy. Both talked loudly in hallways or across cubicles and would slip into Spanish if talking with staff that spoke Spanish. They also practiced
an ethos of “brutal honesty.” This actually became kind of a code phrase meant to signal that what they were about to say was going to cut through the abstraction or misguidance of the “corporate philanthropic” mindset. They both displayed a kind of fearlessness when it came to speaking their minds to the CEO, a move that almost no one else could manage. Though a very similar middle ground with a largely shared set of expectations from the Funder, the fact that Miguel was Funder staff and Martin was from the Lead Partner in combination with the strategies each personally enacted set them on two very different trajectories in terms of the Collaborative.

Martin, though fully availing himself of the “community guy” status he shared with Miguel seemed to also realize that he “trumped” Miguel in terms of his community expertise because he lived in Brighton Park and because he did not work for the Funder. Martin also was deeply involved in advocacy for the CSM at the State level and, knowing that was a space the Funder wanted entry to, actively led them directly into the heart of the work. While he embodied his “community guy” role, he knew the limits of it in reference to the Funder. When he attended Board meetings, he blended in enough to convince them he was a good investment. One time I walked into work around 8:30am for an unusually early meeting and ran into Martin wearing a dark gray suit with a yellow silk tie. As we passed, I noticed he was wearing cufflinks and said, “What, decided to go formal today?” “Yeah,” he said in passing. “Gotta talk diversifying the portfolio and return on investment.” “Don’t you hate that,” I asked, referred to ROI which always made CB staff angry. “Of course I hate it but these guys pay the bills, right?” As the ED
of a neighborhood council, he needed the Funder and would play whatever game he needed to secure, and maybe increase, his funding from them.

What made Martin particularly savvy was that this was not completely charm but now-how. Talking to Martin in his own office at the Lead Partner, he deeply knew community organizing and how to do it. But in Brighton Park he actually introduced some of the structure that resonated with the Funder in order to gain credibility there (although this was years prior to his involved directly with the Collaborative). He told me of his early days in Brighton Park, “we assembled a team, we hired a consultant and they facilitated an assessment we did of ourselves and our neighborhood. The parents collected data themselves, we wrote evaluations together, we did focus groups, we had meetings with parents and critically looked at the data together. But we involved them from start to finish.” Of his own skills he says,

I don’t know how to change someone who has a problem. I do know how to take, like, ten or fifteen people who have a problem and turn that into a campaign around an issue. I know how to do that, so I apply those techniques to specific scenarios—like the school—and make sure to get the experts in who can make the changes we need once we pave the way for them. I tell [people in Brighton Park] all the time, you tell me what you want and we’ll figure out how to get the resources for it and we’ll build it together.

I found it funny in transcribing his interview that just a couple minutes after articulating an empowerment-focused, neighborhood approach to identifying and solving problems he said, “Sometimes you just gotta do a SWOT analysis and see what’s what.” This in part, explains why Funder Leadership found Martin a comfortable “community guy.” All of his techniques for assessment echo the same approach to data that the Funder favors. Even mentioning “SWOT analysis” (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) is
invoking a corporate code; SWOT is a time-tested business technique for program assessment. To the Funder, Martin is a community guy who “gets it;” in Brighton Park, he’s a legitimate, credible leader. His savvy is knowing his audience and when to use tools from the appropriate tool kit and to what degree. For my part, I never witnessed him misstep in this regard.

Miguel, on the other hand, took a different approach. When the Funder hired him in summer 2011, he assumed it was as an expert, a status that he thought would give him latitude to work as he saw fit. When he introduced himself to CB it was as a “community expert” and friends of his already working in CB prefaced his arrival with talk of him as “a community guy.” He told me, “I assumed when I got here that people were ready to hear what I had to say about what community is, yes, but also how I wanted to approach community. I thought they really wanted to do this the right way.” Upon his arrival, he hung chili pepper lights in his cubicle and started organizing “community conversations.” These were town-hall style meetings, advertised by fliers to community centers, inviting people from the neighborhood to come and talk about what their neighborhood was like: the needs, the challenges, and the opportunities. This is actually similar to Martin’s SWOT. But Miguel resisted using those terms, opting for an approach that he called “interested learner” and “neighborhood guest.” When his days out of the office started adding up, Funder leadership began doubting this was anything more than days off. It did not help that he could not produce “results” from these meetings; while he saw them as a legitimate, friendly way to enter neighborhoods that were not his nor anyone he knew,
“making inroads” in this fashion did not resonate with Funder Leadership and were written off as a waste of time.

Similarly, he did not respond well to the corporate way of day-to-day life. Early on in his employment, he reported directly to the CEO, a position of status from her point of view. In his 1:1s every week, he would take a “brutally honest” approach with her, critiquing her approach to the way she thought about community. All of this, he told me himself, “I think she thought she was going to be a mentor for me, like, in a business sense. And I saw it the other way around.” He particularly resisted communicating in the typical corporate ways, particularly around “creating decks.” A “deck” is simply a powerpoint presentation used for “high level” meeting presentations. The CEO expected all meetings with the Board to be highly scripted in deck form. Miguel had no tolerance for either creating decks or the process of editing them for Board consumption. He also had no patience for working with The Consultants who were brought in to “help him get his bearings in the community.” He recounts meetings with The Consultants, “they got ugly. Look, I’m not gonna sit there and let three rich people who had never even gone in to some of the neighborhoods we were talking about tell me what we should be measuring and how we should be talking to them. I know community. I don’t know why they’re here.” After several contentious meetings with the consultants, the CEO asked Maya to step in and “help” Miguel with the Neighborhood Network project.

Miguel’s behavior became progressively erratic in ways that stretched his “community guy” status to the extreme. He became more conspicuous in the office: loud laughing and music would echo across the building, he spent less and less time at his
desk, he sat grudgingly in meetings, often rolling his eyes or making snide comments under his breath. The suit he bought made fewer appearances. His hair got shaggy. When I asked him if he was okay he said, “Yeah I’m great. Just lettin’ my hair down.” I remember asking Maya about Miguel not long after the episode with The Consultants. “I think he feels pretty betrayed or fooled…like he was brought here to do something and then the expectation totally changed. And it kinda did. He knows community organizing. But what they really wanted was someone who could appeal to the Board…and we know that’s tough for him. He just has no interest sitting in a suit and talking about maximizing impact.” Maya and Miguel worked well as a partnership for the next year and half, despite having very different personalities. When I asked how they worked it out she explained, “Well, there’s a lot of ‘train talks’—we both ride the Green Line home and it’s the perfect amount of time. We can decompress together and he can vent and I can suggest how he might tackle things. It works. For now. I just don’t want him to throw in the towel yet.”

It was at this time that he was “off the grid,” secretly planning events and meetings of which the Funder Leadership (and even Maya) had no knowledge. Miguel called it “going rogue.” “Listen, I know what I know,” he said. “And I know how it should be done and I think if I can just show people what can happen when you do something that means something to community, they’ll get it. They’ll see what I’m trying to do. And I think they’ll buy it.” Within the year, surprising no one, Miguel announced his departure. I recall a chat we’d had not long before his announcement. He was obviously very unhappy and had been and I asked what ever made him come to this job.
Well, you know, I know what it’s like on the other side of this equation. I know what it’s like to scrape your organization by, year after year, writing grants and hoping it’ll cover this work you see that people need. And when the chance came around I thought, ‘Man…think of all the times you’ve wished to have the opportunity to have enough resources to do something important. And this is it.’ Sure, I came here for stability…I’ve got three kids, my family, to think about…we need health insurance. But it really felt like a chance to use what I know on a really big scale. To make a real difference.” “Do you feel like that happened?,” I asked. “I don’t think I ever got a chance.”

I asked Maya about this once, as we sat at our desks late in the evening, and she just shook her head. “Well, he got a bad rap, yeah. He was not treated fairly. But he had a chance. He just chose not to play the game.”

The stories of Martin and Miguel highlight provide opportunity for comparison regarding the ways in which the particular Middle ground between neighborhood and The Funder may influence but does not necessarily determine the actors’ responses to it. While I argue both men held a similar “community guy” status, their stories illustrate two different strategies enacted from that shared experience of the middle ground between the Funder and the neighborhood. Martin, “chose to play the game.” He recognized the value of his mutability and controlled his “community guy” presentation based on the audience with which he dealt at any moment; he worked out of both the “community guy” and “Funder” toolkit simultaneously, choosing and mingling those buckets of resources together to create a version of “community guy” that maintained his representative power for Brighton Park while also appealing and resonating with influential stakeholders at the Funder, namely Leadership and the Board.

Though I spent less time with him when he went into Brighton Park schools, I saw him enact a similar “bridging” strategy at the middle school by approaching work in
the school “as a parent.” “My kids are going to go to these schools one day. I want it for them but I want it for everybody in Brighton Park.” In the few conversations I saw him have with educators or the Principal there, he referred to himself and them as parents. “You know how it is,” he said to the Principal. “You’ve got kids…you know how they are. They need this structure.” Though a very common thing to say, in the context of a school, acting as a concerned parent, not just for your own kids but on behalf of everyone’s kids, holds high legitimacy. It’s a traditional role for parents at school, and just like the “community guy” role he crafted at the Funder, Martin traded on this to open inroads and establish trust and rapport with gatekeepers to his vision—Funder Leadership, Principals, Teachers, Funder staff. Where Martin went, he “played the game.”

In contrast, Miguel resisted the game. Though he and Martin shared a similar tenure working “in community,” Miguel’s understanding of the “community guy” status was anti-thetical to the Funder’s “way of doing business.” He assumed he was hired to transform thinking at the Funder and his more literal strategies reflected that. He introduced what he believed to be “authentic” or “real” community strategies: give the neighborhood an “active” voice through direct “community conversations;” celebrate culture and diversity; translate the mode of work around the idea of community into types of presentation that would resonate in community. The “informalizing” of office culture for which he advocated was most important to him for this reason. “Folks in community don’t write decks. I’m used to sittin around a table with Sharpies and paper on the wall and seeing what happens. That’s how real life gets figured out,” he told me. As he
understood his role at the Funder, it was to bring “community in.” Like Martin, Miguel and others understood his role as a “proxy for community” and he also strategically “performed community” as Martin did. But Miguel chose to enact strategies he considered to be “more authentic” representations of community without finessing them to resonate within the context of the Funder. This, ultimately, backfired. Instead of maintaining the legitimacy afforded to him at his hire, Miguel’s refusal to negotiate this middle space to any degree resulted in the hire of The Consultants and Maya’s entrance as the new leader of the project.

This analysis might lead one to conclude that Martin’s strategy was “better” than Miguel’s and in some ways it was. But neither Martin nor Miguel went unheralded or unscathed. Although Martin’s approach resonated with Funder Leadership, over time some Funder staff grew weary and increasingly distrustful of Martin. Many mentioned a feeling that his “spirit of collaboration” might not be as true as it appeared. “You gotta watch that one,” a CB staff member told me once, “he’s clearly got an agenda and it’s clearly Brighton Park.” “Don’t we have a Brighton Park agenda?” I responded. “Well, yeah. But I think we have a hope that it’ll be truly a concerted effort and I’m not sure I get the sense he’s on the same page. I just don’t know how committed his really is to ‘playing with us.’” Others mentioned his demeanor: “It’s like you can’t get a word in edgewise. I’m trying to work with him, not for him” and “he might be getting a too big for his britches around here.” Another simply said, “He’s a shape-shifter. I can never figure out where I am with him.” Another referred to him as “the Operator.” At one point a good working partnership, the trio of Maya, Martin, and Miguel also began to lose its
luster. Miguel, who attended all of the meetings in Brighton Park, began coming back with reports of having to “keep Martin at bay.” Miguel noted, “It’s like this has gotten too big, too fast and he’s getting ahead of himself. As much as he’s treated like a proxy around here, there are no other voices coming through in those meetings. It’s the Martin show right now.” The longer staff saw him in action, the less they saw him as “the community guy.”

Miguel, on the other hand, grew in staff estimation over time. Originally seen as a “goof” or, as a CB staffer called him, “an office fool,” his non-negotiation strategy eventually convinced staff that he was “the real deal.” Staff said about Miguel:

“Miguel…just straight up knows his shit. People take him seriously out there.”

“He knows how to build relationships the right way…I think people can see that And respect that.”

“This work is in his blood…it’s just who he is.”

Some of the biggest converts were staff originally annoyed by his forthright “authenticity.” One of the CB team used to sit directly across from his desk area that had come to be known as “the Passion Station.” Initially, she voiced great frustration with him. Eventually, he won her over. “The first few weeks I just kept thinking, ‘I don’t get it. I don’t get him.’ But after having seen him in action, I get all of the flash. He’s good…as much as he annoys the hell out of me sometimes.” Another noted, “The nice thing about Miguel is you always know where you stand with him. He wears everything on his sleeve. All the time. So I know I can trust him. What you see is what you get.” Miguel’s increasingly obvious, aggressive challenges to Funder authority worked in his favor with CB staff in terms of his credibility. “He is fearless with them. Sometimes I
wonder what he’s thinking. I’m not sure it’s gonna end well. But dude’s got balls. I’m not sure I could do it.” Another pointed out, “He’s fighting the good fight. He might be off the wall sometimes, but no one can say he’s not committed to community.” In his short two year tenure, he became something of a legend to staff. His willingness to not negotiate with Leadership about something he felt passionately resonated with CB staff who also felt a similar frustration but were unable or afraid to resist in the same way. His commitment to “community strategies” worked better in the long-run and with a different audience.

While Martin’s strategies worked to get him “up the chain,” closer to the source of resources at the Funder, Miguel’s strategies worked effectively among the staff tasked with most of the day-to-day work at the Funder and who handled the grant making. Only in hindsight, did it become clear that, though they shared the same “middle” position of “community guy” with similar cultural resources upon which to draw, their strategies of action rooted back to a grander vision about how to make things happen. Martin, as an “outsider” to the Funder, understood his “way in” as resonating with the Funder’s “way of doing business.” He was effective in showing Funder Leadership that he could do business. Miguel, as a “community guy” representing the Funder, ultimately sought to make his “way out” of the Funder, and thus appealed to those with whom he felt solidarity and shared purpose: the CB grant-making staff.

**Bridging to the Board**

So far, this analysis has progressed from the boundaries at the “ground floor” through the middle positions between Funder and Leader Partner bringing us to the
“highest” boundary overlap: that between Funder staff, Martin, and the Funder Leadership and Board. It is over this boundary that strategic vision and direction for the Neighborhood Networks happens; in this space, the Collaborative gains its financial resources and sets its goals. Many stakeholders meet at this boundary but only Maya negotiates it.

Up to this point in the analysis, Maya appears on the fringes. However, her position at the crossroads of Funder Leadership, Corporate Partners, and Funder Board members was the heart of the Collaborative. Like other Middlemen, expectations for her ran high. One of her direct reports commented, “I feel bad for her. They just keep heaping more on her plate and expecting it to all work out. If anybody can do it, though, it’s her. She’s like the CEO whisperer…and she keeps Martin in check. And she babysits Miguel. She does a lot. She makes it work somehow…I don’t know how.” Even Maya herself one day, exasperated, asked me as she plopped back down at her desk, “It’s not like I think I’m all that great but, really, how would this ever get done if I wasn’t here holding hands and drafting a board deck thirteen times!? For a meeting we’re having to repeat a meeting we had about drafting the board deck!” My notes about her confirmed this self-assessment. Generally, all Funder staff, including those in other departments and the CEO, felt she was the authority from the Funder when it came to the Collaborative. Walk in and ask any one of the Community Building Department who to see about the Neighborhood Networks, and you’d get, “Ask Maya. She knows everything.”
The middle ground Maya negotiated tended toward the abstract and, in that way, it differed from the other “middle grounds” in this analysis. RCs and Martin and Miguel adjusted their strategies to some kind of reality, whether school environment or neighborhood environment; they occupied a middle ground between abstract and some version of “real life.” Maya’s middle ground deals only with the reality of corporate life, which roots itself mostly in ideas and rhetoric. This magnified Maya’s challenges but also her potential for direct influence on the direction of the Collaborative: while deeply committed to empowering voices in Brighton park, she also deeply knew the importance of neighborhood dynamics in implementation, and was fluent in “corporate-speak.”

Maya, more than any other Middleman, possessed the skills necessary to negotiate all of the middle grounds that existed in the Collaborative. This positioned her to be the right strategic leader in the right position within the Collaborative to realize change.

Because of this, however, her main strategy became a kind of story-telling. Maya’s work at the funder tended to involve both a lot of “sense making” for corporate board and Funder senior leadership who were l unfamiliar with community school work and hesitant to experience firsthand Brighton Park as a neighborhood. She said:

When I put [our strategy] on a powerpoint and present it as though it’s development made logical sense…that’s not…that’s not how it happened. What actually happened is we defined the strategies first and then we kind of circled the ones that aligned in a way that you can go in and easily talk and say “this is what we’re trying to do in this community” and start to get at something that was community level. We’re increasing the overall number of our childhood slots, we’re increasing the rates of parent engagement in the school and that started to move toward what I’m talking about, you know, that community level change.
As she frequently reminded our own leadership staff and the Board of the value of this work, she also realized the need to get other funders and some of our bigger partner agencies on board with the collaborative we were developing:

We are saying we should think about how to make this work for, you know…I think it's in our interest certainly and I think we have so many of the organizations that this will be appealing to in any way under our umbrella that if you are talking about selling our vision we can certainly push that.

Maya was one of few who could clearly articulate not only the value of the work for the Funder as an organization but also how that could impact communities specifically. Because of this, she was able to adjust the story or “retrofit” parts of it to gain the high-level buy-in she needed from the “corporates.”

This storytelling became a constant process. Without any real reference points, the CEO and Board’s understanding of the vision tended to wander and change every couple weeks. Maya continually and consistently framed the vision in a way that “resonated today.” Over time, though, it became increasingly clear that the highest levels of stakeholders did not completely understand what the Collaborative proposed to do with the CSM. Instead, they took on good faith the word from “the community” (Martin) and Maya that the CSM was the right vehicle to achieve the kind of neighborhood change they sought. But without immediate, quantifiable results, Maya’s job also became one of “reconvincing.” Every time leadership either forgot or slightly changed the story, they would begin to question the value and the process of the Collaborative. Maya became effective at reminding them in their own terms or sometimes defend the decision made several years ago to formulate these partnerships. Her desk was right next to mine and I’d often witness the aftermath of frequent meetings she was pulled into by Funder senior
leadership to either explain or reaffirm the value of our collaborative work in CSM implementation. One day she returned, drooped into her chair as she often did, and just said very plainly, “How many times do I have to convince herself [a nickname often used for the CEO] of her own vision for these things? It’s like I’m a board member and the CEO and the staff person that takes the meeting minutes all the time. This work is simultaneously above and below my pay grade.”

Maya had a series of mantras that best captured her strategies, many of which appeared so subtle or “soft” that they often do not appear as strategies. First and foremost, Maya “figured it out” and “made it work.” In her interview for this research alone, she used this phrase seven times. This was her mindset and it spoke to the level of abstraction she became used to. I witnessed this personally when responding to the CEO’s expectations regarding outcome metrics, which had become increasingly pressing but, in my professional opinion, also outlandish. In one of my meetings with Maya, I expressed frustration and concern, ultimately saying, “What are we going to do? I just can’t make stuff up.” “No,” she said. “I’m not asking you to make stuff up but I am asking you to figure it out. We’ll figure it out. There has to be something we can give them that will buy us more time to get ahead of it. But we have to give them something.” Other staff shared similar stories, “Oh yeah. She doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. But she’s not going to leave you hanging out there by yourself either.” Another noted, “Failure is not an option for her. She’s definitely driven.” This mantra often referred to work with the Consultants. Regarding that she said, “You don’t really need to be a genius to figure out that keeping the consultants is going to make the process with your
board that much easier and your grant making easier so you’re probably going to find a way to make this work.”

Maya also negotiated and distinguished the line between “high level” and “operational level” work and how to carry that out. Her strategy involved a kind of bait and switch with the Funder, in which she would aim to deliver something that resonated with Funder Leadership that would shore up room for CB staff and the Collaborative to move forward as they saw fit. She told me:

I kinda felt like our big team meetings with [the SVP of Marketing] and {the SVP of Fundraising] were too focused on the publicity needs and stuff and I felt like we weren’t moving forward with the actual work, so now Miguel, Martin, the RC, and I are meeting “off the grid” [every other week]…just the four of us to kinda be like, ‘Okay how do we move the actual meat of the work forward while this other stuff is going on.’"

She echoed this strategy regarding the consultants:

The thing I really had to do was to deliver some tangible pieces. So, if I can deliver some short terms wins that will resonate well, then we can move to the figuring out part. I feel like, and Miguel and I had this conversation, at some point, the consultants will be out our hair and we’ll just be free to implement this thing. And then we can do all this stuff that we wanted to do and we can just make things happen.

And of trying to “negotiate terms” with the CEO regarding CSM implementation in Brighton Park:

I said to Miguel, ‘Lets stop beating our heads against the wall. Let’s just get through this design process, put down what seems agreeable, and when we’re on our own we’ll just do it in our own way. So that is maybe me being inspired to figure that out, I dont know.

More so than any other Middle positions, Maya’s spanned the farthest distance between the high level “vision” she presented to the Funder Board and Leadership and the gritty details of implementing the plan on the ground. Had Miguel “played the game” more
effectively, Maya’s job would have been easier. Because he retained little credibility with these high level Stakeholders, Maya became both a storyteller and a practitioner and she figured it out by drawing a clear distinction between these two worlds. Though she negotiated the work across this very high level boundary, the middle space was not negotiated at all but occupied solely by her. By stepping “up” into the realm of the CEO and Board, she fully integrated herself into their world. Then would ferry the pertinent information back down, through her middle ground, to the operational space occupied by Martin and Miguel.

This strategy required Maya’s ultimate ability to flex to whatever situation in which she found herself. Her personality positioned her well for this challenge. Like Martin, she could “shape shift” when necessary but her personality was “true” and “consistent.” She also practiced a version of “brutal honesty,” right sized to resonate with CB staff in their slightly more “brutal” way and with the CEO who often sought an “honest” opinion. So, while she willingly approached situations flexibly, she also personally appealed to almost everyone with whom she worked. When I asked her about this particular challenge she said:

Are you trying to ask me if I’ve figured this out? [Laughing]. No I have not at all figured it out. I have not and I pretty much, at every point remind myself that at some point I have to let it go. At some point, here, you learn to just do the thing you have been asked to do, whether or not it is the thing that you know should actually be done or needs to be done. At some point, like after a year, you say your piece…whatever… and then you realize that…”I just need to do the thing I’m being asked to do.’

Although she said this more than once, she struggled to “make her peace” with some of the tasks handed down and often would find herself pulled back into the fray. In what
appeared to be a complimentary strategy, Maya consciously worked to “team build” with CB staff and foster a sense of solidarity. She started a “quote book” that developed into a communal space for CB staff to capture some of the “ridiculous things” said out loud in the office on a daily basis. She ran CB team meetings and left healthy room for unstructured debate, often soliciting the team for advice and encouraging creativity. Individual, informal “check-ins” with all CB staff, not just her direct reports, were regular. As her own workdays grew upwards of thirteen hours and emails from her stamped at 1am or 2am increased, these efforts also increased. She knew the importance of team solidarity but also fostered it for her own well being and “groundedness.”

Centrality of the Middle

This discussion aims to highlight the “middle grounds” of the Collaborative, those spaces in which one or more organizational boundaries overlap, as negotiated spaces in which Middlemen enact a variety of strategies intended to navigate established boundaries of authority, legitimacy, and expertise as they work to bring the CSM into implementation in Brighton Park. As the analysis shows, these liminal organizational spaces vary in terms of which institutions or organizations overlap, affording those who navigate them regularly the freedom to determine a course of action, presented here as a series of strategies, that the Middlemen develop based on the resources and opportunities their specific “middle ground” affords them. Using these, they broker the development of the CSM in Brighton Park from its highest conceptual stages to its implementation and embodiment in schools for students and parents.
Though I knew early in the research that the Middlemen were integral to the development and implementation process, the analysis reveals a surprising amount of diversity in experience; where the site of negotiated Middle lies relative to the entire organizational structure matters both in determining the specific resources available for use and viable strategies to enact. While the RCs “bridging” activities often involved specific, practical problem-solving scenarios involving negotiation of physical space and resources, the negotiations brokered by Collaborative members dealing with the Funder become more abstract the higher up the Funder Leadership hierarchy one goes. Miguel and Martin bridged the gap between the abstract concept of “community” prevalent at the Funder and their lived experiences of the physical, observable realities of community by embodying the “community guy” status. Though approached different, both strategically sought to bring Funder resources into practical use in real neighborhoods. Maya’s experience as a middleman was likely most similar to Burt’s (2004) concept of broker. Negotiating the highest-level boundary allowed her direct access to the source of power and authority for Funder’s fiscal resources while also possessing and using personal traits to shore up high-level sources of trust and credibility in her power to lead the work. By gaining and maintaining their trust in her “vision,” she freed up the space to implement the work without intervention from the top and brokered that back down toward staff responsible for the details of implementation. While all Middlemen required a certain ability to respond flexibly to the challenges of the organizational middle ground they occupied, their responses to those challenges were theirs to determine.
While they serve the practical function of moving information and planning to their respective levels of development, the brokering of the Middlemen displays what I consider meaning based in interaction. The consistent work of translating what “community” meant, in this case, worked as advocacy. Because the trio of Martin, Miguel, and Maya agreed on what community meant for Brighton Park, their individual strategies taken together did solidify the concept of community as a process involving people who lived there. This basic shift was the most significant I saw in the scope of this project. What once had only been a location on a map described by “rates” was now more clearly understood as a specific, dynamic place made of people with similar but diverse stories and needs. When I last spoke with Maya, she was working to slowly convince Leadership that hearing those voices directly might be a valuable proposition. Though this sounds basic, this is the work of slowly transforming the way the Funder “does business” in thinking about community.

Based on my observation, this is these middle grounds are the heart of CSM implementation and may provide some insight into some of the problems of implementation noted in evaluation literature. Not only does this Funder/Lead Partner model present many spaces for negotiation but the skill and patience required by those brokering that negotiation makes this a formidable collective effort that still holds no guarantee of success. In this research, the turnover of brokers is also high. Constant negotiation of meanings burns people out. However, this perspective does highlight the room for imagining the empowerment of neighborhood voices. With so much room for negotiation available, if brokered by middlemen who value and seek out the voices of the
neighborhood, this organizational arrangement does hold the potential for new voices to be heard.
CHAPTER SEVEN
SCHOOLS ABOUT COMMUNITY

Working on the Funder’s Collaborate always presented challenges but the spring of 2014 proved particularly difficult. Two years into partnership, the luster of a multi-organizational, cross-sector enterprise had faded significantly as original challenges remained and new hurdles continued to appear. The second of three SVPs of Community Building had departed in November of the previous fall and Maya, who had stepped into that role in the interim and had applied for the SVP position did not receive that promotion; rumor had it the new SVP hire was coming “out of the White House” but there was no confirmation. On top of this, Maya announced in December that she was pregnant and due sometime in May. Physically and mentally exhausted, she began pulling back on work as May approached. Reports out of Brighton Park were good in many ways. Existing CSM work was expanding and growing, February marked the first run of a tax prep site located in the Middle school that had been popular and productive. However, except for the dollars in income tax returns the tax site produced, the Neighborhood Network was still lacking quantifiable results in classroom performance, a metric the Funder Leadership and Board continued to pursue.

Furthermore, originally solid relationships began showing signs of wear. The low-level tension between Miguel and Martin, present since the very beginning, had grown.

---

1 As it happened, the incoming SVP did work within the Obama Administration but did not work in the White House.
more noticeable and tension between Maya and Martin had arisen over management of the RC in Brighton Park. In an effort to further the partnership, the RC position in Brighton Park was fully funded by the Funder but housed and managed at the Lead Partner with the expectation that a dedicated RC would amplify progress. But that spring, as Maya said it, “we’re paying her to work for us but either that’s not happening or she’s the slowest worker I’ve ever seen. We really don’t have anything to show for her work and she’s been in that position for over six months now. You’d think we’d have something [results] by now. I think something’s up. I just don’t know.” Before we could begin to figure that out, Miguel announced he was leaving the Funder for “another opportunity” at a direct service non-profit in Pilsen. This surprised no one as his unhappiness had grown since the departure of the last SVP in November. When I asked what made him go he just laughed, “I think there’s nothing left to say on the matter. We’ll all be happier, I think.” When I asked Maya what she thought would happen, she shrugged her shoulders, paused, and with a tired sigh replied, “Somehow we’ll figure it out. Right now, I’m not sure how. But eventually we’ll get it.” That was not a problem I was destined to solve. A month into Maya’s maternity leave, in June 2014, I walked onto the elevator on the 30th floor of the Funder for the last time as an employee still not sure how they’d figure it out but confident that, eventually, they would.

### A Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative and the Community School Model

The analysis presented here aims to shed light on what I argue are central meaning-making activities in the attempt of this multi-stakeholder, cross-sector collaborative initiated in Brighton Park, Chicago, by a philanthropic organization, the
Funder, in 2011. Existing evaluative literature examines the “ends” of CSM implementation efforts as a series of quantifiable program results focused on improved classroom and academic performance. In response, this analysis attempts to illustrate how cultural means, quantified by different conceptualizations of “community” brought into Collaborative implementation efforts from the different perspectives of the CBO leadership and the Community Building Team at the Funder, effects them and to what ends.

In Chapter Four, I identify and compare the way that individuals from the Funder, the Lead Partner, and the neighborhood of Brighton Park think about and articulate ideas of “community.” This discussion demonstrates the presence of multiple meanings of “community” that do not necessarily follow organizational bounds. While residents of Brighton Park lacked formulated ideas of community, those held by employees of the Community Building department (CB) at the Funder and employees of the Lead Partner spoke to personal experience of a given place and their own experiences of community. Funder Leadership, whose experiences of Brighton Park were limited, imagined more abstract and idealistic community goals while those in CB and at the Lead Partner saw goals for community in Brighton Park rooted in the reality of that existing neighborhood. Emerging from this spectrum of ideas about community was a group who shared a concept of community that crossed organizational boundaries. This Collaborative acted as what I call a “community of intention,” united by a shared vision of community in Brighton Park upon which they built a functional cross-sector, cross-organizational partnership. However, the differences in ideas of community between the Funder CEO
and Leadership and the Collaborative also informed two different sets of expectations in terms of the Collaborative work. Without a strongly held notion of community by residents of Brighton Park, the Collaborative and Funder Leadership engaged in a series of contests around the issues of authority and legitimacy to determine whose expertise and, ultimately, community vision would become the focus of Collaborative work.

Chapters Five and Six examine the negotiations that occurred between the Collaborative and Funder Leadership in the process of putting the ideas of community into action. This process revealed sources of tension existing around the organizational demands of “creating community.” Disagreement over the goals of the Collaboration became mutually exclusive and so the contests became about whose “version” of community was right. Chapter Five traces the contests in which the two groups found themselves over issues of authority, legitimacy, and expertise. A lack of formal community input and high dependence on Martin as a proxy for Brighton Park residents’ input, which carried ultimate legitimacy, created a fight that pitted staff expertise against that of external consultants not familiar with Brighton Park. This further heightened the divide between the importance of “deep community knowledge” and the “big picture view.” Meanwhile, organizational posturing and mis-matched organizational agenda created a fight for authority. While Funder Leadership sought validation for their “risk on investment,” the Collaborative wanted to remain faithful to long- and short-term community interests. Finally, tension over who could “claim the results” fed the fire of the questions of legitimacy and authority. With no written rules about “how” to implement the CSM, the Funder Leadership and the Collaborative were left “free rein” to
“figure it out.” This allowed the Collaborative to enact “middleman strategies” to mediate competing organizational boundaries and implement the CSM.

Chapter Six examines the different organizational “middle grounds” that members of the Collaborative occupied. Housed within and financially resourced by the Funder, the Collaborative was challenged to figure out “how to make work” the “empowerment” model of community that they embraced in the context of a hierarchical organization accustomed to a traditional dissemination of power. Members of the Collaborative occupied several different “middle grounds,” found at the junctures of two or more organizational boundaries to negotiate or further their own vision for Brighton Park. While challenging to navigate, these undefined “middle grounds” allowed members of the Collaborative to act as Middlemen, using available cultural resources specific to their “middle grounds” to broker ideas and navigate established structures of power and authority. Through this negotiation, they exerted some control over how implementation “on the ground” took place. It should be noted, however, that neither group ever really compromised or negotiated a resolution; this became the defining purpose of the Middlemen. They brokered because they were ultimately not empowered to negotiate from a place of parity with Funder Leadership.

I intended for this analysis to illuminate the inner-workings of this kind of cross-sector collaboration and focus those workings on culture, a force that seems integral and yet missing from other analyses of the Community School Model. But that which does not appear in this analysis is just as important as that which does. The lack of direct input from residents of Brighton Park was notable. This was not an oversight in the data. As
Martin explained in his interview, in his estimation, Brighton Park as a neighborhood lacked a sense of collective. This was evident in my data not just in the vague way they talked about community but also in their absence from Collaborative planning sessions. While I was able to find some who could talk to me about their ideas of community, those participants did not take part in decision-making meetings at the Funder nor was I aware that their distinct voices were represented. Martin served as the proxy almost entirely; his voice became the community voice for better and worse.

Of course, there were multiple factors that complicated this issue. We knew residents were hesitant and sometimes nervous about the thought of coming to the Funder office. Additionally, many spoke only Spanish. However, the CEO and Funder Leadership also did not extend the invitation. As discussed earlier, the idea that neighborhood residents would be equal stakeholders in this equation seemed a foreign idea to men and women who had climbed the corporate ladder to its top. They knew only one kind of stakeholder: one who earned an advisory seat at a powerful table. While understandable, their active hesitation to talk to people from Brighton Park confounded me. The CEO, particularly, would become observably nervous when talk of going to Brighton Park for meetings would arise; the one instance I saw her at a school in Brighton Park she was awkward and clearly felt out of place. One of my CB team members would always bet that the CEO, born and raised in suburban Chicago, “had never been south of the Stevenson.” This situation put Martin in a difficult position; while Funder Leadership loved him because he was comfortable, he also become the voice for Brighton Park, leading to Maya and Miguel’s increasing skepticism about
whether he conveyed the wishes of residents of Brighton Park or just furthered his own individual agenda that included Brighton Park. Either way, a proxy can only substitute for neighborhood voices partially and those voices were absent from high-level decision-making about them and their interests.

In addition to the absence of the neighborhood, I was also caught off guard by the lack of “school” in decision-making. Though this research concerned a small sample and a tightly focused lens, the work of the Collaborative reached into at least two schools in Brighton Park. Yet, this analysis illustrates that at the places where decisions were made regarding funding and outcomes, Martin, again, represented those community interests around “school.” Though Funder Leadership stated interest in “moving the needle” on improving grades, there was an absence of regular school stakeholder representation at the decision-making table, leaving one to wonder if their intentions were merely rhetoric or whether this was an oversight born from an inefficient “partnership process.”

Additionally, the lack of central support for the CSM by CPS or the City of Chicago also surprised me. The original design of this project assumed some central leadership by both CPS and the Mayor’s Office. While I had contacts within both of those institutions, their participation in this research was marginal due to the lack of involvement by the City. Except for the vestigial reminder of Arne Duncan’s tenure here, the Office of Community School Initiatives (CIS) that serves only to administer 21st Century Funding, the era of the CSM as a publicly supported initiative seems to be fading. Caught in the muddle of rhetoric around schooling models—charters, magnets, selective enrollment, college prep—the Community School Model feels forgotten on the
large scale. Just a few weeks before I left the Funder I attended a meeting of agencies implementing the CSM at the agency with the largest network of CSM schools, serving primarily the Black neighborhoods of south central and southwest Chicago, admitted that their leadership was considering “getting out of the business.” With the new rules governing Federal 21st Century funds that favored program creation instead of support for existing programming, they would not be able to afford to continue their established CSM efforts. Some of their schools were not only the most established but also the highest quality CSM schools in Chicago. They had figured it out. There was just no money to it keep going.

Why the CSM in Chicago? Why Culture? Why Now?

This an interesting, difficult time for Chicago schools. In many ways, good and bad, the public school system has reflected the greater social landscape of the City of Chicago; where schools struggled under the weight of crime and violence, so did the neighborhood. In schools where students felt the effects of racism and poverty within the school walls, the neighborhoods struggle in the same way outside the school doors. Originally intended to serve kids in their neighborhoods, the schools have always acted as a divining rod in this city, drawing attention to and reflecting larger social problems that play out on a small scale within schools and neighborhoods that remain racially and economically segregated. But as social problems hindered academic performance, interventions have only sought to right the academic, and not the social, wrongs. Over-emphasis on improving test-scores and student grades swept important disadvantageous neighborhood conditions under the rug instead of working to improve them. These
conditions affect students and also families, and neighborhoods that are not armed sufficiently to support their students as they try to succeed in social environments. With increasingly privatized, selective enrollment schools, the divide between those students who can “have” and those who “will go without” also increases; charters, selective enrollment, and magnet schools will succeed those students who have the resources to attend them while the rest of Chicago’s children will be lost in a system of neighborhood schools crumbling around them. On their current trajectory, Chicago’s neighborhood schools will more profoundly fail the city’s poorest, under-resourced neighborhoods than they did in 1972 when they were so famously called “the worst schools in the nation.” But it does not have to be that way.

The Community Schools Model holds the potential for addressing the deepest lying concerns in struggling neighborhoods: while providing for the material and physical needs of students, it also aims to provide necessary, integrated supports for families and the neighborhood. Offering an alternative, holistic approach to education, the CSM also introduces the idea of a collective approach to life in the neighborhood. As this work shows, just this idea can be completely novel to a group of people who live near each other but not together. This model holds the potential to re-write some of the deeply embedded divides in neighborhoods that keep people in a persistent cycle of poverty and discrimination. It offers the opportunity to imagine community level change in which those in the neighborhood become their own agents for change. The CSM provides a new, collective and interactive way for a neighborhood to reconceive of itself. At its fullest implementation, the CSM offers an alternative to increasingly privatized solutions
to public problems; this could be a new kind of local public institution and the
Philanthropic community longs to be the catalyst that sparked this revolution. For this
reason and because they fill a particular need for CSM practitioners, the Community
School Model and multi-stakeholder collaboratives are here to stay. But the question of
what they will attain and how they will bring the CSM to fruition remains.

Opportunities for Future Investigation

This project began and ended as exploratory and in that regard it succeeded. I am
left with more avenues of research than answers I provide. Nevertheless, one of the main
contributions this work could make lies in the research method and perspective from
which the main story arises. The most contemporary literature on comprehensive
community initiatives (Boyle and Silver 2005; Silver 2006) remains entrenched in
approaching the subject from the “elite class” down; thus, adding them to the broad
literature on philanthropic giving already existing, we have a diverse examination and
picture of these initiatives from the perspective of those at the top. Focusing the inquiry
on meaning-making and a decision-making process driven largely by individuals who
enact their own ideas and agendas allows the research to access more of the various
perspectives involved. Examining this collaborative from a cultural standpoint allows us
to identify other interests that compete with those of the elite and effect the outcomes in
particular, albeit modest, ways. It also allows us to consider the specific ways in which
the elite do co-opt some of the CBO’s goals.

While theoretical perspective distinguishes this work, its strongest contribution
may lie in methodology. The majority of contemporary studies on this topic rely largely
on interviews with the leaders of the initiative supplemented with archival analyses of
documents. So, not only do these works study the elite of the elite but supplement those
findings with documented statements that were fit to print somewhere. Thus, the studies
lie largely on rhetoric, leaving us to know the story only from one, privileged vantage
point. By employing an ethnographic approach, this research rests on a deep, rich set of
observations and daily interactions between the parties studied. As noted in the analysis,
this makes the pall of elite rhetoric less opaque; what those from the Funder say and what
they do are often quite different.

There is also the challenge of interests, stated and assumed. Much of the existing
literature provides evidence that comprehensive community initiatives actually reframe
philanthropic giving as a social just activity or relay a more general shift from a public to
a further privatized welfare state. However, this literature only acknowledges the
interests of the elite and defines other interests in reference to that. Though offering
critiques of those interests, perhaps, the interests of those associated with the community
partners—CBO staff and neighborhood residents—remain largely assumed. The
ethnographic method employed in this research also begins to crack through into the
territory of identifying and defining in more depth some of the competing interests or
lack of interests. Though the framing of comprehensive community initiatives often
identifies the power of the elite who hold the purse strings and, thus, the ability to direct
the agenda of organizational partnerships, it also tends to assume that this structure
necessarily negates or ignores the interests of “the people” for whom the initiatives are
intended to help. Drawn directly from the nuance of observation and time, this research
shows that, in fact, the subject of the CSM implementation—the residents of Brighton Park—held no cohesive interests in the initiative itself, thus leaving the door open for co-optation by other, more powerful interest groups. If nothing else, this study suggests that, in a country full of people seemingly inherently wanting community (Putnam 2010), those living in neighborhoods may not approach their lives with that in mind. Their interests may lie elsewhere than the interests we, as outsiders, believe they should have. Their lives as they see it may be much different from the inside than they are to us from the outside.

While I consider the methodology here as a distinguishing factor, it did not come without some price: I ended up with many more questions for further research than answers regarding my research questions as stated. The story presented here was the most central and cohesive story my data told and so the focus of this work remained on organizational structures, partnerships, and space. At the same time messy and mechanical, I hoped to show the impact of trying to “merge” two different organizations into a “new kind” of partnership centered on the idea of “community.” But the data I collected contained many “loose ends” not ripe enough to become part of the main story but still worth future consideration. If I was ever concerned that research about the CSM in Chicago not provide me with enough stories to tell, my time in the field proved than worry unnecessary.

In several different ways, I regretted not constructing this as a comparative project which highlighted for me conditions and scenarios that could prove interesting for future research. First, the Funder for whom I worked is a sort of “one of a kind” philanthropic
entity because they fundraise the dollars they invest into communities every year. I often wondered how the partnership dynamic would be different had the philanthropic partner been a more traditionally endowed family or corporate “foundation.” Anecdotally, I know both kinds of philanthropic organizations also share interest in the CSM and some have been involved much longer in that work than the Funder. So the story told here does not represent the larger “funder” story as it relates to the CSM in Chicago.

Similarly, the landscape of stakeholder partnerships across the city is diverse. In early research for this, I talked with many different Lead Partner agencies each of whom had a different emphasis or approach to their partnerships. Exploring the diversity of those would be interesting but especially noting the differences between “neighborhood oriented” agencies (like the Lead Partner in this analysis) and those whose mission is to serve multiple neighborhoods in Chicago. The larger “network” providers appeared more favored by the earliest days of 21st Century grants and have more established programs but also have the challenge of implementing one model in different neighborhoods. Investigating that would more clearly illustrate the distinct neighborhood effects on implementation. When I began this research, the Funder had a plan to implement at least 4 “Neighborhood Networks” within my proposed research timeline and I thought that would be my opportunity for comparison. When that plan stalled, I had to hone in on the one network in production. Nevertheless, I remain curious about the comparison of neighborhoods.

Finally, probably the most important analysis for future consideration should center on race. Very early on in my time in the field, I realized race plays an important
role in both the dynamics of partnerships and neighborhoods in which CSM implementation is underway but as my own analysis became trained on the very specific mechanics of this particular partnership in one neighborhood, the role of race became much less central. The issue of race regarding the CSM is multi-dimensional. The number of neighborhood schools in primarily Black neighborhoods that could benefit from CSM implementation far outweighs that of any other racial or ethnic group. Neighborhood schools in central and south Chicago continually find themselves under-resourced and dealing with multiple neighborhood issues that translate into barriers in the classroom. However, the CSM tends to be less common and less successful in those neighborhoods than in the predominantly Mexican and Latino communities of the west and southwest sides of the city. This is not for lack of trying. My primarily anecdotal data could not speak justly to the depth of this question but I regret that. This is a question that could speak more to the embedded patterns and thoughts about community in those areas than we know.

As far as I have found, room for sociological inquiry about the CSM is expansive. As a newer, alternative model for education delivery, existing literature is slim and limited in its ability to deliver insight about the effects of the method on a broad scale. Broader analyses simple require more data. The challenges to that kind of research oddly mirror the challenges the Funder realized in setting reasonable expectations for its goals: seeing anything of note takes time, patience, and flexibility. Hopefully, as more people learn about the CSM through wide-reaching advocacy efforts in this state and throughout the country, sociologists and other social scientists will heed the call for more research
that could provide much needed context and depth to existing investigations primarily oriented in program evaluation. Just as much a model for education, the CSM is a model for building collective, place-based identities and research to unpack those endeavors is needed.

Closing Thoughts

The most often conveyed thought about CSM implementation is that it is hard. “It wears on you. Only really gifted people can do that work forever without burnout,” a former RC told me. “They are the exception and not the norm.” This was certainly true in the Funder’s Collaborative. Of my original forty participants, only ten remained when I left the Funder in June of 2014 and of all of the Middlemen, only Martin and Maya remain. A new SVP of Community Building at the Funder was added to the fray, bringing a new source of internal tension and competition for ownership of the initiative. After years of “keeping it together,” staff worry that Maya’s position is more tenuous than ever. Despite the shuffle, the community of intention still agrees that their shared vision for community in Brighton Park is worth the struggle and the CSM expansion in Brighton Park continues to grow. I talked with Maya not long ago and as we were wrapping our conversation up, I asked her how she felt about the ways things were going. “It’s day to day,” she said. “Sometimes I get wrapped up in wanting to be right and then I remember that no matter what we’ve done good things so far. Even if they don’t stand up to our own standards that, remember, we determine.” When I asked how long she thought she would stick with it she replied, “I’ll keep going until I wake up one morning and feel
like I can’t do anymore. I don’t know when that will be. I’m pretty sure it’s not today, though, so that’s good.” And so the Funder Collaborative carries on.


Sway, Marlene B. 1981. “Simmel’s Concept of the Stranger and the Gypsies.” *The Social*


Williams, Rhys. 1995. “Constructing the Public Good: Cultural Resources and Social Movements.” *Social Problems* 42 (1): 124-144


Wong, Kenneth K. and Gail L. Sunderman. 2001. “How Bureaucratic Are Big-City


VITA

Kathleen Pacyna was born and raised in suburban Cleveland, Ohio. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI, earning a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Theology, with Distinction, in 1999. From 1999 to 2005, Kathleen taught sophomore and senior social studies and theology classes at Walsh Jesuit High School in Cuyahoga Falls, OH.

In 2005, Kathleen began her graduate program in Sociology at Loyola University Chicago, earning her Master’s Degree in Sociology in 2006. While at Loyola, she served as an officer of the Graduate Association of Sociologists, served on the Graduate Student Advisory Committee, and chaired the planning committee for the 2010 Chicago Ethnography conference.

Throughout her graduate career, Kathleen held several graduate fellowships at various non-profit agencies in Chicago, eventually accepting a full-time position with United Way Metropolitan Chicago for applied research. Active as a consultant in non-profit research and evaluation, Kathleen currently serves as the Senior Manager of Quality Assurance at Chicago Commons, a non-profit direct service organization serving children, families and seniors on the south and west sides of the City of Chicago.