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# MAXIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES AND DIMINISHING OBSTACLES:

Adaptation in Elev8's full service  
community schools

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Evaluation for Progress

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## Introduction

"We believe that all young people—regardless of economic circumstances—deserve to lead fulfilling lives. We are working to ensure that they have access to the resources that can change their lives—education, preventative healthcare, and the support of caring adults."

*—Charles Roussel, former Director of the Disadvantaged Children and Youth Program at Atlantic, 2006*

Inequities in education have been an intractable challenge to our nation. For decades, educational policies have been wholly unsuccessful in creating safe and excellent academic experiences for youth from low-income neighborhoods. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), our country's approach has shifted towards a broader definition of success—one that holds schools accountable for nonacademic measures, such as school climate, social-emotional skills, and student engagement, in addition to traditional academic factors. While some experts worry that these nonacademic factors may be beyond schools' purviews, one educational reform approach has been successfully addressing nonacademic factors in schools for over a decade: community schools. By bringing together community resources and partnering with community agencies and organizations, community schools provide students and families with access to holistic supports to bolster students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. Research on community schools suggests a myriad of potential benefits of community schools to their students, including academic gains,<sup>1</sup> better school attendance, and stronger promotion and graduation rates.<sup>2</sup>

The refocus of educational policy in the U.S., combined with evaluation findings suggesting the potential of community schools to help students succeed academically, has led to a boom in the development of community schools around the country. According to the Coalition for Community Schools, community schools now serve over five million students in about 5,000 schools across the U.S.,<sup>3</sup> and that number is expected to grow. But, while the praises of community schools are being sung widely, and the movement is gaining momentum, there is little documentation to illustrate how community schools develop and are sustained on the ground.

This lack of documentation is a problem, because while the community school approach is popular and seems intuitive, the infrastructure is actually very complex. The challenges that prevent students in struggling schools and communities from succeeding are long-standing, multi-faceted, and the result of decades of social and economic inequity. In practice, community schools' focus on system change and cross-sector collaborations require them to combine the various agendas of service providers; prioritize needs among multiple stakeholders; sustain relationships and efforts in the face of school leader, partner, and student turnover; coordinate efforts; generate and implement new processes; ensure

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<sup>1</sup> ICF International (2010). "Communities In Schools National Evaluation: Five-Year Summary Report." Fairfax, VA. Retrieved from [http://www.communitiesinschools.org/media/uploads/attachments/Communities\\_In\\_Schools\\_National\\_Evaluation\\_Five\\_Year\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](http://www.communitiesinschools.org/media/uploads/attachments/Communities_In_Schools_National_Evaluation_Five_Year_Summary_Report.pdf). and Dryfoos, J. G. (2000). "Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to date." Washington, D.C.: Coalition for Community Schools. Retrieved from [http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Evaluation%20of%20Community%20Schools\\_joy\\_dryfoos.pdf](http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Evaluation%20of%20Community%20Schools_joy_dryfoos.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Coalition for Community Schools (2009). "Community Schools: Research Brief 09." Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CCS%20Research%20Report2009.pdf>. Dryfoos, J. G. (2000). "Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to date." Washington, D.C.: Coalition for Community Schools. Retrieved from [http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/assetmanager/evaluation%20of%20community%20schools\\_joy\\_dryfoos.pdf](http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/assetmanager/evaluation%20of%20community%20schools_joy_dryfoos.pdf). Children's Aid Society (January 2006). "Summary of the Children's Aid Society Community Schools Results to Date." New York, N.Y. Retrieved from <http://www.aypf.org/documents/SummaryoftheChildrensAidSocietyCommunitySchoolsResults.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/faqs.aspx>

quality; and accommodate the schools' capacities and culture. Achieving these requirements is no small feat—even under the best of conditions.

Community school organizers also face formidable obstacles when they look beyond the development of an approach that aims to “fit” the needs of a particular school and community. Once an approach has been developed and a strategy has been put in place, what happens next? The dynamic environment of schools, communities, and policy requires ongoing attention to ensure that the effort remains meaningful, aligned with stakeholders' needs, and compelling to decision makers. Without adaptation to meet the ever-changing context, community schools risk becoming less relevant.

Little has been said about the adaptations community schools need to make during implementation to ensure the effort's ongoing relevance, maximize leverage, and promote sustainability. This report presents the story of one community school effort: Elev8. Elev8 is a place-based community initiative launched in 2007 by the Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) with the goal of providing economically vulnerable middle school students with the supports they need to stay engaged in learning through high school (and college) so that they find success in later life. Elev8 focused intently on providing nonacademic supports that had been proven to facilitate children's educational success.<sup>4</sup> Elev8 offered carefully integrated, school-based supports for youth and their families, including: extending learning opportunities for students beyond the classroom and traditional school year; providing high-quality, school-based health services to children and their families; encouraging parents to be actively involved in their children's education; and offering family supports and resources designed to promote economic stability, wellness, and continuing education. Individually, these components can play a pivotal role in the lives of middle-school-aged children. Elev8 takes this concept a step further by carefully integrating all four supports into a place-based model of school reform that provides combined services to students and their families and strives for a more cohesive and positive school climate.

The purpose of this report is to share lessons about how Elev8 adapted over time to maintain its relevancy in the face of various environmental factors and changes. These lessons are pertinent to the wide array of funders, policy makers, and organizations currently developing or implementing community schools locally. Specifically, this report addresses the following questions:

- What adaptations did Elev8 make over the course of its implementation?
- What were the reasons for these adaptations?
- How did Elev8 fare in terms of leveraging funds and sustainability?
- What are the implications for community school leaders and developers, funders, and policy makers?

## High Level Findings

The research presented within this report shows that Elev8 did indeed implement adaptations to address implementation challenges, maximize the initiative's success and to address contextual issues. Some adaptations were made by the funder (Atlantic), others were made by the lead agencies

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<sup>4</sup> For a review of the research underpinning Elev8's approach see Grossman, J. B. and Vang, Z. (2009). “The Case for School-Based Integration of Services: Changing the Ways Students, Families and Communities Engage With Their Schools.” Philadelphia, P.A.: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved from <http://www.issuelab.org/resources/1898/1898.pdf>. and Cooney, S. M. and Grossman, J. B. (2009). “Paving the Way for Success in High School and Beyond: The Importance of Preparing Middle School Students for the Transition to Ninth Grade.” Philadelphia, P.A.: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved from [http://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/paving\\_the\\_way\\_for\\_success\\_in\\_high\\_school\\_and\\_beyond\\_the\\_importance\\_of\\_preparing\\_middle\\_school\\_students\\_for\\_the\\_transition\\_to\\_ninth\\_grade](http://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/paving_the_way_for_success_in_high_school_and_beyond_the_importance_of_preparing_middle_school_students_for_the_transition_to_ninth_grade).

overseeing the implementation of Elev8 in four to six schools. Generally, these adaptations fall into the following categories:

- Adaptations at the foundation level
  - Adaptations to increase impact
  - Adaptations to address implementation challenges
- Lead agency adaptations
  - Adaptations to improve Elev8's alignment with the mission of the lead agency
  - Adaptations to address specific school needs
  - Adaptations to align Elev8 with the cultures of its participants
  - Adaptations to make Elev8 more sustainable
  - Adaptations to expand Elev8's impact

With respect to leveraging funds and sustainability, Elev8 met with mixed success. Each of the lead agencies successfully leveraged funding for Elev8 once Atlantic's core financial support of the initiative waned and continued to run Elev8 with these leveraged funds. However, in many cases, some of the Elev8 services became diminished, and some lead agency's schools stopped the initiative entirely. On the other hand, Elev8 was instrumental in securing several policy wins, most notably, influencing two districts to implement a larger community school initiative.

In addition to demonstrating that organizations must be flexible in order to successfully navigate the implementation of a community school, this report also discusses five other key lessons that came out of the evaluation of Elev8:





- Sometimes initial assumptions might miss the mark when it comes to community culture, building sustainable partnerships, and meeting schools' needs, therefore **policy makers and funders, as well as implementers, must be open to adaptations in community school efforts.**
- **Lead agencies' missions matter when implementing a community school:** lead agencies play a key role in the successful implementation and adaptation of a community school, and that agency's mission, strategy, and approach must be in alignment with the initiative to ensure strong outcomes.
- **Lead agencies are an essential partner in a community school effort** because they have the unique ability to convene partners, help them build a shared vision for the work, acclimate them to the school culture, and hold them accountable.
- Given that system barriers and long-held systemic beliefs held by some stakeholders are often unexpected obstacles to successful implementation, **adaptations are particularly relevant when working within systems.**
- Despite the many advantages being flexible and adaptable offers to the successful implementation of an initiative such as Elev8, external forces, such as fluctuations in funding streams and changes in the political and economic landscape, means that **adaptations alone are insufficient for ensuring the sustainability of a community school.**

## Data Sources

In preparing this report, McClanahan Associates, Inc. (MAI) used a variety of data sources to inform its research. In late 2013, the firm interviewed national Elev8 historians (former Atlantic staff members who were involved with Elev8 in its planning and early implementation) and current Elev8 staff from Atlantic. In early 2014, MAI conducted three-day-long site visits to each Elev8 region and

school, interviewing current and former Elev8 staff members, and asking them about how Elev8 had evolved and adapted over time. Finally, MAI collected data on the amount of money that Elev8 regions were able to leverage in the 2014–15 school year, and used organizational surveys to collect information on the implementation of Elev8’s services in each of the originally targeted schools in the 2013–14 school year.

The following is a summary of these interviews:

|   |  |
|---|--|
|  <p>CHICAGO</p>    | <p><b>26 interviews, including focus groups</b><br/> <i>(Elev8 site directors: 1; Elev8 site managers: 4; Elev8 site principals: 4; Elev8 local evaluator focus groups: 1; Elev8 teacher and staff focus groups: 5; Elev8 local historians: 11).</i></p> |
|  <p>NEW MEXICO</p> | <p><b>20 interviews, including focus groups</b><br/> <i>(Elev8 site directors: 1; Elev8 site managers: 5; Elev8 site principals: 3; Elev8 local evaluator focus groups: 1; Elev8 teacher and staff focus groups: 2; Elev8 local historians: 8).</i></p>  |
|  <p>OAKLAND</p>    | <p><b>23 interviews, including focus groups</b><br/> <i>(Elev8 site director: 1; Elev8 site managers: 4; Elev8 site principals: 4; Elev8 local evaluator focus groups: 1; Elev8 teacher and staff focus groups: 6; Elev8 local historians: 7).</i></p>   |
|  <p>BALTIMORE</p>  | <p><b>21 interviews, including focus groups</b><br/> <i>(Elev8 site directors: 1; Elev8 site managers: 4; Elev8 site principals: 4; Elev8 local evaluator focus groups: 1; Elev8 teacher and staff focus groups: 4; Elev8 local historians: 7).</i></p>  |

Our interviewees were uniformly positive about the adaptations they made. But, since this report is based primarily on interviews with Elev8 staff members and leaders, our data stops short of being able to definitively determine if the adaptations that Atlantic and the lead agencies made were associated with improvements in program quality, which would theoretically relate to more positive outcomes for students, schools and families.<sup>5</sup>

## Report Structure

In the following section is a summary of the adaptations Atlantic and the four Elev8 grantees (Chicago, New Mexico, Oakland, and Baltimore) made during the implementation of Elev8 through the end of 2013. The adaptations are organized by the stated reasons for why the adaptations were implemented. Next, this report offers information about the extent to which Elev8 was sustained in each school in which it was originally implemented, and shares findings on the successes and challenges Elev8 lead agencies experienced in securing leveraged funding. Finally, the report offers reflections on key lessons gleaned from the findings.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about Elev8’s outcomes, see McClanahan, W.S., and Piccinino, K. (2016). “Elev8 Final Report.” Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action and McClanahan Associates, Inc.

## About Elev8

"Research and experience shows that families do better when they live in strong and supportive communities. In short, place matters. Yet many communities face challenges of high poverty, unemployment, failing schools, and housing instability. These outcomes are influenced by unequal access to opportunity, and decades of disinvestment in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. An equitable approach to ensuring that all neighborhoods become the kinds of places that enable all children and families to succeed and thrive requires intentional efforts to build, sustain, and operationalize certain types of community capacity."

*—Center for the Study of Social Policy*

Community place-based efforts have long been a mainstay of our nation's social programming efforts. According to the Urban Institute, place-based programs "are grown organically in the communities where they are implemented, and draw different interventions from a broad menu of services ... [they are] **tailored** to conditions on the ground [and] continually improved ... in an ongoing development effort<sup>6</sup>." And, in recent years, the application of the collective impact approach to youth development has resulted in increased emphasis on collaboration—bringing multiple programming efforts together in a systematic way to provide vulnerable youth with the wide range of supports needed to assist them in achieving a successful transition to a happy, healthy, and productive adulthood.

Elev8, and other community schools, are essentially collaborative and coordinated place-based programs—employing the strategies outlined above within the confines of the school. Elev8 adopted the premise that success for vulnerable youth requires a holistic, comprehensive approach to address the needs of the child, family, and school. This approach requires the involvement of multiple community partners and funding streams to weave together the four main "pillars" of programming for middle schoolers: out-of-school-time (OST) programming, school-based healthcare, family supports, and family and community engagement. Community schools also strive to create a more positive school climate. While community schools are not designed to change the curricula in core courses, intervene in the delivery of academic material, or determine teacher selection, their impact is intended to be indirect—removing barriers for students and improving school climate to optimize the ability for students to learn and for teachers to teach effectively.

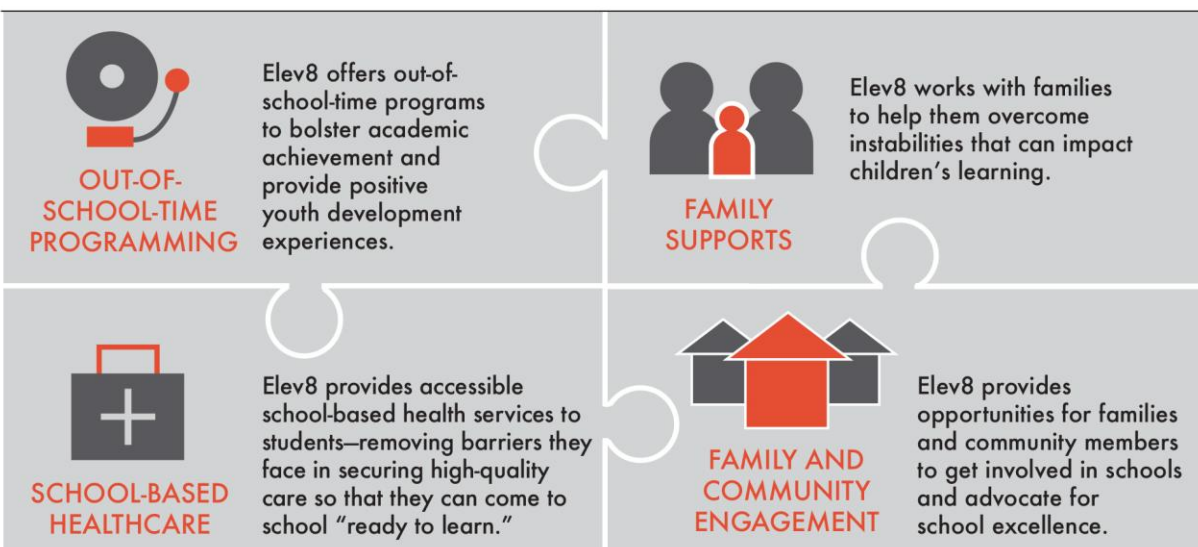
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<sup>6</sup> Nichols, A. (2013). "Evaluating place-based programs." Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/evaluating-place-based-programs>.



|         |   |   |   |
|---------|---|---|---|
| CONTEXT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Regions/Communities</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead Agencies</li> <li>• Service Partners/Providers</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools</li> <li>• Families</li> </ul> |
|---------|---|---|---|

## ELEV8'S CORE PILLARS



|                         |  |                        |   |
|-------------------------|--|------------------------|---|
| KEY SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are healthy;</li> <li>• Students have bright futures;</li> <li>• Families and communities support the education of all students</li> </ul> | KEY LONG-TERM OUTCOMES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students succeed academically;</li> <li>• Schools promote a positive school climate;</li> <li>• Schools prepare students academically;</li> <li>• Schools drive system and policy change;</li> <li>• Families and communities shape and support schools</li> </ul> |
|-------------------------|--|------------------------|---|



**Out-of-School-Time Programming.** In the United States, the deleterious effects of low academic achievement have evolved into a formidable epidemic for our nation's marginalized youth. Over the past two decades, politicians have implemented a variety of programs and policy reforms that have attempted to bolster young people's academic outcomes. OST programming is one such approach that has shown promise, providing young people with educational and social benefits. OST programs in community schools are focused on bolstering school achievement among students by providing educational support, skill-building opportunities, supportive adult relationships, and friendships with positive peers in a safe and accessible setting.



**School-Based Healthcare.** Good health begins in childhood, making healthcare disparities among our nation's poor and minority youth a major concern. These disparities have notable implications, not only for long-term health, but for success in school. In order to be “ready to learn,” students need to have their healthcare needs addressed. Elev8 incorporated School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) into the community school model to address students' health needs. An innovative approach at the time, SBHCs administer easily accessible services to children at little or no

cost to families. SBHCs provide important primary care services, such as wellness visits and vaccinations, mental healthcare, dental care, and sexual health services, and are designed to remove many of the barriers students from vulnerable communities face in getting high-quality healthcare, such as payment or insurance, transportation, and availability.



**Family Supports.** In recent years, there has been increasing awareness of the nexus between stress among students and academic failure. While stress comes in a variety of forms, youth from low-income communities are often facing financial strains and the associated “poverty-related stress” that accompanies it.<sup>7</sup> As such, family supports are among the growing arena of services provided at, near, or in conjunction with schools, to help support academic success among students. Like OST, family supports encompass a variety of services: legal assistance, benefits and income maximization, employment help, food pantries, and more, all tailored to the needs and specific culture of the local community.



**Family and Community Engagement.** It has long been known that families and communities exert a large influence on education. Research has demonstrated that students do better academically when parents are involved in school and that schools held accountable by communities provide more positive and robust educational experiences.<sup>8</sup> Elev8 sites provide robust and varied opportunities for families, students, and community members to get involved in schools, with the goals of teaching parents to support their children academically, and training students and community members to advocate for school reforms and school excellence.

In the spirit of collaboration and coordination, Elev8 not only provided these four pillars of support to students and their families, it focused on the *integration* of services into the school. Elev8 called for an explicit effort to involve students (and their families) in multiple services, meaning that the service partners needed to implement structures and processes to ensure that they were communicating with school staff members and with each other about students. In creating the Elev8 initiative, Atlantic’s vision was an intentional effort to wrap supports around the students to enhance their experience of learning. Atlantic strived to provide more than a typical community school by taking co-location one step further: it created a powerful synergy between what happens during school hours and outside of them by surrounding youth with a constellation of activities and adults dedicated to improving their well-being.<sup>9</sup> More broadly, Atlantic created a new type of school by seeding practice innovations, building collaborative governance, and involving students and their families in collective action for the improvement of education. A major goal of Elev8 was that Elev8 staff and providers would become full partners in the school—leading alongside principals, participating in school activities, and developing school procedures and policies.

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<sup>7</sup> Wadsworth, M.E., and Berger, L.E. (2006). “Adolescents Coping With Poverty-Related Family Stress: Prospective Predictors of Coping and Psychological Symptoms.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 35, 57–70.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, N. E., and Tyson, D. F. (2009). “Parental Involvement in Middle School: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of the Strategies That Promote Achievement.” *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3), 740–763. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2782391/>. Henderson, A. T., and Mapp, K. L. (2002). “A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement (Annual Synthesis 2002).” Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>. Henderson, A. T., and Mapp, K. L. (2002). “A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement (Report Conclusion).” Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/conclusion-final-points.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Grossman, J. B., & Vang Z. M. (2009). “The Case for School-Based Integration of Services: Changing the Ways Students, Families and Communities Engage With Their Schools.” Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved from [https://www.naesp.org/resources/1/A New Day for Learning Resources/Making the Case/The Case for School-Based Integration of Services.pdf](https://www.naesp.org/resources/1/A%20New%20Day%20for%20Learning%20Resources/Making%20the%20Case/The%20Case%20for%20School-Based%20Integration%20of%20Services.pdf).



This report focuses on **adaptations**. According to experts, adaptability is synonymous with flexibility and entails “the ability to perceive changes in the external environment and respond with innovative solutions to maximize impact.”<sup>10</sup> This research identifies adaptability as a key facet of successful nonprofits. According to the authors, successful local, place-based programs such as Elev8, thrive when they: 1) “build lasting bonds with community residents and better understand what works on the ground”; 2) have deep relationships with key stakeholders; and 3) when they are nimble—adapting to meet local contexts and changing circumstances. The authors also point to adaptation as an “elemental trait” of strong organizations and programs.<sup>11</sup> Other research on program implementation finds a

<sup>10</sup> Crutchfield, L. R., & McLeod-Grant, H. (2012). “Local Forces for Good.” Stanford, C.A: *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/local\\_forces\\_for\\_good](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/local_forces_for_good).

<sup>11</sup> Crutchfield, L. R., & McLeod-Grant, H. (2007). “Creating High-Impact Nonprofits.” Stanford, C.A.: *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/creating\\_high\\_impact\\_nonprofits](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/creating_high_impact_nonprofits).

positive effect of program adaptation on outcomes<sup>12</sup>— programs that adapt over time are more likely to achieve their goals than those that are inflexible.

This attention on the importance of adaptation is in contrast to the evidence-based program movement, which emphasizes program fidelity over adaptation. Furthermore, not all adaptations are “good.”<sup>13</sup> For instance, adaptations that modify the core elements of an intervention, or reduce the dosage or focus of a program, are likely to compromise its integrity and less likely to result in positive outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

Elev8 developers recognized the tension between fidelity and adaptation and created the program based on the idea that both are key success factors in a place-based initiative. At the start of the initiative, each school was required to implement programming in each of the pillars, but had choices about which programming they provided. To support the lead agencies, Atlantic created a list of high-quality and evidence-based programs from which lead agencies could select those that best matched their cultures, capacities, and processes. Research-based guidelines were created for program dosage, and technical assistance was provided to help the lead agencies collect data that was used for program improvement efforts. In the words of one former Atlantic staff member,

Atlantic insisted on the gold standards. It mandated that Elev8 schools needed to have extended day learning programs at least five days a week for at least two hours a day and at least one Saturday per month. It also required summer programming. Atlantic also pushed benefits maximization and comprehensive [SBHCs] at every school. At the same time, there was also a requirement that each site officially engage a minimum of six national entities [former or present grantees of the foundation] to advance the work [in the Elev8 schools]. There was a menu of providers that Elev8 schools could choose from, including Citizen Schools, Single Stop, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters, for example.

Elev8 recognized that differing contexts, needs, and capacities would dictate different approaches in each of the schools. In addition to bolstering program results, Atlantic believed, as others have suggested<sup>15</sup>, that flexibility would promote ownership, which would ultimately result in sustainability as Atlantic decreased its financial investment in the initiative.

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<sup>12</sup> Blakely, C. H., Mayer, J. P., Gottschalk, R. G., Schmitt, N., Davidson, W. S., Roitman, D. B., et al. (1987). “The Fidelity–Adaptation Debate: Implications for the Implementation of Public Sector Social Programs.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 15, 253–268; Kerr, D. M., Kent, L., Lam, T. C. M. (1985). “Measuring Program Implementation with a Classroom Observation Instrument: The Interactive Teaching Map.” *Evaluation Review*, 9, 461–482; and McGraw, S., Sellers, D., Stone, E., Bebhuk, J., Edmundson, E., Johnson, C., et al. (1996). “Using Process Data to Explain Outcomes: An Illustration from the Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health (CATCH).” *Evaluation Review*, 20, 291–312.

<sup>13</sup> Marsiglia, F. F., and Booth, J. M. (2015). “Cultural Adaptation of Interventions in Real Practice Settings.” *Research on Social Work Practice*, 25, 423–432.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Kumpfer, K. L., Alvarado, R., Smith, P., and Bellamy, N. (2002). “Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation in Family-Based Prevention Interventions.” *Prevention Science*, 3, 241–246.

<sup>15</sup> Berman, P. and McLaughlin, M. W. (1978). “Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VIII: Implementing and Sustaining Innovations.” Santa Monica, CA: Rand. Retrieved from <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R1589.8.pdf>.

## The Road Traveled

This section describes the major adaptations that Atlantic and local Elev8 lead agencies made during the course of the initiative, organized around the impetus for the change. It is likely that more adaptations were made than are reported here; however, these adaptations represent the most prominent themes that were uncovered in our interviews.

### Adaptations at the foundation level

Atlantic was the primary funder for Elev8 for four years in each region. Lead agencies were required to secure matching funders, with the goal of bolstering sustainability of the initiative in the long run. As the primary funder of Elev8, Atlantic developed the initiative with particular goals, strategies, and requirements. However, as the initiative progressed, Atlantic made adaptations to the approach to better reflect what the field was learning about successful strategies and what the foundation was learning about the implementation of Elev8 specifically.

### Adaptations to increase impact

Elev8 began with an emphasis on just three of the four pillars. However, field lessons about the importance of advocacy in long-term social change led to a shift in the core elements of Elev8. According to Atlantic's 2007 annual report,

Public policy advocacy is often the most direct and effective route to enduring social change for the poor, the disenfranchised, and the most vulnerable among us. To achieve lasting change during Atlantic's limited lifetime, we are increasingly supporting advocacy across our programme areas and in all of the countries where our grantees work (p.12).<sup>16</sup>

It was at this time that the fourth pillar of Elev8—family and community engagement—came to fruition. To develop the concept, Atlantic's Elev8 staff launched a co-creation process with Elev8 lead agencies and their partners to “find common ground that placed [...] increased emphasis on policy and advocacy.” This fourth pillar was not designed to replace family supports, rather to enhance it by adding a focus on supporting families, communities, and students to advocate for the success of schools. The goal in adding this pillar was to facilitate wide-reaching change in the educational systems of the targeted regions. Atlantic provided the lead agencies with policy, advocacy and communications technical assistance supports to help execute this fourth pillar.

Elev8 lead agencies' responses to the focus on advocacy varied. Chicago and Baltimore, perhaps due to their lead agencies' organizational missions, had already been working on grassroots advocacy prior to this shift. These lead agencies shared that the increased emphasis on advocacy did not actually have much of an impact on their implementation of the initiative. One Elev8 leader shared the view of many regarding the impact of Atlantic's strategy changes on Elev8:

It did not change our Elev8 implementation plan much, because we had made commitments as part of the initiative to implement the three, and later four, components [of Elev8 ...] We, and our partners, also believed in the strategies that were selected—they met [a] need and were backed by research. So even though Atlantic said Elev8 [included] advocacy, [that] did not mean we would stop

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<sup>16</sup> Source: <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/app/uploads/2015/12/2007apar-3.pdf>

funding school-based healthcare or [OST] programming. It meant that we had to figure out how these things went together, and focus on high-quality implementation, because high quality is what you need to advocate. We needed to have outcomes at the end of the day, and we would only get to those outcomes if we were implementing at a very high level.

On the other hand, New Mexico had never envisioned grassroots advocacy or organizing efforts as a part of Elev8, and the lead agency did not have strong organizing and advocacy capacities. Here is how one Elev8 staff member from New Mexico recalled the change in Atlantic's strategy and its impact on the initiative in the region:

It shifted from benefits to families to family engagement, which is families identifying what they need. And I think what that did was, it confused a lot of folks, and it created some divisions in the work on the ground and at the national level, as well. It was something we had to transition to and make it connect somehow and tie it into what we were doing before [...] It created a new wave of concern among principals and teachers.

New Mexico did, however, have state-wide relationships with policy makers. Therefore, it focused its efforts on policy by direct engagement with elected and appointed officials. Oakland, too, focused on policy, engaging the Joint Powers Authority (which hosted every agency that provided funding to children and families) and the mayor of Oakland.

### Adaptations to address implementation challenges

While shifts in Atlantic's strategy influenced Elev8's rollout, so did learnings from early implementation of the initiative. Two main adaptations were made to Elev8's implementation process: increasing flexibility and lengthening the time local lead agencies were allotted for planning.

*INCREASING FLEXIBILITY.* Based on lessons from Elev8's early implementation, Atlantic made the decision to increase the lead agencies' autonomy over time. While Atlantic steadfastly maintained an emphasis on high-quality service provision within the pillars of Elev8, as the initiative matured, local implementers were permitted increasing license to customize the initiative to meet changing local needs and capacities. When the initiative was launched in New Mexico (the first site), Atlantic expected that OST providers would be selected from a subset of proven, middle school-oriented programs; that a particular dosage and quality of programming would be offered across the schools; and that each school would have a full-service SBHC. However, early implementation in New Mexico demonstrated a myriad of challenges with this approach.

Atlantic's requirement that lead agencies use national providers resulted in challenges with implementation, which was one reason for Atlantic's decision to increase flexibility by allowing lead agencies to select local service partners. One former Atlantic leader summed it up this way,

Elev8 started with a level of rigidity. Atlantic quickly learned that you could not successfully adopt these national organizations into the variety of contexts in which the schools were operating. So, when the other sites got to rolling out their plans, there was a lot more flexibility, and it increased with each launch. By the time you get to Baltimore, they have a health suite [no doctor] as opposed to a fully built out [staffed SBHC].



While this interviewee highlighted Atlantic's shift from an approach that required the lead agencies to implement national evidence-based programs, other Elev8 stakeholders shared that Atlantic's flexibility began to extend to other areas of the program. One Elev8 director described it this way,

Over time, I think Atlantic began to realize that [it does not work] to [say] "you must do this curriculum, you have this many days, [you have to have] this adult-to-child ratio." I think the entire presentation of Elev8 changed, that it actually [ended up being] a framework and fill-in-the-blanks, based on the needs of each community, and on the needs of the school and the resources that were available locally or nationally.

Other interviewees believed that push back from lead agencies who implemented Elev8 later on also influenced Atlantic's increased flexibility. In particular, the Elev8 leader quoted below shares how the variations in the Elev8 schools at his site were shared with Atlantic to help influence its decision to be more flexible with Elev8's requirements:

[We had two schools that were] very different places, and we felt the cookie-cutter model that Atlantic was proposing to try to implement in those two places would be impossible, because [the schools had] very different needs, very different goals, and very different environments [...]. At [the first school], we needed [OST] programming providers that could work in the school, but weren't "of" the school, and could provide these learning opportunities and link the school day with the after-school programming. [This school also needed an after-school provider who could provide] support and capacity building to the teachers. [At the second school], what made more sense was [to use the school's teachers for the after-school programming ...]. We had a faculty that knew its craft and knew it well, and could really benefit from more time with its students in order to build better relationships with them. I think that both of these models were successful, but were both very, very different [...]. We were just getting to the same end in a little bit of a different way.

As the initiative matured, Atlantic loosened its specific requirements and afforded sites more leeway within the Elev8 framework. For example, lead agencies were able to select a broader range of providers, customize program dosage and the way in which they targeted students, and be more flexible in how they organized the structure of school-based healthcare. In New Mexico, the lead agency was given the opportunity to sever a relationship with an "imposed" program that was directly funded by Atlantic and not working in the pueblo in which one of its schools operated. Ultimately, Atlantic released the funding and re-granted it to the lead agency so that it could contract with another provider that would be a better fit for the school and stakeholders. Elev8 stakeholders interviewed by MAI all agreed that Elev8 would not have been successful without Atlantic's move toward greater flexibility. They also shared that local customizations and adaptations led to programming that was better matched to the unique context of each community, school, and lead agency in which it operated.

According to interviewees, the newly adopted flexibility not only resulted in Elev8 being able to adapt to the needs, interests, cultures, and capacities of the schools and communities in which they were located, it also had an impact on the success and sustainability of the initiative. For example, New Mexico interviewees reported that using national providers resulted in a lack of buy-in from the school and the community. According to them, the national providers came to the table because of Atlantic and the money associated with the initiative, not because they had an investment in the wellbeing of the students and the schools. One Elev8 staff member from New Mexico articulated the downside of bringing in national organizations this way, "When there is no money attached, we have to be very driven by what [the school and community] wants [...]. When the money is

there, [organizations] are super compliant, but there is not a local focus.” This interviewee contrasted this situation with using local providers, which had a mission-based stake in the communities in which they operated. An Atlantic leader described the buy-in challenge for sustainability this way,

The notion of variation developed over time. Originally, [foundation leaders wanted to minimize ...] variation from site to site. I think the responsiveness to the site and the needs of students and the community grew over the years [as challenges to Elev8’s implementation surfaced ...] The way to get people to support and promote Elev8 was to get their buy-in, and that was not thought through [fully] at the start. People need to support a program over time to make it effective, especially in a [program implemented in a] school district.

*LENGTHENING TIME FOR PLANNING.* The second major midcourse correction that Atlantic made was extending the planning period. The first implementing site, New Mexico, was provided with a three-month planning period. Based on the experience of launching Elev8 in New Mexico, the foundation learned that a complex initiative such as Elev8 required a much longer planning period to provide ample opportunity to engage providers, secure school leadership and staff buy-in, set up data and management systems, develop systems and processes for service integration, and lay the groundwork for the shifts that were necessary to create an Elev8 school. One site director explained,

[New Mexico Elev8] was not given a year of planning. [New Mexico] went straight into it, which left a very short window of opportunity to identify strategies and tactics. [New Mexico Elev8] was not able to nail down billing practices [for the SBHCs] because folks were still figuring that out at the state level. And even with [other] organizations [New Mexico] worked with—even though they were considered the cream of the crop—some of them were still figuring out their own infrastructure and their own ability to deliver on something as big as Elev8.

The other three lead agencies were afforded longer planning periods to engage stakeholders, including partners and schools. These longer planning periods gave the lead agencies in these regions time to build a shared vision for the initiative. Each held extensive planning meetings with teams of providers, worked closely with the selected schools to develop workable plans for implementing Elev8, and spent time orienting partners to the schools and to each other. According to one Elev8 leader,

We had a planning process we went through [... it was] very super intense, and we still joke here that we did twenty-five meetings in twenty-eight days to kick this thing off—and we had forty to 100 people in each of those meetings. It was craziness [... ]It was an incredible planning process that [produced] these great plans for what was going happen at the school, and we built really strong relationships [among] a lot of key players, including the executive directors, our new community program organizers, principals, and, to some extent, healthcare providers, and some other folks who were instrumental in getting the program up and running.

## Lead agency adaptations

Just as Atlantic initiated adaptations to Elev8, so did the local lead agencies. The Elev8 staff and historians noted several important adaptations and innovations they made to the Elev8 framework. The reasons for their adaptations fell into five categories:

- Adaptations to improve Elev8’s alignment with the mission of the lead agency







- Adaptations to address specific school needs
- Adaptations to align Elev8 with the cultures of its participants
- Adaptations to make Elev8 more sustainable
- Adaptations to expand Elev8's impact

Each of these categories are described in more detail below.

### Adaptations to improve Elev8's alignment with the mission of the lead agency

Many of the local lead agencies made adaptations to Elev8 in order to make the program more compatible with their missions. The impulse to create this alignment is supported by research that illustrates that "... organizations implement new programs more effectively to the extent they fit with the organization's current mission, priorities, and existing practices."<sup>17</sup>

The table below lists the mission statements of each of the lead agencies.

|   | LEAD AGENCY                                   | GUIDESTAR CATEGORY                           | MISSION   |
|---|---|--|---|
|    | Local Initiatives Support Corporation—Chicago | Community Improvement and Capacity Building  | LISC Chicago's mission is to connect neighborhoods to the resources they need to become stronger and healthier.   |
|    | New Mexico Community Foundation               | Philanthropy, Volunteerism, and Grant Making | <p>New Mexico Community Foundation (NMCf) is a statewide endowment building and grant making organization that serves and invests in New Mexico's communities and their greatest asset . . . people.</p> <p>As a steward of community resources, we support a quality of life that reflects the diverse values, traditions, beauty, and dreams of New Mexico.</p> <p>Building community wealth and relationships, maximizing community capacity and self-reliance are at the heart of our work.</p>   |
|  | Safe Passages                                 | Youth Development                            | <p>Safe Passages disrupts the cycle of poverty by engaging youth and families to build and drive a continuum of services that supports student success and community development.</p> <p>Safe Passages envisions a community where all young people have the opportunity to realize their full potential. Safe Passages is based on the premises that access to educational opportunity, health services, and family support should not be dictated by race or socio-economic status, and that healthy and supported young people are better prepared to learn and succeed.</p> |
|  | East Baltimore Development, Inc. (EBDI)       | Community Improvement and Capacity Building  | EBDI's mission is to successfully attract market-oriented investment, development, population, and enterprise to the East Baltimore Community, while equipping community residents with the skills, information, and resources they need to benefit from newer housing, employment, and business.   |

<sup>17</sup> Durlak, J. A., and Dupre, E. P. (2008). "Implementation Matters: A Review of Research on the Influence of Implementation on Program Outcomes and the Factors Affecting Implementation." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 327–350.

*ADDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.* Elev8, as it was originally envisioned did not aim to specifically serve the community. Instead, it was focused on supporting Elev8 school students and their families with services that would prepare those students to be ready to learn. One interviewee said, “[Elev8] was driven by the school community and did not incorporate the broader community voice. At the start, the community was the school and not so much all the people in the community.” But Elev8 Chicago’s lead agency, LISC, has a mission that emphasizes community organizing and advocacy, and Chicago Elev8 had launched community engagement efforts even before they officially became the fourth pillar of Elev8. Ultimately, the engagement perspective infused all of Elev8 Chicago’s efforts.

We interpreted Elev8’s implementation in a different way than Atlantic was presenting it at [first]. Atlantic had a three-pronged approach to Elev8, where it was after-school activities that tied back to the learning during the day, [...] connections with a caring adult, and the on-site services, [including] quality healthcare and other services [... There were also] attempts early on to bring in [...] family supports, [such as] job training or things for parents [...] We pretty adamantly said, “Well, we’re good with those three things, but we’re going to add a fourth: community engagement” [... LISC’s] model is very much bottom-up, [...] working] with neighborhoods to identify their needs and then [bringing] in tools and resources to realize those visions and those plans.

Chicago opened Elev8’s SBHCs (which were originally designed to serve students only) to allow for the centers to serve community members. The “Community Door” through the Esperanza Campaign was an adaptation that facilitated access to the school’s health centers for the broader community. Elev8 leaders in Chicago shared that they knew from the start of Elev8 that they “were not going to build [...] state-of-the-art health centers in the middle of underserved neighborhoods” and serve just the school’s students—these centers had to be accessible to the public. One Elev8 staff member described how once the decision was made to open the doors to the public, privacy became a consideration. Staff wanted to ensure the privacy of the students, so the health center held different hours for students and community members; this, for example, would mitigate the risk of a student running into a neighbor when s/he was accessing reproductive information at the center. Chicago Elev8 also considered safety when making this change; staff members changed Chicago zoning code in order to build an exterior door on the SBHC, so that community members did not have to go through the school to access the center.

Because of LISC’s focus on organizing and advocacy, Elev8 Chicago implemented an innovative OST program that taught Elev8 students how to organize and advocate for policy change. This program was called the Mikva Challenge, and was started in Chicago in 1997 to enable “youth to be informed, empowered, and active citizens and community leaders.”<sup>18</sup> Mikva engages youth in authentic civic activities, building their voices and leadership skills. Indeed, Chicago’s advocacy and civic engagement OST approach was innovative among Elev8 sites, although when family and community engagement became the fourth pillar of Elev8, other lead agencies also added some policy activities to their programs.

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<sup>18</sup> Source: <http://www.mikvachallenge.org/>

Lastly, within its community engagement efforts, Chicago Elev8 also organized community members. According to one interviewee, the Elev8 school “served as a hub for the community to come together” to organize around issues that challenged their neighborhoods, schools, and lives.

For the community, one of the things that [Elev8 Chicago] works on is initiatives, such as healthcare, safety, and education. We rally around things of concern to families, like immigration. We are able to bring people together to rally around an issue.

*TARGETING HIGH-RISK STUDENTS.* In Oakland, Elev8 was run by Safe Passages, an organization that was created as a part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Urban Health Initiative (UHI). UHI was a comprehensive effort in five cities to define and address each community’s most pressing child health and safety problems. Education was a central focus of the Oakland Elev8 strategy, and Safe Passages’ focus is on “youth at risk of dropping out of school, at risk or involved in gangs or the juvenile justice system, and likely to be involved in other risky behaviors.”<sup>19</sup> Given these priorities, Safe Passages made a strategic adaptation to Elev8, which was to refocus its OST programming on students who were exhibiting the greatest academic challenges.

The Oakland Elev8 initiative also built on its roots by adapting its OST programming to include an anti-gang program as its Saturday School offering. The “History of Gangs” was a Saturday School program for males who were at risk of being involved in or who are currently involved in gangs in East Oakland. The program sought to “teach students about the reasons why youth join gangs, about self-knowledge, cultural awareness, educational disparities, social injustices, and consequences for actions.”<sup>20</sup> Here again, youth at the highest risk of delinquency and gang involvement were targeted to participate, unlike other Elev8 programs that served a broader swath of students.

*A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT.* Baltimore Elev8 was first led by East Baltimore Development, Inc. (EBDI). Historically, the East Baltimore community was one of the most neglected in the city; the community had high rates of crime and violence, low educational attainment among residents, and high home vacancy rates. The schools in East Baltimore were similarly plagued with challenges, and Elev8 realized EBDI’s vision to create exemplary middle schools for students from East Baltimore and the “[Johns] Hopkins area.” Baltimore was the last Elev8 site to get up and running, and, as such, it enjoyed the most flexibility in how it implemented Elev8. Nonetheless, there, too, adaptations were made to accommodate the lead agency’s mission of improving living conditions in East Baltimore. EBDI focused all of Elev8’s resources on schools only in that neighborhood, and, as a result, the selected schools were all in very close proximity to one another. Relatedly, Baltimore city had few “traditional” middle schools; many schools that served middle schoolers were combined elementary and middle grades schools. Baltimore Elev8, therefore, included fifth graders in Elev8 from the start of the initiative.

With a focus on development, EBDI had partnerships with many organizations that it brought together to support residents in East Baltimore. These partnerships, then, became the foundation of Elev8’s model. For instance, while Baltimore was encouraged to set up family resource centers in Elev8 schools—a successful approach in other Elev8 schools—EBDI and Elev8 took an alternative route for family supports that was community-based and took advantage of its strong relationships with East Baltimore organizations. One interviewee from Baltimore Elev8 described it this way,

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<sup>19</sup> Source: <http://safepassages.org/mission-history/>

<sup>20</sup> Source: <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs080/1103255370887/archive/1107208080210.html>

The one-stop model wasn't [going to] work for us. I mean, there are other organizations locally who provide [family resources], and whenever we need it, we tap into it for referrals or for events or different family care education kind of things [... W]e didn't set up family resource centers in our school; we just set up a family support [system ...]

*INTEGRATION OF SERVICES AND SCHOOL APPROACH.* Interviewees from New Mexico did not describe any mission-informed adaptations to Elev8. This may be due to the fact that they were the first region implementing Elev8 and felt the most pressure to align the program with Atlantic's initial vision.

However, Elev8 New Mexico was influenced by the lead agency that launched it. The New Mexico Community Foundation (NMCF) had broad goals for improving the state residents' wellbeing. Its holistic mission, combined with its experience as a funder, rather than program implementer, may have influenced its emphasis on the system change aspects of Elev8. New Mexico, more than any another Elev8 region, honed in on the integration of Elev8 into the schools. In the words of one New Mexico Elev8 staffer,

[In New Mexico], there was a focus was on integration, [...] so my work as a site coordinator was focused on the integration piece—what did it look like? We had a site team, [an] action plan. It brought the SBHC and OST programs (more than one) and family support people together to learn about one another [... W]e looked at how we could support each other's goals, and worked to identify efficiencies between the components/models (instead of having three separate events, for instance). This was our focus in the first two years [...]

While site coordinators in other regions also worked to achieve integration, coordinators and other New Mexico Elev8 staffers described their *primary* goals in terms of creating Elev8 schools, where school leadership, service providers, and Elev8 staff worked together to form a holistic approach to schooling.

#### Adaptations to address specific school needs

Elev8 is a school-based initiative, and, as such, principals are at the center of Elev8 implementation and can greatly affect the degree to which Elev8 is implemented and sustained. According to McClanahan and Piccinino<sup>21</sup>, where Elev8 implementation was most successful, principals played a leadership role in developing the vision for Elev8, helping to adapt it to the particular needs and culture of their students and schools. Indeed, to a great extent, Elev8's sustainability was contingent upon the support of and buy-in among principals. At the time of MAI's site visits, Elev8 was no longer receiving operational funding from Atlantic, and many school principals had dedicated their discretionary dollars and space to Elev8 coordinators and family resource centers. School staff also had a role in promoting and sustaining Elev8—when they could make the link between how Elev8 could help them educate students, it was more likely that they would become full partners in the initiative—referring youth to Elev8's services and interfacing with Elev8 staff.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Elev8 adapted to meet schools' needs over time. Initially, many Elev8 school leaders and staff felt that Elev8 was "dropped" on them, and, as such, the success of the initiative was contingent upon Elev8 leaders and staff customizing the initiative.

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<sup>21</sup> McClanahan, W.S., and Piccinino, K. (2016). "Elev8 Final Report." Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action and McClanahan Associates, Inc.

*SUPPORTING STUDENTS ACADEMICALLY.* From the start of Elev8, principals were focused on Elev8's potential to impact students' academic achievement. All four Elev8 regions explored adaptations with the goal of better supporting students' academic achievement. The Coordination of Services Team (COST) was an Elev8 adaptation that Safe Passages in Oakland implemented early in the initiative to create focus on strengthening students' academic outcomes. The COST team ensured the integration of Elev8 components and streamlined service provisions. Suggestions from school staff, including counselors, teachers, and principals, as well as Elev8 providers, were given to the COST team, which was composed of teachers, the after-school director, AmeriCorps team, restorative justice team, mental health counselors, the health center, the family resource center, and various other partners and providers. The representatives met regularly to discuss students' needs in a case-management style. The team matched students to services, to make sure there was no duplication of service, and to case manage the student. In essence, COST ensured that students and families knew about services, and helped those who needed them access them so that students were ready to learn.

In its fourth year of operation, Elev8 Chicago (like Elev8 Oakland before it) began targeting students who were at risk of falling behind academically, amid increasing concern about school and student performance in Elev8 schools. Specifically, school staff in Chicago's Elev8 schools were concerned that Elev8 was missing the group of students who were struggling academically, and might not be motivated to connect with Elev8's services on their own. Unlike Oakland, which based its targeting on referrals, Chicago Elev8 used data called "early warning indicators" (EWIs), which predicted a student's likelihood of dropping out of school before high school graduation.<sup>22</sup> EWIs were formulated by the Consortium on Chicago, which based its research on student academic data from Chicago public schools, as well as students' school attendance, behavior, and overall academic performance. In response to school needs, LISC encouraged each Elev8 school to find ways of better serving students who had one or more EWIs.

There were variations in how Elev8 schools programmed for youth with EWIs. Some schools focused on developing new tutoring programs, while other schools encouraged youth with EWIs to participate in behavioral health services. Others directed these students to recreation programs or leadership development. One school developed a case management program called Early Response Action Practitioners (ERAP) for students with EWIs, which was later replicated in other schools. ERAP was based on the COST model in Oakland, and, as one Elev8 leader describes, "used data to target specific kids who needed Elev8 resources, but were not accessing them." This Elev8 leader notes the key questions ERAP sought to answer,

One [adaptation] is ERAP, which is where we really looked at [...] which students fit under the early warning indicators [...] Students who have been absent a lot [...] how do we support them? How do we try to engage and use community [...] programs to help support them? Or students who are getting suspended a lot [...] how do we support them, so they get their behavior [back on track]? Or students who are failing? ERAP provides wrap-around services to help support those students.

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<sup>22</sup> Other lead agencies also worked to implement adaptations based on EWIs. However, not all were successful. Some lead agencies abandoned the approach due to cross-cutting challenges, such as data access; but in some cases, the districts or schools themselves abandoned the approach.

Students in ERAP were provided interventions, and their progress was monitored by the group overseeing the student's case, which included the school principal, the Elev8 coordinator, SBHC staff, and other service providers. Once a student was back on track, s/he was removed from the ERAP caseload, making room for other students. An ancillary benefit of focusing on EWIs was Chicago's ability to target services as it faced lower funding levels later on.

Elev8 Baltimore also found ways to adapt its programming to better support students academically. Because Baltimore's schools faced challenges in getting and keeping middle school youth involved in enrichment activities, they initially opted to encourage students to take part in both academic and nonacademic OST programs by asking them what OST programs they wanted to participate in. While this approach may have solved the problem of getting students involved in healthy OST activities, in the view of the schools, it did not go far enough to support students academically. Schools wanted Elev8 to provide more academic enrichment in the OST offerings. In response, Elev8 Baltimore grew its educational enrichment portfolio to include a more comprehensive array of offerings.

[...] the schools pushed and said, "[...] we need you to add academic time," [...] We've now added STEM, and we've integrated STEM into the after-school program.

Participating schools in Oakland were equally concerned about improving students' academic success. While the district was very excited that Elev8 was providing services to students' families, it wanted schools to invest less in family supports and more in activities and education that helped parents promote their children's academic success.

[...] the district really values family engagement as part of its community schools model, and we've taken the stance, at least currently, of doing it less around family supports and more around supporting families to engage with their child's academics.

One way in which Elev8 adapted to meet this need was to change its Saturday School program, "The History of Gangs." Principals in the schools in which "The History of Gangs" curriculum was implemented wanted youth in Saturday School to have a more straightforward educational enrichment experience that would help them learn more about the connection between education and career. In response, Saturday School was re-imagined into a program called College and Career Pathways (CCP). Elev8's CCP program provided students with "college-prep and work-based courses and experiences (e.g., internships) designed to give students career-oriented, real-world experiences and lead to more post-high school options."<sup>23</sup>

The Homework Diner was New Mexico's response to creating more supports around student academics. Here students and their parents (and sometimes siblings) would join Elev8 and school staff at dinner time. Meals were provided, which was especially helpful to parents who had limited funds for food, and also helped to ensure working parents, who might not have time to prepare dinner and participate in an evening program, could be involved. In addition to dinner, the Homework Diner staff helped students with their homework, but its main focus was modeling to parents how they could best help their own children with school assignments. The Homework Diner initiative was met with broad praise from school and Elev8 staff alike.

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<sup>23</sup> Source: <https://gopublicschoolsOakland.org/2016/04/college-and-career-pathways/>



*ADDRESSING BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES.* Chicago school leaders were concerned about behavioral issues that were affecting school climate, and in response the CALM classroom—a program designed to teach students and teachers mindfulness techniques to increase calmness and self-awareness, and to promote a positive school climate—was implemented by Elev8. Initially, Elev8 did not focus on providing services for the school staff, but CALM classroom required teacher training, which principals embraced.

Behavior management also arose as a challenge to the Baltimore Elev8 schools. Initially, Elev8 partnered with a community provider to offer therapy to small groups of students who were referred. However, after two years, Elev8 and the school staff realized that it “just did not make sense to keep tinkering at the edges with the small groups,” and instead, Elev8 Baltimore made an adaptation to serve all students in the school. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Baltimore Elev8 introduced “De-Stress,” a mindfulness program and holistic health class designed to teach students about making healthy choices in stressful situations.

According to interviewees, “De-Stress” was a huge success—all middle school students in Elev8 Baltimore schools learned techniques for coping with anger, stress, and loss, which resulted in a more peaceful school environment and the de-escalation of encounters between staff and students, and between students and their peers.

*ALIGNMENT TO THE SCHOOL'S EDUCATIONAL APPROACH.* In response to educators in Chicago's schools moving towards a project-based approach to learning, Elev8 Chicago adapted its OST programming to better align with this pedagogy. For instance, one school incorporated bike repair as an in-school Elev8 activity to align with the school's experiential physical education approach. A local bike shop would provide students with bikes, which they learned to repair and tune. Then they would ride the bikes in the community for physical activity. One interviewee describes the thought process behind this particular adaptation:

[... We decided that we were] going to stop doing [things the old way] and [instead] take these kids to, [say], a real dojo if they're doing martial arts. If we do culinary arts, we're [going to] take [them] to the Washburne Culinary Arts School, or downtown to one of the culinary arts schools, so they can have a real culinary arts experience [...]

Elev8 Baltimore incorporated a project-based element into its OST programming, as well. It created a “simulated city” or “mini-economy” program as an educational enrichment activity that was engaging and exciting. In the program, students developed and ran their own cities. It exposed students to academic skills such as math, orating, and writing; life skills, such as civic engagement and budgeting; and basic workforce skills, such as completing job applications, interviewing, and creating a résumé.

*ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM.* Another noteworthy adaptation in Oakland Elev8 was the “attendance team.” Chronic absence was a major issue in many Oakland Elev8 schools, and the schools communicated this to Elev8 leadership. An Elev8 school principal provides insight into this adaptation:

I don't think Elev8 had a direct attendance effort when I got here [...] but after my first year, I realized that attendance in Oakland schools, especially chronic absence, is just a mess. And so, I had the Elev8 coordinator and some of the interns [...] form an attendance team. And that had a giant impact on chronic absence numbers [... We] got together and systematically looked at our

attendance numbers [...] and the Elev8 coordinator, the interns, and the nurse did the direct work of contacting [the] families of those kids to make sure that they came to school. And our chronic absence dropped from 15 percent [...] to 5 percent in a couple of years.

Baltimore implemented a similar model, using home visitation to address schools' attendance challenges. In Baltimore Elev8, family advocates conducted visits to the homes of chronically absent students, with the goal of providing them with services and supports to address barriers students were facing, including chronic asthma, a lack of immunizations, or a lack of adequate clothing.

### Adaptations to align Elev8 with the cultures of its participants

Program adaptations that address a community's culture have long been recognized as necessary for programmatic success, and Elev8 was no exception. Several Elev8 schools adapted their family supports and community engagement efforts to make them more culturally appropriate as the initiative progressed.

*LANGUAGE.* In many Elev8 schools, language was a barrier to the full participation of students' families. Schools in Oakland and New Mexico both formed Latino Concilios, where Spanish-speaking parents of students in the school could discuss school policy as it related to academics in general, and Latino families specifically. These meetings were held in Spanish, and were focused on organizing Latino parents around the issues that were most important to them. The Concilio program in Oakland was created by a VISTA volunteer who was of Mexican descent. He understood the culture and started a group tailored to Spanish speaking families. Initially, the school and Elev8 staff would run these meetings; later in the initiative, parents began to run the meetings themselves.

In New Mexico, the inception of the Spanish-speaking Consejo de Padres (Latino Parent Council) was in response to an outgrowth of feedback Elev8 staff members received from families, and was designed to grow Latino parent engagement in school, which was at an all-time low. According to one Elev8 New Mexico staff member,

[When I joined Elev8], a parent organization, Consejo de Padres, had just started. They had had maybe one or two meetings [...] and there was] a base of [about] six families [...] Part of my training was doing home visits with these families [...] I [...] got to meet the parents where they were, in their homes, and got to see the conditions, and they were just so open [and] welcoming, and they embraced me, knowing that I was new to the community. And they [...] shared what it was that they wanted and why they started the Consejo [...] [M]any of them said, "Well, because we've never identified with any other kind of parent group, and what we like about this is that it's [...] Spanish speaking, and we talk about issues that are relevant to our community [...]"

*INTEGRATION WITH EXISTING CULTURAL VALUES AND TRADITIONS.* New Mexico Elev8 was implemented in a variety of settings, including a tribal school. Interviewees from New Mexico Elev8 emphasized the need for adaptations to align with tribal culture, Native American youths' backgrounds, and governmental structures already in place to make the initiative successful and sustainable. One Elev8 New Mexico interviewee shared the following reflection on working to align Elev8 with tribal culture and government,



There are a lot of procedures and policies that you have to follow [when working with a tribal government [...]] Because of traditional values and ways [...], bringing in an [outside] program—something that's already so structured, strict, [and] rigorous—[is] questionable [to them].

OST programming was also adapted to match the cultural backgrounds of students in New Mexico's Elev8 schools. The *National Indian Youth Leadership Program* (NIYLP) was an enrichment program that was brought into Elev8's tribal schools to suit the needs and culture of local populations after a previous national provider did not succeed in the setting. NIYLP's mission is to nurture the potential of Native youth to be contributors to a more positive world through adventure-based learning and service to family, community, and nature. NIYLP's work is steeped in traditional indigenous values regarding family, community, service, and appreciation for the magic of the natural world. NIYLP was brought in to replace Atlantic's national educational enrichment OST provider, which was unable to provide programming that reflected the tribe's values and culture.

*FAMILY ENGAGEMENT.* Baltimore Elev8 staff also described adaptations that were made to accommodate the culture of the community generally. Most notably, Baltimore recognized that parent and community involvement was historically low at Baltimore's Elev8 schools, and that there was distrust of the schools. One interviewee summarized the problem this way,

I think a lot of our parents [were] intimidated by the schools, in part because of the personality of the staff [... and] parents who [were] not routinely invited and encouraged to be assertive and to ask questions and to raise uncomfortable questions [...] were really intimidated.

While not unique to Baltimore, Baltimore's Elev8 staff made several adaptations to the model to tackle the ongoing disconnect between parents and schools in order to bolster family engagement. Parent University was one such program.

[Parent University refers to] a variety of parent education workshops. [These workshops were designed to teach parents ...] what a student support team was all about—otherwise known as an SST—or what an individual education plan was—otherwise known as an IEP. Schools throw these acronyms around all the time and it can really be off-putting and intimidating to parents. [To address this disconnect], our family advocates and our site managers, along with faculty and staff of the school, created these parent workshops to help [parents] feel more comfortable.

As previously noted, Elev8 Baltimore did not implement family resource centers. Instead, they hired full-time family advocates whose job it was to reach out to parents and connect them with existing community-based resources. After learning about Chicago Elev8's approach to family engagement, which used community members as parent liaisons, Baltimore Elev8 hired members of the community, most typically parents of students in the school, to augment the reach of the advocates. This new staff position—the parent outreach worker—provided unique insights and perspectives that family advocates could not. They were also able to connect with other parents in authentic ways that encouraged their participation in the initiative. Interviewees unanimously praised this particular adaptation, sharing that “parent and family engagement skyrocketed” when Baltimore added the parent outreach worker role. One interviewee explained why:

[The parent outreach worker] position changed the tenor of our family engagement. So, no longer was Elev8, this outsider, you know? [...] We do the work [and] maybe have good

relationships with parents, but [we're] still an outsider creating programming for parents [... With the parent outreach worker], it was a parent they knew [who was] creating new programming for [his or her] friends.

Another interviewee expanded on how the parent outreach workers addressed the “outsider” limitation that the family advocates faced,

[Parent outreach workers were [a] brilliant idea [... Parents] wouldn't share with [the family advocates] because we [were] from an agency. [Parents thought] that we were [going to] turn on them, but they trust [our parent outreach worker]. Elev8 [was] really being intentional about that [approach], selecting [parent outreach workers] who live in the community and connect with Elev8 to be able to provide better services [to Elev8 families].

Baltimore's family supports adaptations ultimately facilitated open communication between Elev8 and school staff and parents, which helped Elev8 effectively support families.

### Adaptations to make Elev8 more sustainable

Elev8 is a complex, multi-partner program; as such, it requires ample funding. Lead agencies recognized that ultimately the services and coordination activities would have to be funded by entities other than Atlantic, and that to sustain Elev8 at its initial levels, large funding sources would have to be identified. Ultimately, these sources were not identified, and Elev8 lead agencies had to work to pull together smaller existing and new resources to keep the initiative rolling, even if it was at a smaller scale. Many lead agencies made adaptations with this sustainability approach in mind.

*LOCAL PARTNERS.* First, as discussed previously, moving from Atlantic's national evidence-based providers to local providers was a key factor in New Mexico's sustainability plan. New Mexico found that the national providers were drawn to Elev8 because of Atlantic's involvement, but did not have roots in the community that could sustain their involvement when Atlantic's funding was reduced. One New Mexico local historian put it very plainly, “Once the resources went, the partners went, [too].” While New Mexico still struggled with sustainability, interviewees believed that bringing community partners in as providers maximized Elev8's sustainability, particularly in Albuquerque, where resources were less scarce than in the tribal and border schools in which it operated.

*SBHCs.* School-based health services were paid for, in part, by Atlantic in the early years of the initiative, with the expectation that the centers would work to enroll uninsured families in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) for low-income families, and other affordable insurance plans. By doing this, the centers would maximize their ability to bill and sustain services in the long run. Sustaining the SBHCs was a challenge for all Elev8 regions, and different sites employed different adaptations to help maximize their sustainability. In Baltimore, Elev8 schools were close together, so the initiative leaders there decided not to build SBHCs in every school. This reduced the cost of the initiative and also increased traffic to the shared centers, which, in turn, increased their billable services.

Oakland Elev8 also implemented adaptations to influence the SBHCs' sustainability—aiming to give the centers the best chance of becoming self-sufficient, while simultaneously providing universal behavioral health services. There, the SBHC provider collaborated with the county to ensure universal behavioral healthcare for students in Elev8 schools. One Elev8 site manager offered the following insight:

We do this universal [...] behavioral health[care] model, where we place a mental health organization/behavioral health organization that can bill MediCal for the students, and then we place one of our [Alameda county] clinicians from our office [who] doesn't have to bill and can see anyone. So, it's universal behavioral health. That wasn't part of the model when we started Elev8, but we told them that's the way we are going to do it.

We have a partnership with Alameda County to have our clinical case manager [...] here. She's a social worker, and she is able to see any student regardless of whether it's a billable visit or not. And she's able to do crisis interventions, have interns, see more students, and lead groups.

It is important to note that Oakland had a progressive county health department. The department participated in the management of the contracts with the health center providers and offered base funding to cover the costs to students that were not covered by insurance or for services that were not billable. Building on this effort, Atlantic provided a separate grant to a local organization to further supplement these health services.

In Chicago, opening the SBHCs to the community through the Community Door, boosted the sustainability of the health centers. By working with community members, Chicago's SBHCs were able to increase billing for services, which meant that some services for uninsured students or unbillable services could be covered.

Baltimore Elev8 took advantage of the proximity of its schools and Atlantic's increased flexibility to promote the sustainability of its SBHC. As an example, taking its cue from the challenges other Elev8 regions were facing or expected to be facing in sustaining the SBHCs, Baltimore opted not to build SBHCs at each of its school locations. One interviewee described it like this,

It wasn't necessary for us to place a full-service Cadillac [SBHC] in all four of our schools at this time. We went for more modified models of having a full-time nurse and a medical assistant at the schools [that did not have the full-service health centers] and then selecting, over time, which schools [would be the best candidates] for [an SBHC].

The close proximity of Baltimore Elev8 schools and the school sizes permitted sharing of the full-service SBHCs, which, in the short term, required less funding and other resources, and, in the long term, meant that Elev8 Baltimore was in a better position to sustain the SBHCs that it did build. Elev8 Baltimore similarly aligned OST offerings so that students could opt to participate in afterschool programs in an Elev8 school that was not their own. According to our interviewees, Elev8 Baltimore provided transportation to and from the different Elev8 schools so that students could access the full menu of Elev8 OST opportunities. Over time, however, the Baltimore team learned that students were most interested in staying at their own schools and not traveling to an unfamiliar location. Parents echoed their desire—they were more comfortable with students attending programming in schools where they knew the teachers and staff.

**STAFFING.** Adaptations to Elev8 staff positions and roles was another way Elev8 sites bolstered sustainability by minimizing role duplication. As an example, one interviewee in Oakland explained,

So when I first came in, I was purely involved with the Coordination of Services Team (COST) and making sure that that was running smoothly. Over time, that kind of morphed into me taking on things that we just didn't have people for [... including] the attendance and truancy problem at

our site [...A]s time went on, we were trying to figure out how to keep this role funded and how to make sure that these things could all happen [... When our] afterschool coordinator [left ...], that was the time for us to re-imagine this role. So, now I'm involved with the Coordination of Services Team, the Student Success Teams, the Student Attendance Review Teams, and I also manage the afterschool program, and that's how we can keep the role funded[—]through the afterschool funding and a little bit of [government funding].

While collapsing roles did reduce costs, which made Elev8 easier to sustain, interviewees also shared that it resulted in a less robust program than had been in place when the initiative had more funding.

*INITIATIVE STRUCTURE.* Believing that that local buy-in and ownership was crucial for Elev8's sustainability, Chicago Elev8 used a community approach to the initiative, and unlike the other Elev8 sites, Chicago opted to decentralize the program. LISC utilized its New Communities Program to find organizations that had strong ties to the community. In the New Communities Program, these agencies collaborate with local partners on "quality of life issues," including opportunities for youth. The partner agencies that were selected were accustomed to collaboration, and had productive working relationships with neighborhood organizations and funders. Additionally, their missions were narrowly focused on the community in which they worked. Taken together, these factors facilitated Elev8 becoming a routine part of the partners' charge in the community, and they had a vested interest in keeping the program going even after Atlantic funding ended. Elements of Elev8 are routinely included in the partner agencies' fundraising requests and plans. However, according to Elev8 leaders in Chicago, although all five of the Elev8 partner agencies were committed to Elev8, there was variation in their capacities and their opinions on the prioritization of Elev8 in their fundraising efforts. In the opinion of one Elev8 leader,

I think short-term sustainability is a definite given; I'm not worried about that at all. I can't tell you what's [going] happen five or ten years from now; but, I think one of the benefits of our model of having these [partner] agencies really manage the program in the communities is that there's a lot of local community buy-in to the program and a lot of local ownership over it. So, you know, there's a whole staff now at [the local organization that has been managing Elev8] that's bought into Elev8 [...] they own that program. It's not just LISC coming in and running a program in that neighborhood[—]it's local people who live and work there who have the ownership over the program.

### Adaptations to expand Elev8's impact

Although Atlantic's vision was to serve middle school students and their families exclusively, with school campus expansions, the needs of other low-income populations in the community, and new school leadership, many Elev8 schools adapted their programs to meet increasing demand and expand their impact.

*EXTENDING ELEV8 BEYOND MIDDLE SCHOOL.* Baltimore and Oakland were motivated to expand Elev8 beyond middle school, primarily because their multi-school campuses (e.g., campuses serving K-8, 6-12, or K-12) provided the opportunity to enable Elev8 to reach more students and families that could benefit from the initiative. First, Elev8 Oakland leaders expanded Elev8's target grade ranges on campuses that served elementary and/or high school students along with middle schoolers. An Elev8 staffer discusses the adaptation:

We were doing the middle school strategy, supporting our students, and we [began to consider] how could this look for our older students [...] So, we worked with the principals [and asked them

...], how can we best support the high school students, and with their schedules, what will that look like?

One school principal commented that her school was successful in providing Elev8 to students in the multiple schools on her K–12 campus. According to her, this expansion was one of Elev8 Oakland’s most significant and innovative adaptations. This principal goes on to point out how the adaptation was not as simple as expanding services.

We have had to adapt to make sure that we can stretch our resources between the two other sites. There’s not an official budget for everything that the high school needs. So, I know that our [high school] principal has had to find ways, creative ways, to provide services for the high school [students]. Like, in the afterschool programming. There wasn’t an afterschool program at all for high school [... We had to] reduce some of the classes that were for [middle schoolers], or combine them, [so that we could] provide a few more activities that the [high schoolers] could utilize.

Baltimore, with its K-8 schools, followed Oakland’s lead, expanding services to students in younger grades as the initiative progressed. By expanding its reach to all students in the Elev8 schools, Baltimore was able to better define itself as a full-service community school.

In Chicago, expanding Elev8 services to non–middle school students was initially used as a strategy to curtail Elev8 students from being absent from programming due to their familial obligations. However, over time, the leaders realized that expanding Elev8 to fit a broader age range could have implications for filling “gaps”—particularly academic gaps—for both younger and older students. One Chicago site manager discussed the expansion of programming to younger students:

[...] Plenty of data and stories [...] demonstrate the impact of Elev8, but we also have plenty of stories and data to demonstrate that we need to be doing all of these things that we're doing for middle school students earlier. And that's what [the] goal is; we're taking all of these services and we're starting [...] to implement these services at the lower levels.

Chicago interviewees described several Elev8 programs that were open to younger students, as the following quotations illustrate:

We offer fifteen different afterschool programs. There is an abundance of things [middle school and non–middle school students] can do. Saturday School has family aspects which I love, and younger siblings, even as young as eighteen months have come [...]

I definitely would say Camp Arambe [was innovative]. We first used the Freedom School Model, but once we trained our own staff, we had students captured by what we were offering. Our goal was to have fifty students in sixth through eighth grade, and also allow siblings to participate. Attendance stayed above 95 percent, and we kept students off the street. We had forty-five [students] stick with it, plus thirty students participating from the younger grades.

Students were not the only target of Elev8’s adaptations to expand program reach. Many Elev8 schools expanded their resource programs to members of the community. For instance, Elev8 Oakland began offering their clothing closet programs to students’ siblings and other family members, and their food

pantry to members of the community. The quote below is from an Elev8 Oakland staffer explaining the thinking behind expanding clothing closet programs to Elev8 students' families:

[...M]any of our students have siblings that go to [...] the school right across the street [from ours]. And so our families [...] say, "Well, I would like to get a coat for my middle schooler, but my seven year old definitely needs a coat, and she doesn't go here. She goes to [the school across the street]." Well, our understanding [is] that our students are connected to their families [and that] means that we make provision for the families as well. We're not just going to provide a coat to the seventh grader, we're going to provide it for the seven year old, too; [...] and to mom if there's a need.

*EXPANSION OF PROGRAMMING.* In addition to expanding impact by extending services to broader populations, several Elev8 sites expanded programming to deepen their impact. For instance, in Oakland, the Elev8 staff learned that benefits access, the original focus of Elev8's family supports pillar, was too narrow and could not provide families with the range of supports they needed to be successful. In response, Oakland refocused its family supports pillar on self-sufficiency, building family resource centers that provided parents of students with food and clothing, as well as workforce development and educational opportunities. One Oakland Elev8 interviewee described this adaptation:

[...]initially, the frame for family support was very much tied to public benefits and making sure that families had access to public benefits. And that was the only emphasis on the family support component, with this particular focus [on] the earned income tax credit. So, [after working on benefits maximization], we decided in Oakland that [...] it wasn't enough, and that we wanted a continuum towards self-sufficiency for families. So, we added the whole idea of a family resource center at each of the sites and built in [...] food banks [... O]ne of the things that we had heard at the school level—directly from parents and kids—was they didn't have access to food. So, we built that in. We built in the family education training, [...] workforce development, [...] and] parent education [...]

Baltimore Elev8 also implemented programmatic adaptations to deepen its impact. For instance, it developed a home visiting approach to family engagement and supports, recognizing that a school-based strategy would exclude families and students with the greatest challenges. The family advocates routinely conducted home visits to engage the families of chronically absent students, or to bring resources to parents who might have been struggling to get or keep their children in school. One interviewee provides this example:

[...] Last summer, we had one student who lived in the neighborhood [and had transferred to our] school. So, some of the staff at [the school] were able to tell us [about] some issues that the kid was having [... About a week before school started,] I did [a] home visit, [and] found out that he didn't have any uniforms; he didn't have sneakers; he didn't have anything. [...] I was able to provide him with all of that so that he could be here on the first day of school. [...] It's those types of things that, I think, when it comes to the community [and] the school, [...] Elev8 really shines.

## Leverage and Sustainability in Elev8

Elev8 leaders made adaptations to Elev8 with the end goal of ensuring the initiative's success and sustaining it in the long run. When Elev8 launched, Atlantic communicated an eight- to ten-year glide path for the initiative. And while Atlantic had been supporting the lead agencies since the start of the initiative in New Mexico in 2007, after the first four years of funding, its support of the initiative moved away from services and turned to costs associated with communications, advocacy, and data collection. Because this plan was not clear at the start of the initiative, the shift had more significant impact on the sites, such as New Mexico, that started implementation assuming that they would be receiving longer grants for service provision. Other sites knew before they launched implementation that Atlantic would fund service delivery in Elev8 for just four years. In the case of Oakland, staff members were in the planning phase of Elev8 when the news was delivered. In reaction, Elev8 leaders there built out a plan that emphasized partnerships and sustainability from the start. In other words, in Oakland and Baltimore, funding expectations were aligned with the foundation's funding strategy.

Unfortunately, the shift in funding from services to supports coincided with the recession, which rendered the leveraging of state and local funds at expected levels an elusive goal. Arguably, given the economic context, Elev8 sites accomplished a lot with respect to sustaining the initiative. Elev8 continues to provide services in many of the schools it started in. As of 2014, almost all Elev8 school principals had set aside some of their discretionary funds to continue to pay for Elev8's school coordinator. Furthermore, two of the sites—Oakland and New Mexico—have blossoming district-wide community school initiatives, based, in part, on the Elev8 experience.

The table on the next page shows that in 2013, three of the four Elev8 regions were no longer receiving support from Atlantic to cover program services, and yet, almost three-quarters of the original Elev8 schools were still implementing all four of the pillars (74 percent), albeit at a lower level of intensity than when Elev8 was fully funded by Atlantic. Furthermore, with the exception of Laguna, which was no longer active in Elev8 at the time of our site visits in early 2014, these findings mirror our experience of Elev8 at that time. In other words, there was little change in service provision from 2013 to 2014.

The lower service intensity meant that while SBHCs were still running, several had reduced hours (from full time to a few days a week). In other cases, providers changed, and sometimes fewer youth and/or families were served. These adaptations to sustain the program were necessary, but did not honor Elev8's original vision—likely resulting in less robust experiences for Elev8 students, families, and schools.



| PILLAR OF SERVICE  |   |  |   |   |
|--|---|--|---|---|
|  | OST  | SBHC  | Family Supports  | Parent and Community Engagement  |
|  <b>CHICAGO</b>     |   |  |   |   |
| Ames   | ✓   | ✓  |   | ✓   |
| Marquette  | ✓   | ✓  |   | ✓   |
| Perspectives   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Reavis   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Orozco   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
|  <b>NEW MEXICO</b>  |   |  |   |   |
| Laguna   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Wilson   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Grant  | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| NACA   |   |  |   |   |
| Gadsden  | ✓   |  |   |   |
|  <b>OAKLAND</b>     |   |  |   |   |
| Roosevelt  | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| West Oakland   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| United for Success   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Madison  | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Havenscourt-CCPA   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
|  <b>BALTIMORE</b> |   |  |   |   |
| Commodore John Rogers<br>(formerly East Baltimore Community School)                                  | ✓   |  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Tench Tilghman   | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Dr. Rayner Browne<br>(has since closed)  | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |
| Collington Square  | ✓   | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |

Nonetheless, Elev8 was able to sustain itself, albeit it at more modest levels, and while this study cannot *prove* that the adaptations made by Elev8 sites were the reason, many of our interviewees did share their thoughts about how the adaptations described above impacted the program's ability to endure even during a recession. An Oakland Elev8 leader described it in this way,



[...] I think [...] the local adaptations helped [with sustainability and] have helped to make the case for COST as well as the Elev8 coordinators. Now I think it's been a huge success that those positions have been sustained—[...] we have agreement from all of our schools that next year those positions will be sustained again. And each of the school sites have been contributing towards those positions now for the last three years out of their own site funds [...], and so they're choosing to fund the Elev8 site coordinator [instead of] a reading specialist or some other position at the schools. [...] I would say that that speaks volumes to the impact that [...] the individuals and the initiative and the services have had on those [...] sites [...]

I think that after the Atlantic funding goes away entirely, there will continue to be some amount of programming that goes on at these schools that would be something like Elev8 or called Elev8 by the lead agencies. They'll have funding to do something at their schools, regardless of what they get from Atlantic. They're also working in [other schools]. I think at [...] last count, there [were] about seventeen other schools doing some piece of Elev8 [...] either an afterschool program; [...] connecting kids in that school to the [SBHC ...] near them; [or] doing [...] the parent mentor program or something that connects them to the larger Elev8 program.

### Examples of how adaptations led to leveraged funding

In order to be sustainable, Elev8 sites needed to leverage funding from alternative sources. Data collected over the 2014–15 school year from the Elev8 lead agencies shows that many of the sites were quite successful.

|   | DOLLARS LEVERAGED |            |           |                  |
|---|-------------------|------------|-----------|------------------|
|   | 2011-2012         | 2012-13    | 2013-14   | 2014-15          |
|  <b>CHICAGO</b>    | 3,170,000         | 768,300    | 2,005,000 | Data Unavailable |
|  <b>NEW MEXICO</b> | 308,235           | 1, 511,341 | 478,000   | 270,000          |
|  <b>OAKLAND</b>    | 2,612,963         | 3,600,998  | 3,318,699 | 6,045,495        |
|  <b>BALTIMORE</b>  | 1,611,643         | 674,102    | 1,534,548 | 1,688,029        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | 6,091,198         | 6,554,741  | 7,336,247 | 8,003,524        |

The formal addition of Elev8's fourth pillar provided Elev8 Chicago with a specific benefit: the ability to secure additional funding for parent involvement. This funding built off of, and was integrated into, Elev8's implementation in Chicago, providing parents with the voice and connections necessary to help them become partners in education with their children. As described by one interviewee,

We were able to actually write additional grant[s] to support Elev8 through the State Board of [Education], so we have a dedicated full-time family engagement specialist. So, that person [...]

engage[s] parents, [looks] at [the] sort of [...] resources [...] parents need, [and identifies] how we can help them to [...] access resources. That person has also helped parents engage in the process internally in the schools, so helping them to feel comfortable engaging in the local school [...] I think that has been a benefit to our parents, in particular.

Sites also found that their adaptations to serve youth in lower (or higher) grades led to their ability to go after a broader range of funding opportunities. One site shared this example of how it secured funding to support students in the younger grades:

We received some funding from the Kellogg Foundation to take the Elev8 model and implement it [in] K through third [...] We're working on getting kids to read on time by third grade, [...] and we're partnering with lots of folks to [use] that same model.

Elev8 Oakland also provided examples of ways that they were able to sustain and leverage elements of the Elev8 framework. One example of this was the Alameda County Food Bank partnership:

We entered into a partnership with Alameda County Food Bank, and created food pantries at the Elev8 sites in the family resource centers. So, after the direct service funding from [Atlantic] ended, we were able to shift some of that cost to the afterschool programs through the 21st Century Family Engagement funding. [That has allowed [...] us to continue to [...] provide those food pantries at the schools, and it is meeting a very [...] significant and important need for the families.

Finally, Atlantic's focus on advocacy and policy led to strong efforts by many Elev8 sites to secure policies and funding streams that resulted in the sustainability of the initiative. For example, Elev8 sites:

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| ADVOCATED FOR  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocated for their city to invest in early childhood programs in Elev8 sites. The pipeline of services for Elev8 families now starts at birth at three of the Elev8 schools, resulting in an allocation of \$200,000 annually for three years to expand outreach, playgroups, parent workshops, and case management for parents with children ages birth to five.</li> <li>• Advocated for the creation of their city's Fund for Children and Youth, which increased the investment in transition programs for high-need schools. The city has committed \$153,000 annually for three years for this effort.</li> </ul>  |
| WORKED TOWARDS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Led efforts to secure legislation that gave undocumented immigrants the ability to get a driver's license.</li> <li>• Worked with the State Board of Education to develop language and guidelines for waivers that allowed 21st Century Community Schools funding to be used for formal school day programming.</li> <li>• Helped to pass state legislation for a Community Schools Act.</li> <li>• Secured state appropriations for family resource centers at two Elev8 middle schools.</li> <li>• Played a leadership role in the effort to win \$1.1 billion for school renovations and the building of a new school in their city.</li> <li>• Played a leadership role to prevent cuts to the 2013–14 fiscal year city funding for community schools and OST programming.</li> </ul> |
| ARGUED AGAINST | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocated against proposed zeroing out of the district's community schools initiative, which resulted in the district maintaining some funding for community schools in the district.</li> <li>• Argued against proposed cuts to the only state funding line devoted to funding after-school programming.</li> </ul>  |

## Barriers to sustainability

Even with the successes Elev8 sites experienced in leveraging funding to keep services going, the current Elev8 services are not as robust as they once were. In the words of one interviewee from New Mexico,

We thought we would figure out how to sustain services, [but] it did not work. I am not sure where we went wrong. I had never been a part of something where sustainability was so much of a focus. I was so surprised at the complete lack of ownership of the partners, despite their engagement in those sustainability conversations and the benefit it would have afforded them.

*ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES.* Many interviewees attributed the sustainability challenge to the recession. For instance, New Mexico, which struggled the most with sustaining the initiative, was located in a resource-poor state that was especially hard hit by the recession. One of the site managers provides insight below:

[... The] economic crisis [...] didn't hit New Mexico until 2011 [or] 2012. So, all of a sudden, there's that much less state money, [and] we have a new governor who [brought] new ideas, new connections, [etc.]. So, there wasn't that commitment [...] All of these different offices [at] the state level all of a sudden [...] had a different focus and there was no more money left [...] It's kind of like we started with a Cadillac and we ended up with a Ford Festiva. [We realized], "Okay, we've got to go trade down," and that's kind of how it ended up happening.

Other interviewees in New Mexico believed that the difficulty they experienced in sustaining the initiative was exacerbated by other factors, such as the difficulty surrounding working with and in so many different systems. One local historian provides more context below:

I think that we would have been more successful if we didn't try to be all things to all [people]. Focusing on a middle-income school, an immigrant school, a native school, and a border school all at once was too much. If we had concentrated the effort [on] Albuquerque public schools, for instance, [...] I think there would have been greater success. Because you're dealing with different systems and you're dealing with different districts, and you're dealing with different funding streams. [...] it] made it very, very difficult.

*STAFF TURNOVER.* Another factor that all sites highlighted as a challenge to sustainability was turnover. In Elev8, turnover was abundant at every level, from Elev8 school staff to partner staff to lead agencies to school and district staff and leadership. In the words of one interviewee who summarized the sentiment of many,

Turnover has been one of [the challenges]. I mean it's happening everywhere, so it's at the [SBHC], it's within [school] administration, and also within the Elev8 team and [the lead agency] staff.

In Chicago, for instance, interviewees felt that turnover was a major factor that affected buy-in to Elev8, and therefore, its sustainability. One interviewee describes the challenge of turnover using the principal as an example:

The principal who was here when the program was created [and] was a part of the brainstorming and the visioning [...] had all of this knowledge and motivation and [Elev8 had] her personal buy-in. Her replacement didn't. That's been a tough thing for us [in terms of sustaining Elev8 in that school].

While it is obvious that principal turnover will impact the implementation of Elev8, it also impacts the initiative's sustainability. As shared earlier in this report, many Elev8 principals used their discretionary funding to support the coordinator position after Atlantic's financial support dwindled. A small number of the "new-to-Elev8" principals did not back the initiative, and felt that the school's money could be better spent in other ways.

Atlantic also experienced changes in leadership, which had implications for the sustainability of the initiative. The main outcome of these staffing changes was a move away from place-based initiatives and demonstrations like Elev8, and a shorter funding timeline for Elev8's services. As previously described, while the foundation honored its commitment to the existing and upcoming Elev8 sites, the original vision of eight to ten years of service funding was shortened to just four years. A complex initiative like Elev8 takes time to gel, and Atlantic's funding ended just as Elev8 overcame its initial implementation challenges and hit its stride. This shift had a significant impact on the stability of the initiative as it moved into a position of being responsible for sustaining the service infrastructure that was built out with Atlantic's support. Furthermore, turnover of appointed and elected officials with whom Elev8 leaders had developed relationships, put the initiative's sustainability into question. And while foundations can play a stabilizing role amidst changing political tides, Atlantic's diminished investment in the initiative left the lead agencies navigating these shifts alone.

*SHIFTS IN THE LEAD AGENCY.* In New Mexico and Baltimore, Elev8 experienced a lead agency shift. New Mexico saw Elev8's management change from the NMCF to Youth Development, Inc.—a local service provider. While interviewees acknowledged both organizations brought strengths and opportunities to Elev8, they acknowledged that moving Elev8's management to a service provider may have made it more challenging to sustain the initiative in the absence of Atlantic's funding. One interviewee summarized the challenge in this way:

[... It] changed the focus of the work [... As] a direct service provider, [Elev8 was] in competition with [the organization's] other fundraising efforts, which [made] it hard to focus on and advocate for Elev8 ... [t]hey [were] competing for money. [This service provider couldn't] adequately support the partners getting money because they [were] trying to get it [themselves].

The mid-initiative merger of Elev8 Baltimore into Humanim also brought about questions pertaining to sustainability. One interviewee stated,

What would have been helpful [...] when [Elev8] merged with Humanim, [is to have said, "[T]his is the plan." But, the plan [was] really to seek grants all of the time, and we [couldn't] continue on that path because that's all we'd [have done].

Although Baltimore and New Mexico experienced challenges when their Elev8 programs shifted to a new lead agency, both regions were able to leverage and sustain certain parts of the Elev8 framework, in part due to the adaptations their sites made.

*THE NATURE OF EXISTING FUNDING STREAMS.* Finally, existing funding streams heavily influenced Elev8’s sustainability. One interviewee eloquently described how Elev8 took advantage of where the money was—in OST and family and community engagement—to shape the post-Atlantic Elev8.

[Elev8’s sustainability has] mostly focused on the work around [OST] programming and to some degree around parent and community engagement. That’s where the fundraising is focused [because that is where the money is]. The 21st Century grant has money for both [OST] programming and parent and community engagement. [It’s] the same with the Kellogg funding—it’s about doing both [... T]he two things are really in many ways woven together [to give] kids [OST] opportunities, but also [create] opportunities for parents to become lifelong learners.

Elev8 sites were likely to put school money into the Elev8 coordinators and family resource centers—arguably the two facets of Elev8 where no clear funding streams existed. The quote from an Elev8 staffer below highlights the realities of maintaining the family support pillar of Elev8:

[...] I think [...] the component that has suffered the most with sustainability has been the family engagement and support component of Elev8, and I think that’s because there are not very many funding sources that are specifically targeting that work. And you know, it’s very challenging to find sustainable dollars for family support services. [W]e have had all of the government partners at the table, and we haven’t been able to identify long-term funding to support the family resource centers. It’s always [about] piecing a lot of different things together to keep that work going, and I think it’s [...] an area [of philanthropy] that’s not sexy, [...] so [it is] easy for this piece to kind of fall through the cracks. Yes, there [are] public benefits, but those public benefits don’t really provide all of the supports that families need [...] I think that’s an area where we have done a lot of adaptation over time.

## Implications for Community Schools

The Elev8 experience offers rich insights—lessons that are particularly relevant as funders, policy makers, and schools across the country jump on the community school bandwagon. Elev8 was implemented across a variety of schools in a variety of settings, ultimately striving to meet the needs of middle schoolers through the promotion of their ongoing academic success in a community-relevant way. Elev8 underwent many adaptations—some on the funder side and others that were initiated by the local lead agencies.

Our study revealed that the local landscape was a critical factor in shaping Elev8’s adaptations. Adaptations were made to meet the needs of the schools in which Elev8 was implemented, to reflect the culture of the community in which the initiative was embedded, and to expand impact to others who could benefit from Elev8’s supports. Mining the Elev8 experience has generated five key lessons for community school funders and implementers.

### 1) Policy makers, funders, and lead agencies must be open to but cautious about adaptations

In recent years, funders have increasingly supported new and innovative programs and ideas, many of which are informed by the deep knowledge and experience of the benefactors, leaders, and program officers. Atlantic Philanthropies is no exception. While Elev8 looked similar to typical community schools, Atlantic’s leaders envisioned more for Elev8. Based on their experience, they believed that Elev8 could be even more effective than a typical community school if it was entirely place-based, focused on the integration of services and shared school leadership, and on serving the school community, specifically—not neighborhood residents who were not connected with the targeted school. Additionally, Atlantic had ample knowledge of and experience with youth development. Elev8’s founders knew that research pointed to the importance of youth development and academic success in middle school, and that successful programmatic efforts had to account for the unique developmental stage of middle schoolers. Elev8 was designed to be implemented in middle schools only, with supports and programs that were tailored to the needs of middle schoolers specifically.<sup>24</sup> As such, Atlantic initially required Elev8 sites to implement supports and programs, particularly high-quality OST activities, that were designed for and proven effective with middle schoolers. Finally, Atlantic set out to prove that an initiative like Elev8 could change the trajectories of students and schools, which meant that they dictated program dosage levels and particular processes.

Yet, during Elev8’s inaugural implementation in New Mexico, Atlantic learned that some of its initial assumptions or requirements simply did not work: they did not reflect the communities’ culture, they did not result in partnerships that were sustainable, and they did not fully accommodate schools’ needs. In response, the foundation permitted and encouraged sites to make adaptations to their original approach. While some interviewees felt that Elev8 was continuously evolving, and that this made success an elusive target, Atlantic’s willingness to act on lessons learned early in the initiative set the stage for increased impact and for lead agencies’ ability to implement adaptations that would partially

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<sup>24</sup> Cooney, S. M. and Grossman, J. B. (2009). “Paving the Way for Success in High School and Beyond: The Importance of Preparing Middle School Students for the Transition to Ninth Grade.” Philadelphia, P.A.: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved from [http://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/paving\\_the\\_way\\_for\\_success\\_in\\_high\\_school\\_and\\_beyond\\_the\\_importance\\_of\\_preparing\\_middle\\_school\\_students\\_for\\_the\\_transition\\_to\\_ninth\\_grade](http://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/paving_the_way_for_success_in_high_school_and_beyond_the_importance_of_preparing_middle_school_students_for_the_transition_to_ninth_grade).



sustain the initiative, even in a time of deep recession. MAI's findings suggest that **success with a complex, multi-partner initiative such as community schools, requires flexibility and humbleness from the initiative's funders, partners, and lead agencies.**

The literature suggests that adaptations are most likely to be successful when they are made formally and systematically. Unfortunately, this study was not designed to assess if the adaptations made by Atlantic or the lead agencies resulted in more or less positive outcomes for students and schools. While our interviewees reported that their adaptations were successful, the true success of the adaptations, in terms of the quality of Elev8's programming, remains unknown. What we do know is that the adaptations made by the lead agencies and funder during the phase of Elev8 where it was funded by Atlantic did not alter the core elements of the model—the pillars of Elev8 remained intact, as did the intensity with which services were provided (until the point at which Atlantic's resources for services were reduced). So, while the openness to adaptation is critical to a complex initiative's successful implementation, so too is having the skills to only alter the approach in ways that do not compromise the integrity of the initiative.

## 2) Lead agencies' missions matter

Funders and policy makers have long known that the strength of a lead agency is a critical factor in the success of a program. Experts have touted the importance of capacity building in the nonprofit sector. Venture Philanthropy Partners summarizes its importance below:

All too many nonprofits [...] focus on creating new programs and keeping administrative costs low instead of building the organizational capacity necessary to achieve their aspirations effectively and efficiently. This is not surprising, given that donors and funders have traditionally been more interested in supporting an exciting new idea than in building an organization that can effectively carry out that idea. This must change; both nonprofit managers and those [who] fund them must recognize that excellence in programmatic innovation and implementation are insufficient for nonprofits to achieve lasting results. Great programs need great organizations behind them (p.19).<sup>25</sup>

But less frequently is “mission” highlighted as an important component of program implementation and adaptation. All of Elev8's lead agencies have missions that are plainly connected to an effort like Elev8. All four of the original agencies had goals of improving outcomes for youth, families, and communities. But there are important nuances; each organization's mission is different, emphasizing varying strategies and approaches. With the exception of New Mexico, each of the lead agencies adapted Elev8 in ways that aligned with their missions and with the processes they believed were most likely to create lasting change. Chicago and Baltimore both targeted the community more than the founders of Elev8 envisioned; striving to strengthen infrastructure and connections to improve living conditions for their residents. As a result, these two sites were those that implemented adaptations that incorporated community and families, through strategic organizing and engagement efforts. Oakland's lead agency, Safe Passages, believes that successful social change must involve those who are most vulnerable, and their adaptations to Elev8, including focusing on the students who were most at risk of educational failure, reflected this mission. Arguably, NMCF's mission is the broadest, not promoting a particular

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<sup>25</sup> Source: [http://www.vppartners.org/sites/default/files/reports/full\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.vppartners.org/sites/default/files/reports/full_rpt.pdf)

strategy to solve the state's social challenges. Again, perhaps not surprisingly, Elev8 New Mexico did not make adaptations that were aligned with the lead agency's mission. Its position may have uniquely afforded it the ability to come to Elev8 with a "blank slate." **As funders and policy makers move forward with community school planning, special attention must be paid to the mission of the lead agency.** Carefully considering the nuances of organizational mission and approach can lead to important information about the possible adaptations that may transpire—the goal is to generate adaptations that will create stronger alignment between the initiative and the organization, which will result in strong implementation and outcomes. Similarly, partners in the effort should have missions that will complement the initiative. In Elev8, some lead agencies' missions were better aligned with the community school approach than others, and some Elev8 lead agencies had stronger capacities to implement community schools than others.

### 3) Lead agencies are essential partners in a community school effort

As is the case with all community school initiatives, Elev8 is based on the well-supported premise that success for disadvantaged students requires a holistic, comprehensive approach to address the needs of the child, family, and community. Such approaches involve multiple partners and, in turn, multiple funding streams, and they require adequate management and oversight to ensure the coordinated and effective use of resources and related services.<sup>26</sup> As a complex multi-partner initiative, many of the Elev8 staff members interviewed felt strongly that the initiative's success hinged on intermediary involvement, both in terms of smooth implementation and the ability to be sustainable. One interviewee from Chicago gave an example to highlight the value of Chicago's unique intermediary approach to Elev8:

[...] I think what worked really well was having this independent community-based partner who had some control over the financial resources that went into the program [and acted as the] glue that held the program together at the sites. And that was really true. [This partner] could [...] say, "I know you're really busy, but we have to sit down and figure out how we're [going to] get kids from classrooms to health centers and back in a way that's safe [...] and lets everybody know that they're okay without violating HIPAA requirements for the health center." [...] Community partners had the legitimacy to pull people together and [...] to be taken] seriously [...]

Interviewees from other Elev8 sites echoed this sentiment. They shared that the lead agencies were in a unique position to convene partners, help them build a shared vision for the work, acclimate them to the school culture, and hold partners accountable to one another.

[...] no one entity can do it alone ... funders can put the money on the table and say, "[Y]ou're not going to get the money until all entities at the table collaborate," and this is where the role of the lead agency or intermediary comes into play ... [without a lead agency] partners will continue to work in their silos.

Some Elev8 leaders had experience with community school or multi-partner efforts in schools where the funding was provided directly to the school district. Each of these interviewees shared that the outcome, in terms of sustainability and fidelity, was much less positive than the Elev8 experience. In

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<sup>26</sup> McClanahan, W.S., and Piccinino, K. (2016). "Elev8 Final Report." Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action and McClanahan Associates, Inc.



particular, turnover at the district and school levels was associated with a change in priorities that deeply impacted the work in ways that challenged its success and often sustainability. Chicago, which had a two-layer intermediary approach to Elev8. It strongly believed that while LISC was in a unique position to convene and hold partners accountable, ultimately, community-based lead agencies are best suited for ensuring sustainability.

People respected the community partners to bring people together [...] And the fact that there's been so little turnover at those lead agencies has really meant a lot in terms of sustainability [...]

Baltimore Elev8, which had a different structure, reported that Elev8 gave the lead organization the community status, connections, and partnerships it needed to gain traction and credibility in the community. In the words of one Baltimore Elev8 staffer,

Because [the] community that we serve is so under-resourced, creating and establishing Elev8 made Elev8 one of the anchors in the community [... W]e had more resources than any other community organization in that neighborhood, [...] so we [...] became an anchor, an institution that other groups around the city could then connect with and enter into the fold and provide services to the children and to families.

#### 4) Adaptations are particularly relevant when working within systems

Community schools attempt to provide supports to youth from low-income communities to bolster their success. However, funders and policy makers must be willing to acknowledge and address the specific systemic barriers and opportunities facing their key stakeholders.

First, schools themselves operate within a system and low-income schools within those systems are often faced with inequalities in funding, facilities, and staffing. Principals are tasked with making sure their students perform well, despite the barriers they, as leaders, face—successful education of their students is their main goal. As noted earlier in this report, Elev8 made many adaptations to meet the needs of schools, particularly around academics and behavior. Adaptations that helped Elev8 meet the needs of schools were critical to gaining buy-in from the principals and teachers. One principal describes the importance of aligning Elev8's supports with the state's school rating system,

Schools are under pressure from the state [in relation] to the reporting, [...] the approving, and the school grading that they do for us. [Elev8] makes my reporting look fabulous. [The state] wants to know what [the school] does over and above the average day for kids and families. And you get points for that. [W]e got the highest bonus points for two years running now.

Moreover, schools are systems with established leadership structures and cultures. After the short planning period in New Mexico, Elev8 quickly learned that in order for the initiative to get off on the right foot, it was critical that adequate planning time was incorporated into its launch. One principal commented,

[Our school] needed more time to really plan [...] and] look into how to integrate this and talk about how to be a complete partner, developing [realistic] expectations and understanding where are we going to be in one year, two years, three years down the road.

This principal noted that having that additional time would have given his school, the Elev8 staff, and community partners more of an opportunity to develop a shared vision for the initiative and school that would offer the best chances of success and sustainability over time. Because of the insufficient planning time, certain Elev8 principals were not supportive of the initiative—resulting in ongoing implementation challenges and conflict between the partners.

The addition of the fourth pillar of Elev8, family and community engagement, was an adaptation that acknowledged the limited funding and resources of Elev8 schools. The outgrowth of this addition was several efforts to improve conditions in the Elev8 schools. Students and their families:

- Successfully advocated against proposed school actions that would have closed or reassigned schools.
- Successfully advocated with a local government official for new lights in an unsafe park near their school, and to create opportunities for the students and the police to build better relationships.
- Developed a plan to improve relationships between the students and school security. The plan and recommendations were presented to the principal and are being implemented.
- Successfully advocated for a change to school’s “cold food policy.”
- Advocated for the protection of school funding and the improvement of school facilities.

Each of these efforts positively impacted the schools, and in many cases, resulted in additional resources for school programs and facilities.

Finally, many young people and their families face systemic inequities, and, therefore, community schools are working against long-held distrust—of schools, institutions, and agencies. According to many of our interviewees, adaptations must be built on a solid understanding of the history of the initiative’s recipients, communities, and schools. According to one Elev8 leader, “[Y]ou’ve [got to] have those candid conversations. And when you don’t have those conversations, then you’re not really getting at what people need, what people want.”

One interviewee shared a specific example of the importance of acknowledgement and open dialogue in generating an approach that works to bring students and families who don’t trust healthcare into Elev8’s SBHCs:

[A kid was having a conversation with other students about] building this health center in a school. [These kids] have never gone to [a] health center because they don’t trust it. Why don’t they trust it? Because their mothers and fathers and their dead mothers and dead fathers had horrific experiences with healthcare in the city [...] at [other] clinics. Then you’ve [got to] have that conversation [and say,] “Look, I understand [the history of sub-par healthcare for low-income and minority individuals ...] How can we heal this? [...]”

As we highlighted earlier in this report, Elev8 made several adaptations to help break down the barriers between students and families and the systems in which Elev8 operated. Some of these adaptations included creating family resource centers, instituting culturally relevant parent organizations, and hiring parents to serve as ambassadors for Elev8. Without these adaptations, Elev8’s services would have gone underutilized.

## 5) Adaptations alone are insufficient for ensuring the sustainability of a community school

While Elev8 made many adaptations to ensure the initiative's success, these alone did not result in full sustainability of the initiative after its first four years of funding. The reality is that initiatives such as Elev8 aim to address tremendous and persistent inequities that exist in low-performing schools in struggling communities. The challenges of implementation are great,<sup>27</sup> and sustainability is even harder. At the most basic level, a full-service community school requires ample funding for all of the services it provides. Some of this funding may be available through other funding streams, but it is unlikely that community school services can be funded with existing resources alone.

First, an effective community school involves collaboration and communication across partners, which requires ongoing funding for coordination. Principals and Elev8 leaders noted that they have to have systematic communication protocols in place to ensure alignment of the schools' and Elev8's visions, and to maximize Elev8's impact. They also recognize that implementing those protocols is hard with the limitations on time and funding.

Second, staff quality and consistency are essential for the success of a community school. Research shows that the length and quality of adult relationships with students is a critical factor in improving outcomes and ensuring the students' uptake of services. Elev8 leaders echoed this sentiment and shared that strong consistent staffing is also an area where community schools need ongoing dedicated funding. One interviewee provided the following illustration when asked about the importance of dedicated funding:

[...] Nobody's volunteering to do the work. You get what you pay for, and we want high-quality people because our students deserve the best. So, if that [dedicated] funding goes away, I cannot see this program remaining even as it is right now.

Changes in the political and economic landscape can have even a more profound impact on community school implementation, continuity, and sustainability. Each change in leadership comes with new reform ideas, and priorities. Elev8 sites experienced transitions in governors, mayors, and district superintendents, which had a knock-on effect on Elev8's sustainability. The impacts of these changes are more profound if funders do not help their grantees navigate the churning waters. Elev8 had just exited its infancy when Atlantic's funding shifted from supporting services in the schools to ancillary supports to help lead agencies communicate about and advocate for school excellence, community schools, and Elev8. Without concrete evidence of its impact, lead agencies struggled to secure enough resources to maintain service levels comparable to the period of time when it was being supported by Atlantic. Finally, the question of Elev8's sustainability coincided with the recession, which made securing public and private dollars for its implementation even more challenging. Many of our interviewees noted that the economic climate was an insurmountable barrier to securing ongoing public funding for Elev8.

Philanthropic support, if it is committed at adequate levels for multiple years, can serve as the building block of a long-term community school strategy and provide implementers with the bandwidth needed to develop and mature a complex initiative so that it is integrated into the school and political landscapes. While adaptations to Elev8 did not guarantee Elev8's sustainability, they did contribute to Elev8 survival amid leadership changes at Atlantic, and despite facing turnover in technical assistance

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, McClanahan, W.S., and Piccinino, K. (2016). "Elev8 Final Report." Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action and McClanahan Associates, Inc.

providers, local officials, principals, teachers, and lead agencies. Community school investors need to prepare for a long haul to sustainability. They need to have long-term flexible funding visions that can fully support schools as they work to institutionalize the model and make it immune from derailment due to staffing and shifts in economic and political conditions.

## Final Thoughts

Elev8's experience demonstrates what is already known about strong organizations: they must be flexible. Atlantic, Elev8 staff, the lead agencies, and partner organizations were all involved in implementing many adaptations to the initiative with the chief goal of making Elev8 more successful and sustainable in the long term. The specific adaptations they selected were based on their particular organizational philosophies and approaches; observations about the needs and contexts of the local communities and the individual schools; and with a forward-looking perspective on the long-term sustainability of the program.

While the primary aim of this report was to share how the specific adaptations that were made affected the viability of the Elev8 program and to highlight some key learnings, the many interviews MAI conducted with various stakeholders also served to underscore the important role community schools are playing in the changing nature of our country's education system today. Programs like Elev8 can serve as a model for the broader system, demonstrating how to effectively use human-centered design to find solutions to the various educational challenges and shortcomings we face as our world continues to change at lightning speed.

Though Elev8 met with mixed success in terms of long-term sustainability, it has made lasting contributions to not only the lives of the stakeholders involved, but to the idea that openness, collaboration, human-centered design, and, ultimately, adaptability are the key levers to moving forward in our collective aim to *elevate* our youth to contribute their highest and greatest value to the world we live in.

## About McClanahan Associates, Inc.

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At McClanahan Associates, Inc. (MAI), we are committed to strengthening programs based on flexible, yet rigorous, evaluation practices that help organizations and funders achieve their mission of improving people's lives. We work closely with the organizations we partner with—capitalizing on their deep knowledge of the local context, the population they serve, and their own program—and generate information and recommendations for our clients that are understandable, practical, and useful. Our staff is comprised of expert researchers, evaluators, and technical assistance providers. As a team, we believe that meaningful evaluation efforts respond to each program's unique needs, align with the developmental stage of the program, and produce information that is immediately relevant to practitioners.

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