

The Cluster Model for School Improvement: A Parent Involvement Initiative in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

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With improved student achievement a national goal of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) government, the task for the Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) federal grant for the RMI, which started in 2003, was to improve parent involvement in school activities and the education process of their children. When the RMI PIRC first began, there were many challenges in the school communities, such as underprepared schools, ineffective school leadership, under qualified teachers, and little to no parental involvement. It was hard to imagine we could make an impact on parent involvement given the issues facing the school system.

In order to work with a school and parents meaningfully to improve levels of engagement in school activities, we needed to assess the types of existing formal and informal parent activities regarding their quality, relevance, and usefulness in contributing to student success. There is no doubt that parent involvement is an essential element of school improvement, but when RMI school principals are asked in discussions about processes for achieving meaningful parent involvement outcomes, there was much confusion and varied responses ranging from helping with building maintenance and campus clean-up to participation in school meetings. It is evident by the conditions and status of school management that parents and

teachers need to work together if student academic improvement is the RMI national goal.

Emerging needs from school visit reports, administrative reports, parents and teacher meetings, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) forums, and informal interviews with school principals, community leaders reaffirms challenges that are not unique to the RMI, but are common in most Pacific island schools. Indicators, such as teacher attitudes, mind set of parents, and methods of teaching, created a classroom environment non-conducive to learning. In particular, these four needs were identified as affecting the quality of learning:

1. Lack of consistent leadership skills within and across schools
2. Quality of teaching (instructional preparation & delivery)
3. Low levels of parent involvement
4. Lack of community stake holders involvement

Something needed to be done, and involving the community in their children's education through partnerships seemed to offer promise. The RMI Ministry of Education (MOE) began looking for opportunities to build partnerships within communities to increase their involvement in education, and schools in particular, and to improve the learning environment for students.

The four elements served as the basis for the development of the PIRC-funded Cluster Model (CM). The key goal for this process is to improve parent involvement in order to increase student academic achievement in school. The need to involve

parents, the extended families, and the whole community in learning is essential. The people who live in each community—rural and often remote—are the ones closest to the children. They are the parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunties of the children in RMI schools. Therefore, the focus is on empowerment and ownership of improving the learning environment for each child. The challenge is to engage the community, especially parents, in school decision-making processes, sharing learning goals and holding all stakeholders accountable for the learning that takes place in schools.

Adaptation of the wise proverb, “It takes a community to raise a child,” is used by weaving culturally appropriate practices into the leadership structure and capacity building strategies to match local contexts that increase parent involvement in the local school communities. Research talks about the importance of home support to children’s learning and the impact on a child when there is consistency of support from an adult (not necessarily a parent) who takes the time to nurture the learning development and growth from early years (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Johsorn, & Voorhis, 2002; Fehrmann, Keith, & Reiners, 1987). Research also confirms the natural phenomenon that when children know they are being held responsible for their learning, they will be encouraged to learn and, therefore, the interest to learn and motivation to stay in school longer will, moreover, assist in their achievement levels (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007). How can schools and homes bridge this gap so all children have a model for learning? These types of conversations are what the CM process is encouraging at various levels and among groups, (e.g., teacher-teacher, teacher-parents; parent–parent; parents–

traditional leaders, parents-local governments, schools-local governments). These dialogs are important because each community is unique, and the context of working with change for improvement purposes is not a “one size fits all” fix. It is interesting to compare the evolving changes in the school communities since the CM initiative started and how they have begun to infuse cultural practices that foster children’s learning growth into the school decision making process.

Background of Parent Involvement in the RMI Prior to 2003

Community involvement and participation is expected, but it is detached from the school. Parents and other community members do not see a role for themselves in education and, therefore, keep their distance. This idea of school is very different from the way they traditionally educate their children. There is fragmented authority for education among the MOE (central governance), local governments, traditional leadership, and faith-based organizations. The role of parents overlap within the fragmented authority, contributing to the lack of organized development and focus, thus the status of the RMI’S struggling schools prior to 2003. The support required to foster academic achievement of the school and students is left to the “experts,”—the teachers at the school, who often come directly from high school with little or no teacher training.

During those years, parent involvement in the schools was minimal. Parents and teachers shared their experiences through comments such as these:

“Many of us didn’t have the skills required to carry out the work we were asked to do at the school.”

“The PTA was a communication forum controlled by the principal or head teacher; it was not for the parents.”

“The work in the classrooms seldom makes it to the PTA agendas of meetings.”

“The PTA is a parent forum for administrative issues and has little or no connection to the instructional process in the classroom of which parental involvement should focus on.”

“The PTA is not representative of the stakeholders in the community. It is mostly the women who participate.”

As the need for change in community involvement with the school grew, the CM became the vehicle of reform designed to meet that need.

Indicators of Improvement From Use of the Cluster Model From 2003 to Present

The CM utilizes government leaders (national and local), traditional leaders, and community members, church leaders and their groups, business leaders, and other local clubs and chapters by bringing them together in a school-based decision making body called the School Improvement Team (SIT). Each school establishes three core teams:

1. Teacher Grade Clusters are accountable to meet student learning goals (curriculum benchmarks). Only large schools such as Ebeye, Rita & Laura Elementary have the Instructional Improvement Team (IIT)—a principal support team to help monitor instructional progress of the clusters. Establish learning groups; teambuilding for lesson planning, learning strategies, use of assessments & assessment data to inform instruction etc. (taking ownership of self-growth in teaching and learning)
2. School Improvement Team pull in other important community (stake holders) leaders/groups for shared decision making and school improvement planning (the outcome for this feature is two fold: 1) systemized and improved two-way communications and, 2) parents included in the school decision-making process.
3. Cluster PTAs are a forum to share and discuss student learning and ‘parent learning’ about RMI’s Ministry of Education content standards and benchmark outcomes focused on specific clusters of grades (i.e., K-3, 4-6, 7-8).

Figure 1 outlines the organizational chart of the CM.

The CM includes professional development for teachers to work with parents focusing on student learning. The school PTA is reorganized into smaller clusters, based on learning expectations of the National Curriculum Standards. Teachers and parents are accountable for student learning outcomes in those grades that make up a cluster (e.g., Cluster 1 includes kindergarten through grade 3). School-based professional development and meetings are also organized into cluster groups, and the principle of “Koba Marog,” or collective

sharing of ideas, knowledge, skills, and talents, is used in a facilitative manner to construct plans and resolve necessary issues. Grade level clusters used these facilitative sessions to learn, develop, and create learning activities that matched the learning outcomes of their grade levels. Each grade level cluster is responsible for communicating about learning to: parents, the school SIT, the Cluster PTA, and school principal. The principal reports to the MOE (see Figure 2). Restructuring schools to align with the CM allows for community involvement in the management of their schools, but leaves the reins in the hands of the school administrator.

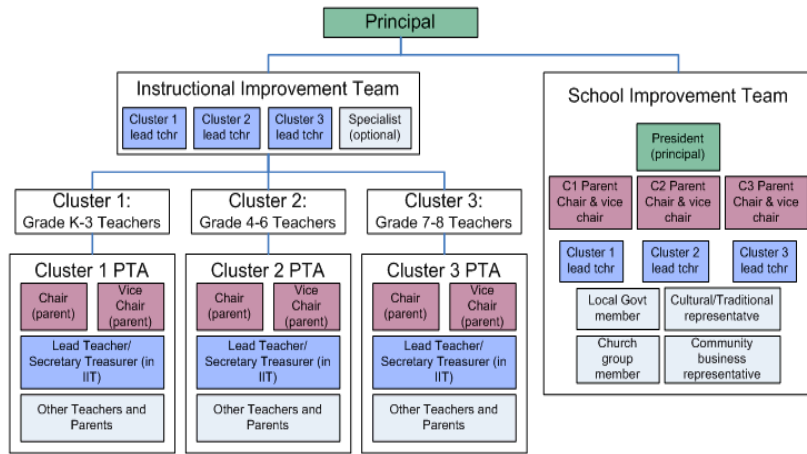


Figure 1. The Cluster Model Organizational Chart

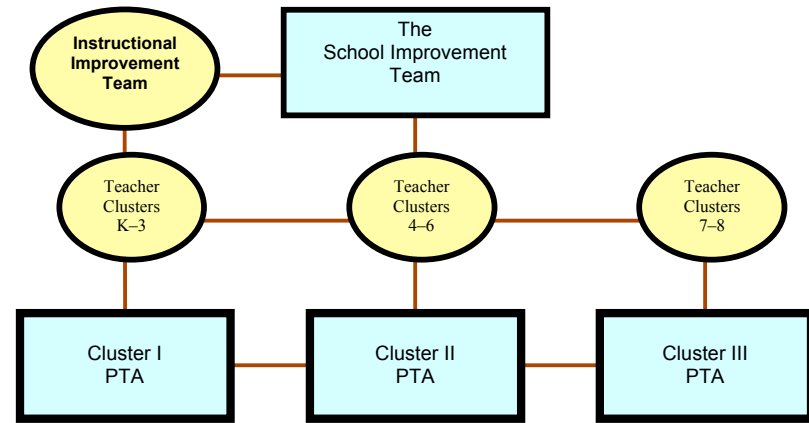


Figure 2. The Structure

Responding to the Challenges

Developing a sustainable process for mobilizing the stakeholders of children in communities near and distant from the central MOE/DOE administration seems relevant not only by educational research, but also by the cultural way of collaboration in existent in our local communities. The far and isolated schools often operate independently, almost in a stand alone existence, with little support and communication to the MOE. The CM seems to be working in schools, both near and far from the central office. Hence, in 2006, the RMI MOE mandated the implementation of the CM as policy. In Figure 3, the process by which a school adopts the CM is outlined.

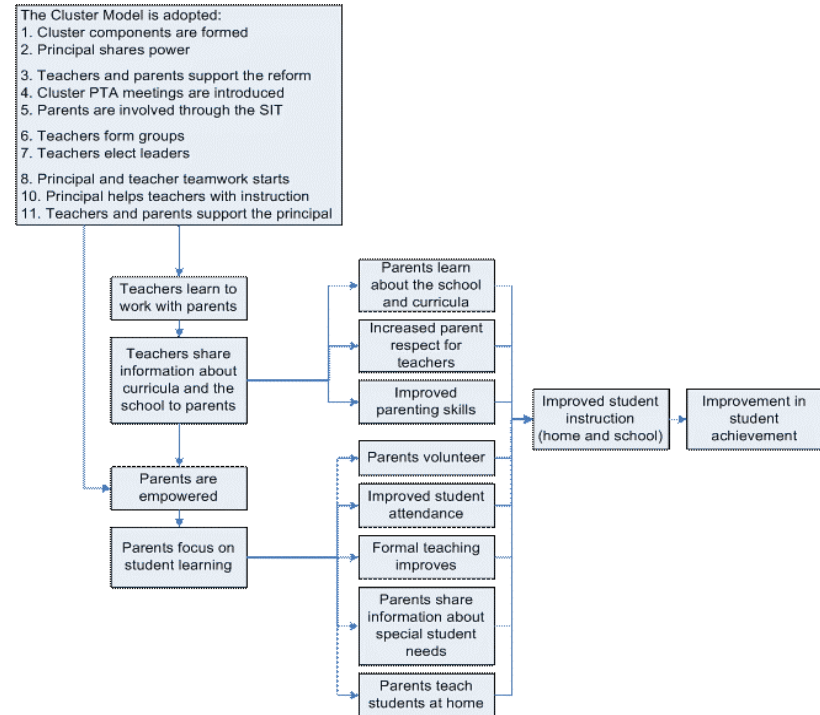


Figure 3. Implementing the Cluster Model at the School Level

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and Parent Involvement in RMI Schools

Locally, the RMI PIRC worked with individual schools in using the CM to develop school improvement plans (SIPs), and had the action teams develop their own outcome measures to improve learning in those clusters (Clusters I, II, and III). Although the RMI is exempt from NCLB, the seven priorities that the RMI PIRC worked with through the CM are NCLB mandates. They are as follows:

1. Improve home school communications (two-way & effective strategies)
2. Increase student academic achievement
3. Increase school academic achievement
4. Increase parent involvement in school planning
5. Increase parent involvement in school review
6. Increase parental involvement in school improvement
7. Improve school readiness

Aligning the Priorities With Cluster Model Initiatives in the Schools

Priority 1: Improving home-school communication

Activities used are aimed to foster awareness, develop communication skills, and increase the understanding of the value of information sharing.

Current Status	CM Implementation	Indicators/Expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School-home communication is the common mode ○ Very little effort on parents part to volunteer information about child to school or teacher ○ Absenteeism is subject of most home-school communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parent training in home-school communication strategies to get parents or childcare providers to communicate more with teachers and school staff - Quality of information - Value of information - Timeliness of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parents volunteering student information ○ Parents visit classrooms and school more frequently ○ Parents know what questions to ask at PTC & PTA meetings ○ Improved collaborations - Frequent conversations - Shared responsibility for student learning

Priority 2: Increase student academic achievement

Activities in these areas target teaching and learning in the formal, as well as informal, settings.

Current Status	CM Implementation	Indicators/Expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Low scores on National Exams ○ High number of at risk students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Incorporating cluster teams and a facilitative Instructional Improvement Team (IIT) that coordinate frequent and on-going school-based professional development meetings where group collective skills and knowledge is the strength. Learning is challenged and assessments of weaknesses and strengths are self/group assessed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 5% improvement on performance-based assessments each year in numeracy & literacy skills for grades 3, 6, and 8. ○ Increased success rates of students on the high school entrance test.

Priority 3: Increase school academic achievement

Current Status	CM Implementation	Indicators/Expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rank of school each year ○ Infrequent school-based support to teacher development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Implement teacher cluster learning teams ○ Implement SIT (decision making body) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improved communications around teaching and learning ○ Increased support to teaching and learning

Priorities 4, 5, & 6: Increase parent involvement in school planning, review and improvement.

Current Status	CM Implementation	Expectations
No process in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Establish the SIT ○ Implement the SIT—put them to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shared decision making ○ Shared planning ○ Shared review and improvement of necessary issues

Conclusion

It is not easy to bring about change, but it is possible. Change will come slowly but surely, if everyone is willing to participate in the process. There are many challenges and logistics to work through, as we have encountered and experienced, but these are also important parts of the learning to help improve teaching and learning in our isolated island communities. Parents are our schools' most valued assets and the school system should help to empower them.

References

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