

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

By

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With improved student achievement a national goal of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) government, the task for the Parental 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, underqualified 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 meaningfully work with schools and parents 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, 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 and delivery)
3. Low levels of parent involvement
4. Lack of community stakeholders 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

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to improve parent involvement in order to increase student academic achievement in school. The need to involve parents, 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 leaning goals and holding all stakeholders accountable for the learning that takes place in schools.

Adaptation of the wise proverb, "It takes a village 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 dialogues 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:

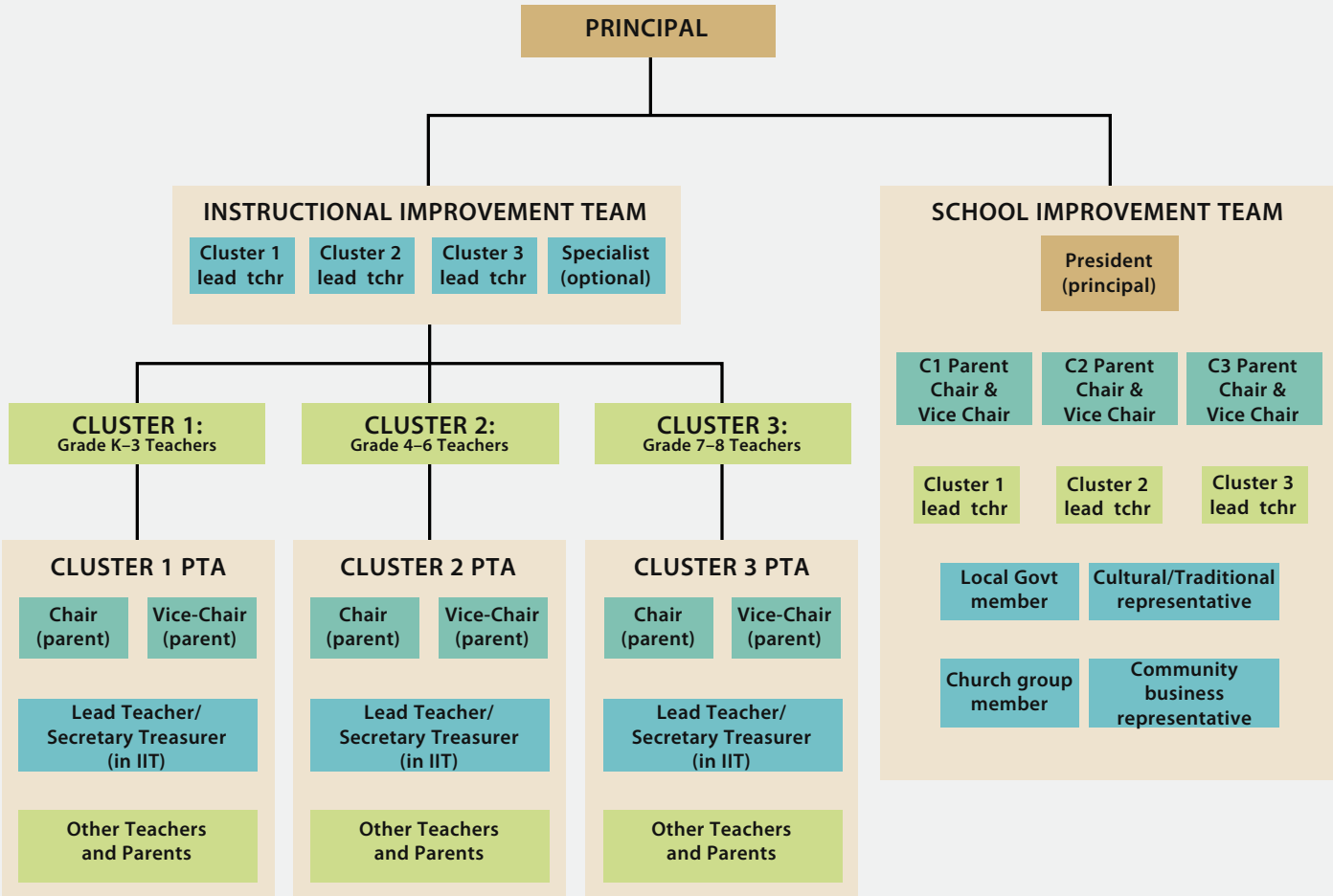
“Many of us didn’t have the skills required to carry out the work we were asked to do at the school.”

“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.”

Figure 1. The Cluster Model Organizational Chart



“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.

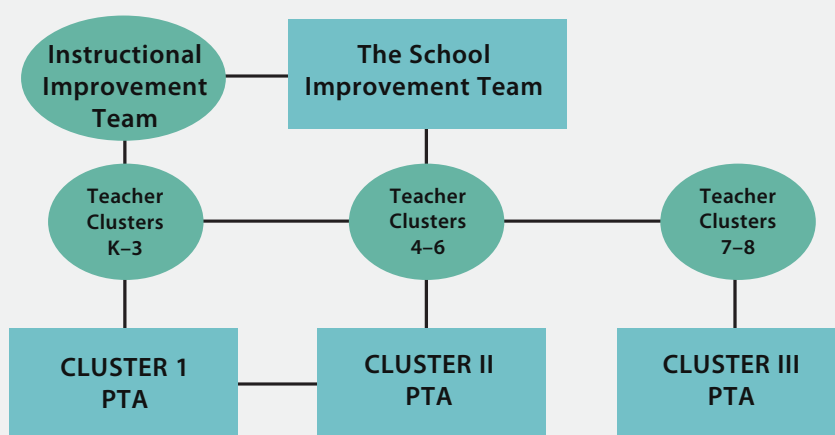
Indicators of Improvement From Use of the Cluster Model From 2003 to Present

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 Rita & Laura Elementary in Ebeye, have the Instructional Improvement Team (IIT)—a principal support team that helps teachers take ownership of their own self-growth in teaching and learning by monitoring the instructional progress of the clusters, establishing learning groups, fostering teambuilding for lesson planning, implementing learning strategies, and encouraging the use of assessments and assessment data to inform instruction.
2. School Improvement Teams pull in other important community stakeholders, such as leaders and groups, for shared decision making and school improvement planning. The outcome for this is two-fold: (1) systemized and improved two-way communications and, (2) parental inclusion in the school decision making process.
3. Cluster PTAs are a forum to share and discuss student learning and parent learning about the RMI’s Ministry of Education content standards and benchmark outcomes focused on specific clusters of grades, including K–3, 4–6, and 7–8.

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 com-

Figure 2. The Structure



municating about learning to parents, the 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.

Responding to the Challenges

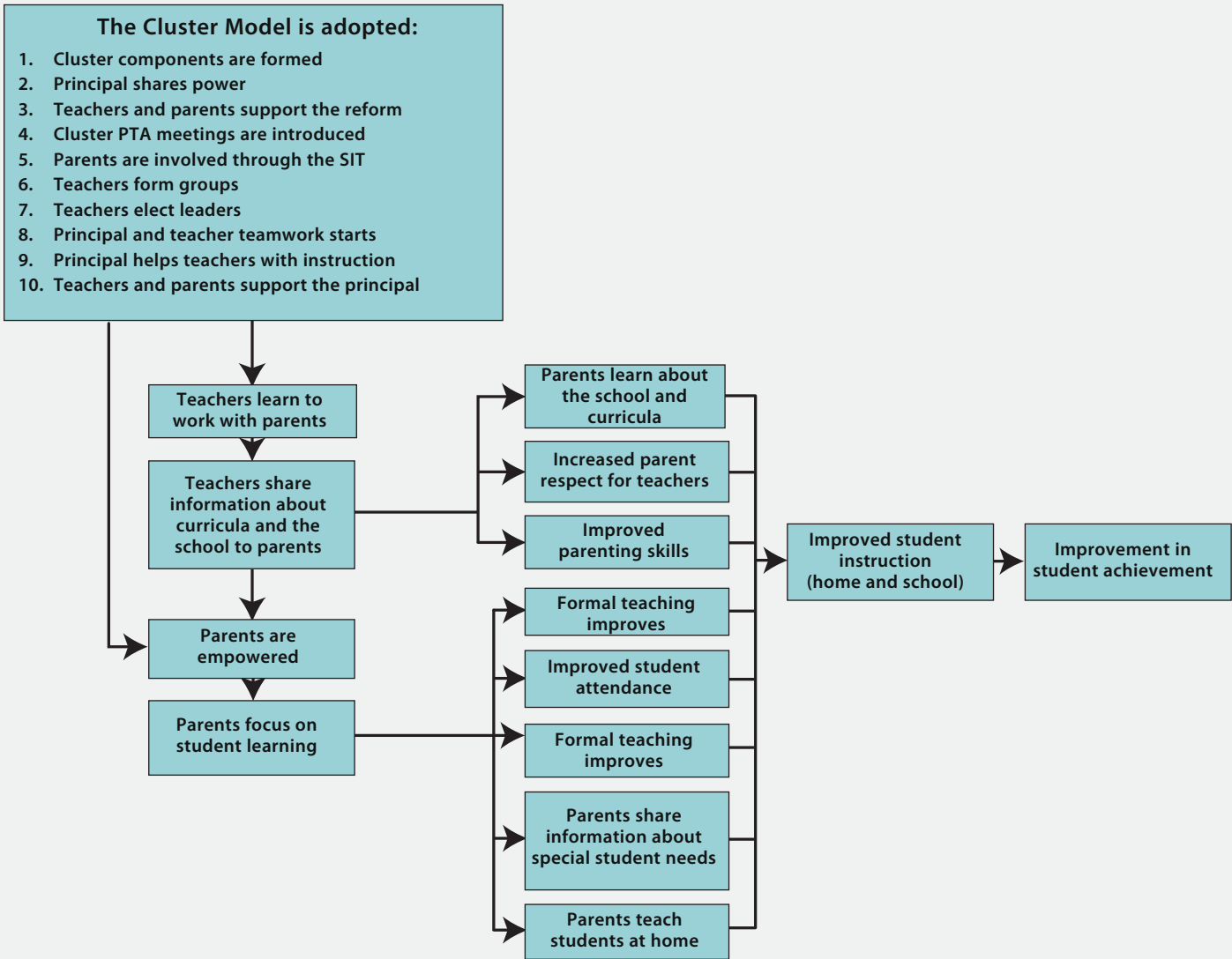
Developing a sustainable process for mobilizing the stakeholders of children in communities near and distant from the central MOE/DOE administration seems relevant not only by educational research, but also by the cultural way of collaboration in existent in our local communities. The far and isolated 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.

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 parental involvement in school planning
5. Increase parental involvement in school review
6. Increase parental involvement in school improvement
7. Improve school readiness

Figure 3. Implementing the Cluster Model at the School Level



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.

Priority 2: Increase student academic achievement

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

Priority 3: Increase school academic achievement

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

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.

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 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequent conversations - Shared responsibility for student learning
<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.
<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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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

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About the Author



Ms. Evelyn Joseph serves as Coordinator of PREL Republic of the Marshall Island Pacific Parental Information and Resource Center (RMI PIRC). Focusing on early childhood, school improvement, and community education issues, Ms. Joseph coordinates the PTA in various RMI schools and the Early Childhood Education Program with Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI). Prior to her work with PREL's RMI PIRC, she worked for the RMI Ministry of Education in a variety of capacities, including Teacher Training Director, Field Supervisor, and Family Life Curriculum Specialist.

Commentary:

Tim Donahue, PhD, Education Specialist and Grants Manager, Department of the Interior Office of Insular Affairs

Years of educational research have validated the common sense notion that schools are more effective when parents are involved. But efforts to involve parents are never easy and perhaps even more difficult in Pacific island contexts. From my experience, I contend that parental involvement in Pacific schools is held back by a sociolinguistic conundrum. Parents play little part in western-style education because of cultural confusion over how to address western institutions. They would like to be more involved, but don't know how to communicate with the schools.

There remains a widespread attitude that formal education is exclusively a governmental endeavor. Parents are willing to cede responsibility for their children's schooling to their elected government officials. At the same time, however, they expect the schools to provide high-quality education and are often dissatisfied with the results. But being an advocate on behalf of their children is not a role Pacific parents can easily assume. The cultures are hierarchically organized. One does not criticize those in positions of authority, at least not directly. It would be disrespectful to do so.

Nevertheless, each of the cultures has ways to express opinions and expectations upwardly to authorities. Unfortunately, upwardly directed communication patterns have not transferred to education. PTA meetings are quarterly meetings where parents pick up report cards and are given directives by school administrators. The PTA is not an opportunity for parent input and participation, as is the case in a democratically based and individualistic culture, such as that in the United States. Rather, the process is one directional, from the school to the parents. Similarly, education systems are top-down from centralized offices to the schools. Culturally appropriate communication patterns have not developed that close the loop from parent to school and school to central administration.

From this sociolinguistic perspective, the Cluster PTA model, developed and nurtured in the Marshall Islands, shows great promise. The model helps parents and schools articulate roles and responsibilities, providing everyone an acceptable means of speaking up and down the hierarchy. For the long-term success of education in the Pacific, parents must become more involved. The Cluster Model bridges a critical gap by engineering social interactions that result in mutually acceptable and productive communication patterns.

About the Author



Dr. Tim Donahue started his career in education as a Peace Corps Volunteer to Palau in the 1960s. He eventually found himself at PREL, where he served as Program Director and wrote the original application that secured the Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) grant for PREL. He was also one of the individuals who worked to bring Evelyn Joseph onboard and encouraged her to develop the Cluster PTA Model. Dr. Donahue now oversees the education grants that are funded through the Compacts of Free Association between the United States, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). In that capacity, he has been able to gauge the favorable impact of the Cluster Model on parental involvement and school improvement in the Marshall Islands. Dr. Donahue received his bachelor's degree in foreign service from Georgetown University, his master's degree in English as a second language and doctoral degree in education foundations from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Response to Commentary:

Evelyn Joseph

Kommol, Dr. Tim Donahue, for your comments. During the last 5 years, I have found that strong leadership skills are essential to implementing school improvement within the Republic of the Marshall Islands' public schools. I also strongly agree that it is time to change how schools and school systems are defining and understanding highly effective schools and school performance measures.

From my experiences within the school system, I argue that positive change within the educational system will take place if school administrators are focused more closely on transforming school *leadership* as opposed to school *management*. Most RMI schools are rural and isolated by distance from the Central Command Post, the RMI Ministry of Education (MOE) on Majuro, and school administrators have acted as managers reporting administrative and fiscal details, as opposed to acting in a leadership-visionary and practical role. Over time, this has resulted in school principals and head teachers assuming managerial roles, detracting from the time in which these individuals could be acting as educational leaders and modeling strategies and techniques to advance learning. Today, schools are pretty much doing things independently and in isolation of both the community and the MOE. With

the introduction of the CM, this trend is being challenged. The response from communities, in relation to the implementation of the CM, has been positive, but leadership on the *how* pieces remains a challenge for our school principals.

Today, data available on national measures illustrate improvements at schools implementing the CM. These improvements may not be solely due to the implementation of the CM, but there is a persistent pattern that links the implementation of the CM to the presence of school improvement teams that assist schools in making decisions. It is clear that schools are continuing to struggle to improve academically—this is the challenge that the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning’s RMI Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) CM is working with the RMI MOE to address. The CM has been essential in initiating change and has led to systemic change. Change will take time, but it is important to recognize the successes that are taking place and positively impacting school cultures. The CM’s team building and partnerships are beginning to impact the culture of school communities, and they are well on their way to becoming high learning communities. The table depicts some indicators of systemic outcomes of the CM schools.

The Marshallese culture is communal, and the partnership building emphasis of the CM has worked well. Difficulties have centered on identifying ways to keep participants engaged in

meaningful activities with an absence of strong and organized leadership. Leadership training is provided to School Improvement Team (SIT) members, but these members do rotate. Making short-term, achievable goals is important to keep participants engaged and moving forward with school change.

In conclusion, I believe that the CM been successful due to its ability to be culturally responsive and flexible when addressing school improvement issues. The MOE does not currently have an alternative school improvement model in place that schools can choose to implement when PIRC funding ends in 2011. Thus, the commitment of the MOE to the CM needs to be prioritized in order to sustain and nurture the positive changes that are being realized now. To realize this, we will need to continue to emphasize that education is *everyone’s* business, and there are great benefits to continuing to implement the CM.

Systematic (Traditional)	Systemic (Cluster Model)
Bureaucratic Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centrally administered Principal-controlled Low parental involvement Low community engagement 	Collegial Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building partnerships (teachers, parents, community members) Shared decision making Shared ownership of improvement needs Meaningful parent and community involvement and engagement
PTA: Management-Oriented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School-wide PTA Administrative focus Main form of parental involvement 	PTA: Leadership-Oriented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared leadership (with parents and teachers) Benchmark clustered student learning focus Shared accountability for student learning Standard-based & teacher-driven Together Everyone Achieves More (TEAM) effort
School Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School grounds off limits to parents Parents come only when invited School staff/ teachers are experts on learning Communication mostly one way (school-home) 	School Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent-friendly and inviting-work with parents to ensure home environments are school-friendly Parents are first teachers/partners in learning Communication is two way (home-school, school-home) and effective.