

Tackling Wicked Problems through Organizational Hybridity:

The Example of Community Schools

by

Sanjiv G. Rao

Dissertation Advisor: Professor Erica G. Foldy

ABSTRACT

Ensuring child well-being in low-income communities is a complex, multi-faceted, wicked policy problem. Confronting this challenge is essential to providing equality of opportunity for all, but often involves complex policy and institutional decisions that have implications for policy implementation and organizational practices. This study suggests that the notion of organizational hybridity (the blending of organizational features, expertise, and resources) can facilitate and influence the implementation of policy and organizational solutions to wicked problems.

Community schools attempt to tackle the wicked problems of ensuring child well-being and improving educational capacity by co-locating social services and creating deep partnerships between schools and community-based organizations. However, there is a dearth of evidence about the process through which community schools make a difference, the implementation decisions they make, and how the strategy influences school-level practices. Through a qualitative comparative multiple case study approach, this study helps fill these knowledge gaps by exploring how three public elementary schools implemented a community school approach. In each case, schools partnered with

a community organization, The Children's Aid Society, to create and enact a partnership that blended their respective organizations and which reflected features characteristic of hybrid organizations. Study findings (a) describe programmatic and organizational implementation decisions made by study sites, (b) articulate a process model illuminating implementation patterns and drivers (specifically organizational hybridity and boundary spanning), and (c) suggest how community school implementation influences school-level organizational outputs and practices.

This study has broader implications for policy implementation, organizational behavior, and public administration. First, it builds on existing implementation scholarship by highlighting organizational hybridity as an implementation driver. In addition, the proposed process model and practice findings lay the groundwork for future research that can continue build and test the ideas identified in this study in a variety of policy contexts about how to expand the capacity of policy ideas and organizational features to tackle complex social problems, especially in low-income communities.