
Improving Children's Services

Overcoming Barriers, Creating New Opportunities

The effort to improve children's services is still in the trial-and-error stage. Mr. Kirst suggests that the goal now should be to devise some initial strategies and to build on these.

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BY MICHAEL W. KIRST

CHILDHOOD is changing. More children are unhealthy — physically and mentally. More children suffer from substance abuse and child abuse, from inadequate child care, and from family disorganization. More and more students from single-parent families and from minority and non-English-speaking backgrounds are entering public schools that have never done a good job of meeting the needs of non-middle-class, nonwhite, non-English-speaking children. School leaders must understand how children's educational prospects are affected by their daily lives. Childhood is changing, and schools must change as well.

The risks add up: Johnny can't read because he needs glasses and breakfast and encouragement from his absent father; Maria doesn't pay attention in class because she can't understand English very well and she's worried about her mother's drinking and she's tired from trying to sleep in the car. Dick is flunking because he's frequently absent. His mother doesn't get him to school because she's depressed because she lost her job. She missed too much work because she was sick and could not afford medical care.

The solution to these multiple problems is not as simple as expanding existing programs like Head Start — a response that was highlighted at the September 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville,

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Virginia. What's needed is a complete overhaul of children's services, bringing together public and private organizations to meet the comprehensive needs of children, adolescents, and parents. Schools should constitute one of the centers of a coordinated network of total children's services.

At a time when funding for social services is down, some children receive redundant services for various overlapping problems; others receive no help at all. Children with multiple problems are typically given a single label — substance abuser, delinquent, dropout, teen parent — that oversimplifies the nature of the trouble and obstructs a real evaluation of what's going on and what needs to be done. As these children move from one level of care to another — from home to juvenile hall or from inpatient psychiatric hospitalization to residential treatment — they move in and out of different departmental jurisdictions and encounter different groups of service providers who tend their own turf.

Fragmentation prevents social service professionals from seeing the cumulative impact of their interventions. Because problems are defined in the short term and are related to single issues, there is no "permanent record" that shows what happened over the long haul; there is no joint assessment by the drug counselor, the school nurse, the welfare worker, and the special education teacher. Most of the resources are used for reacting to acute problems and emergencies; prevention is usually neglected.

In our society, school is the institution with the most sustained contact with children and their families. But most schools have no family counselors or health facilities, and they lack information about and contact with other service providers who could help address the needs of students.

Reports and projects aimed at improving the coordination and effectiveness of services for at-risk children have been proliferating around the U.S.¹ There is an increasing realization that many crucial influences on the education of at-risk children are outside the school's orbit; schools cannot do it all. Only an alliance of parents, social service agencies, and educators can make a big difference for children with multiple needs and dysfunctional families. For example, some schools have become "hubs" for integrated social services, including health care, child care, children's protective services, juvenile justice counseling, and parent education. They stay open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and provide breakfast, snacks, recreation, child care, and a variety of social services. But these schools are rare, and there is no federal or state policy to increase their number.

Any attempt to improve the system of social services for children must proceed from a dismal current situation and take into account a history of failed approaches.² In a comprehensive study of California children, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) found that children's services:

- focus on acute situations rather than on prevention;
- are fragmented, so that the child is bounced like a pinball from agency to agency with no coordination or follow-up;
- are discontinuous, episodic, and do not follow the life course of the needy child;
- have major gaps where no services exist, such as health insurance;
- display inequities in the quantity of services that are offered within various local jurisdictions (e.g., counties) that greatly exceed disparities in school finance; and
- are not accountable for performance, since only education has any system for tracking outcomes.

There are numerous indictments of the current system, and they are so severe that one must reconsider whether huge amounts of new money should be poured into the existing configuration of categories and monuments to single-issue groups. In our PACE study we commented that coordinating children's services is like forcing unconsenting adults to perform unnatural acts. In this article I recommend a complete overhaul of the current system rather than a mere patch-up. There are other dimensions to the solutions that I propose, such as improving communities and focusing on parent education. But I will not address them here, because they have been discussed elsewhere.³

ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

The attempt to improve the current nonsystem must proceed from a grasp of the deeply rooted causes of its fragmentation. Problems start with splintered professional preparation on the university campus. Educators go to education schools, social workers to social welfare schools, health professionals to schools of medicine or public health, juvenile justice workers to criminology schools, county executives to public administration schools, and so on. There is rarely any interprofessional education or contact. Recently a foundation in California gave a grant to a large university in the state to allow faculty members and students from the education school to "meet" their counterparts in the school of social welfare. They had coexisted in splendid isolation for 40 years.

The initial professional preparation is followed by involvement in isolated professional networks that rarely interact and have no staff development across professions. In 1988 I attended a convention that included most of the providers of children's services in California, and I did not know anybody except the educators. This was despite my having been a member and president of the California State Board of Education for eight years.

Since the professionals do not know one another, it is difficult to overcome informal legal conventions regarding the confidentiality of a child's records. It

is not uncommon for five different agencies to be assisting the same child and family and not be aware of one another's involvement. Some children's records need to be confidential, but parents will often waive these rights. The information systems of the various children's agencies, however, are not linked or cross-referenced.⁴

The structure of state and local government is a major barrier. School boards seceded from local government around the turn of the 20th century and went their separate ways.⁵ A major study of school boards concluded that local boards have only sporadic interaction with general government and tend to be isolated from mainstream political structures in the community. Categorical fragmentation in education is multiplied exponentially when one examines children's services. The California state government has 160 programs and 35 state agencies that administer children's programs. There are 12 committees working in the California legislature on behalf of children, but the legislators who serve on them tend to specialize in a single area. There is no leadership at the state or local level that can transcend this morass. We have superintendents of schools but no superintendent for children. Children's problems are increasingly horizontal, but government is organized vertically, like the quills on a porcupine.

Attempts to patch the current system often suffer from "projectitis" — the tendency to give one delivery system, such as the schools, a grant to coordinate all the others. This procedure merely multiplies the number of separate projects in a system already overloaded with agencies guarding their professional turfs. The coordination game degenerates into superficial reorganization, such as creating an "office for children" that placates child advocates but does not change the actual delivery of services or support parents.

SHORT-RUN IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Our objective should be to reverse the current pattern and provide services that emphasize prevention, continuity, comprehensiveness, equity, and accountability.⁶ But how can we get there? No one is certain, but some general principles are useful. First is the straightforward idea that grouping a number of services in one place makes it easier to use all of them. Schools can be one hub, but they should not be the only one and may not be as appropriate in some instances as child-care centers, churches, or other institutions. In some cities parents perceive schools as hostile places and feel more comfortable with other community institutions.

If the decision is made to locate multiple services in the schools, it should not be assumed that the schools are "in charge" of a group of subordinate agencies. The parties should be regarded as coequals. If collocation of services takes place, schools should

not have to divert their already scarce resources to management and staffing. County or other local agencies should pay for their own personnel and provide an overall coordinator.

Coordination of services enables each agency to be more effective while maintaining administrative and programmatic autonomy. However, a better approach is *collaboration*, whereby organizations join to create improvements in children's services that are no single agency's responsibility. But collaboration must be based on a communitywide planning process that is locally generated and includes broad citizen involvement. Staff members need to help parents participate in the design of programs. This planning phase will require seed money from federal, state, and foundation sources.

Line workers — teachers, social workers, and parent educators — should discuss collaboration techniques at the start. The process can be reinforced by certain strategies, including "hooks," "glue," and joint ventures that let workers know that no one agency can solve all the problems.⁷ Hooks formally link a child's participation in one program with participation in another. For example, foster children automatically qualify to move from school to a local job-training program. Glue money allows one agency to subcontract with other agencies and ensures that children can get services in one place. The lead agency becomes the "broker" for the child; for example, a school could subcontract with health, social service, and job-training agencies. Glue money would allow each child to be assigned a case manager who could procure or command resources from other agencies. In joint ventures, several agencies create partnerships to raise funds for jointly operated programs. This type of collaboration makes it less likely that agencies will put out tentacles into other domains. For example, drug prevention would not be grafted onto schools, but the school system along with several other agencies would apply for funds to conduct an integrated reinforcing program. A crucial element in all these financial arrangements is the credibility of the initial community planning.

All these collaborative processes must be followed by a base-line assessment of the overall conditions of children. A comprehensive report card can then be compiled at periodic intervals. Otherwise, those involved in the collaborative efforts will not know whether or not they have made much difference.

LONG-RUN DIRECTIONS

These short-run strategies must be supplemented by a longer-run focus on the roots of fragmentation. Universities have a major role in designing interprofessional preparation through interprofessional courses, continuing education, and interprofessional policy analysis. Ohio State University has been offering such a program for more than a decade. Staff

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development programs run by school systems can create opportunities for professionals from different children's services to meet and work together informally. The successful integration of local services relies on forming and nurturing grassroots personal relationships.

The U.S. needs to rethink its local governance structure and move toward such concepts as the Minnesota Youth Coordinating Board (MYCB). The MYCB is a joint-powers agreement between the city of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis schools, Hennepin County, the Minnesota Parks and Recreation Board, and the city library board. The MYCB can levy a local property tax to promote the integration and improve the quality of services for children. A written interagency agreement specifying who has which responsibilities for which services could be a follow-up to the restructuring of a local policy-making system.

Confidentiality requirements need to be revised with the objective of fostering collaboration by numerous agencies. The information systems of a variety of agencies can be merged and computerized.

State government has a major role in funding local planning and in providing start-up capital for the integrative efforts sketched above. But the states need to put their own houses in order. State legislative jurisdictions should be merged and a new state mechanism created for waiving state regulations that govern health services, social services, juvenile justice, education, and other areas. California has passed a bill creating a State Interagency Children's Services Coordinating Board composed of a director (whom the governor appoints), the chief state school officer, the attorney general, the secretary of health and welfare, and the directors of social services, the youth authority, and the departments of mental health, alcohol and drugs, and criminal justice.⁸ The legislation encourages counties to create interagency councils to coordinate children's services and to perform (but not be limited to) the following duties:

- ensuring collaboration and countywide planning for the provision of children's services,
- identifying those agencies that have a significant joint responsibility in providing services to children and families,
- identifying gaps in services to specific populations,
- developing policies and setting priorities to ensure the effectiveness of services,
- implementing public and private collaborative programs whenever possible, and
- providing for countywide interagency case management to coordinate resources, especially for those children and their families who are using the services of more than one agency.

The local interagency councils are to devise three-year plans for phasing in a coordinated delivery system for services to children. The state board may

waive existing state regulations when they hinder the coordination of children's services or when waivers would help to carry out the intent of the legislation. The board can also seek any necessary waivers of federal regulations.

Integrated children's services could also be enhanced by school restructuring that provided more personal relationships between secondary school students and their teachers. Smaller schools would help; perhaps even more effective would be a system that allowed two or three teachers to stay with a group of secondary school students for several years. In the typical high school, students see teachers for one period a day during one year, and no teacher feels responsible for individual students or knows what is going on in their lives. Counselors and social workers enter the picture episodically but lack sustained contact with students. Teachers refer students to counselors but rarely follow up on their progress. If the same subject-matter teachers stayed with students for several years, those teachers could provide a link to the nonschool case manager working with other social services.

The effort to improve children's services is still in the trial-and-error stage. There is a dearth of proven strategies, and no single approach will fit all diverse and complex local circumstances. The goal now should be to devise some initial strategies and to build on these. Luvern Cunningham advocates local constitutional conventions to create new governance structures such as local districts for "well-being."⁹ Such radical solutions may be the only way to move beyond incrementalism.

1. *Joining Forces* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of State Boards of Education, 1989); and William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, *The Forgotten Half: Non-College-Bound Youth in America* (Washington, D.C.: William T. Grant Foundation, 1988).

2. Milbrey McLaughlin and Shirley Heath, "Policies for Children with Multiple Needs," in Michael Kirst, ed., *Conditions of Children in California* (Berkeley: Policy Analysis for California Education, 1989).

3. See William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Deborah L. Cohen, "Parents as Partners," *Education Week*, 9 May 1990, pp. 13-20.

4. See Sid Gardner, "Failure by Fragmentation," *California Tomorrow*, Fall 1989, pp. 17-25.

5. Jacqueline P. Danzberger et al., "School Boards: The Forgotten Players on the Education Team," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1987, pp. 53-59.

6. For an overview of how these ideas can be effective, see Lisbeth Schorr, *Within Our Reach* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

7. Gardner, op. cit.

8. This bill is S.B. 997, passed in the fall of 1989. Several California counties are now preparing "mega waiver" requests. For other state approaches, see *Family: Support, Education, and Involvement* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1989).

9. Luvern Cunningham, "Reconstituting Local Government for Well Being and Education," in Brad Mitchell and Luvern Cunningham, eds., *Educational Leadership and the Changing Context of Families, Communities, and Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 135-54. K

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