

Integrating Services For Families

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During the past decade, our human service delivery system for children and families has proven increasingly inadequate. A need now exists for more integrated services or more partnerships between agencies and organizations to create "seamless" or "wraparound" services. Several foundations have sponsored major initiatives to explore the development of these types of services, including the New Schools for the Future by the Hogg Foundation and the New Futures initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Kellogg Foundation has also been instrumental in engaging land grant universities to renew their commitment to children and families.

These ideas have begun to take hold. The National Center for Children in Poverty (1995) recently reported increased development of comprehensive prevention services for children and their families. Eight states including Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, and West Virginia have initiated multi-strategy, interconnected programs and planning efforts. In Ohio, the Family and Children First initiative has linked human services, child protection, education, health, and juvenile justice to create a comprehensive system of services for children. In Oregon, the governor's office has directed local commissions in every county to develop and implement preventive, integrated, and accessible services. The result has been county-wide efforts focusing on such issues as child resiliency, juvenile reform/youth development, foster care, and child care.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED - AND STILL HAVE TO LEARN. Developing collaborations and integrated services is hard, takes time, and is a learning process. At present, no one has a blueprint or a formula for developing 100-percent effective integrated services. Indeed, among the pioneer efforts, many more failures than successes have emerged. Persons interested in building comprehensive services for children and families must be prepared to learn more about themselves, children, families, and their communities in the following ways:

LEARNING TO BEGIN. Some groups and communities are just not ready to start the process of developing integrated services (Casey, 1995). Melaville and Blank (1991) describe both supportive and nonsupportive climates, which in turn either foster or fail to foster community members working together. Blumenkrantz (1992) describes a set of characteristics related to the readiness of an organization to address prevention issues. These characteristics include an awareness of the need for integrated services, resources available to support the effort, and a history of flexibility in organizational structure and communication. Many communities will not fit this readiness profile. For these communities, the first step would include creating awareness of the need for a new approach by documenting the difficulties with the current system and the challenges facing families. These communities would also need to build an awareness of innovative programs that have addressed similar concerns (see for example, *Building Bridges: Supporting Families Across Service Systems* in the Applied Resources section). Getting ready

may also involve identifying community members and human service system representatives to provide a core of committed participants to begin improving services for children. (see Guiding Service Improvements through Community Assessment.)

LEARNING TO BE UNCOMFORTABLE. Integrating services represents a radical departure from our current practices. Trying to work with other agencies and organizations and exploring other ways of serving families may automatically be uncomfortable; however, many efforts have failed because participants were unwilling to create sufficiently challenging or uncomfortable planning structures. It is far easier to have a group of agency leaders meet than to bring together planning groups that include staff from a variety of levels in the organization or to include clients in the process. Creating new service delivery models cannot be done by simply reorganizing the boxes on a chart.

Developers of the New Beginnings Project (Jehl and Kirst, 1991) learned quickly that executive directors alone could not effectively transform service delivery in the San Diego schools. Caseworkers, supervisors, principals, teachers, and parents were all needed to make family-oriented schools a success. In short, "parents are a resource to the school, and not individual[s] in need of service from a school" (Milliea and Coleman, 1992; p. 145). By creating planning groups that challenge our comfortable beliefs about families and the services delivered to families, the chances of identifying what will really improve the situation increases (see "Together We Are Better").

LEARNING TO FIND DIRECTION. At the heart of many successful efforts to integrate services are leaders who have helped develop a shared vision among the participants. Melaville and Blank (1991) write that two components contribute to developing a vision. The first is establishing a clear goal and direction. The second is maintaining a practical vision that tempers the grand vision with "a brutally realistic understanding of what is possible given the constraints of the situation" (p. 22). The Casey Foundation, in reflecting on their work, have written, "The best original plans from states or local communities for complex multi-year change will require repair, revision, reassessment, and recommitment" (p. 19). Learning direction requires the ability to chart a realistic course and modify it as new information emerges and opportunities arise. Too often leadership is viewed as a function of a single individual. The Floyd County Youth Services Coalition (Melaville & Blank, 1991) bucked that myth by organizing three parallel committees to address the main objectives of their community. Representatives from each of these committees formed a steering committee to oversee and integrate the work of each committee. This organizational structure provided a means of involving a variety of people in finding direction.

LEARNING TO TALK AND TO LISTEN. When developing effective services for children and families, staff and leaders must be able to talk to each other, begin to know each other, and understand each other's point of view. Defining acronyms and other types of shorthand from the outset enables everyone to speak the same language. Even so, words that have different meanings for various professional groups may still pose a significant problem. Many of the words used in system change, such as "empowerment," "family-focused," and "community-based," have different meanings for different people. Using concrete descriptions and examples, rather than jargon, to describe goals and activities gives everyone a clearer idea of what is being discussed. Learning to communicate also requires attention to the dynamics of the group

communication process. Committees comprised of both supervisors and staff will enable all perspectives to be heard. Likewise, committees comprised of both professionals and community residents will need to ensure that both groups feel comfortable contributing. The Casey Foundation (1995) concluded that "communication gaps created by historical isolation of participants from one another were formidable. The sheer lack of experience that most people have in dealing across racial, class, and cultural lines was as pervasive on most of the collaborative governing boards as in the community itself" (p. 4). Reorganizing systems to serve families will require the achievement of new understandings through thoughtful talk and careful listening.

LEARNING TO DISAGREE. Conflict is an integral part of change. Early on it is important to anticipate conflicts and to develop procedures to manage differences. Melaville and Blank suggest that real reform requires participants to express their differing views on direction, strategies for change, and the allocation of resources. At the same time, constant conflict or repeated discussions of unresolved issues can doom an effort. Fisher and Ury (1983) offer some important guidelines on how to negotiate differences in ways that lead to acceptable solutions. A central tenet in their approach to conflict management is framing disputes in terms of the interests of the parties rather than as positions and working together to create options to satisfy all parties. Learning to disagree effectively is critical to reshaping a system.

LEARNING TO FAIL. There are likely to be many more failures than successes when implementing system-wide reform. Participants must be willing to experiment and take risks. Evaluation and monitoring should be part of every phase of the redesign of service delivery activities to provide feedback on what is working or not working. At every stage, it is useful to have objectives, plans of action, and monitoring procedures to chart the course. Developing monitoring strategies forces the planning process to stay on track; it also encourages people to step back from their work to reflect on what is working and why. Learning from failures offers a chance for real progress.

LEARNING TO HOPE. During this process of renewal, it's easy to ask the proverbial question, "Is the glass half empty or half full?" Almost anyone working to reform human service systems is likely to respond, "What do you mean half full? There is barely anything left in the glass at all!" Burnout and frustration are likely outcomes for those involved in reforming systems, yet progress is made by groups of people who learn to be hopeful in the face of enormous obstacles. Successful groups work toward small, achievable goals; they keep their attention directed at the enormous challenges children and families face; and celebrate their accomplishments. Success depends on helping each other believe that, through perseverance, a real difference will be made in the lives of children and families.

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