
Key Issues in Developing School-linked, Integrated Services

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Abstract

This article identifies several nuts-and-bolts issues involved in planning and implementing school-linked services. Effective planning must include discussion of implementation details and is possible only if a policy-minded team of coequals works toward the same goals. No one agency should “own” the process. In addition to education, health, and social services agency leaders, the team should include representatives of community and neighborhood groups, line workers, and parents. This team must carefully address questions of targeting, governance, financing, evaluation, and information sharing. In addition, team members must consider operational issues such as ensuring line worker buy-in and establishing an effective case management staffing plan that is acceptable to existing staff. The article discusses different strategies that community teams can use to address each of these issues.

The development of school-linked services has progressed to a point where we can begin to distill the most effective approaches to planning and implementing these programs. In this journal issue the article by Levy and Shepardson discusses key elements of these programs. This article identifies some of the nuts-and-bolts issues that must be addressed when establishing school-linked service programs. These include planning, targeting, governance, information systems, and staffing.

Planning

Perhaps the most obvious lesson to date from the experience of communities that have embarked on school-linked service efforts is that no one model fits all settings and works well in all cases. In fact, those who advocate one “franchise” model to fit all sites quickly confront skepticism from those who must adapt the model to local realities.

Successful programs must be shaped by the history and current needs of the community, the politics of agency relationships and government entities, and the unique energies and talents of particular program leaders. To accomplish this requires good planning. In fact, planning is a key operational issue and perhaps the most important phase of any program.

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Schools and communities cannot cut short planning in their rush to open the doors of a new program.

Planning Is Implementation

Good planning is good implementation. Quality planning is the best insurance for quality implementation. The best implementation literature from the late 1960s to the present repeatedly stresses the need for a blurring of the lines that some planners draw between planning and implementation.¹ In fact, carrying out effective school-linked service programs demands implementation planning, in which the distinction almost completely disappears.

For example, when planners target a single group of children and families to be served in a newly opened school-based program, the planning for serving that target group needs to include in-depth discussion of implementation issues. If children under age 5 are to be served, planning must specify the ways to perform outreach to these young children; it will not be enough just to mention outreach in the design and leave the details for staff to work out later, when the center opens. Or, if children who are two grade levels behind are targeted for services, planning must specify the appropriate links to the testing staff, the need for special arrangements for multilingual testing in diverse schools, and the funding for the testing.

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There is a further paradox of implementation planning, however. It is that the better the job the planning staff does in considering implementation issues, the more likely it is that a form of "projectitis" takes over. Projectitis occurs when the operational details of the project itself have obscured the policy reasons for undertaking the project. Operations drives out policy as more immediate concerns take priority over long-term goals. In such cases, the original goals of institutional change may no longer seem to have priority because of the constant pressures of responding to the daily details of getting

a project off the ground. The more complex the project, the more its implementation details threaten to swamp policy goals. And school-linked services are invariably complex, because they are interagency efforts that require multiple approvals.

When projectitis takes over planning, the project is likely to become merely additive. Additive projects cannot change institutions, because they operate as new activities grafted on top of the existing system. School-linked services are especially at risk of becoming additive, since they often develop out of a perceived need to address the problems of "at-risk youth." This label, however, may become part of the problem, since it sometimes signals a mistaken belief that fixing children is more important than *fixing the institutions that we fund to help children*. Perhaps we have at-risk schools, at-risk health agencies, and at-risk United Way agencies as often as we have at-risk children.

Children are at risk when they are likely not to live up to their full potential as parents, citizens, and workers. Institutions, in contrast, are at risk when they are likely to fail at doing what they receive public money for doing: providing services and support to children and families so that they can transcend the risk factors in their lives and become successful parents, citizens, and workers.

Planners need to bear both sets of needs in mind in preparing interagency approaches to the problems of students who are in fact at risk of not fulfilling their potential. Project planning that leaves out these institutional dimensions will leave these institutions intact in a comfortable but inadequate status quo.

The solution to projectitis, if there is one, is to staff the team with policy-minded planners (a topic this article will discuss) and at the same time ensure that policy review by senior officials takes place often enough to provide a periodic injection of the "policy" perspective. Also, employing outside consultants may be a means of keeping the policy goals in view during planning, as the following discussion will describe.

Planning Staff Characteristics

One of the basic questions faced by any school district or interagency consortium as it moves toward school-linked services is Who should do the planning? Larger districts and agencies may have full-time

planning staffs, and in such cases the tendency is to vest planning responsibilities in such staffs because planning is what they do all the time.

The problem is that agency planners are usually most familiar with planning projects, not institutional reforms. And here the lesson is clear: It takes senior staff with several basic characteristics to do the kind of in-depth, strategic planning demanded for school-linked services. Those characteristics include:

- Experience at both line and supervisory levels, so that the staff members understand the delivery point and the points in the organization where decisions are made
- Full access to the senior executive officials of the agency
- Adequate time—at least one quarter of the business day—to devote to the planning effort
- Diplomatic and “intercultural” skills in working across agency and disciplinary lines with professionals in other fields
- A natural curiosity and willingness to learn new things

Without these characteristics, planners will plan, but they are likely to end up producing just another set of isolated projects—projects unreviewed by senior officials, cautiously designed to fit within the status quo, and protective of all existing arenas of power.

A second issue that arises in forming the planning team is balance. As Jehl and

Kirst discuss in their article in this journal issue, no one agency can be allowed to “own” the process to the point that the other agencies just withdraw and leave it up to the “owner.” The planning team must be just that—a team. If its captains are too much in charge, other team members will gradually fade away, since they are all likely to have busy tasks to return to in their own agencies.

When the team functions well, it becomes a part of the implementation process, since it is involved in its own cross-training. In 1989 in San Jose, California, an interagency team that was based at a local elementary school gave a progress report to a meeting of senior county officials. One of the workers said enthusiastically, “We didn’t have any formal training program, so we just went ahead and trained each other!” Such informal cross-training, when tackled with this kind of energetic support from line workers, can accomplish more than an elaborate staff development program handed down from a training office or a university.

Cross-training means, in part, learning “the glossary function.” This training decodes each agency’s alphabet soup—IEP, 99-457, JTPA, Chapter I, WIC, ADA, DRG—and carefully explains it to the full team. A spirit of “no questions are dumb questions” has to pervade the process. After a few meetings, the glossary begins to fall into place, and what one law enforcement official describes as the “Peggy Lee effect” occurs: Participants ask, “Is that all there is?” meaning, Is that all there is

to the jargon and acronyms you've been using?

One example illustrates the importance of the glossary function particularly well. A team in a city that had spent many months developing a nationally recognized model of school-linked services was having difficulty communicating with child protective services staff members who were to be part of school-based case management. What team members finally realized was that the problem was the way they were using the term *preventive services*. To the child protective services staff, *preventive services* had a specific meaning: any services designed to prevent placement in out-of-home foster care. In contrast, most school staff members used the term more loosely to mean any programs that try to anticipate and prevent school failure. Once the planners realized that they were using a precise term imprecisely, they were able to communicate more clearly.

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Some interagency experts talk about the need to learn to speak “CSL: coordination as a second language.” What is required is not mastery of every other agency’s special terms and funding sources, but an openness to ask questions, to clarify the differences, and to work through the best ways of making dissimilar systems work for children.

Consultants

Another tendency for some districts and consortia is to rely too much on outside consultants. Consultants are at their most effective in three roles: (1) questioning the basic policy assumptions of the process or pushing and helping the local team to make those policy assumptions clear if they have not yet been stated, (2) networking with project planners in other communities and states to give local planners a comparative sense of how another site handled the same issue, and (3) providing actual expertise with particular school-linked service efforts in which the consultant may have personal skills and knowledge. Such expertise might be in the

areas of information systems, federal reimbursements, or foundation funding. Beyond these roles, consultants who are relied upon to do the planning will in most cases walk out of town with most of the planning process left in their heads. This can cost the local team a great deal of time figuring out “Now, why did she do it that way?”

Community and Neighborhood Groups

Another issue in planning is which local “outsiders” to invite into the planning team. For example:

Should we invite the United Way?

Should we invite the local neighborhood, ethnic, and self-help groups?

Should we invite community organizations that have been critical of the service delivery system in the past?

What about the PTA or the local school site councils?

What about corporate groups that have been working with the schools or that have plants and offices in the neighborhoods where we are planning school-linked services?

Decisions about involving each of these groups should be made explicitly, recognizing the trade-offs among the overall size of the planning team, the benefits the group can bring to the table, and the costs of omitting the group from the initial planning effort. For some of these groups, an early chance to react to the initial proposal will be more useful than being at the actual planning table from the start. But what is crucial is to ensure that no influential group feels it was not consulted at all before the public announcement of the adoption of the new system.

Those who are most often left out—and most often needed in planning—are first, professional workers at the line level and second, parents. Both, in obvious ways, can make the implementation of a school-linked service system easier—or much harder. Because of the potential of line-level professionals to introduce resistance, workers whose daily practice will be affected by a new system of services must be involved in its design. This set of planning issues will be discussed in a following section.

The role of parents in implementing the program is obvious: Without their support at home, the interventions at school and in the agencies will lack indispensable

reinforcement. In planning, parents can become members of focus groups, join advisory councils formed before the program opens its doors, help build cultural understanding on the part of new workers, serve as paraprofessional aides, and even take part in the initial training for school-linked service staff. In all these ways and others, parents are critical partners in school-linked programs.

Health and Social Services Agencies

Determining which health and social services agencies will participate in the planning and implementation of school-linked services requires sensitivity to whether agencies are interested and ready to do so. Communities cannot follow a formula in making this determination. They must examine organization health and readiness, perhaps bearing in mind an old saying: Never try to teach a pig to sing. It won't work, and it will only irritate the pig.

Organizations have life cycles, cultures, and insecurities just like humans.

There are some agencies that are quite like pigs being taught to sing—they are just not interested. This may be due to their current leadership, their history, their professional culture, or their budget. Some organizations, however, are just not interested or are incapable of becoming interested. Planners need to know that integrated services does not necessarily mean integrating *everybody*, and that the perfect is often the enemy of the good.

It is also helpful to realize that organizations have life cycles, cultures, and insecurities just like humans. Some agencies have recent “life experiences” that make them as profoundly insecure in discussing interagency negotiations as some people can be in discussing marriage or other long-term partnerships. Planners with a psychological perspective may view these agencies as not having resolved their own Eriksonian crisis stage, uncertain of their own identity, unable to deal with the demands of autonomy, or even frightened of it because of a history of “abuse” from legislators, the media, or their clients.

An insecure agency is probably not as effective a service integration partner as a secure one. Planners need, therefore, to

learn to size up an unfamiliar agency and not assume that all agencies will come to the table with the same readiness to develop new partnerships by bargaining as equals. The experience of acting as equals in marriage is difficult for some people who have lacked that history in their own family of origin. So, perhaps, is the experience of co-equal partnership for agencies whose history suggests either that they were always in control or that they were never in control. In either case, they will bring that history to the process of negotiating service integration, and planners should recognize its impact.

Planners may be able to defuse the problem by acknowledging that an agency has experienced recent budget cuts, or that its caseloads are unusually high, or that its leadership just turned over and staff members are uncertain of their directions. Negotiations in planning should be tailored to these realities, rather than treating all potential interagency partners as equally equipped to enter into the partnership.

Fiscal climate also affects planning for integrated services. On the one hand, there is an inevitable response to budget crisis; agency planners say, “We can't do anything new now. This is no time for demonstration projects.” On the other hand, times of budget crisis are sometimes the best possible periods to try new ideas. The time may be ripe for relocating staff in combined offices, working as a team of generalists instead of as isolated specialists, and setting priorities among clients instead of assuming that all those who are referred to the agency can be served equally well. In a kickoff for a new school-based service planning effort in a small California city, one leader summed up this view particularly well: “We've got to try this new approach because we've got nothing to lose now and we know that doing things the old way won't work any more.”

Targeting

Schools and communities must face a basic question early on: Will their school-linked service efforts be universal, providing some level of service for all children, or will efforts be targeted, focusing on a particular age or subgroup of children, such as those who are poor? For some agencies and school districts, this decision is the single most difficult issue they have to confront.

At one California site, the decision makers resolutely avoided addressing this issue for the better part of a year. They assumed that their target would be the entire school population and that there was no need to single out any one group within a very needy elementary school student body. Finally, they agreed on a numerical target but still resisted designating any explicit criteria that would define which one group of students would “go to the head of the line” for services.

The phrase makes clear, perhaps, why we are reluctant to target in specific terms. “Going to the head of the line” has a ring of unfairness to it. “First come, first served” is a more prevalent principle of social services priority setting than many agencies would like to admit. Crisis management—the kind of atmosphere we so often operate in today, with funding reductions and growing human needs—means taking whomever shows up and not waiting to do some formal assessment of who might need help most.

But every school in America has a pyramid of needs, in which a small number of students are severely at risk, in physical danger, or have serious health disorders. These students, at the top of the pyramid, are high-cost, high-needs cases, likely to be referred out to other agencies that handle clients with intensive needs. Then

there is a larger, less seriously impacted group. And below them is a group of students who may come from poor families in dangerous neighborhoods but who have personal qualities of resilience or family support that will enable them to make it—no matter what schools or social agencies do to or for them.

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Where to provide services on that pyramid is the first and most basic targeting question. It may be answered in advance by categorical funding services that dictate, for example, that services can only be provided to Chapter I students or to those whose English-language skills are limited or to those who are Medicaid eligible. But without such categorical restrictions—which could stigmatize at-risk students—the targeting question remains, and planners must address it explicitly. They should do so knowing that there will be substantial political resistance to saying that one group is more in need than another.

Governance Issues

One of the most important issues that emerges when planning a school-linked service program is Who should run it? The issue of governance is unavoidable, even if the school system is fully in the lead. Initially, in fact, it is often the schools that propose to take the lead. As a result, an “educentric” governance system can emerge in the first stage of planning. Three powerful reasons underlie this focus: (1) Schools have more access to children than the other, far-more-fragmented social service systems that serve children; (2) schools have better data on children; and (3) schools realize more quickly than other agencies the need for interagency cooperation. School personnel often recognize that they cannot accomplish education reform for the most at-risk students without help from the other agencies that are serving the same children and their families.

Yet, for several reasons, it has proven difficult for a school-dominated governance system to operate successful school-linked services. The primary reasons for this include (1) the difficulty of attracting other agencies’ funds if schools are seen to be in charge; (2) the difficulty of structuring the hierarchy so staff members from other agencies report only to school personnel; (3) the possibility that only one or two agencies will come under school management, rather than the broad array that can be attracted to a system of genuine partnership; (4) the need for space that many cramped urban schools face, which means that school-linked programs must use agencies’ facilities as bases of operations; and (5) the enormous challenges faced by schools in responding to the tasks for which they are most directly responsible—reforming the education system and raising levels of academic achievement.

There is also a more subtle problem that planners need to take into account: If school leadership—or any one agency—steps forward to “own” an interagency partnership, the partnership is likely to step back and let that agency take the lead. The other agencies will continue to staff the program but not with senior people, and they will describe the system as “that school project” rather than as a partnership. When governance is really in the hands of one dominant agency, some planners talk about the system as having yielded to the “Sinatra syndrome”: An agency says it

wants to collaborate, but it has to do it “My Way.” This message is not hard for other agencies to pick up. When this happens, a system that needs to be co-equal in mobilizing resources from many agencies becomes merely unilateral.

The governance choices often come down to three broad options: (1) Let an existing public agency, typically the schools, run the new school-linked services; (2) set up a new nonprofit agency,

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such as the collaboratives created in three of the New Futures cities funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation; or (3) work with a consortium of agencies to establish an operation that is co-equal, more or less.

A co-equal system can be more difficult to plan and operate than a unilateral system. But recent literature on corporate and public-sector management suggests that the management systems of the twenty-first century will be far less hierarchical than those of the twentieth century.² These writers stress that, increasingly, management will be about horizontal partnerships among agencies and firms that do not control, but depend upon, each other. To again cite the point noted by Jehl and Kirst in their article in this journal issue, no one agency can own the planning process.

Governance Issues and Funding

Many governance issues become finance issues, for obvious reasons. The agency that contributes the most funding wants and perhaps needs to maintain control. Planners need to understand how much the sources and duration of funding will affect their decisions. If funding is restricted to short-term, nonrecurring funds, funding issues will come up each year and may threaten the stability of the whole effort. As noted in the article by Farrow and Joe in this journal issue, institutionalized funding, such as Medicaid, child-welfare services, or Average Daily Attendance funding, is far more stable than one-time grants. Grants may be necessary to start operations, but as soon as possible

longer-term funding commitments should replace or supplement them.

Governance Issues and Evaluation

Governance issues also relate to evaluation and its effect on funding decisions. To convince legislators or other elected officials to buy in to the sponsorship of an integrated service program requires an early clarification of what would justify the buy-in. This then becomes an issue of evaluation, in which the most powerful question is What would it take to prove to you (a potential funder) that this is worth funding on a long-term basis? The task is then to organize the information systems and evaluations to produce that data. The elected officials must be involved in this process. If the outcomes of the project are positive but no elected official knew that these were the intended outcomes, the buy-in may be more difficult than if the elected officials helped to decide what outcomes would convince them the project was worth funding.

Well-intentioned confidentiality requirements have been developed separately by state and federal agencies and imposed piecemeal in a way that often results in inconsistency.

One of the clearest examples of this is the negotiation over the past few years between the Mental Health Department in Ventura County, California, and the state legislature regarding a program offering comprehensive services to a targeted group of children at risk of institutional placement. In the early stages of program development, planners asked legislators what it would take to convince them to fund the project. The planners devoted resources to establishing the information system that could produce what the legislators asked for. The system involved tracking clients and dollars in much more depth than is usually the case. This evaluation is described in Appendix B, under the heading "Ventura County Children's Demonstration Project."

Information Systems

Each school-linked service system inevitably confronts issues of information systems

and confidentiality when trying to work across agency lines with students who are in more than one agency's caseload. In his powerful monograph, *The Same Client*, Bud Hodgkinson shows how often the same children and families may be served by schools and other agencies.³ Yet, documenting this fact and organizing systems around this reality is a very difficult part of planning new networks of services for students.

At the outset, planners must inventory current information systems. They are often amazed to find how inadequate some large public agencies' data systems really are. Agencies that have no files on repeat clients, agencies that have all their files on 3 by 5 cards in totally nonretrievable form, agencies that cannot allocate any costs to client services—these are common realities in the recent history of planning school-linked service programs.

Also common is the frequency with which someone says, usually quite early in the planning, "We can't give you that information because of confidentiality requirements." Well-intentioned confidentiality requirements have been developed separately by state and federal agencies and imposed piecemeal in a way that often results in inconsistency. Therefore, confidentiality can be a tangled thicket for planners to negotiate. (See Appendix A for a discussion of confidentiality issues.)

The thicket is not impenetrable, however. Some careful studies of this issue are currently under way, and they provide hope for those who want to remove barriers to sharing information in an interagency context while protecting confidentiality. In addressing confidentiality problems, planners must keep uppermost in mind the central principle of *informed consent*. Many schools have designed parent-consent forms for use in developing multiagency intake and assessment processes.

There are definitely some cases in which agencies are simply using confidentiality to duck accountability. Clearly, an interagency system that follows clients from one agency to another can evaluate what services, if any, those clients receive. This follow-up is an unaccustomed form of accountability for some agencies, and initially it can be quite threatening for an agency unsure of its performance. Although technical issues are often important in information systems, planners need to look behind these "presenting issues"

to determine whether more basic political issues of accountability are really at stake.

Other Operational Considerations

When planning school-linked services, the people who will be directly involved in implementing changes in the delivery of services to clients play a very important role. Several issues emerge in the efforts to build a staff that functions as a team.

Line Worker Buy-in

In his recent book, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*, Seymour Sarason established the fact that teachers are frequently omitted from the planning of education reform.⁴ The same scenario applies throughout much of the history of human services reform as well. The very people whose daily work with clients is being changed by a “reform” proposal are not involved in the planning and implementation of these changes until the late stages. The result is completely predictable: either open opposition or “wait-out” responses, in which workers’ organizations assume that top-down policy initiatives will fade away as the policymakers leave to go on to new jobs.

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Ensuring line workers’ involvement in the early stages of planning can demand a great deal of time. Yet, in general, doing so results in a net savings of time because workers who are in on the early stages of planning are able to identify problems that will arise later, in implementation. Once such problems are identified, the team can jointly develop alternative responses in the planning stage, rather than after implementation has begun.

Some school-linked service planning teams have used worker focus groups to get a “bottom-up” view of how today’s school-agency interactions really work. Others have encouraged unions and workers’ organizations to design their own ori-

entation programs, with staff time set aside for developing in-service training. Such planning can tap into those colleges and universities that have been involved with school-linked services, using their continuing education programs and in-service programs. Planners may also want to participate in the growing discussions about how to build collaboration skills into undergraduate and graduate programs.

Worker reassignment or relocation, often an element of school-linked service proposals, raises major personnel issues. Planners must involve the staff in the personnel department at an early stage, even though the staff may at times be skeptical. As protectors of the organization’s credentialing process, the personnel staff may overstate the uniqueness of personnel needs, but knowing in advance what credentialing issues will be raised during implementation is helpful. For example, in one school system existing counselors refused to work with outside “case managers” whose credentialing and pay was different from theirs. Knowing this in advance is far preferable to finding it out on the first day a team is scheduled to handle family cases on referrals.

Case Management: The Staffing Plan for Integrated Services

Issues of line worker buy-in tie directly into the staffing plan developed by school-linked service planners. A common direction for such planning is to describe a form of case management in which a team of workers from different agencies assesses, treats, or refers students to a variety of services and then tracks the referrals and outcomes.

Case management, however, is another of those terms that means many different things to different agencies and disciplines. Case management, like integrated services as a whole, is at risk of degenerating into “just another program,” in which the case management staff operates parallel to existing staff without changing the system at all. Case managers then may be perceived as isolated new staff members who are sometimes paid more than other staff members. The consequences are obvious. In one California city, a headline reading “Super-Counselors to Treat At-risk Youth” understandably upset existing counselors. They saw the new staff members as glorified counselors, called case managers, who had smaller caseloads and higher pay.

Other issues of case management that have proved difficult for planners are those related to governance. Case management that deteriorates into just another program usually does so because it merely performs a referral function, sending students out to receive services but without any assurances that the services will in fact be there. What planners need to focus on is the source of clout—the power to get things done for students in the receiving agency. Clout can come from different sources; it can be as a result of personal relationships, a carefully negotiated inter-agency agreement, a “line of credit” for a certain number of referrals, or the power of the elected official who is sponsoring the project. But whatever the source, clout is essential to making case management more than a lot of paper without any new services or changed outcomes for children.

Community Controversy and School-linked Services

Planners should not assume that community reaction to their work will be low-key and technical. The basic role of schools in delivering social services is an issue of great controversy in communities where a vocal minority believes schools should never address issues that are the exclusive province

of the family. This controversy becomes most acute over the issue of providing reproductive information in school-based health clinics serving adolescents; it also arises in regard to health education at the elementary school level. Planners need to know that the responses to their proposals will not always be rational and that some groups are extremely well-organized. Some are capable of opposing proposals on a national level, using emotion rather than facts as their primary ammunition.

Conclusions

Those planning school-linked services face some issues that are technical; other issues are political or policy-oriented. Of these, the political and policy issues are most important in seeking partnerships among independent agencies within a complicated, intergovernmental setting. To prevent projectitis from taking over planning, the technical issues must be addressed in the larger context of policy goals for children and families. Designing an interagency system is challenging. Planners should allow the outcomes for children and families to serve as the guideposts for planning and implementing school-linked services.

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