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ABSTRACT

Because the American elementary school was designed for a society that no longer exists and is generally unresponsive to current societal realities affecting children and their families, the Elementary School Center proposes a new concept of the elementary school as the locus of advocacy for all children. Also proposed is the development of a series of models to illustrate ways in which schools and communities can begin to redirect their resources to implement child advocacy. The Center's plans involve four major goals: (1) stimulating and guiding a national dialogue on the issues and specifics of the new concept; (2) articulating children's fundamental needs and rights and child advocacy principles; (3) delineating a series of systematic approaches, processes, and models expressing the concept of school as child advocate; and (4) developing a community needs assessment instrument and planning handbook as a resource for communities to use in restructuring their schools to the requisites of the new role. It is believed that vigorous discussion of the issues will raise the national consciousness and lead to fundamental changes in planning for children. It is also believed that those changes will have far-reaching implications requiring systemic changes in schools as they are presently known. (RH)

THE SCHOOL AS LOCUS OF ADVOCACY FOR ALL CHILDREN

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THE SCHOOL AS LOCUS OF ADVOCACY FOR ALL CHILDREN

Recognizing that after the family, the elementary school provides the most significant institutional experience in a child's life, the Elementary School Center (ESC) was founded in 1985. It is a nonprofit, membership organization dedicated to improving the quality of schooling. It serves as a national advocacy, research and resource center. Through its interdisciplinary collaborative programs, projects, research and activities it informs the practices and engages the participation of educators, other professionals and officials working in and with elementary schools and parents. Since its inception, the main concern of the Center has been the improvement of the quality of life for all children and teachers in elementary schools.

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SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The American elementary school was designed for a society that no longer exists. While the size and design of buildings may change to reflect economic and demographic changes, the role of the school and what goes on inside it are not generally responsive to current societal realities affecting children and their families. Dramatic changes are occurring in the social foundations of our lives: in family structure and stability, in the ethnic and cultural composition of the population, in economic needs, sexual mores, parental attitudes and concerns, and in the impact of the media and technological innovation. These changes have urgent implications for the ways we think about and practice schooling.

"The American elementary school was designed for a society that no longer exists."

It is widely accepted, for example, that success in school is related to the total life of the child, with special emphasis on the role of the family as a primary source of life support. Yet increasingly families do not or cannot provide the care nor mobilize the resources required for their children. Adverse conditions in today's society combine to deprive millions of children in all socio-economic strata of basic support in many areas of their lives. The severity and pervasiveness of these conditions are making it difficult for families of all socio-economic levels "to provide the setting that schools are designed to complement. - - - School as we conceive of it", Coleman notes, "no longer corresponds to family as it now exists" (Coleman, 1987, p. 32).

"The school is not generally responsive to current societal realities affecting children and their families."

It is widely accepted also that earlier and more effective intervention is needed to rectify the circumstances that impede the growth of children. There are strong economic and political imperatives for such early intervention, in addition to moral and social obligations to our children. As for economic imperatives, it has become increasingly well documented that dollars invested at the preschool level are prudently spent in terms of money saved on future remedial problems.[1] Political imperatives stem from the very premise of democracy - that our form of government depends upon a well-educated and well-informed citizenry. And moral and social obligations are also inherent in our democratic ethic: As conscientious adults we acknowledge that society has a responsibility to see that children's needs are fulfilled independently of changing social attitudes or current political factions. In recognizing that basic needs should be met for every child we affirm that children have fundamental rights to develop fully as human beings.[2] Our obligations to protect those rights are especially critical in the case of children, who are intrinsically vulnerable, powerless and lacking in political leverage (Howe, 1986).

"A single child's optimal development, multiplied by many millions every year, is the future of our country."

Taking care of all our children upholds the axiom that a single child's optimal development, multiplied by many millions every year, is the future of our country. Yet the lack of constructive response to traumatic social changes affecting the lives of children threatens the realization of that potential.

LIFE-DEFEATING REALITIES FOR TODAY'S CHILDREN

What specifically are the life-defeating realities for children? The facts are overwhelming[3]:

- More than 60% of mothers with children under 14 are in the labor force. A majority of mothers (51.9%) with children 1 year old or younger are in the labor force. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, New York Times, November 25, 1987).[4]
- Fewer than half of all pre-school children are immunized against preventable diseases. Predictably the incidence of infectious childhood disease is rising while child immunizations rates are declining.[5]
- More than 9 million children have no health care; 18 million have never seen a dentist.
- In 1986 more than one-third of all children under 18 years were not living with both biological parents.
- The number of children living with a divorced mother more than doubled between 1970 and 1986; every day 2,989 children see their parents divorced.
- Thirty percent of all children are latchkey children.
- Forty percent of the poor in America are children; child poverty kills an American child every 53 minutes.
- More than 20% (approximately 13 million) of American children were poor in 1985; of these children, more than 40% lived in families with incomes of less than half the poverty level.
- An estimated 1.5 million children are homeless in the United States as runaway or so-called "throw-away" children, that is, those who have been cast out.
- In 1986, 2.2 million children were reported abused and neglected; the average age of these children was 7 years; 67% were white.
- It is estimated that more than 70% of all children have experimented with drugs in some form.

- 1,000 young people attempt suicide every day.
- Due to their low birth weights, nearly a quarter of a million children entering school each year are more likely than other children to be educationally impaired or to experience major problems in school.
- Twenty-five of every 100 children will be on welfare at some point prior to adulthood.
- Since 1960, delinquency rates of youngsters 10 to 17 years old increased by 130%.
- Fifteen of every 100 children will be born in a household where no parent is employed.
- Families with children now make up the largest segment of the homeless population.

And if current circumstances appear grim, the demographic projections concerning children's lives are even worse. The facts concerning our teenage population are particularly alarming:

- Each year more than half a million teenagers give birth (two-thirds are white, two-thirds are not poor and two-thirds are not living in inner-cities); the teen birth rate in the United States is twice that of any Western nation.
- Every day 40 teenagers give birth to their third child.
- This nation has the highest rate of teenage drug use of any industrialized nation.
- About half of American teenagers are sexually active by the time they leave high school.
- Each year 400,000 teenagers have abortions.
- Every day 1,868 teenagers drop out of high school.

It is critical to recognize that problems cited transcend all economic lines and cut across rural, suburban and urban boundaries. As the figures above indicate, abuse, delinquency, experimentation with drugs, poor school performance, abortions, and suicide are problems that cannot be attributed exclusively to the "at risk" child population. In The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1987, 51% of the teachers interviewed cited children's isolation and lack of supervision after school as major reasons for children's difficulties in school.[6]

"It is critical to recognize that problems cited transcend all economic lines and cut across rural, suburban and urban boundaries."

Traditional sources of support for the child — the family, the neighborhood, schools, social and religious organizations, nutrition and health care programs — are fragmented or do not exist at all for many children and youth. Moreover, this breakdown in traditional institutions has accelerated during a period when children are confronting an increasingly complex and explosive world (Elkind, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1985; Heath and McLaughlin, 1987). Children must now, more than ever before, deal with new obstacles to their growth, as well as anxieties about nuclear accidents and nuclear war, violence in the home and environment, more rigorous vocational requirements, and more vigorous competition to survive in educational and economic worlds. For these reasons we must consider ALL children to be vulnerable and potentially at risk. We need to develop comprehensive preventive strategies to deal with the stresses and obstacles affecting all children, directly or indirectly (Levin, 1985). The school, which has increasingly become the stabilizing influence in many children's lives, is the appropriate setting in which to institute such change.

"Traditional sources of support for the child are fragmented or do not exist at all for many children and youth."

Yet how has the educational system responded to these realities? Despite important innovations and experiments implemented around the country in recent decades, the prevailing conception of the school and its relationship to the child has not changed significantly. Even where responsive institutional reform has been attempted and new educational strategies have been implemented, change generally has taken place within the conventional school improvement paradigm.[7] Such approaches are usually additive, focusing on the adoption of a particular innovation in the context of the school, as is. Program reforms are thus expected to effect change within a static concept of the school and the social system in which it exists.

"We must consider ALL children to be vulnerable and potentially at risk. We need to develop comprehensive preventive strategies to deal with the stresses and obstacles affecting all children, directly or indirectly."

By struggling to implement a concept of education developed for a different era, the American public school is failing to meet the basic goal for which it was conceived: the optimal intellectual development of all children. The magnitude of this failure is underlined by the Children's Defense Fund assertion that "not only does each child's future hinge on education, but our nation's economic and social survival hinges on the collective education of all American children" (1987).

"By struggling to implement a concept of education developed for a different era, the American public school is failing to meet the basic goal for which it was conceived: the optimal intellectual development of all children."

A PROPOSED RESPONSE TO THE NEED

What can be done? Where do we start? To respond creatively to the social changes affecting children's lives, the Elementary School Center (ESC) is calling for a reconceptualization of the role schools play in the lives of children: We are proposing a new concept of schooling in America: THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AS THE LOCUS OF ADVOCACY FOR ALL CHILDREN.[8]

Our approach is based on these convictions:

- Adults in our society have moral and social obligations to meet the fundamental needs and protect the fundamental rights of all our children.
- When all elements in a child's life support the child's development, growth and learning are enhanced.
- A holistic approach is required in looking at and in supporting the child's life as a totality.
- The fragmentation and breakdown of traditional institutions that children, youth and families have depended on in the past for support have created a serious void; **a designated locus for advocacy is required** to mobilize our local, state and national resources on behalf of our children.
- The school must be redesigned to serve as that locus of advocacy; it is the natural, strategic and available social agency to act as ombudsman, broker and advocate for ALL children.
- Systemic and fundamental changes in our schools are required for the new role of child advocacy.

"As the only institution in our society reaching all children, the elementary school is the appropriate locus for change."

We believe that a comprehensive and holistic approach to children and their lives is essential to child advocacy efforts. Such an approach fosters greater equity of access to opportunities to grow and to function in our changing environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Lazar and Darlington, 1978; Brown, 1985; Seeley, 1985; Schorr, 1988). Whether this holistic approach will be widely enacted in our society depends on our readiness to make significant changes in our institutions, particularly in those agencies that work with children and families. **As the only institution in our society reaching all children, the elementary school is the appropriate locus for change.** We believe that the elementary school should be redefined, then restructured to respond to the needs and rights of today's children.

The Elementary School Center is not alone in its concern. Many agencies and individuals, noted educators as well as lay persons, have offered new suggestions to assist schools in their attempts to be responsive to critical social pressures. These efforts have ranged from proposals to augment, supplant or

redirect existing programs to the introduction of new programs, and additional personnel and resources. **What has been lacking to date is a comprehensive framework for examining systematically both the issues and the proposals for achieving responsive changes in schools.** The framework must articulate both a new concept of schooling and a plan of action for restructuring our schools to implement that concept. Any proposed reconceptualization of schooling must be based on sound principles of child development and educational theory, and at the same time, must advocate the needs and rights of ALL children. The action plan must embody a comprehensive approach, one that will lead to intensified national awareness of the severity of the problem, and, ultimately, to national implementation of the new concept. The Center is initiating just such a comprehensive approach: **We are proposing a conceptualization of schools as the locus of child advocacy and a multi-faceted plan for developing and implementing the concept.**

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WHY THE SCHOOLS?

As responsible community representatives, professionals, and lay persons, we recognize that schools are facing increasing pressures to maintain quality in formal education programs, while at the same time they are being burdened with formidable problems of social disarray in the lives of the children they are trying to educate. One might reasonably ask why the schools should be asked to take on yet another responsibility. Are we overlooking the promise of responsive educational innovations of the last few years? Can schools take on an advocacy role and still continue to fulfill their designated educational functions?

"To assume the proposed new role of child advocacy, schools as we know them must change systemically, in the most fundamental ways."

We acknowledge with respect the contributions of the many elementary schools and many school systems throughout this country that are making serious and even heroic efforts to respond to the current needs of children. Responses often include extensive modifications in programs, procedures and personnel. And in many instances schools have invented new, highly promising programs and approaches in order to respond more effectively to our children's urgent needs. But to assume the proposed new role of child advocacy, schools as we know them must change systemically, in the most fundamental ways — in role definition, in ways of functioning and in their relationship to the community. **Without fundamental changes in schools, added or modified programs are limited in impact because the system supporting the interventions has not changed.**

Schools as we know them, then, are not being asked to take on yet another responsibility; instead, schools are being asked to assume leadership in a national effort to rethink the role and practice of schooling in our country. Such redefinition is critical if schools are to function effectively in supporting the full development of children in our changing society.

"Schools as we know them, then, are not being asked to take on yet another responsibility; instead, schools are being asked to assume leadership in a national effort to rethink the role and practice of schooling in our country."

We see the school, working together with families and the community, as the appropriate and strategic agency to serve as ombudsman, broker and advocate on behalf of children. This is the rationale for our position:

- Schools offer accessibility; **school is where the children are.**
- Schools are an already existing resource in a community. Although the same may be said of other community institutions such as churches, synagogues, recreation centers, libraries, etc., there is this critical difference: although many children may use one or more of the latter resources, all children of all races and all ethnic and socio-economic groups MUST GO TO SCHOOL.

  (Historically, too, schools have played an important role as a central community resource, particularly in periods of great social stress, for example, the Community School movement of the 1930's.)

- Schools have always been seen as upholding the American optimism about individual potential and opportunity. Many Americans owe their life's achievement to the identity and competencies they gained in the elementary school.

- School is the social agency with greatest potential for interaction with families. For the elementary school child, the school plays a key role in the developmental-transitional rites of passage from home to outside world.

- School as child advocate represents responsible choice and a commitment by educators to uphold our social and moral obligations to our children.

Translating this potential of schools into working models of child advocacy requires further delineation of both the school advocacy concept and the proposed approach for implementing the new role in our schools.

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THE SCHOOL'S ROLE AS CHILD ADVOCATE

We are using the term child advocacy in its broadest sense: acting to insure that the rights of all children are being protected and the needs of all children are being met. Advocacy to us means increasing the responsiveness and accountability of all our social and political institutions on the local, state and national levels, in the interests of all children.

For the school, an advocacy role means accepting responsibility for mobilizing available resources and generating new ones as needed; an advocacy role does not mean that the school itself must provide or perform the necessary services. As the locus of child advocacy the school will support families on all socio-economic levels in meeting the needs of their children and in finding or creating services and programs required to do so.[9] Where such resources are fragmented, incomplete, difficult to find, or nonexistent, the school acting with the family will take the lead in mobilizing available resources, or demanding and generating new ones. **We believe that what is needed to enact this concept are coalitions or compacts of individuals and groups, spearheaded by the schools, working together as advocates on behalf of all children.** As Goffin emphasizes, such advocacy "is more that just a fight for specific programs and services - - -[it] represents arguments for assumptions about the kinds of relationships we believe should exist among families, various levels of government and our future adult citizens." (Goffin, 1988, p.52).

"For the school, an advocacy role means accepting responsibility for mobilizing available resources and generating new ones as needed; an advocacy role does not mean that the school itself must provide or perform the necessary services."

Child advocacy takes place in context. On the local level, each community offers a unique setting and unique conditions for enacting advocacy. How a community establishes a compact of individuals and groups,[10] how the community carries out its child advocacy, and how the school responds in terms of institutional change will depend on many factors. There needs to be a consensus on the role of the elementary school; there needs to be a delineation of the total ecological niche in which the school functions—its geographic location, the community's own resources and needs, the socio-economic characteristics of the parents and children, the political and social forces in the area and the role of the school in that community. Communities with limited resources will need special support in identifying and obtaining ways and means for meeting their children's needs.

"What is needed are coalitions or compacts of individuals and groups, spearheaded by the schools, working together as advocates on behalf of all children.

"There needs to be a delineation of the total ecological niche in which the school functions."

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF THE NEW CONCEPT

What are the essential dimensions of this new concept; what changes does it entail? How can we implement the concept in schools? **The idea of shared community responsibility for the welfare of its children is inherent in the school advocacy concept.**[11] The facts describing childhood conditions tell us that it is a luxury to argue about turf, to indulge in "political" posturing while so many children are being neglected. As Nanette Dembitz, retired New York City Family Court Judge, noted, "There is virtually no recognition of a shared social responsibility for the well-being of our children." (The New York Times, Feb., 1987).

"The idea of shared community responsibility for the welfare of its children is inherent in the school advocacy concept."

With advocacy defined and enacted on the community level, and with the school as the designated locus for child advocacy, a structure is in place for mobilizing legislative, judicial, governmental, business and industry resources on regional, state and national levels, directly and systematically. Of course, the concept of the school's role as child advocate can only be realized by real people acting together in specific community settings. It is a dynamic process of change. Yet essential features of the school's new role can be outlined as a way of amplifying the concept and moving it closer to realization. Defining features of the new concept are described here in a set of working precepts and in conditions and actions needed to evoke change. Some likely areas of changes in schools are also set forth. Further elaboration of the concept will evolve as communities participate in articulating and implementing the advocacy role in their schools.

As communities begin to enact the concept of shared advocacy responsibilities, varied conceptual models and methods of implementation may be developed and refined. **Whatever models are established, the operative feature must be a shared obligation for our children.**

"Whatever models are established, the operative feature must be a shared obligation for our children."

Working Precepts

Fundamental principles of the school advocacy concept must be apparent in both commitment and practice in a community and its schools. Communities and schools that adopt the school advocacy concept would be expected to express their commitments in these ways:

- Local and state governing structures accept the educational agency as the locus of advocacy for children.
- Advocacy occurs with all families in a community, regardless of their socioeconomic status.
- Pervasive commitment to the school advocacy concept is evident in planning and in allocation of resources.

- Complementary roles of families and schools in working together on behalf of children are acknowledged.
- Coalition building with community and outside resources on behalf of children is ongoing. (Community resources should include: health, recreation, social, cultural, political, judicial and recreational agencies, programs and services.)
- Change is viewed as an ongoing process, not as an event.
- Changes in structure and functioning of schools are viewed as proactive, intrinsic and systemic rather than as reactive or incremental additions.
- Respect for differences and diversity exists among all students, all school personnel, and all administrators.

Operational Conditions and Actions

Although varied patterns of implementation may be expected to unfold in different communities, the efforts will have in common these key conditions and actions:

- Total school commitment sparked by informed leadership on building, district and system-wide levels.

  (Leadership of the entire school system must be committed to the concept, and must accept responsibility for providing needed services and programs or seeing to it that the services and programs are provided.)
- Coalition building to include community organizations, professionals and other individuals.
- Ongoing community assessment of the particular needs of its children.
- A comprehensive plan for changes in schools to meet children's needs, including long-range goals as well as immediate objectives.
- Procedures for implementing immediate objectives without losing sight of the community's long-range goals for its children.

Anticipated Changes in Schools

It is certain that adopting the proposed advocacy role in the lives of children will require schools to redefine and restructure their present ways of functioning. Schools must do more than strengthen the curriculum or improve teaching. Fundamental changes will be required in every aspect of the school's definition and functioning: in roles and objectives, in length of school year and school day, in operating procedures, and in educational preparation of administrators, teachers and support personnel.[12] New services and new roles may also be established as needed. Although it is not our intent to prescribe specific school changes, some areas of expected impact are:

"It is certain that adopting the proposed advocacy role in the lives of children will require schools to redefine and restructure their present ways of functioning."

- Rethinking the professional education of all personnel, including preservice teacher education, on-going-inservice education, and programs for administrators and support personnel.
- Changes in financial support at the local, state, and national level to provide for additional staff, new roles and services to implement the concept.
- Consideration of school size as a critical factor in relation to community goals.
- Extension of learning settings into the community and workplace.
- Reinterpretation of student and teacher roles to assure optimal relations between children and adults.

"The locus of advocacy will depend on the unique characteristics of each community and the unique patterns of implementation developed by individual communities."

- Fundamental changes in curriculum planning and in instructional approaches.
- Involvement of families as an integral part of school life.
- Re-education of school staffs to work with community agencies on behalf of their children.

Clearly, cooperative efforts among schools, families and communities are necessary but not sufficient. Expectations for all services and agencies must be made clear, and responses must be forthcoming. The school may have to broker for some major changes in children's lives, whether it be for better nutrition, part-time employment, recreational programs, adequate housing, or improved health services (Heath and McLaughlin, 1987). The specifics of how particular schools must change to assume the locus of advocacy will depend on the unique characteristics of each community and the unique patterns of implementation developed by individual communities.

A PROPOSAL FOR ACTION

From its very inception the main concern of the Elementary School Center (ESC), has been the improvement of the quality of life for all children and teachers in elementary schools. Now, in response to children's urgent needs, the Elementary School Center is initiating a comprehensive approach toward refining and implementing the new concept of school as child advocate. The Center's approach embodies four major thrusts: 1) Stimulating and guiding a national dialogue on the issues and specifics of the new concept; 2) Articulating children's fundamental needs and rights and child advocacy principles; 3) Delineating a series of systematic approaches, processes and models expressing the concept of school as child advocate; and 4) Developing a Community Needs Assessment Instrument and Planning Handbook (C-NAP) as a resource for communities to use in restructuring their schools in the new role.

There is a planned interplay among these dimensions in intent, time and scope; they are not a linear series of activities and events. Although some of these areas have been developed further than others, preliminary activities in all four dimensions are underway at the Center.

A National Dialogue

A primary initiative of the Center has been to foster a national dialogue on the issues and specifics of the school's new role in the lives of children. How does knowledge about child needs, child rights and child advocacy determine the direction of school change? What would the restructured schools look like? And what policy changes and legislation are required to implement the new concept? We believe that the dialogue itself, the process of engaging key people and groups in articulating and implementing the new role for elementary schools is a critical aspect of the movement toward change. Through a planned, ongoing dialogue national awareness of the stresses in children's lives will be intensified. Participation by a range of individuals and groups is essential; changes in national, state and local policies must be addressed. The eventual goal is to institutionalize the concept of the school as locus of advocacy for children.

The national dialogue has begun. In April, 1987, the Center issued the first draft of a paper exploring the new concept. The paper, widely distributed, received a great deal of attention. A subsequent planning grant from the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation enabled the Center to commit itself to a multi-year, research-action study to implement the school advocacy concept. During a six month planning period, the Center explored various dimensions of the concept with a national group of distinguished educators, health experts, psychologists, social workers, teachers and legal experts. The Center also established an ongoing group of project advisors to critique and amplify the

overall directions and design of the proposed approach, and investigated the universe of literature and resources on children's needs and rights, as well as child advocacy. Throughout this early planning phase, a wide range of professionals from several disciplines expressed intense interest in our new concept. Interest continues to grow.

To assure broad participation in the national dialogue, professional organizations, government and community agencies, and representatives of the political system are taking part in all of the Center's planning, development and assessment activities. Most recently, at the Center's 3rd Annual Conference in January, 1988, participation was further broadened. An interdisciplinary group of 250 participants from 21 states considered the question: "What is the Role of the School in a Child's Life - Toward A New Concept of the Elementary School". As an outgrowth of the conference, the Center is currently conducting a nationwide search for programs, practices, agencies, and institutions that exemplify the child advocacy concept. Additional and varied forums are planned, including conferences, colloquia, written reports and person-to-person meetings.

Policy making and practical implementation of the advocacy concept have also been prime concerns of the Center from the beginning and will continue to be so. Change in legislation at local, state and national levels is critical. The Center will work with states and school districts to develop experimental programs. Pertinent legislation already in effect in states and school districts will be collected and shared. Guidelines will be developed for implementing the concept of school as the locus of child advocacy at local, state and national levels, as well as in family and community life.

Child Needs, Child Rights and Child Advocacy

A second thrust of the Center's approach is to clarify the principles of **child needs, child rights, and child advocacy** as they apply to the new concept. The Center will develop working documents on the fundamental needs and rights of all children and will define principles of advocacy for protecting those needs and rights. The documents will be made available for communities to use in assessing and planning for the needs of their children, and for wide general distribution.

Currently, a study and compilation of statements of children's needs, developed by various individuals and professional organizations, is underway at the Center. Our preliminary work indicates differing perspectives in viewing children's needs, each viewpoint significant in itself. However, to consider the full scope of a child's fundamental needs for optimal development, we believe it is essential to integrate these various approaches in a coherent statement, from a multidisciplinary perspective that defines the totality of a child's needs.

To support this unifying effort, the Center is assembling an interdisciplinary panel of national experts from education, pediatrics, psychology, psychiatry, social work, law and politics to review and critique the children's needs document as it is developed.

We recognize that the danger inherent in using the language of needs, rights, and advocacy is the tendency to remain vague and general. We intend to follow the advice of David Lloyd George, "- - - the finest eloquence is that which gets things done." **Against statements of universal needs and rights of children, a community must define specific needs and rights for its children with a level of detail that gives direction to the community's planning and action for advocacy.** The working statements issued by the Center will give communities an informed base from which to review and clarify the needs and rights of their children. The premise of such review must be that in all actions concerning children **the best interests of the children shall be primary.**

"Against statements of universal needs and rights of children, a community must define specific needs and rights for its children with a level of detail that gives direction to the community's planning and action for advocacy."

New Models of Schools

The third dimension of the Center's approach is to develop a series of new models of schooling as the locus of advocacy for all children.

"In all actions concerning children the best interests of the children shall be primary."

The Center plans to air on national television a full discussion of the needs and rights of children and to issue a "call for programs" that are already meeting many of those needs and protecting those rights. These events will enable the Center to supplement activities underway and to identify and document existing educational programs, services, practices. agencies, and perhaps schools that reflect the advocacy concept. Relevant features also will be gleaned from comprehensive new proposals for schools (Comer, 1980; Goodlad, 1984 and 1985; Zigler, 1988) and from specific modifications urged by child advocacy groups (Designs for Change, 1983; Kentucky Youth Advocates and The Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1987). Promising aspects from these and other sources will be incorporated into a series of new models for restructuring schools.

In this effort, the Center is not seeking a single, best model or approach. Rather, our intent is to define new sets of possibilities for schooling and to organize those possibilities as working models that are useful to schools and communities in their planning. Models of the school as locus of child advocacy will certainly vary as they are enacted by different communities. **What the models will have in common is a pervasive commitment to child advocacy, expressed in every aspect of the school's functioning.**

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A Community Needs Assessment and Planning Handbook (C-NAP)

The fourth facet of the Center's approach is to develop a Community Needs Assessment and Planning Handbook (C-NAP) for communities to use in equipping their schools for the advocacy role. The handbook will include: an information and resource base on children's fundamental needs and rights and principles of community advocacy; an assessment instrument for communities to use in defining the particular needs of their children and in assessing the extent to which those needs are being met; a compendium of new models of schooling as the locus of advocacy; and a series of feasible processes and procedures to guide a community in creating its unique plan for child advocacy, with the school as the locus of the process. These resources and procedures are intended as a guide, an inventory of possible strategies with infinite variations likely as communities work out their individual approaches. However, common parameters of the process can be described. For each community the process will entail:

- Increasing the community's awareness of the fundamental needs and rights of children as well as promoting their acceptance of child advocacy principles;
- Assessing the extent to which the community is meeting the particular needs and protecting the particular rights of its children;
- Establishing priorities for responding to unmet needs of their children;
- Analyzing available community resources;
- Determining what further resources are required;
- Restructuring community resources with the school as the locus of the process.

To illustrate these processes, here is a hypothetical example of how a particular community's approach could unfold.

In a geographical area the head of the school system initiates the assessment process by building a coalition of individuals and organizations concemed with the welfare of children and youth. As they build the necessary commitment to the task, the group's designated leadership would gather information about studies and assessments that have been made in the state or in the area. At the same time, the group would review and debate available information on child needs, child rights and child advocacy - as general concepts. Building from these data, together with their agreed upon interpretations of child needs, child rights and child advocacy, an assessment design is developed.

The community begins the assessment process by examining the actual needs of its children. This means analyzing available resources as well as gathering data on factors such as the characteristics of families, the quality of home and community environments, the health profiles of children, the history of the educational progress of its youth and the economic status of its constituents.[13]

The community then must state what it perceives as the rights of its children and youth. Does it begin with the Declaration of the Rights of the Child passed by the United Nations and a number of other organizations within the United States?[14] Certainly a community must add to the more general statements of rights the particular rights they perceive as pertinent.

The assessment process also involves a review of available services and resources. This analysis must be made in terms of the perceived needs of the community's children and of how well the services are meeting those needs. If after school child-care is a perceived need, for example, what is the community doing to serve the need and what more must it do?

The development of new ways of meeting children's needs becomes the task of a compact of individuals, groups and agencies. The school as child advocate enables the new services to develop and move ahead. The school either monitors, or sees to it that monitoring takes place, once the needed service is established. The formal education establishment is the central agency, the locus of the advocacy process. A community's on-going assessment of the needs of its children is an integral part of that process.

Response Thus Far

From the beginning of the Center's effort, responses from individuals and organizations have been encouraging; there is a sense that the premise of the school as the locus of child advocacy is so timely and so self-apparent, the concept invites systematic exploration and development. The interest and excitement the concept has generated are now propelling it forward.

IN SUMMARY

We began with the argument that the American elementary school was designed for a society that no longer exists. We live in a time when children are particularly vulnerable, yet society's attempts to meet children's needs are fragmented and diffuse. Schooling does not proceed in a vacuum; there is a direct link between a child's ability to succeed in school and the web of other circumstances affecting the child's life out of school. Although there are many children who are being born "at risk" and who may be labeled "disadvantaged," it is time for us to acknowledge that we—the adults—are permitting all children to be at risk, if we do not respond promptly and systematically to the disruptive and pervasive social changes affecting their lives.

"Schooling does not proceed in a vacuum; there is a direct link between a child's ability to succeed in school and the web of other circumstances affecting the child's life out of school."

In response to the dramatic social changes affecting children's lives, the Elementary School Center is proposing a new concept of schooling, one that designates the elementary school working with the family and the community as the locus of advocacy for all children. We propose also to develop a series of models to illustrate ways in which schools and communities can begin to redirect their resources to implement child advocacy.

"The Center is proposing a new concept of schooling, one that designates the elementary school working with the family and the community as the locus of advocacy for all children."

The Center's approach seeks to compel a national dialogue and to revitalize a national commitment to meeting the needs and protecting the rights of children. We believe that vigorous discussion of the issues will raise the national consciousness and lead to fundamental changes in our planning for children. Those changes will have far reaching implications requiring systemic changes in schools as we know them.

The Center's approach focuses on all elementary school children, across all social and economic lines. Taking care of our children is not only a moral imperative, it is the most prudent policy we as a nation can adopt. **Reconceptualizing and restructuring elementary schools — to assert advocacy for all children — is our obligation as responsible adults; this nation can do no less.**

"Reconceptualizing and restructuring elementary schools — to assert advocacy for all children — is our obligation as responsible adults; this nation can do no less."

NOTES

1. In Changed Lives (1984), the High Scope Educational Research Foundation used cost-benefit analysis to document how the return on an investment in a substantive preschool program is equal to several times its cost. See also the 1987 report of the Committee for Economic Development (CED), "Children in Need", and their earlier report, "Investing in Our Children" (1985), for further documentation of this issue.

2. Much of the ethos of concern for the needs and rights of children has been created by the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1924, and in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations in 1959. A new Convention on the Rights of the Child is being prepared for acceptance at the General Assembly in 1989. The Convention asserts the rights of the child to be fully prepared to live in society.

3. These facts are taken from A Children's Defense Budget, 1988 and 1989, The Center for Education Statistics, The Committee On Education and Labor House of Representatives 99th Congress, H. L. Hodgkinson, H. M. Levin, Defense for Children International-USA, and The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1987.

4. Hofferth & Phillips (1987) project that by 1995 two-thirds of all preschool children and three-fourths of all school-age children will have mothers in the labor force.

5. The House Select Committee on Children, Youth & Families notes that $1 spent on childhood immunizations saves $10 in later medical costs.

6. The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1987, conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, points out that the problems cited cut across all economic lines and across rural, suburban and urban boundaries.

7. For an exceptionally clear description of social forces affecting schools, and some ideas for change see E. Boyer, H. L. Hodgkinson, The Governors' 1991 Report on Education, and the statements by the Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development in 1985 and 1987.

8. During the past two years The Elementary School Center has been examining this issue in conferences, colloquia and publications. Recently the Center developed a comprehensive proposal for exploring this concept.

9. Goffin argues that advocacy must occur with families of all socio-economic status "because all parents need support to fulfill their child rearing responsibilities more effectively" (1988, p.55).

10. In First Lessons, U.S. Education Secretary William J. Bennett's 1986 report on elementary education in America, Bennett states: "If our institutions, values and knowledge are to make it into the next century in good shape, we must come to regard the education of young children as a task shared by all adults. We must see [the community of adults] as a covenant - - - ". (p.15).

11. The notion of advocacy as a social responsibility was proposed by the Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children in 1969 in an attempt to increase the responsiveness and accountability of social, institutions affecting children. Unfortunately, the idea of creating child advocacy centers on the local, state and federal levels has never fully materialized. For a clear analysis and history of the concept of child advocacy, see Melton, 1983, and Westman, 1979.

12. Some directions for specific changes in schools are discussed in "Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education". The report urges states to increase teachers salaries, widen the use of new technologies in schools and develop new initiatives to help at-risk pre-school children prepare for school. It also recommends that states allow parents to choose what schools their children will attend, find better ways to use school facilities, including holding classes year-round, and demand greater accountability for student progress from colleges and universities.

13. Publications issued by the Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado, can be particularly helpful to communities in beginning the assessment process. See, for example, the 1976 publication of the Education Commission of the States, The Children's Needs Assessment Handbook, the states' assessment of present and future needs.

14. Among many proposals for children's rights, see, especially, National Association of Social Workers; Children's Defense Fund's Legislative Agenda; and Defense for Children International's "The Children's Clarion". In the United States the constitutional rights of children were first recognized by the Supreme Court in 1967, in the case of In Re Gault; since then the court reaffirmed the principle that "the Bill of Rights is not for adults alone."

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AN INVITATION

Recognizing the importance of engaging key people and groups in a dialogue about the new realities of childhood and the concomitant need for a new role for the schools in the lives of children, the Elementary School Center welcomes your comments in response to this concept paper. As we continue our search for programs, practices, agencies and institutions that exemplify our child advocacy concept, we would like to learn about existing models. As we stimulate discussion of this new role, we invite you to participate in our exploration. We also look forward to opportunities to continue the dialogue with interested groups through informal discussions, meetings, conferences and other forums.

You can contact the Elementary School Center at 2 East 103rd Street, New York, NY 10029. Our telephone number is (212) 289-5929.