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ABSTRACT

Although many programs and agencies exist to serve the needs of at-risk children, their fragmented organization results in a failure to meet all students' needs. Ways for agencies working together to provide integrative services to at-risk youth are presented in this paper. First, emerging principles for interagency collaboration are summarized. The four steps in developing an improvement plan are described next--mapping the territory; surveying the field; developing a plan; and getting started. Four pitfalls to avoid are also identified: (1) all talk, no action; (2) creating a superagency or person; (3) the lack of linkage between information, knowledge, and action; and (4) an excess of jargon. A conclusion is that an urgent need exists for agency/school collaboration to develop a coordinated, efficient, and child-centered system that focuses on early intervention and prevention. (9 references) (LMI)

STREAMLINING INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION FOR YOUTH AT RISK:

ISSUES FOR EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

Schools today are becoming super-agencies, with broad-ranging social service responsibilities being placed on already overburdened educators. This creates a bind. Schools need to focus on academic subjects and helping students learn. Yet if they concentrate exclusively on academic improvement, they almost certainly will lose students most at risk–those who drop out not because of poor grades but for a complex of social and emotional reasons.

But *Streamlining Interagency Collaboration for Youth At Risk: Issues for Educators* points out that a multitude of community agencies, including county welfare and child protective services, the courts, youth employment services, and health programs also serve the needs of children. Yet because of fragmentation, kids get some needs met and not others. What's urgently needed is collaboration among all agencies, including schools, to develop a coordinated, case-managed, child-centered system that efficiently and economically serves children and their families with a focus on early intervention and prevention. This document offers general guideposts for streamlining interagency collaboration. Drawing from the most promising existing models nationwide, it offers advice on mapping the territory, surveying the field, and–most important–developing a careful plan. It also points out pitfalls that can undo well-intentioned efforts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Schools today are being asked to carry out a wide range of functions that in previous generations were the purview of families, churches, neighborhoods or clans, or the variety of community agencies. Indeed, the school is becoming increasingly like a super-agency with broad-ranging responsibilities falling to educators already overburdened—ironically—by efforts toward school upgrading and reform. Schools are in a bind. As educational institutions, their focus is to teach academic subjects and help students learn. At the same time, if schools concentrate exclusively on academic improvement, they almost certainly will lose students most at risk—those who drop out not just because of poor grades but for a complex of social and emotional reasons. Still, the school is basically ill-equipped to meet all the needs of all children.

This is not to say, of course, that schools are operating in isolation. In fact, a vast assortment of social service agencies has been established to serve children and youth at risk. These agencies include the county welfare agencies, child protection agencies, juvenile courts, youth employment programs, health and mental health programs, child care programs, and early childhood development agencies. In California, over 160 programs in 35 agencies and seven departments have been set up to serve children (Kirst & McLaughlin, 1989). Various private institutions add to the mix.

Very often, however, the services provided are overlapping and uncoordinated, agencies are compartmentalized, and children are incorrectly referred (Fantini & Sinclair, 1985; Heath & McLaughlin, 1989; Hodgkinson, 1989; Kirst & McLaughlin, 1989; Schorr, 1989). As Hodgkinson (1989) points out, the "bewildering array" of agencies have become part of large, unwieldy bureaucracies where the emphasis is on self-preservation and maintenance. Unfortunately, the needs of at-risk children and families are at odds with what Schorr (1989) calls the "traditional requirements of professionalism and bureaucracy." Very often, the nature of services and who gets them is determined by sets of complex rules and regulations. As a result, critical needs go unmet, and those families least able to navigate their way through the maze of requirements are left out.

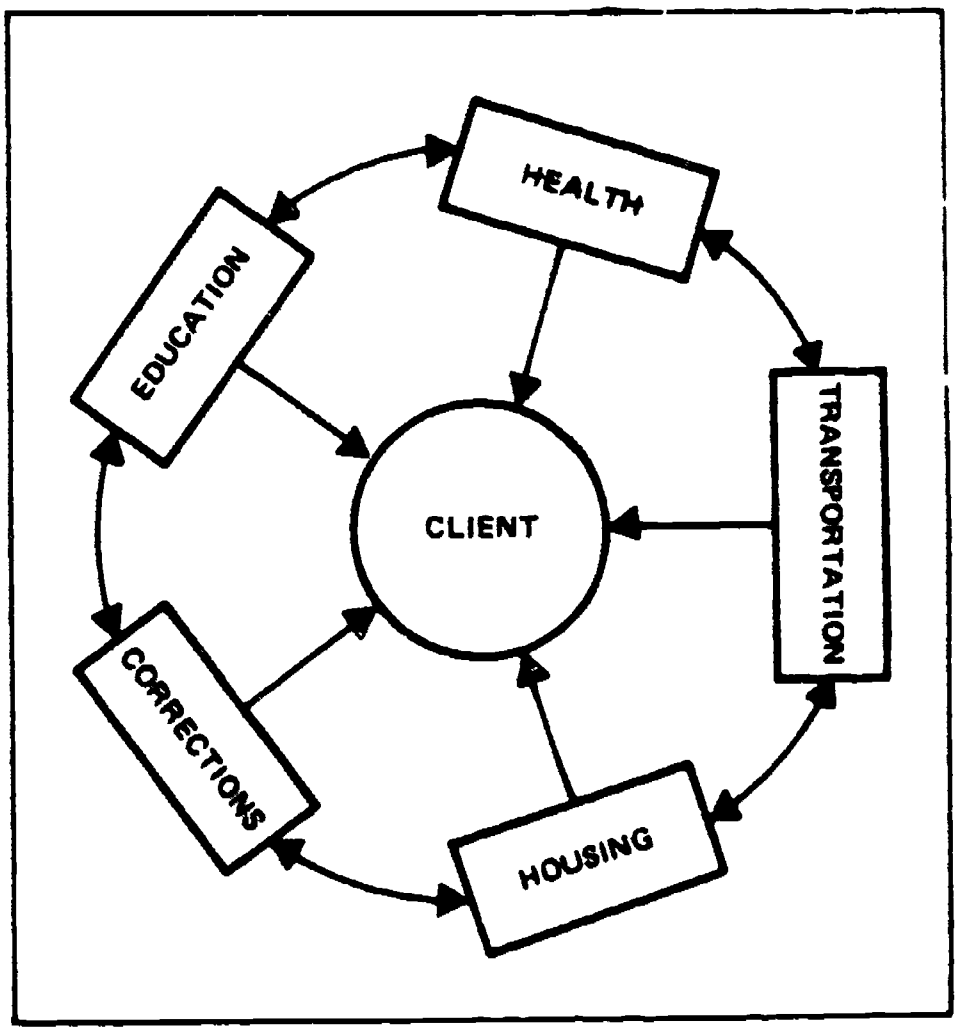
One reason for all this confusion is that each service or agency is set up to deal with a particular problem; as new types of problems are identified, new programs are developed. Instead of integrated services, this cult of specialization creates a jumble of single-issue programs. Heath and McLaughlin (1989) describe a "nonsystem" driven by funding concerns and crisis mentality. Few agencies take a long-term, developmental perspective. Instead, they respond to one crisis after another.

Fortunately, the potential value of integrating services and building collaborations among agencies has started to make sense to social service agents, childcare specialists, school personnel, and policymakers. Some agencies have at least begun to talk to each other, and a number of communities have established procedures for periodic networking and information-sharing. But we must go much farther. More effective ways must be found to distribute and coordinate the activities of these various agencies so that children's services are improved.

Now is the time to look at the full range of functions that schools are being asked to perform and identify which of those the school is best suited to handle, which can best be provided by other institutions and agencies, and which can best be accomplished by joint efforts. The challenge is not simply to divide up responsibilities, but to reconceptualize the role of the school and the relationship between the school, the community, and the larger society. The new arrangement must be designed so that it shifts the emphasis of each agency away from itself and toward the client–the child.

Hodgkinson (1989) depicts his idea of the integration of services in this way:

Figure 1*



* Taken from *The Same Client: The Demographics of Education and Service Delivery Systems*, page 1, figure 2.

Whether Hodgkinson's or some other design is realized, the time for discussion about whether to collaborate or not is passed; it is now time to talk about how to get agencies together in ways that efficiently and economically provide the help children and their families need.

Some plans for interagency collaboration rely on an infusion of new funds for regular interagency communication and service coordination, or a call for creation of new layers of bureaucracy. However, given increasingly tight federal, state, county, and local budgets, it's probably a mistake to count on additional funding. It seems clear that competition for scarce resources will only get worse in the coming months and years. Many schools and social service agencies have already been forced to focus on only the most serious, needy cases. Minimizing fragmentation and duplication of services, while still cutting down on bureaucracy, seems the only reasonable direction to take. Our purpose here is to suggest some innovative ways to do that.

In addition, we hope to stimulate and challenge people on the front line of youth education and services to expand their thinking and devise even better and more efficient ways to suit their specific local talents and conditions. Having reviewed recent literature on the topic and having listened to many practitioners talk about their struggles to provide better, integrated services to youth at-risk, we are convinced that alternatives are available. In the pages that follow, we first summarize emerging principles for interagency collaboration. Next, we outline steps a school or other agency might take toward developing an improvement plan. Finally, we point out four pitfalls that social service and educational administrators should avoid to save time, energy, and funds.

This represents only the initial effort on this topic by the Students At Risk Program at the Far West Laboratory. In future work, we will take an in-depth look at promising approaches to interagency collaboration. We will examine and document these experiments, disseminate our findings, and eventually provide technical assistance to schools, districts, counties, and states in our service region.

ALTERNATIVES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The idea that better ways must be found for providing children's services is gaining acceptance around the country. Social service personnel, legislators, and educators are coming to realize that the current set of compartmentalized programs are an affront and an injustice to our children. Communities across the country have focused attention on finding ways to encourage collaboration among agencies and

better integrate services. Pilot collaborative projects, interagency networks, conferences, and new legislation also reflect this trend.

- Experiments are underway in a number of places. The most frequently mentioned pilot efforts (at least from the perspective of the West Coast) are those in Ventura and San Bernardino Counties (CA), Dayton (OH), and Minneapolis (MN). Heath & McLaughlin (1989) briefly reviewed these projects and identified three common elements: (1) outside funding that provided some organizational flexibility; (2) a design that reflected local needs and resources; and (3) a strong commitment from middle-level staff and a base of experience in trying to integrate services. However, without the third element, Heath & McLaughlin doubt extra funding would have made much difference.

- Interagency networks for sharing experiences and ideas have been established. Instead of everyone trying to reinvent the wheel, these mechanisms for exchange will allow agencies to learn from each other. In California, for example, the State Interagency Network for Youth At Risk serves as a clearinghouse on new models and local developments. Current membership includes over 100 organizations and agencies.

- Conferences have been organized to showcase pilot programs, allow participants to share ideas, and exhort agency representatives to join together. For example, at a conference in San Bernardino County in September 1990, various state, county, and local agencies presented information on services and resources for the county's children at risk.

- New legislation offers incentives and seed money for collaboration. A bill recently passed by the California State Legislature (Pressley SB997) provides waivers for county agencies wishing to integrate services. These waivers may apply to auditing and accounting requirements that might restrict coordination.

Time will tell how effective these promising experiments will be. As we monitor progress, however, we need to bear in mind that a better working relationship among agencies is a means, not an end in itself. The bottom line is improved services for children, and that—rather than how much effort is expended, or the degree of cooperation between organizations—not level of effort or organizational cooperation, is what we need to hold agencies accountable for.

Even as these pioneer efforts unfold, every community can and must begin to create its own interagency collaboration. Just as all politics are local, so will improved services for children develop in the contexts of particular communities, schools, and service agencies. We must remember that the strategy that helps collaboration in one community may not apply in the next, and the set of agencies involved, or how they connect with schools, may differ from community to community.

Even without "proven models" of interagency collaboration, however, recent experience can give us direction. Having reviewed the recommendations of a number of proponents of interagency collaboration and talked with a variety of practitioners, we can offer here today's best thinking.

EMERGING ELEMENTS OF INTEGRATED SERVICES

Collaboration can be approached through (1) a professional coordinator (or case manager) within a school who might coordinate the services of several agencies and match them with the needs of children; (2) locating the services of various agencies at the school for easy access and close coordination; or (3) consistent communication and joint projects that allow all educational, mental health, correctional, and other institutions to coordinate with each other. Whatever approach is taken, however, certain basic principles will apply. There is a growing consensus among policymakers, educators, and social service personnel, that interagency collaborations should be comprehensive, preventive, child-centered, and flexible.

Comprehensive. By "comprehensive," we mean that the set of agencies involved should—as a group—provide a wide spectrum of essential services and attempt to meet the most important needs of those most at risk. Rather than concentrate on the single-issue approaches that dominate city and county services now, involved agencies should seek ways to ensure that individual children and families actually receive a coherent program of assistance. Each program needs to take into account the functions of partner agencies and how they fit into an overall matrix. Such factors as service overlaps or differing perspectives on proper services must be addressed.

Accomplishing this won't be easy. Long-standing habits and bureaucratic barriers will have to fall. We'll need to take the time to learn about other agencies—how they operate and how we can best connect with them. From the individual agency's point of view, there may be no tangible incentive to collaboration, and in the end, we'll all have to give up some turf.

Preventive. Unfortunately, under the current system, services don't kick in until children are in critical condition. We offer mental health services only for the

most emotionally disturbed. Academically, students have to be failing before they are eligible for special help. By then, the student may get so far behind that his confidence is shot and his ego destroyed.

A better way would be to create a system that can accomodate an increasingly diverse group of students–in terms of their background, culture, and ways of learning. The system should be able to monitor the progress and development of all children, providing special assistance when needed. In practice, this will probably mean a major overhaul in the school program; it may also that some person (or group) will need to take primary responsibility for each child: a teacher, social worker, or counselor. Student study teams might be one way to make this work.

We can also begin to shift resources from acute intervention programs into approaches such as prenatal care, health care, day care, and preschool. These might not make a big difference right away, but as the Committee on Economic Development has pointed out, putting resources into children is an investment, not a cost.

Child-centered. When services are child-centered, the overall needs of the child are given priority over institutional or other concerns. Agencies cooperate to develop the best, most appropriate response, and success is measured by improvement of the child's condition. Single-issue programs slice the child any number of ways, without taking a balanced, comprehensive, and long-term view of what will really make a difference. When individual programs provide their services in isolation, no one has the responsibility for checking the overall condition of the child and family. School staffs, Heath and McLaughlin assert, are "notoriously unaware of services available through juvenile justice, social service, or mental health agencies" (1989, p. 309). Even if they suspect a child's school failure is related to problems at home, they don't know where to turn for help.

Kirst and McLaughlin (1989) stress that children's services need to reflect the growing diversity of our child population–diversity not only of ethnicity, language and culture, but also of needs. Drugs, crime, AIDS, and poverty have become so prevalent that our schools are facing challenges very different from those of 10–or even five–years ago. Schools must respond with effective assistance.

To move from program-driven to child-centered services, we also need to improve our understanding of children's needs, monitor them over time, and take a broader contextual view of how to help. To do this, we need to come up with improved ways of collecting, maintaining, and sharing data on children. In some agencies, staff don't even know how many kids are receiving what kind of service.

Gardner (1989) points out that no city in California really knows how much is being spent on youth services.

Flexible. To get away from the overlapping or conflicting programs we have now, we need to consider alternative ways of applying procedures, assigning staff responsibilities, and designing services. At present, the services children receive are often predetermined by rigid sets of procedures and regulations. Everything is done by rules. Screening, referral, and the type and length of treatment a child receives are all prescribed from the beginning. If a child is eligible for "*x*" program, he or she receives "*x*" service no matter what; if eligible for "*y*," then that service is provided. A religious adherence to guidelines can cause children to get the fragmented, overlapping services described above. Effective children's services need to break out of this mold and allow service providers to respond to the child. Children are complex and can't be divided up into pieces—pieces that don't necessarily add up to the whole.

The way kids are identified and treated can have long-lasting effects on the types of services they receive, and in a larger sense, who they become. Once a child is pigeonholed into a category (dropout, drug abuser, pregnant teen), his or her fate within the system is often sealed. Heath and McLaughlin (1989) even recommend involving children in their own diagnosis and treatment as a way of ensuring the best possible services. When we leave decision-making entirely up to adults, important opportunities for helping children may be lost.

Staff roles can also be more flexible. Service providers sometimes may need to step outside the particular boundaries of their job descriptions to make sure what needs doing gets done. Schorr (1988) suggests ways that service can be continued when staff and clients develop close relationships. Agencies, too, must be able to continue or increase responsibilities from time to time.

Finally, we need to look at how services operate. For example, we might allow staff to step out of agency boundaries to provide services. They can go to community centers, schools, and even homes to ensure that clients receive close attention. Agencies can also arrange for staff, when necessary, to devote more than the usual amount of time to the children and families they serve. Programs can be set up to draw on a variety of resources and other services, instead of maintaining the narrow-focus approach often found today.

STEPS TOWARD AN ECOLOGY OF COLLABORATION

In this section, we offer a step-by-step guide toward streamlining interagency collaboration. The four phases described are by no means comprehensive or complete; they are meant to be general guideposts. Just as there is no ideal model for collaboration, there is no one way of getting there. Moreover, no rules exist for how long it might take. Until we have more research in this area, a lot will have to be played by ear. We will continue to refine the process of building interagency collaboration as we gather data from the actual experiments in the schools, districts, and counties.

Step 1: Map the Territory

The first step toward building collaboration is finding out who the potential (and probable) partners might be. Make an inventory of all the social service agencies that currently interact with the school. For each, list overall purpose, services provided, functions served, and the name and number of a contact person.

Next, try to identify other agencies in the community that aren't currently involved with the schools. Check with the city and county governments for leads. Be sure to include private programs. The famous semanticist Korzybski cautioned that we shouldn't mistake the map for the territory; the picture of social services you have now might not accurately reflect what's really there.

As a final step in mapping the territory, you'll need to figure out who from the local schools and other agencies you can count on to be the main players in a collaboration effort. Who can work with you and assume some of the responsibilities connected with developing the plan and getting it underway? Who can you rely on to stay with it? Find these people and get them on board.

Step 2: Survey the Field

The information we've provided in this brief report only scratches the surface of existing models and strategies. Before you start to make up your own plan, you need to find out what others are doing to improve interagency collaboration. A good place to start is with the references listed here. Next, follow up on your own leads. You've probably already heard of a community or school near you that has begun to explore alternatives for coordinating children's services. Contact them and find out what they've done and if they have any materials to share. If they sound like they're succeeding, arrange a visit.

If you're the interagency pioneer in your area and aren't aware of any other efforts nearby, try to find a state or regional network that can point you in the right direction. The state department of education or county agencies are potential resources. The main idea in this phase is simply to learn as much about improving interagency collaboration as you can. Do your homework.

Step 3: Develop a Plan

A project is only as good as the plan it's based on. No matter how urgent the need to collaborate, time for careful planning will pay off in the long run. Pull together a core team of people you feel will devote the time and energy necessary to develop a plan and put it into action. Here are some essential components of a good plan:

- **A vision.** Try to capture your team's shared vision of interagency collaboration. Think about how you would like to see children's services provided. How would agencies and their representatives interact? How would children be identified and served? You might start with the principles outlined above. Are these part of your vision? How could services be made more comprehensive, preventive, child-centered, and flexible?

  Bear in mind that other agencies may bring different perspectives and concerns. These should be expressed early in the course of collaboration to avoid problems with communication later on. Try to keep everyone focused on what is best for children.

- **Goals and expectations.** Your goals and expectations should operationalize the vision. First, conduct a thorough needs assessment for children and youth in the community. Don't just rely on what planning committee members know—look carefully at the data schools and agencies have collected; then interview or survey administrators, teachers, parents, and students to complete the picture. Next, the outcomes you can reasonably expect for children, the changes you foresee in how agencies work, and how you'd like interactions among agencies to be. As you work through the planning phase, you will probably want to modify your expectations and refine them. Throughout, the primary focus will likely be on the partner agencies and how they work together to improve the services for children and youth. Keep in mind,

however, that each organization will have its own set of needs, priorities, and goals.

Some important goals will reach beyond the agencies involved. For example, the team might want to explore ways to tap outside resources, both public and private. In this case, someone will need to assume the task of monitoring new legislation. Exerting influence on policymakers and future funding might be another goal. For this, you might want to share lessons learned from the collaborative process.

- **Roles.** A fourth element of planning is to clarify the role each agency and its representatives will play in the collaborative process. This applies not only to the planning and development stage, but also to the actual integration of services. In planning, try to share assignments fairly; don't let one person shoulder all the responsibility. Build a spirit of collaboration.

  Institutional philosophies, imperatives, and expectations must be clearly laid out and communicated, because each agency operates under certain constraints that will affect their participation in the collaborative. Mental health service agencies, for example, are restricted by law from disclosing information about their clients, even though information about parents of at-risk youth may very well be crucial for school and social service personnel as they develop a program for the child. Another example is that while principals are required by law to report to child protective services any suspicion of child abuse in their schools, they must realize that the heavy case load of the protection agency may force them to focus only on the most serious cases (Zellman, 1990).

- **Action steps.** Formulate steps that the planning committee or task force will follow in order to improve interagency collaboration. It's a good idea to develop a flow chart that shows what will be done, who will do it, and when it's expected. Make sure the flow chart is jointly developed and agreed upon by all involved agencies. Then once you get started, it can serve as a guide and a check to make sure each agency is holding up its end and events are on schedule. You might want to include how you will ensure information-sharing and day-to-day communication.

- **Evaluation.** In these times of belt-tightening budgets, accountability takes on added importance. Unfortunately, many people don't think of evaluating their program until after it is well underway or too late to gather the necessary data. A good evaluation requires careful planning, and a place to start is the *Evaluator's Handbook* (Herman, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987).

  Whether you conduct the evaluation yourself or get outside assistance, make sure you're asking both summative (outcome) and formative (project improvement) questions. To get useful answers, you'll need to go beyond the traditional bean-counting of numbers of children served or contact hours. How effective was the collaborative? Is communication improved? Have some of the bureaucratic barriers fallen? Are services for children more effective and timely? How can interagency collaboration be improved? What changes has one agency made that others might learn from? What can increase efficiency and effectiveness? Decide beforehand which data you're going to need to answer your outcomes questions; it'll be much harder to collect it after the fact.

Step 4: Get Started

The main rule for getting started is to start small. Don't expect to have everyone involved in joint projects right away. You are dealing with entrenched habits and practices, so begin with a clearly manageable tasks. Schedule monthly or biweekly meetings. Covering the first two phases (map the territory and survey the field) should help the agencies involved learn about each other and establish ties. As you reach the planning phase, think in terms of pilot projects, rather than massive change efforts.

PITFALLS AND DANGER SIGNS

As you embark on an interagency effort, there are at least four pitfalls you should look out for. While they may seem obvious, they have been the undoing of many well-intentioned groups.

NATO (No Action, Talk Only). Interagency collaboration meetings can easily collapse into gripe sessions with little actual follow-up or resolution to client's needs and problems. We call this NATO.

Some district- or state-wide interagency councils have called together program directors or key personnel to weekly or monthly meetings across great geographical distances. Social service personnel have busy schedules and are often over-committed.

They cannot afford to take time out that's not well-spent; unless participants see some potential pay-off from the beginning, they'll soon drop out. Without the likelihood of tangible results, NATO can be demoralizing to all involved.

Creating an interagency czar or a superagency. Another pitfall to avoid is the establishment of yet a new layer of bureaucracy. As Gardner (1989) has pointed out, many cities, districts, counties, and states have learned to "play the coordination game" very quickly—they pay lip service to the new social concern and appear to be coordinating without actually helping kids. Kirst and McLaughlin (1989) also argue against additional bureaucracy. In these days of an astronomical budget deficits and dwindling state, county, and local funds, money is best spent on direct, front line services.

Information ≠ Knowledge ≠ Action. In today's world of advanced information technology, we are all too often information-rich but knowledge-poor. Information does not automatically become knowledge. Emotional readiness and active mental work are required before facts and data can be absorbed, digested, and turned into personal knowledge. As you gather information about other agencies and what they do, keep in mind that this inventory is only a beginning.

A number of organizations have sponsored successful conferences, pulling together parents, teachers, administrators, and public and private community agency personnel to exchange information about their various concerns, needs, and services. Unfortunately, the sponsoring agency often considers its mission accomplished when the participants head home; plans begin for the next annual conference. We need to take the time to figure out what we've learned.

Action, or follow-up, is the third part of the equation. The distance between knowledge and action is great; even when we have the necessary knowledge to accomplish a task, it takes still more hard work and motivational force to act effectively on what we know.

An excess of jargon. If you have ever attended a meeting where different agencies were represented, you may have encountered a parade of acronyms, such as DPSS, CWA, WIG, SARB, SART, SAR, LEP, NEP, or professional jargon such as Chapter 1 or Chapter 2 programs, 601 or 602 schools.

To avoid this jargon-naut, we must take care to speak plainly and clearly, in the spirit of true collaboration, without taking refuge in the security and opaqueness of our own bureaucratese. However familiar our own acronyms may be to us, they're probably meaningless to those from other agencies.

CONCLUSION

As educators, we know that schools can no longer afford to go it alone. The same is true for social service agencies. Collaborative efforts between schools and other community sectors require careful attention to the proper conditions for safeguarding and bettering the child's education and welfare, and to the relationships between school and non-school personnel. Instant collaboration may bring instant gratification, but it is less likely to bring any lasting success. Instead, careful planning, combined with thoughtful use of people and places, is an essential ingredient for successful school-community collaboration and improved education and well-being for all children and youth at risk.

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