

Establishing School-Based, Collaborative Teams to Coordinate Resources: A Case Study

Organization of a school's internal support programs and services (offered by psychologists, nurses, counselors, school social workers, and special education staff) is an important but often ignored facet of the services integration movement. This article presents a case study of the establishment of school-based collaborative teams designed to coordinate and enhance a school's support service resources. Factors contributing to the establishment of resource coordination teams were strong commitment from participants, successes leading to tangible results, and effective guidance and support from a change agent. Implications for expansion of the role of school social workers are explored, as are recommendations for how school social workers can be prepared to assume these roles.

Key words: collaboration; enabling; school teams; service integration; support services

The need for integrating and linking education, social, and health services to better serve the multiple needs of students and families is well documented (Dryfoos, 1995; Kirst, 1991; Levy & Shepardson, 1992; Uphold & Graham, 1993). Although a school's primary purpose is to attend to the education needs of students, school and community personnel realize that noneducational needs pose significant barriers to learning. In the past decade, various school-based and school-

linked service integration models have been demonstrated to integrate and coordinate school and community resources. Simultaneously, reform movements aimed at restructuring education have highlighted the need to expand traditional school services to provide comprehensive, coordinated services to students and families.

An important component of establishing school-community linkages is organizing existing school-owned and -operated support programs and services. Before establishing links and collaborating with outside agencies, schools need to organize the delivery of their internal services so that additional services are woven into the school's current system rather than just becoming another added-on program (Adelman, 1996).

A model using an enabling component has been proposed to help schools restructure the delivery of their internal support programs and services and establish collaborations with community resources (Adelman, 1996; Adelman & Taylor, 1994). A central element is the establishment of a school-based mechanism (for example, a resource coordinating team) to coordinate and enhance programs

and resources, and the key mechanism for adapting the model to a new site is a change agent—the organizational facilitator (Rosenblum, DiCecco, Taylor, & Adelman, 1995). Although conceptualization of such mechanisms appears straightforward, actual implementation raises a multitude of complications. This article extends previous studies of the enabling component by describing the implementation process at two schools. The roles of the organizational facilitator are explored, as are the perceptions of the participants about the nature of the collaborative process. This article also provides an example of how school social workers can become involved in school reform activities and offers recommendations for how school social workers can be prepared to assume these roles.

Enabling Component

Current school reform discussions center around changes in instruction, such as teaching activities and curriculum, and management, such as increased participation in decision making. Missing from the discussions is a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing barriers to learning in ways that enable students to experience the benefits of instructional reform. From this perspective, it becomes essential that school restructuring agendas encompass three primary and complementary components: (1) instruction, (2) management, and (3) enabling (Adelman, 1996; Adelman & Taylor, 1994).

The concept of the enabling component is formulated around the proposition that a comprehensive, integrated continuum of enabling activity is essential to addressing the needs of the many students who encounter barriers to learning and performing satisfactorily at school. The

enabling component stresses efforts to address specific problems students and their families experience, including establishing programs to promote healthy development and to foster positive functioning as the best way to prevent many learning, behavioral, emotional, and health problems and as a necessary adjunct to corrective interventions. To accomplish all this requires meshing school and community enabling activity.

One key element of the enabling component is the creation of a school-based collaborative mechanism—the resource coordinating team (Rosenblum et al., 1995)—that includes all school personnel involved in education support programs and services (for example, psychologists, counselors, school social workers, nurses, bilingual and Title I coordinators, and special education staff, as well as representatives of the administrative or governing body such as principal or assistant principal). The support personnel on the team typically are assigned to schools through a variety of funding sources.

A resource coordinating team is designed to facilitate coordination; ongoing enhancement; and, where feasible, integration of all enabling activity at a school site. Among the main tasks are mapping and analyzing existing school-owned and relevant community activity with a view to improving resource use and efficacy. As an aid in moving toward a comprehensive, integrated approach, programs and services are clustered into six programmatic areas: (1) classroom-focused enabling, (2) student and family assistance, (3) crisis assistance and prevention, (4) support for transitions, (5) home involvement in schooling, and (6) community outreach for involvement and support (including a focus on volunteers).

Existing programs are charted according to these areas to foster a programmatic vision, to help team members visualize how enabling activities can be woven together, and to help clarify which areas need strengthening. After analysis of existing activity and resources, team members identify ways to improve resource use and enhance the school's overall approach to addressing barriers to learning.

Organizational facilitators can facilitate the establishment of an enabling component at schools. This professional facilitates change in three overlapping phases: The first stage is creating readiness—the facilitator introduces the model to the school and attempts to build interest and consensus for developing the component. The second stage is phasing in—the facilitator helps the site build an infrastructure for systemically addressing barriers to learning (including a resource coordinating team). In the third phase, institutionalization, the facilitator ensures that there are plans for maintenance and evolution of the component's infrastructure.

Pilot Project

As part of a pilot project, the enabling component model was introduced to a group of about 50 schools (elementary, middle, and senior high schools) in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). School social workers were used as organizational facilitators because their training in consultation and collaboration with school personnel made them well suited as change agents. At the initiation of the pilot project, several overlapping school reform efforts were under way in the school district. The administrative structure governing all schools in LAUSD had become decentralized, with administrative control, decision making, and account-

ability being shifted to local clusters of schools. In addition, some schools were participants in a voluntary restructuring movement called LEARN (Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now) aimed at improving educational outcomes by increasing parent participation, creating a school-based planning process, and adopting performance standards. Although restructuring support services is mentioned in each reform movement, the main focus is on instruction and management practices. The enabling component was piloted as a viable mechanism for restructuring support services in the hopes that it would be replicated in the future at schools in conjunction with ongoing reform efforts.

The difficulty of implementing systemic change in organizations is well documented (Beer, 1980; Hall & Hord, 1987; Hasenfeld, 1983; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Numerous barriers arise, such as lack of commitment from the leadership of the school or resistance to change from other stakeholder groups. For example, creation of mechanisms such as a resource coordinating team does not guarantee that services will be coordinated or that school personnel will work collaboratively. Team members must value such coordination and learn to establish effective working relationships, share information, and communicate freely with each other.

Two elementary schools were selected for the case study because they were farthest along in the implementation process of the enabling component and were being assisted by the same organizational facilitator. Information on the implementation process was gathered in a variety of ways to provide multiple perspectives and to enhance validity and reliability

(Miles & Huberman, 1984; Spradley, 1980; Yin, 1984). The organizational facilitator's detailed notes of meetings and interactions with school personnel were content analyzed, the organizational facilitator was interviewed, and participant observations were conducted at resource coordinating team meetings at both schools over a three-month period. Near the end of the school year, each member of the team was interviewed, yielding 16 interviews. A semistructured instrument was used that covered topics such as the team member's vision of how the enabling component should work, how the school dealt with support services before adoption of the enabling component and what changes had occurred, satisfaction with their school's effort to change support services, appealing aspects, perceived strengths and weaknesses, and potential impact. Interviews were about 30 minutes in duration, moving from general to more specific questions. (A copy of the interview instrument is available on request.)

School A

School A, located in an urban suburb in northeastern Los Angeles, enrolled about 1,100 students in kindergarten through sixth grade on a year-round schedule. Nearly 80 percent of the students were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches based on family income, and 68 percent spoke Spanish as their primary language. The student population was 87 percent Latino, 6 percent white, and the remainder Asian or African American.

The support personnel assigned to the school were a full-time resource specialist teacher, a coordinator of bilingual programs, a dropout prevention consultant, a part-time

nurse, and a part-time psychologist. The dropout prevention consultant's position was funded by a state dropout prevention program, but the consultant was accountable to the principal. The nurse and psychologist reported to offices centrally administered in the school district.

The support personnel characterized their service delivery system as fragmented and disconnected from the overall educational program before they began resource coordination efforts. Service provision reflected the individual efforts of separate professionals working independently of each other. According to one team member, "the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing." The principal recalled, "You didn't feel empowered. It didn't feel like the support services people were part of our program. They were just sort of an add-on—a convenience—and when you could get them to do what you wanted them to do, that was great, and if you didn't, then that's just the way it was."

Before the enabling component was introduced to the principal in September of the 1994–95 school year, the school had been involved in the LEARN school reform process for a year. During that year, the principal and a teacher attended training sessions on management, budgeting, strategic planning, and team building. After the presentation of the enabling component by the organizational facilitator, the principal agreed to its adoption because it was consistent with and expanded on the reforms under way. She said, "it's not going to do any good to have a wonderful curriculum if [we] don't have any way to impart it to the children." The principal initiated a process for eliciting the involvement of potential members for a resource coordinating

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team and allocated time and space for team meetings.

A variety of strategies were used to build interest and consensus among potential team members. The principal personally approached and invited some team members to a meeting where they were introduced to the concept. The organizational facilitator approached other team members by asking for their input on how a resource coordinating team should operate at their school. A majority of the team members conveyed an interest in improving strategies for addressing barriers to learning. When asked, "How worthwhile do you think it is to make changes in the way support services operate at your school?" using a six-point response scale (6 = very worthwhile), the mean response was 5.9. Team members cited the lack of coordination of current resources as reasons why changes were needed. One team member commented, "We're talking about all these resources and going out and getting resources, but we have a lot going on now that's not coordinated." Other factors cited by team members were the changing demographics of families and the difficulties in disseminating information to families.

The resource coordinating team held its first meeting in November. The team consisted of the nurse, psychologist, resource specialist teacher, coordinator of bilingual programs, dropout prevention consultant, two classroom teachers, and two parent volunteers as well as the principal and assistant principal.

One of the first team tasks was to map existing resources in the school into the six programmatic areas of enabling activity. Under the facilitator's guidance, team members catalogued all of the current programs at the school and determined which pro-

grammatic areas were addressed (for example, classroom-focused enabling, student and family assistance). A listing of current and desired resources was recorded on a wall chart. Team members then analyzed where gaps existed in current activity and proposed programs or services that were needed. With assistance from the facilitator, team members developed plans to obtain desired resources.

In general, team members reported little or no difficulty in getting people involved on the team and did not feel it was difficult for them personally to participate. Part of the ease in participating on the team was because of such aspects of the enabling component as the ability to take a holistic, integrative view of interventions to address barriers to learning. One team member stated, "the format, the charts that showed an overall look of our school, which included our crisis team, classroom enabling, student transitioning, and parent involvement—all these things together, globally, made up our school." Another team member cited the advantages of teamwork or "philosophy of collaboration" in getting various disciplines to plan activities together. Other appealing aspects mentioned were the potential for greater community and parent involvement.

Follow-up meetings focused on topics such as instituting parent education classes, providing support for transitions, writing a school safety plan, and conflict resolution training. Discussion of individual programs allowed team members to see how well various activities were coordinated or integrated. For example, the dropout prevention consultant presented an overview of conflict resolution training she was providing for children on the student council. As she described how students

were using skills to resolve peer conflicts on the play yard, other team members pointed out the need for similar training for all adult personnel in the school to cut down on the number of student discipline referrals to the office. Interactive discussions among team members resulted in plans to extend conflict resolution training to lunch duty personnel, teaching assistants, and teachers.

Because the school was interested in acquiring more volunteers, the organizational facilitator invited a county public health nurse to speak about community outreach activities. During the meeting team members agreed that immunizations were needed for a large number of families, and the public health nurse offered the services of her office. This exchange resulted in plans for a health fair during which immunizations and medical and dental screenings could be offered. Team meetings focused on obtaining community resources for the health fair and coordinating planning duties among team members. Contacts were made with a dental school to provide screenings, local businesses were approached to cover printing and refreshment expenses, and resources from within the district were solicited to provide referral information. The health fair, held at the end of the school year, was attended by many families. Although the health fair did not represent an institutional change in the delivery of services, the success of this one-time event demonstrated the power of the team's collaborative efforts.

Team meetings were well attended. The principal demonstrated commitment by providing time for teachers to attend meetings, setting aside classroom space, and participating as an active facilitator of meetings. The principal led the meetings with ac-

tion-oriented questions such as "How can we incorporate more interaction with older and younger kids in the classroom meeting time?" which generated much interactive discussion and brainstorming among team members. Members conveyed respect for the opinions of others and freely offered suggestions.

To explore how resource coordination efforts changed the use of resources at their school, team members were asked what changes had occurred as a result of adopting the enabling component. Although the work of the various support personnel did not change, team members reported a greater awareness of the resources available in the school and community. One team member explained, "What the resource coordinating team has done is enable us to see what we've done and what we are doing with our . . . resources. And we also know what we'd like to get from them. It's enabled us to go out and get those things." Another change was the ability to view support services in a more holistic manner, or "looking at all the things we do as part of a program, rather than just a piece that needs fixing. [Our work] is part of a program; there are overall goals to it. Our support services people are really involved in being integral members, being leaders in our school."

One team member perceived a difference in the delivery of support services at the school as compared to other schools she worked with that did not have a resource coordinating mechanism. When asked how her role differed, she replied, "it's much more difficult to communicate [at the other school]. Everyone is doing things with the same student, and you'd never know about it because everyone is working in isolation. . . . This school

feels more organized, and everybody knows what's going on. There are systems set up already to provide the proper referrals for parents and teachers, whether it has to do with academics or behavior."

When asked what they thought were the strengths of the resource coordinating team, members reported better coordination of resources and an ability to communicate with each other. A strength for one team member was "all your resources coming together for one purpose, and everyone is kept updated on what's going on within the school with the resources." Another team member stated, "it focuses the school. It helps people understand that we need to be more than just a place where children come to learn to read and write."

When team members were asked about the perceived weaknesses of the enabling component, time was a major constraint. The teachers who regularly participated on the team generally had available out-of-classroom time. Increasing teacher participation on the team would require more flexible scheduling arrangements.

Language barriers were also mentioned as a constraint. Team members at both schools acknowledged that more parent and community involvement was needed and that translators were required for non-English-speaking parents. A team member explained the dilemma as follows: "Community people . . . often don't speak English. [But] we can't conduct our meetings all in Spanish. We have to conduct them in English and Spanish, and that loses something in the translation."

Although most team members expressed a high level of satisfaction with their school's current efforts at restructuring (mean rating of 5.0 using a six-point scale, with 6 = very

satisfied), team members felt there was still more to be done. Members also felt that resource coordination would have a strong impact on enabling students to learn (mean rating of 4.8 using a six-point scale, with 6 = strong impact). Some team members felt the commitment from the leadership and other team members was important, fearing that if the leadership or team membership changed, resource coordination would become more difficult.

School B

School B, located a few miles from School A, enrolled about 1,270 students in kindergarten through sixth grade on a year-round schedule. Nearly 95 percent of the school population was Latino, with the remainder Asian or white. About 80 percent of the students were eligible for reduced-price or free lunches based on parental income; about 75 percent had limited proficiency in English.

Support personnel assigned to this school consisted of a full-time nurse, a resource specialist teacher, a categorical programs coordinator, a part-time psychologist, and a part-time pupil services and attendance counselor. Although support personnel described their work as fragmented and individually focused before resource coordination, they did meet together as the guidance committee to discuss individual student cases.

When the enabling component was introduced to the principal in September of the 1994-95 school year, some members of the school staff had just completed extensive training in management, budgeting, strategic planning, and team building. The school adopted the LEARN program in 1994-95 and was in the midst of instituting various changes. The principal was reluctant to proceed with

the enabling component because she did not want to overwhelm her staff. She arranged for individual meetings between the organizational facilitator and several potential team members to gauge their interest level. When she was satisfied there was sufficient interest, she made an initial commitment to resource coordination and appointed the assistant principal to head the enabling component.

One deciding factor in considering implementation of the enabling component was the growing conviction that instructional reforms were insufficient to address barriers to learning. The principal explained that children were not learning “in spite of all these teaching strategies and all these materials.” “We’ve done everything we can as educators, and the traditional educator role isn’t enough—it’s not working. We need to expand our description of what we need to do and how we need to do it within the course of a school day so that we meet the needs of the child, so he [or she] can benefit.”

The organizational facilitator explained the model to potential team members individually or in small groups. Team members felt it worthwhile to make changes related to enabling activities (mean of 5.6 on a six-point scale, with 6 = very worthwhile) to enhance resources and improve services for children. Most team members reported that motivation to join the team was high because of a strong commitment among school personnel to improve student achievement.

The resource coordinating team held its first meeting in November. The team consisted of the nurse, psychologist, resource specialist teacher, categorical programs advisor, pupil services and attendance counselor, office manager, principal, and assistant principal. One of the first tasks

accomplished was the mapping of existing resources and programs into the six programmatic areas of enabling activity and identifying desired programs to meet needs. A list of internal and external resources was produced. This activity provided the impetus to focus on programs related to support for transitions. The office manager had many ideas on how to improve their programs to welcome new families and volunteered to organize orientation materials for them. The result was a comprehensive welcoming booklet.

Other team meetings highlighted the need for information on availability of outside resources. The organizational facilitator helped arrange speakers from the school district’s suicide prevention unit and the state-administered child health and disability prevention program; team members perceived these activities as very informative. In April the assistant principal folded various planning activities into the work of the resource coordinating team. One activity involved writing a school safety plan. Portions of meetings for the remainder of the school year were spent formulating objectives for the plan. This activity focused the team’s attention on clarifying current resources and how they could be improved; the discussions also highlighted the complexities of developing systems for referral to outside agencies. Ironically, only a few decisions were made for meeting the specific objectives formulated for the school safety plan. However, the activity resulted in greater clarification and appreciation of the value of having a resource coordinating team.

The assistant principal kept the meetings on task and productive. She began each meeting with an update of accomplishments from the previous

Motivation to join the team was high because of a strong commitment among school personnel to improve student achievement.

meeting, and she continually praised the efforts of team members. Meetings were characterized by feelings of warmth and empathy among team members. Early success with the organization of welcoming activities provided the team with tangible results and maintained momentum for change efforts. In addition, presentations from outside speakers provided a foundation for community linkages.

When team members were asked what changes had occurred as a result of adopting the enabling component, most team members cited better communication among support staff and increased awareness of individual efforts. Team members did not mention changes in their individual roles at the school but felt that the creation of the resource coordinating team produced a forum for team members to "meet, exchange ideas, and make suggestions." One team member commented, "there's a greater understanding and appreciation for all the work that we are all doing individually. We are certainly more aware of all the services that we are providing."

However, perceptions of change were not all positive. Several team members felt that the functioning of support services within their school was no different than before resource coordination efforts. One team member explained, "The efforts are more focused, more coordinated, but other than that, I don't know what to say. I can't really differentiate because of LEARN, and before that, we did all of this with this principal. It's hard to say what has changed. . . . It's hard to tell what all these changes are."

When asked what were the strengths of the resource coordinating team, team members reported better coordination of resources, an ability to communicate and share ideas with each other, and a sense of strong com-

mitment from other team members. When asked about perceived weaknesses, time constraints were most often cited. Some team members felt frustrated spending so much time in meetings when there were children needing direct services. Others felt frustrated with the amount of time spent writing plans rather than implementing programs. One team member reported, "so far we have just been brainstorming, not implementing. . . . There has been nothing tangible or concrete." Other weaknesses included team members feeling uncomfortable with new roles and responsibilities. One team member mentioned that some support personnel did not feel comfortable assuming leadership roles for which they were not trained.

When team members were asked how satisfied they were with their school's current efforts at restructuring, most team members expressed a high level of satisfaction (mean rating of 5.0 using a six-point scale, with 6 = very satisfied). Several team members felt satisfied because of the commitment level of other team members. However, members felt there was still more to be done and expressed frustration at the slow pace of change. One member felt the team wanted to do more but was confined by the everyday needs in running the school.

Role of the Organizational Facilitator

The organizational facilitator played an important role in creating readiness for reform and helping phase in the resource coordinating team. In describing strategies used to create readiness, the organizational facilitator said she began her efforts with schools that expressed interest in the change process; she tailored

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team meetings and provided technical assistance and support to individual members between meetings.

The preliminary findings suggest that members perceived the creation of the collaborative team positively and valued the outcomes of their efforts. Whether the teams continue to work together in a collaborative manner to coordinate services remains to be seen. Examination of the efforts at these two schools in the second year will illuminate the extent to which momentum for change is maintained.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Restructuring movements in education and social services, in progress throughout the nation, have important implications for the role of school social workers. Social workers in schools must function as "case managers, chairs of transdisciplinary assessment teams, interdisciplinary team builders, technical training advisors, program planners, policymakers, and policy influencers" (Aguirre, 1995, p. 222). School social workers need to become more active in leadership and policy-making roles to highlight the need to expand traditional school services (Allen-Meares, 1994). Clearly, reform efforts in schools and communities provide an excellent opportunity for school social workers to take a leadership role in restructuring systems to better address barriers to learning.

In this pilot project, school social workers were used as organizational facilitators because their training makes them well suited for a role as change agents. The types of skills needed encompass traditional community organization skills, such as consensus building, problem solving, and acting as a catalyst for change (Rothman & Tropman, 1987). As

change agents, school social workers can expand their role beyond provision of direct services to become team leaders, advocates, and capacity builders at macro levels of practice in school systems.

School social workers are also spending increasingly more time working in interdisciplinary teams, which suggests that they should become knowledgeable about the "orientation and values of other professionals in educational settings" (Radin, 1989, p. 223) such as psychologists, nurses, and special education staff. School social workers and other professionals need to engage in active dialogue with school and community leaders about new directions and models. In times of limited resources for education, health, and social services, collaboration is essential.

How well prepared are school social workers to assume these expanded roles? Those participating on school-based resource coordinating teams generally had not been trained to carry out the roles and functions involved in restructuring their programs and services. Universities and professional development programs are just beginning to explore the value of interprofessional collaborative programs that cross-train practitioners from disciplines such as social work, psychology, education, and public health (Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1994). At a minimum, schools of social work offering a school social work specialization need to emphasize community organization methods designed to develop change agent and policy advocacy skills. To survive and grow as a profession, school social workers must gain expertise in instituting and coordinating systemic change and learn to maneuver among interdisciplinary collaborative teams. ■

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