By Linda Rosenblum, Mary Beth DiCecco,
Linda Taylor, and Howard S. Adelman

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Upgrading School
Support Programs
through Collaboration:
Resource Coordinating
Teams

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Given the difficulty of collaborating effectively, it is not surprising that many school support services, programs, and projects are developed in isolation of each other and with no formal linkages to off-site resources. The problem is further exacerbated by the long-standing history of school personnel working alone—teachers in their respective classrooms, support service workers in different sites on different days. One inevitable result is piecemeal interventions rather than development of an integrated programmatic approach. Critics see this fragmentation as reducing effectiveness and failing to maximize use of limited and often shrinking resources. In reaction to this state of affairs, there are widespread calls for coordination and integration (Adelman, 1993; Adelman & Taylor, 1993a, 1993b; Buettens & Kern, 1991; Center for the Future of Children Staff, 1992; Dryfoos, 1993; Hodgkinson, 1989; Kagan, Rivera, & Parker, 1990; Kirst, 1991).

Proposals for coordination and integration are easy to make. The hard work begins with the decision to develop a strategy. This article describes the concept of a school-based resource coordinating team as a mechanism for collaboration and the concept of an organization facilitator as a mechanism for institutionalizing such teams. The

Policymakers have called for increased coordination and integration of services and programs. This article presents the concept of a school-based resource coordinating team as a mechanism for enhancing collaboration among school support services and programs. The discussion outlines the use of social workers as organization facilitators in developing and maintaining such teams; also highlighted are some of the challenges encountered in the process.

Key words: change agents; organizational change; program collaboration; service coordination

article details some of the challenges the authors have encountered in establishing teams and how we are dealing with them. The article concludes with a brief note of caution about premature outcome accountability.

Mechanisms for Improving Collaboration

The work reported in this article is being carried out in the Los Angeles Unified School District as part of a demonstration project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Initially, the project provided a special intervention program at 24 schools for students not making a successful adjustment to school (Adelman & Taylor, 1991). The intent was to integrate the program into each school in ways that meshed with other related support

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services, programs, and special projects. Surprisingly, there was no institutionalized structure at the schools for doing this. That is, there was no collaborative mechanism in place for coordination and integration of resources. To address this problem, the project was broadened to encompass the development and institutionalization of a school-based collaborative team to facilitate resource coordination, integration, maintenance, and development, which we call a "resource coordinating team." (Participating schools often adopt their own names; at one school, the group is called the "Help! Team.") To introduce this structural mechanism at school sites, the project has created organization facilitators. These individuals are conceived as catalysts and developers of systemic change. To carry out these functions for the project, school social workers were recruited and provided with specialized training for their new role.

Resource Coordinating Team

A resource coordinating team exemplifies the type of on-site organizational mechanism needed for overall cohesion and coordination of school support programs for students and families. Minimally, such a team can reduce fragmentation and enhance cost-effectiveness by helping programs to function in a coordinated and increasingly integrated way. For example, the team can develop communication mechanisms among school staff and can develop methods of communicating to homes information about available assistance and referral processes; the team can coordinate resources and monitor programs to ensure that they are functioning effectively and efficiently. More generally, this group can provide leadership in guiding school personnel and clients in evolving the school's vision for its support program (for example, as not only preventing and correcting learn-

ing, behavior, emotional, and health problems but also contributing to classroom efforts to foster academic, social, emotional, and physical functioning). The group also can help identify ways to improve existing resources and acquire additional ones. Major examples of the group's activity are

• identifying and preparing a list of available resources (programs, personnel, special projects, services, agencies) at the school, in the district, and in the community

• clarifying how school staff and families can gain access to resources

• refining and clarifying referral, triage, and case management processes to ensure that resources are used appropriately ("appropriately" meaning where they are needed most, in keeping with the principle of adopting the least intervention needed, with provision for referral follow-through)

• mediating problems related to resource allocation and scheduling

• ensuring maintenance of needed resources

• exploring ways to improve and augment existing resources to ensure that a wider range are available (for example, encouraging preventive approaches, developing linkages with other district and community programs, and facilitating relevant staff development).

Team membership typically includes representatives of all activities designed to support a school's teaching efforts (for example, school psychologist, nurse, counselor, social worker, key special education staff), along with someone representing the governing body (for example, an assistant principal). Also included are representatives of community agencies already connected with the school; others are invited to join the team as they become involved.

The team meets as needed. Initially, this may mean once a week. Later, when meetings are scheduled for every

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two to three weeks, continuity and momentum can be maintained through interim tasks performed by individuals or subgroups. Because some participants are at a school on a part-time basis, one of the problems that must be addressed is that of rescheduling personnel so that there is an overlapping time for meeting together. Of course, the reality is that not all team members will be able to attend every meeting, but a good approximation can be made at each meeting, and steps can be taken to keep others informed about what was done.

For many support service personnel, their past experiences of working in isolation—and in competition— make this collaborative opportunity unusual; collaboration requires that they learn new ways of relating and functioning. For those concerned with school restructuring, establishment of such a team can be seen as one facet of restructuring school support services in ways that integrate them with school-based or school-linked support programs, special projects, and teams and that involve reaching out and linking with community health and social service resources (Adelman, 1993).

Organization Facilitator

As the concept of a resource coordinating team indicates, some degree of organizational shift is required to improve collaboration among school personnel, between school and community professionals, and between professionals and families. Organizational research indicates that there usually is resistance to institutional changes and that even when demonstration programs are implemented, they tend not to be maintained over the long run (Argyris, 1993; Braiger & Holloway, 1978; Brookover, 1981; Connor & Lake, 1988; Fullan, Miles, & Taylor, 1980; Sarason, 1982). Therefore, it is essential to develop mechanisms and procedures that maximize the likeli-

hood that new ideas and programs are not only tried but also maintained. Based on the organizational literature, creation of an appropriate climate for change requires at least the following conditions:

• appropriate incentives for change (for example, intrinsically valued outcomes, expectations of success, recognitions, rewards)

• procedural options so that those who are expected to implement change can select one they see as workable

• establishment of mechanisms to facilitate the efforts of those who have responsibility for installing change (for example, participatory decision making, special training, resources, procedures designed to improve organizational health)

• agents of change who are perceived as pragmatic rather than idealistic

• planned transition or phasing in of changes (for example, facilitating readiness)

• appropriate feedback regarding progress of change activity

• ongoing support mechanisms to maintain changes as long as they remain appropriate.

Building on what is known about organizational change, the authors are evolving a model for use in addressing the establishment, ongoing development, and long-term maintenance of school-based programs (Adelman & Taylor, 1993b). Because the work involves facilitating significant changes in the structure and operation of a school, the model is built around the idea of a small cadre of change agents called "organization facilitators." Although many school professionals (especially those involved in support services) can be trained for this role, the project used school social workers because the nature of their training makes them especially well suited to learning the functions of this change agent role of consultation and collaboration with school personnel to promote a school

environment responsive to the needs of children.

At each school participating in the project, the authors offered to help organize a resource coordinating team. An organization facilitator was to go to a school site the equivalent of one day a week for several months to help organize such a team. Given the number of schools with which we were working, two full-time professionals were employed. Each was trained to understand major concepts and strategies for organizational change with specific emphasis on the matters outlined above.

An organization facilitator accomplishes his or her work through on-site demonstrations and on-the-job training for school personnel who are to adapt, implement, and maintain a resource coordinating team. The work is pursued in three sequential steps, each involving a variety of tasks and taking different periods of time to accomplish. In practice, the time varies with the organization facilitator's degree of skill and the commitment and skill of key staff members at a school site. Each step is designed to create the conditions necessary to establish a resource coordinating team as an institutionalized mechanism for enhancing service and program collaboration at a school site.

Development of a Team

The first step involves a set of readiness and initial implementation tasks related to initiating the on-site process such as reaching out to establish a working relationship with key staff members and underscoring incentives for change and procedural options. The second step encompasses developing and institutionalizing on-site operational mechanisms to maintain and evolve desired activity such as addressing policy, resource, and training considerations in a pragmatic way. The third set of tasks includes ongoing

monitoring and support to ensure the continuing functional integrity and evolution (that is, the institutionalization) of the activity. The key steps and related tasks as they are intended to be applied to resource coordinating teams are outlined briefly in the following sections and are elaborated in a guidebook developed by the project as a program, training, and supervisory aid (Early Assistance for Students and Families, 1993). Enumerating the steps is infinitely easier than carrying them out.

Initiating the Process. The organization facilitator begins the process by making a presentation of the program to the decision makers at a school and arriving at an agreement with respect to establishing and maintaining the team. A policy commitment is made, members of the school community are identified as prospective team members, and a commitment is made that the school will maintain and evolve the team after the organization facilitator moves on to another school. In making agreements, it is essential that each participating school understands that the organizer's primary role is to help establish mechanisms that will allow the school to maintain and evolve the team.

After agreements are made, the organization facilitator makes individual appointments to talk with those who have been nominated for the team. The focus of the dialogue is to determine individual interest in participating and to identify who wants to play a major role. After these dialogues, a meeting of the group is held. The agenda for the initial meeting is one of clarifying roles and functions, mutual sharing, and planning. Key agenda items are identifying other possible team members to be contacted, identifying existing services and programs at the school (including identifying any problems related to their use, coordination, and integration), and discussing how to

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proceed (for example, how to adapt the concept of a resource coordinating team to fit the school and how to introduce the team to school staff, parents, and students). Toward the end of the meeting, the group schedules a follow-up time to work on specific implementation plans. Initially, the organizer's role is to delineate the group's agenda, facilitate the meeting, and prepare the minutes. The goal is to have the team take over its own facilitation after a few sessions.

As noted earlier, subsequent sessions are devoted to clarifying for the school staff and students' families the existing resources at the school and in the community and how to gain access to these resources (for example, referral, triage, and follow-through procedures). At the same time, the group focuses on enhancing resource coordination and staff collaboration (for example, refining case management and system management procedures) and clarifies resources that are needed and the possible steps for acquiring them (for example, additional resources that may be available through the school district or through brokering to establish formal linkages with community agencies).

Shortly after the first meeting, a presentation at a school staff meeting or at subgroup meetings is in order so that all are aware of the program. Also, if feasible, a presentation should be made at a general parents' meeting so that they are aware and have a chance to volunteer to help. Afterwards, school staff and parents should receive periodic updates (for example, through announcements, reports, newsletter).

Developing Mechanisms for Maintenance. Once the team is implemented, its maintenance and continuing development require institutionalized processes. The organizer's role is to help develop a growing appreciation of the team, help the school staff understand the importance of mechanisms that maintain and evolve the

team, and then aid in institutionalizing essential maintenance mechanisms.

Providing Ongoing Support. After mechanisms are created, they must be monitored and supported to ensure that functional integrity is maintained and that the program evolves appropriately. The key task of the organization facilitator is to return to a school periodically (for example, as requested or on a regular schedule) to support the efforts of school-based staff to maintain and evolve the team's role and functions.

On the basis of available evidence, the authors anticipate that an organization facilitator with good training, support, and supervision will need up to eight hours per week for several months in carrying out the first two sets of tasks and up to an additional eight hours a month for the third set. Thus, one full-time professional should be able to cover about five schools at a time and rotate through 10 schools a year in two cycles of about four to five months each. Of course, as more and more monitoring and follow-up support are needed, some adjustment in numbers will be required.

Challenges in Establishing and Maintaining Collaboration Teams

It is relatively easy to conceive structural and operational mechanisms such as a resource coordinating team to enhance program collaboration at a school site, and the concept of an organization facilitator is a rather straightforward approach to the problem of establishing such mechanisms. Unfortunately, turning these concepts into effective practice is not an easy matter (for example, see Argyris, 1993; Sarason, 1982).

At each stage, problems can be anticipated that are more than a bit frustrating. Every change agent, of course, must be prepared to deal with barriers to change and the dynamics of change, but the problems are often disheartening. For example, on a mundane level, he or she may encounter constant

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scheduling and priority conflicts ("I would like to cooperate, but I can't make the meeting." "I already have so much to do, I don't have time for another meeting."). School staff often function reactively rather than proactively because competing demands and priorities make it difficult to stop doing long enough to plan ways to do things better. Problems also arise with respect to territoriality ("That's my job!"). Staff can raise concerns during discussions of the forms of coordination needed, ideas for integrating programs, and who is qualified to provide designated services. Particularly vociferous reactions may arise when discussing collaborations with community agencies who offer or are contracted to provide services at schools.

In dealing with the various problems as they have emerged in relation to creating resource coordinating teams, the key challenges have been to overcome participants' feelings of distrust and to enhance their motivation and skills for collaboration (including their sense of empowerment with respect to really feeling they own the team). Our experience supports the widely held view that trust among collaborative team members grows only after they learn to validate each other's contributions. Motivation and skills seem to develop best when the process is structured in a way that facilitates communication and provides support and direction. Thus, the authors have found it essential for groups to establish a clear agenda, have regular contacts, designate a leader, make a record of plans and assignments for follow-up by individuals or subgroups, and frequently review their accomplishments to reassure themselves that the team is worth the time and energy. Reviewing progress is especially important because it validates a team's efforts; in this respect, special recognition should be accorded each product the group generates (for example, a flow chart of the referral process, a list of resources at the school and in the community, a handbook on how to organize and coordinate resources).

Those who work in large school districts may imagine that collaboration is easier in smaller towns with fewer staff who have to get to know each other. It is likely, however, in all settings that those who are asked to collaborate must come to feel they have a lot to gain by working together and that their efforts will be effective.

Premature Outcome Accountability

Sometimes a project staff member will bemoan, "If only I were a bricklayer, I'd see progress at the end of each day." In many ways, collaborative work can be perceived as akin to bricklaying. Developing a resource coordinating team at a school is like building the foundation for a house. The team is part of an enhanced infrastructure on which a remodeled set of programs can be erected. Properly designed, the new edifice ultimately should be a better framework for overcoming barriers interfering with student learning and functioning. Those who are involved in building new infrastructures and restructuring existing approaches must learn to appreciate their contribution to structure and function because they cannot expect to see improved student outcomes until the new structure is completed and operating appropriately.

Similarly, in calling for increased collaboration, policymakers must recognize the complexity of accomplishing effective program coordination and integration. Although the desire for immediate evidence of efficacy is understandable (especially in light of the unfulfilled promise of so many programs and the insatiable demands on limited public finances), naive accountability demands can be counterproductive to serious reform efforts. The

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major organizational changes required cannot simply be mandated, and early progress in accomplishing the desired changes cannot be assessed through data on immediate student or family outcomes. Accountability in the early stages of such activity must be measured in terms of the success of the institutional changes per se. For instance, during the first stages of our work, we use evaluation in a formative way; that is, we only gather data that can inform our organizational change efforts. When implementing the first step, for example, the focus is on how well we are able to elicit policy agreements for establishing resource coordinating teams and whether we are able to enhance the motivation and skills of team members so that they actually collaborate.

After the teams are properly developed, we will gather data on the degree to which the efficacy of support services and programs is enhanced. In coming years, we will also investigate whether the teams are maintained and whether collaborative cooperation leads to integration of programs in cases where integration is appropriate.

Conclusion

Increased coordination and integration of services can only happen on a large scale through the establishment and maintenance of structural and operational mechanisms designed to enhance collaboration. The concept of a resource coordinating team illustrates one such mechanism being tested at school sites. Development of such mechanisms requires a process for facilitating systemic change. The concept of an organization facilitator illustrates how professionals (for example, school social workers) can function as catalysts and developers of systemic change.

The difficulties in creating structures that enhance integrative collaboration in organizations such as schools are well documented. It is clear that the desired changes will be accomplished only after clarifying what mechanisms are needed, learning how to construct them, and demonstrating their efficacy. This all requires a lengthy timeline and avoidance of premature demands for proof of cost-effectiveness.

At the risk of belaboring the metaphor, change agents and those who call for change must value the bricks and mortar and each step in the construction process. If they do not appreciate the signs of progress, they may abort the process in search of quick, prefabricated edifices that have no lasting value. It is a fantasy to think that effective collaboration can be accomplished without investing the time and resources to develop, maintain, and evolve potent mechanisms. ■

About the Authors

Linda Rosenblum, MSW, LCSW, is social worker, School Mental Health Unit, Los Angeles Unified School District, 6651 Balboa Boulevard, Van Nuys, CA 91406. Mary Beth DiCecco, MSW, LCSW, is social worker, and Linda Taylor, PhD, LCPsych, is project director, School Mental Health Unit, Los Angeles Unified School District, Van Nuys, CA. Howard S. Adelman, PhD, LCPsych, is professor, University of California, Los Angeles.

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