

CHILDREN AND FAMILY FUTURES

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Lessons of Three Decades of Coordination Efforts

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Proposals to coordinate federal (and state) programs in urban areas date back to the early 1960's, when federal planners first realized that there were dozens of federal programs flowing into cities in fragmented, categorical streams of funding and policy. Both the original community action program of 1964 and the Model Cities legislation of 1966 explicitly sought such coordination in urban areas as part of their legislative mandate. The first congressional hearings on categorical fragmentation and its effects on state and local government were held by Sen. Muskie in 1966, more than 32 years ago.

These ideas for coordination persist— and they should, since today's system is far more fragmented than that of earlier times. In many ways, the grail of coordinated federal programs in urban areas is nearer at hand today—and more needed. The system of the late 90's is (1) more fragmented, with more categorical programs and restrictions, despite recent consolidations, (2) more automated, enabling use of geocoding to inventory where the dollars actually are going and where they are coming from and (3) more capable of accountability, with expanded use of outcomes as a basis for assessing programs' effectiveness rather than simply counting clients served or units of treatment provided.

Given this greater urgency and potential capacity, to launch new efforts without knowing the history of the past efforts is not only naive— it is irresponsible, since not knowing the past is, as Santayana so forcefully states, being condemned to repeat it. The lessons are there— they need to be debated and discussed in depth before proceeding down well-trodden paths as if it were a maiden voyage.

Lessons:

1. Pilot projects are easy to start and very hard to take to scale. Lisbeth Schorr has written an entire book on this principle, and recent work on innovation at the intersection of substance abuse and the child welfare system has cited her work and that of others.ⁱ
2. It takes White House or OMB-level coordinative authority to make federal agencies cooperate on anything other than issuing press releases. A single federal agency announcing that it is going to “coordinate with” other federal agencies means very little; a reality test is whether that federal agency has yet been able to coordinate its own community-targeted programs first. Federal

agencies' own initiatives will often form a set of "parallel reforms" in communities that lack any relationship to each other across federal agencies and may undermine local efforts to achieve consensus outcomes.ⁱⁱ

3. Federal technical assistance will invariably be categorical in nature and will rarely cut across program areas that go beyond the expertise and experience of the federal categorical officials charged with providing technical assistance to states and localities. A recent DHHS task force on technical assistance headed by Beryl Radin concluded that significant changes were needed in federal technical assistance in order to provide more useful assistance to states and communities.

4. Many federal "barriers" to state blending of funds turn out to be non-existent or easily waivable with state requests. At times it is far more convenient for state officials to blame federal barriers than to make the effort within state agencies to remove barriers that are state-mandated or have grown up out of state practice without ever being set forth as policy.

5. The federal funds that are most visible— project grants and discretionary funding— are temporary in nature, as opposed to federal formula grants and ongoing funding in programs such as TANF, child welfare, Medicaid, and substance abuse block grants. These funding streams are much larger, but much less visible to local coordinative efforts. A serious coordination effort must include a redirection strategy, however, since these funds are so much larger than federal project grants. In addition, the federal "market share" of funding for areas such as education or law enforcement may be very small, relative to state and local investments, and coordinating federal funding may therefore be far less significant than coordinating existing funding in state and local budgets.

6. Governors have far more incentives to fragment their allocation of funds across the state than to coordinate it, since coordination may mean that some places get more than what others perceive to be their "fair share" of funding. Coordination means that resources are at times concentrated, not proliferated— and proliferation is what gets more votes in the legislature for programs. Widely dispersed, token-level funding of multiple small projects throughout a state is one of the most important reasons that state programs never reach critical mass and thus never achieve permanent results or go to scale. If coordination efforts are serious, they will address this lack of critical mass, either by matching requirements or by making two levels of grants: major investments where there is strong local capacity to make changes and smaller "presence" funding where it is important to show visibility.

7. Community involvement matters to coordination efforts; coordination which is top-down will invariably fail.

8. Coordination efforts will also fail to the extent that they are merely "bottom-up" efforts in which a neighborhood is told "here are the programs— now go coordinate them"(or ignore them and go start your own, which other efforts have attempted).

9. Shared outcomes are the best basis for coordinative efforts– and the most difficult to develop without serious commitment to an interagency process and the time it takes to go through such a process and the leadership it takes to keep it moving and keep it from degenerating into a discussion group or an irrelevant seminar. “Coordinating programs” is meaningless unless there exists a strong consensus on *why* the programs are to be coordinated–on what measures of success will show that coordinated programs are making a difference in a community.

10. The tools of coordination are partly technical in nature and must be available and fully staffed in order to be effective. They include

- a. Geocoding allocations
- b. A comprehensive inventory of spending in a given jurisdiction
- c. A “report card” on neighborhood, community, or county-level indicators of progress and local conditions
- d. Adequate fiscal data on the costs and potential cost offsets of programs
- e. Management and client information systems adequate to track clients over time and measure their progress in programs and sufficiently detailed to gather useful client outcomes data over time and distinguish the relative success of clients with different characteristics, i.e. the risk and positive factors that promote better client outcomes

11. Place-based strategies must take into account the mobility of American families and the special mobility of lower-income, working families, who move whenever they can get into a better community than the one they seek to leave. For more than 35 years, place-based strategies have been ambivalent about this reality, but the social force of mobility in American life– the very forces that *built* Arizona and the West–are far more powerful than a few “coordinated” federal or state programs dropped into a given neighborhood. People seek to improve their family’s living conditions, their schooling, and their safety– and that means leaving some neighborhoods that lack these qualities and moving to those that are better. So many of the most mobile, most energetic families are unlikely to wait for conditions to get better once their own family income enables them to leave. This does not mean that place-based strategies should be abandoned– but that they should be measured realistically against how many families leave a targeted area, not just how the area as a whole does, since newcomers are usually coming into such areas all the time.

12. Coordination strategies need to take market forces into account, not only in addressing issues of family mobility, but in addressing the economic incentives for neighborhood change. Some extraordinary progress has been made in the work of the Local Initiative Support Corporation supported by several national foundations for a sustained period. A few of the Enterprise Zones/Empowerment Communities have achieved such success, but most of these have remained smaller-scale efforts.

Lesson	Response Needed	Degree of difficulty [1-5]
1. Pilot projects rarely go to scale	Design initiatives to include replication issues at first (see Schorr)	5
2. Federal interagency coordination efforts require top-level support; separate reforms undermine local efforts	Test federal interagency support in the early stages of a "federal-state initiative"	2 to test;5 to do
3. Federal TA will be categorical	Don't rely on federal TA	1
4. Federal barriers are often state barriers	Document barriers carefully and test state authority before blaming federal agencies	3
5. Focusing on federal grants ignores the need for a redirection agenda	An adequate inventory of current spending will show the proportions of old and new funds; a redirection strategy needs to be explicit	5
6. State-level fragmentation results from strong political motives and blocks critical mass funding	Consider matching requirements and two tiers of grants	5
7. Top-down coordination won't work	Plan for adequate community involvement in coordination efforts and sufficient capacity-building to assure that community players have time and information needed to do their part	3
8. Bottom-up coordination won't work	Provide community-based groups with inventories about where spending is concentrated; develop a redirection strategy for funds already in the community	4
9. Shared outcomes are the best glue for a collaborative	Build in the time needed to achieve a genuine consensus on what outcomes the collaborative will accept as fair measures of its progress	3
10. Specific technical tools are needed in coordinative work	Build in capacity investments; self-assess readiness to use needed tools; support local coordination efforts with adequate staffing and staff development	3
11. Place-based strategies are affected by family mobility	Collect information on current mobility patterns in targeted neighborhoods and communities	2
12. Private sector roles and market incentives are critical to community change	Grant-driven coordinative efforts must plan carefully to factor in private investment and market incentives, and not assume that small public funding can trigger large private investment	3

In conclusion, because their work is so directly relevant to this paper, it is useful to quote at length from a paper developed by Peter Edelman and Beryl Radin "Effective Services for Children and Families: Lessons from the Past and Strategies for the Future." Edelman and Radin cite five lessons at the end of their thoughtful review of the "myths of the 60's" and the "myths of the 80's," suggesting that the era of the 1990's demands a synthesis of the lessons of both prior eras:

We offer five lessons for the future:

1. Modesty and Humility. We have learned that the social change we have attempted (and want to attempt in the future) is extremely difficult to achieve. We are still far from knowing enough about what actually works and what does not, even though we know much more than we did in 1960 (and if we had the political will to fund fully the things that we know are successful, we would be far better off than we are now). While we want a society in which all citizens have hope for the future, we cannot raise expectations beyond some point of real possibility. Thus, even though we may seek to intervene in a few places in as massive a way as possible, we must at the same time do so cautiously, without grand promises and with the knowledge that we have embarked on a somewhat risky path. Panacea solutions of any kind are likely to fail.

2. Limited Resources. Few have to be reminded that programs for children and families are expensive, and it is extremely difficult to obtain funding for them in this era of budget limitation. While we know this, we sometimes have to be reminded that we have other resource limitations. Some of these limitations are of our own making and could be addressed. We do not have adequate expertise to guide our action. It has often been difficult to obtain support for program evaluation efforts and other data collection and monitoring schemes that provide program managers with information to use to modify ongoing programs. And we have found that time is also a scarce resource. Even small demonstration programs take much more time to put into operation than we usually give them. Frequently, the political system is not willing to wait for programs to develop before assessing their impact.

3. Diversity. Over the past 30 years we have learned a lot about the diversity of situations and populations around the country. We have been forced to acknowledge that the idiosyncracies of a state, locality, or even a neighborhood can determine the effectiveness of a particular program. We have recognized the importance of beginning programs or projects with a mapping of local perceptions of needs and finding ways to ensure a sense of participation and ownership by those who are the recipients of the services. At the same time, we have learned that change requires partnerships between many different actors: the professionals who actually deliver the services; the elected officials who must provide the

resources for them, at least when they come to be replicated on a broad scale; the citizens who are the consumers of the services; and the administrators and managers at national, state, and local levels.

4. Complexity. Much of the negative perception about past programs stems from the unintended consequences that emerged from them. Seemingly simple strategies for change opened up numerous Pandora's boxes and created problems that seemed neverending. For example, a decision by a community to open up a multiservice center may confront an array of licensing and other bureaucratic requirements that effectively kills the effort. Similarly, schemes to address one set of problems may create other problems, particularly when eligibility requirements are affected.

5. Synergy. We know that the problems faced by children and families are interrelated and interdependent. While public safety, available jobs, school improvement, and affordable housing are separate problems, they are also closely related when we are talking about areas of concentrated poverty. Although for many families, even in such areas, there are single interventions that may have great impact, we have learned that others need multiple service interventions and still others need the benefit that comes from efforts to restore the basic institutions that make up a community. As we devise new schemes for the future, we are challenged to find ways to construct programs that have the ability to build on one another and operate in a related way.

We are well aware that these lessons pose a major dilemma. On one hand, the lessons of humility, complexity, and resource limitations counsel efforts at modest, incremental approaches to change. On the other, at least insofar as the problem of concentrated, intense, highly impacted poverty areas is concerned, it is time to seek a few demonstrations that are comprehensive on a synergistic scale never before attempted.

Conclusion

The last of these— synergy— is a fair test of any proposed initiative, and suggests that four clear questions be given clear answers before proceeding:

1. Have the state and its participating communities identified the resources now in the areas to be targeted in enough depth to be able to develop a redirection agenda, or is the initiative seeking new funding without regard to existing funds?
2. What measures of success or progress have participating agencies agreed to use to assess the outcomes of their efforts annually?
3. Is the proposed federal role one where federal agencies have developed experience in

blending their funding with state and local resources and have those agencies demonstrated their capacity to link new efforts with prior federal initiatives?

4. Are the state and local agencies and community-based organizations whose efforts are essential to success fully engaged in the planning, and what top-level budget and policy incentives do they have for continuing these efforts?

Notes

i. Schorr, L. (1998) Common Purpose. New York: Doubleday.; Young, N., Gardner, S. and Dennis, K.(1998) Responding to Alcohol and other Drug Problems in the Child Welfare System: Weaving Together Practice and Policy. Washington, D. C.: Child Welfare League of America.

ii. Blanchette, C. (1997) At-risk and delinquent youth: Multiple programs lack coordinated federal effort. Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office GAO T-HEHS-98-38.