Supporting Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems: What does Research Tell Us?

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Wisdom from Lisbeth Schorr

Why your work as bridge builders, connectors, and systems changers is so crucial – and so hard

"It's hard in part because when you leave the safety of replicating individual programs that have been proven successful by elegant experimental evaluations, you have to turn to other ways of determining what works.

It's also hard because the money, the training, the construction of the knowledge base -- they're all done in silos, they're all categorical. And when you try to cross those boundaries -- to get the missing mental health expertise injected into child care centers, or the child development orientation into the child welfare system, or the parent support center to connect families to medical homes or to partner with the drug treatment program -- you're pushing a mighty boulder up a very steep mountain."

Definition: System

• A system is a set of interacting units with relationships among them.
  • UNITS are coupled in some way.
  • SET implies units share some properties.
  • Each unit is constrained by, conditioned by, and dependent upon the status of other units.
  • Managing a system typically means to find common goals and have fixed decisions
  • This theory doesn't work for LOOSELY COUPLED SYSTEMS.

Loosely Coupled Systems

• As "organizational" size increases
• As environments become more complex
• As relationships become less direct
• When people view problems differently
  – disagree about cause and effect
  – hold different definitions
  – see different realities
  – have varied levels of commitment.


5 Steps for Changing Loosely Coupled Systems

• Create doubt
  – e.g. change assumptions, problem definition, challenge existing logic
• Shift structures and "resocialize"
• Increase participation, direct impact
• Fix the disconnects and linkages
• Augment information exchange
Many variations, similar purposes

• States have created networks of local collaboratives to coordinate and manage the delivery of comprehensive, community-based services to families.
  – Typically partnerships
  – Varied forms, functions, and financing strategies
  – New structures for connecting stakeholders and reorganizing resources to support more comprehensive, integrated services

Principles for Comprehensive Community Collaboratives

• Results orientation
• Attention to governance relationships
• Community involvement & engagement
• Strategic financing
• Adaptable to changing conditions

Sample of ECCS Efforts to Support Local Systems Development

• AZ First Things First
• CO Smart Start & Early Childhood Councils Act
• CT Early Childhood Partners, plus 4 demos
• IL Birth to Five Project & All Our Kids (AOK) Network
• IA Community Empowerment
• KY Kids Now & Community Early Childhood Councils
• MI Great Start & local collaboratives
• OK Smart Start
• VT Building Bright Futures & Regional Affiliate Councils
• WA Kids Matter & Building Connections to "communities in practice"

Resources & References

• Community Tool Box — ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/

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