

Still Fragmented, After All These Years

In 1988, with the help of a gifted editor, Bruce Kelly, I wrote an article titled “Failure by Fragmentation.” It was published by California Tomorrow, where I was then working, and reprints have somehow found their way into thousands of conference and workshop packets across the nation.

It has been very gratifying to know that this article has helped illuminate the work done by thousands of people on these issues. But it is somewhat frustrating, too, to know that fragmentation is today widely acknowledged as a problem that affects children and families, but still *so widely practiced at the same time*.

In fact, I believe it is possible to make a case that fragmentation is a more serious problem for services for children and families today than it was in 1988. Not only is the problem more evident; we are no longer taking fragmentation seriously. Instead we are taking it for granted, or we are failing to see it at all because it has become normal, like fish experiencing water. What water, say the fish? What fragmentation, say those who work with children and families? That’s just the way the system *is*. Now let’s get on with our new initiative!

It sometimes seems that the emperors of fragmentation are walking around without a stitch of clothing on, and because they are funders, or politicians we like, or local officials we work with, we smile and say how nice their clothes look today. Those clothes take the form of each new initiative, launched down a parallel track, as though there were no other programs aimed at that problem or those children and families.

What is the evidence for this finding of worsening fragmentation?

- < Welfare reform, which is preoccupying many providers and advocates in the children and families field, is being implemented in a fragmented way in most communities and only in a few is it being used to pull programs together.
- < Foundation initiatives have in some large and medium-sized metropolitan areas, begun to proliferate to a point where the locals chuckle about the latest RFP that they have received and how much it reads like the last one. A few foundations have begun to try to work together, but the norm is still taking a proposal to a board and claiming that “no one else is really trying to do this.”
- < Education reform is proceeding with a classroom-only focus down an almost totally separate track from the other school-based reforms aimed at career readiness, school-linked family support programs, and early childhood initiatives that seek school readiness outcomes among younger children.
- < New juvenile delinquency prevention programs, or positive youth development programs, as they have been re-labeled in some communities, are launched in the form of new centers or services that ignore all the prior prevention programs that aim at violence, teen pregnancy, alcohol, tobacco, or drug abuse, or other risky adolescent behavior; new layers of youth programs come in on top of the old layers, but very few communities yet have an annual budget for all youth spending or an annual report card for key indicators of youth

problems and progress. Since 1964, more than two dozen separate prevention programs aimed at youth have been begun by the federal government alone.

- < At the neighborhood level in some communities, family resource centers, family support programs, school-based centers, after-school centers, and multiservice centers housing public agency teams of workers all exist separately from each other. Sacramento County recently did an inventory of all neighborhood-based programs in the city which resulted in a matrix describing millions of dollars of staffing and facilities which no one had ever mapped or added up before.
- < At a recent statewide conference aimed at moving “from pilots to policy,” three legislators came to the conference armed with proposals for new categorical pilot projects. What is worse, there is increasing evidence that term limits accentuates the narrow-gauge view of categorical legislation as the way that short-term legislators can “leave their mark.”

In some communities, the problem is worsened by the practice of fragmenting by ethnicity. As Keith Choy from San Francisco has put it in numerous meetings over the years, to the great amusement of some and the distress of others, “when you have to have programs for blue-eyed Samoan cross-dressers and every other imaginable group, the money gets spread very thinly.”

Of course programs should be culturally sensitive to the groups they serve, and of course we should recognize how few programs today really are. We can stipulate that large public and nonprofit agencies have great difficulty responding to specific groups’ needs and strengths. But a program for nearly every group, which is where the logic of some of the ethnic fund-slicing has headed, is ultimately destructive of the effort to find “common ground” as well as celebrating and understanding diversity. It also makes it far more difficult to take an excellent pilot project to scale, as we slice and dice programs across dozens of different ethnic and geographically defined groups.

The answer? It is *not* seeking the grail of fully comprehensive, coordinated initiatives. We have a categorical funding system and a federal delivery structure because we live in a large, diverse nation, which has chosen for more than a century to operate a wide variety of social welfare programs in both public and private sectors. Coordinating all of those programs with each other would be hopelessly complex and largely a waste of time. But the opposite extreme, allowing each initiative to compete or fade away as though they were brands of cereal or cars, is wasteful of scarce resources that are intended to help people. In the middle ground, between mega-coordination and the current trend toward the “initiative *du jour*” approach, there is a lot of room for improvement.

As one who has spoken against collaboration for its own sake, I believe that collaboratives and local coalitions can and will be judged by what they do to break through conventional thinking on the endemic problem of fragmentation. The good news is that technologically addressing the confusion is not difficult, with geocoding, regularly updated inventories of services, and data matching across agencies to find shared clients. But solving it *politically* demands leadership, not just good management. The act of leadership that is missing in most communities is the willingness to hold existing programs accountable for results, rather than launching new

programs every time new resources are available. Lisbeth Schorr's book Common Purpose tackles these hard questions of going to scale and how pilot projects have become part of the problem. She and others have pointed out how often pilot projects become the method used by large institutions to insulate themselves for real change. The lessons in her book are powerful challenges to community leadership, which is where the pieces have to be put together to reverse the tides of further fragmentation.

Funders, leaders, and grantees willing to speak the truth to their sources of support—that's all we need to reverse the worst of the flow of fragmentation that is now running. It's upstream work, to be sure, but surely floating downstream is not how community building will happen. Building communities is finding how the people and the programmatic pieces fit together in a greater whole, with a greater hope for a payoff for children and families.