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Commentary on "Using Strengths-Based Leadership to Improve the Child Welfare System"

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Introduction and Background

The East Region jurisdiction of a county child welfare agency devised a plan to utilize strength-based leadership practices to re-structure and transform service delivery. Staff was reorganized into small teams called clusters, which were collectively responsible for the agency's families within a given geographical area. Specific goals were to improve relationships with community agencies—especially schools—so that children could be placed in familiar settings when placement was necessary and, ultimately, to improve the targeted state and federal outcomes.

Model Strengths

The design characteristics of effective child welfare programs have long been identified (Schorr, 1989). However, much less clear are the policies and processes which best hold accountable and maintain staff within these programs to produce the intended programmatic and policy outcomes (Lipsky, 1980). In fact, the stultifying effects on worker morale and effectiveness of large public bureaucracies are legendary and affect many public child welfare agencies. The theory and data presented suggest that incorporating key aspects of effective worker-family relationships into agency-staff relationships may provide effective antidotes.

The strengths perspective has become a basic tenet of social work practice (Saleeby, 2006). East Region leadership looked to management literature from the business sector (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) for strategies by which to apply the strengths perspective—employing the StrengthsFinder technology and utilizing workers' strength themes as guides in assigning work.

A second tenet of family assessment and sound service planning is family engagement. Similarly, the East Region model combines an employee engagement initiative with the strengths-based workplace initiative to create an energized workplace and to enhance performance.

Genuine collaboration among service providers is one of the most elusive goals of human services (Dennis & Lourie, 2006). The East Region planned for effective collaboration both internally and externally. They replaced service units based on service types with multi-program clusters based on geographic school boundaries. Staff members were assigned as dedicated liaisons to both schools and law enforcement. Each school requested its own liaison. Although the immediate goal was to enhance child well-being by maintaining cultural connections and

school assignments for children in care, both internal and external communication and continuity of decision making were enhanced.

Child welfare reform initiatives have often endeavored to find placements for foster children within their school districts (Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Harden, & Landsverk, 2005). However, the East Region went one step further by developing the agency-school relationship through the system of school liaisons. No matter how well-trained and committed as educators, teachers are often ill-equipped to deal with the multiple challenges children at risk bring to school (Schorr, 1989). An agency which consults with and provides support to teachers has enormous potential for expanding teachers' insights and methods and, ultimately, enhancing the educational outcomes for at-risk children and their families.

Just as competent case planning delineates clear measurable goals for families, the East Region's leadership defined target outcomes and used monthly data to drill down to and evaluate individual worker performance. The movement to a data-driven orientation was accelerated for states by the federally mandated Child and Family Services Review process (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997). State child welfare agencies were required to demonstrate measurable improvements in seven (7) distinct outcomes. East Region used their state and federal performance measures to set goals and evaluate individual worker performance. The strengths within the cluster are then used to address challenges individual workers may face.

Limitations

While the scope of the paper is of necessity limited as written, the model as described suggests several questions and areas for further analysis. How has leadership fit or modified the delineation of strengths in the StrengthFinder methodology to the needs of social work practice? While agency liaisons with education and law enforcement are specifically mentioned, it is unclear how the model assures collaboration among the multiple public health, mental health, and other community agencies which are typically involved with the families of children at risk. Have the staff "clusters" developed methods of caseload and workload management? Although the authors repeatedly use the term "well-being" the paper does not acknowledge the challenges implicit in defining child well-being (Wulczyn et.al., 2005). The data presented relate to safety and permanency, but only school data are included with respect to well-being. This suggests that the developmental needs of very young children may be unaddressed. Finally, during the eight years of the East Region

model's existence, how has leadership maintained the enthusiasm and dynamism which is apparent in the spirit of the paper?

Summary

The challenges faced by public child welfare agencies are numerous, as are critiques and suggestions for reform strategies. The more evidence-based and thoughtful of these critiques recognize the complexity and barriers implicit in attempting to change individual practitioners' behavior at the "street level" through policies from a distant central office.

East Region grappled with these challenges by applying evidence-based strategies and strength-based leadership practices at the local level and within the parameters of existing resources. The results of East Region's eight-year transformation include meeting or exceeding almost all of their state and federal targets, as well as achieving increased staff satisfaction. Their experience demonstrates how having the flexibility to build local structures and processes based on sound social work and management principles can produce positive outcomes for both agency staff and the children and families they serve.

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