

what works

policy brief

Citizens Making Decisions: Local Governance Making Change

Frank Farrow and Sid Gardner

What are Local Governance Partnerships?

“Local governance partnership” is a term often used to describe the new decision-making process by which local communities design and implement a broadly-supported plan of action to achieve desired results for children and families. In creating these partnerships, communities are pulling together the many fragmented governance entities that exist, linking these with private sector resources (from the business world to faith communities), and thus generating more effective strategies to improve children’s and families’ lives.

Local governance partnerships take several forms. The most formal of these, and the ones that usually have the most explicit goal of systems change, have developed where state governments are encouraging cities and counties to create these new entities. In these instances, governance partnerships operate as community boards with anywhere from 15–40 members. They carry out defined responsibilities at the request of state agencies. They generally control

some public dollars directly, and influence expenditure of other public and private funds. Most importantly, over time they forge a “community agenda” that represents local priorities for children and families. These partnerships are officially recognized by either state agencies, state legislatures or by local/county government as players whose efforts help public and private agencies to become more effective.

In many other communities, collaborative bodies are emerging spontaneously, without a mandate to be a local governance partnership. Their members, usually public and private agencies, join together voluntarily to accomplish more efficient and effective service delivery. While these collaboratives lack the formal control over funds and the legal mandates that characterize local governance partnerships, their overall aim is similar — to improve outcomes for children and families by combining ideas and resources in new ways. Many local governance partnerships started out in this informal way.

Information for
Schools, Communities and
Government Working
Together to Improve the
Well Being of Children
And Families

Systems Integration Definition:

Systems integration is the blending of a set of interdependent systems into a functioning or unified whole. In the **Community** approach, schools, communities and government blend their systems to ensure that children and families will be healthier, safer, and more successful in school and economically self-sufficient. This series of What Works Policy Briefs examines governance, data-driven decision-making, services and results-based accountability and finance aspects of systems integration. Each brief offers definitions and examples and explores benefits, challenges, and first steps towards implementation.

First in a
Four-Part
Series

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The Local Investment Commission (LINC) Kansas City, Missouri

The Local Investment Commission (LINC) is a citizen board dedicated to improving the well-being of children and families in the Kansas City region. LINC defines its mission as creating "... a caring community that builds on its strengths to provide meaningful opportunities for children, families, and individuals to achieve self-sufficiency, attain their highest potential, and contribute to the common good."

The Commission's 36 members represent all parts of the Kansas City community, with especially strong leadership coming from the corporate and business worlds and from Kansas City neighborhoods. The Commission is supported in its work by literally hundreds of volunteers who participate on its working committees and in its community activities; by a Professional Cabinet made up of elected officials, public agency staff, and representatives of private sector providers; and by a staff of approximately 35 full and part time people.

LINC is strongly supported by Missouri State government, which has designated it as one of 16 local community partnerships through which state agencies are engaging communities in new ways. In some instances, state agencies are asking the partnerships to share in responsibilities which previously were carried out by state agencies alone.

LINC's major initiative includes:

- *Responsibility for designing and implementing welfare reform in the Kansas City region, in collaboration with state agencies.* LINC develops new jobs for welfare recipients, administers a wage supplement program, and has introduced new performance-based contracts with local employment/training providers. Over 3,200 people have been placed in jobs through LINC's welfare reform efforts.
- *Developing comprehensive agencies in 16 sites (28 neighborhoods), in collaboration with neighborhood schools and resident councils;* LINC provides guidance and funding to neighborhoods as they tailor services to local needs, using schools as hubs.
- *Helping to strengthen operations of public agencies.* For example, LINC is engaged in a long-term partnership with the Jackson County office of the State Division of Family Services to improve child protection, foster care, and adoption services.

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What are the Potential Benefits of Local Governance?

The biggest benefit is that local governance partnerships are designed to make children's lives better and promote strong families. Local governance partnerships focus on outcomes, most often that children will be healthier, safer, and more successful in school, and that parents will be able to support their families economically and nurture their children. Local governance partnerships try to achieve these outcomes by securing several other benefits as well.

First, state and local governments hope that local governance partnerships can reach across agency boundaries and retool the current service system. Most people now agree that "what works" for children and families is a system that:

- focuses on results, rather than on rules and procedures,
- emphasizes prevention, family support, and healthy child development, rather than merely crisis intervention,
- is accessible where families live, in neighborhoods and small geographic areas, and
- combines professional services with the natural supports on which families prefer to rely.

By contrast, current service systems tend to be centralized, highly professional, specialized and categorical, and focused primarily on addressing serious problems, not promoting healthy development. Local governance partnerships have been created because no one agency — however well-meaning — is able to turn this system around.

The public clearly wants services to be improved, especially from public agencies. In a 1998 Field Institute poll, a majority of Californians said they believed the state was only doing a "fair" or "poor" job in reducing delinquency, substance abuse, and foster care, and ensuring that high school graduates are ready for the work force.

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Second, local governance partnerships place key decisions in the hands of local people. Whether termed “devolution” or “decentralization” the flow of responsibilities from the federal government to states, and then from state government to counties and even to neighborhoods, is underway. Local governance partnerships are the vehicle through which local leaders are stepping up to these new responsibilities.

Finally, local governance partnerships bring new people into the decision which affect children’s and families’ futures. Local governance partnerships deliberately “open up” human services decisions to neighborhood residents, business people, and other civic leaders, not just human service professionals. The hope is that, by working together, all segments of the community can make better decisions.

When are Local Governance Partnerships Most Successful?

Across many states, people are agreeing that effective local partnerships:

Focus on results. Local governance partnerships which stay true to a set of outcomes avoid the trap of advocating for just one service or trying to solve a single categorical problem.

Are broadly inclusive. Local governance partnerships which engage people from all segments of the community have a stronger base of support and influence from which to operate.

Have defined responsibilities. When local governance partnerships have clear mandates from state legislatures or governors (through executive order), or from mayors or county boards of supervisors, they usually maintain their sense of purpose and are less likely to become diverted by other agendas.

Earn trust and credibility from their accomplishments. Local governance partnerships can

succeed in their communities only by proving their worth. Within three to four years, they must be able to demonstrate to people in their communities that community life is better as a result of their existence.

Establish close ties with local neighborhoods.

Effective local governance partnerships promote the development of neighborhood service delivery, and forge strong linkages with neighborhood-level leaders and organizations. They aim to make a difference in the places — the neighborhoods — where people live, and to change the public and private systems which have an impact on those neighborhoods.

Challenges Faced by Local Governance Partnerships

To succeed, local governance partnerships must overcome the challenges associated with “doing business differently”:

They face an intergovernmental system which resists concentration of power, even for good purposes.

Legal, historical, and political forces underlie the deliberate fragmentation of the current human service system: “it’s supposed to be this way.” Governance which bridges agency boundaries and brings the public and private sectors together requires sharing power in the interest of greater effectiveness. Not all holders of power know how to share in this way. Not all want to, either.

Procedural wrangling will frustrate key supporters. Some governance partnerships suffer from “bylawitis” — a compulsion to spend a great deal of time on process and procedures, rather than on their real task: developing community strategies to improve results. Local governance partnerships that pay attention to common goals get further and avoid the procedural disputes that can turn off some potential supporters, especially neighborhood residents and business leaders.

LINC, continued

LINC strives to achieve better results for children and families through influence rather than control. LINC works aggressively to affect how resources are used on behalf of children and families, but not to control other agencies’ operations and funds or to compete with them.

Local governance partnerships must weather the “hard knocks” that come with true accountability for results for children and families.

Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council

The Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council was formed in 1991 by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. The Council has a mandated structure with representatives from major county agencies, cities, school districts, private and nonprofit associations concerned with children and families, business, and the geographic, youth and ethnic communities of Los Angeles County. Its chair rotates among the five members of the Board of Supervisors. As approved by the Board, the Council will concentrate its work in the years ahead on four major priorities:

- ensuring that the voice of the County's diverse communities is heard in decision-making affecting children, youth, and families;
- encouraging large public agencies to become more responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families through coordinated planning and service delivery;
- linking resource allocations and results achieved; and
- supporting action by community and regional groups to identify program priorities for children's services.

In Los Angeles County, the Children's Planning Council has provided a forum for public-private dialogue and action on children's issues for the past six years. A major governance reform itself, the Council has devoted much of its first efforts to establishing Service Planning Areas (SPAs) that divide the County — a nation-sized jurisdiction of more than 9.6 million residents — into eight planning areas for children's and family issues. All county agencies and several key private entities (such as United Way) have agreed to observe those boundaries. During the past two years, a SPA Council has been created in each area with a membership mirroring that of the Children's Planning Council. A countywide American Indian Children's Council has also been established. These councils now have their own staff and are hard at work developing area-wide plans to improve results for their children as well as regionalized responses to countywide programs such as family preservation, health insurance enrollment, domestic violence prevention, and early childhood development. The work of the SPA Councils and the Children's Planning Council has been aided greatly by a history of data-driven development of a strategic agenda for children that has included detailed children's budgets and a regularly issued score card on children's outcomes. Both these Council products have been national models cited in the work of the Finance Project and other organizations concerned with children's and family issues. These two governance reforms — the creation of the Children's

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Local governance partnerships must weather the "hard knocks" that come with true accountability for results for children and families. Whether a governance partnership is really committed to accountability will be clear in how rigorously it assesses its own performance. This has to occur in at least three ways. Member agencies need to examine their own performance relative to the collaborative's goals. The collaborative as a whole needs to monitor its own overall goals. And, the collaborative needs to develop a community-wide report card and track progress against it.

A balancing act is needed. On the one hand, there should be a "no blame game" spirit within the group, or agencies will desert the partnership. At the same time, participants need to face up to the need to change themselves and their own operations, as well as the "system" as a whole.

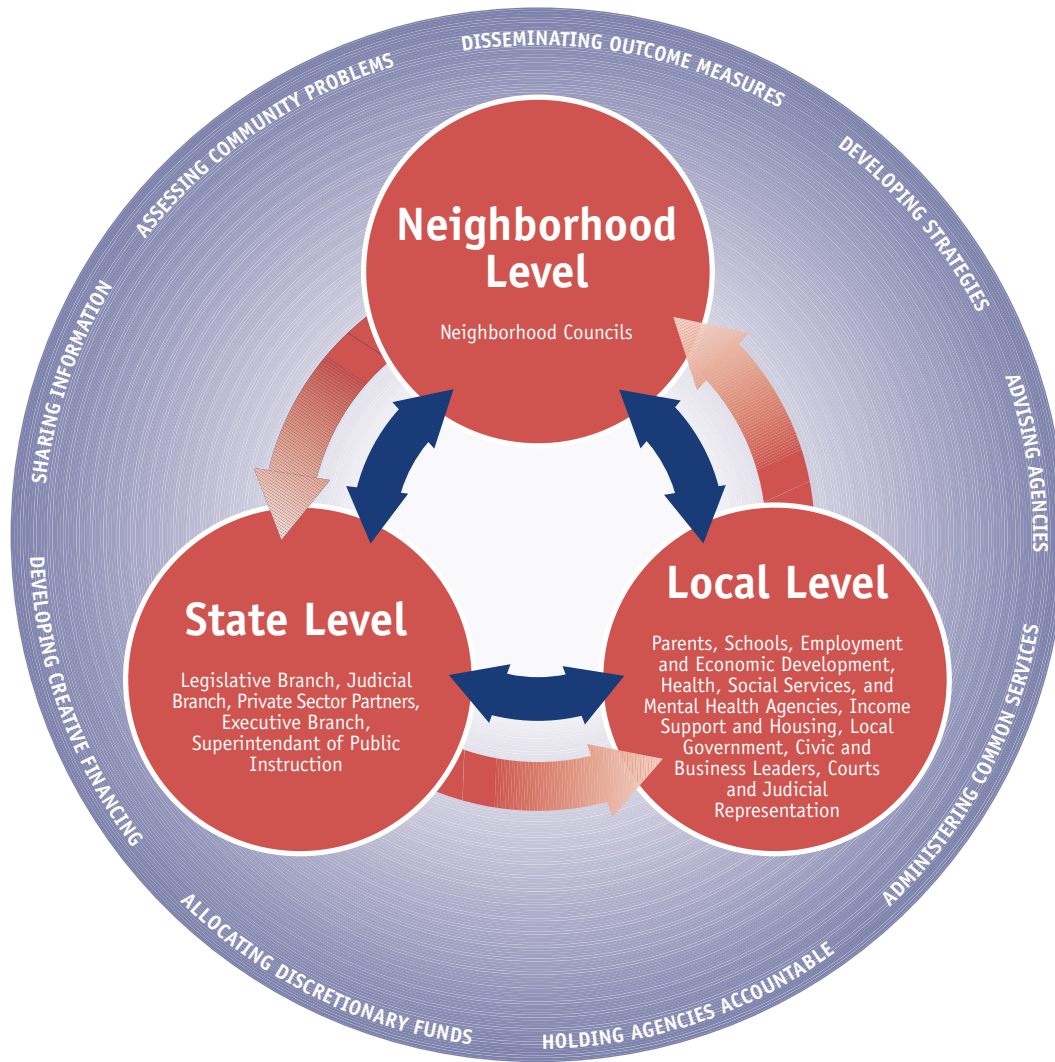
Getting Started





Each community needs to build its local governance partnerships in a way that works for that community. This means building on existing community leadership, respecting current collaborations, knowing the framework of state/county/local policy and funding responsibilities, and being alert to the intangibles of influence and power.

Here are general steps that can help a local jurisdiction get started.

Step One: Commit to a core set of results. A local jurisdiction's first decision is whether it wants to accept responsibility for a core set of results for children, youth, and families. Think through the implications of this decision. By committing to a cross-cutting, broadly defined set of results, local leaders are saying they want to draw all parts of the community together to make children's and families' lives better.

A Comprehensive Community Services System Model



-  Flow of information and reporting
-  Flow of money
-  Community levels
-  Collaboratives' evolving responsibilities

Los Angeles, continued

Planning Council and its decentralization to the SPA Councils in building community-level forums for addressing and monitoring progress on children's issues — are exemplary in responding to the needs of an immense governmental entity. Contact: Sharon G. Watson, Ph.D., Executive Director, Children's Planning Council (213) 893-0421.

Savannah

The Chatham-Savannah Youth Futures Authority

The Chatham-Savannah Youth Futures Authority (YFA) is a collaborative of 23 public and private agency, community, neighborhood, and business leaders. The Georgia state legislature chartered the Authority in 1988 to coordinate programs and administer public and private funds to improve results for youth and families in communities with high poverty rates. Since that time, the Authority's scope of work has steadily expanded. And, through its strong partnership with state government, the Authority has become the recognized "community partnership" for the Savannah/Chatham County area.

The Authority strives to improve outcomes for children and families by analyzing community needs carefully, and then mobilizing public and private resources in a way that will make an observable difference. Several of the Authority's major initiatives over the years have been their Healthy Start initiative for women (and children) at risk of poor pregnancy outcomes; efforts to increase the availability and accessibility of learning-rich pre-school experiences for young children; and the development of Community Schools Resource Teams to address risks that inhibit student success.

While the Authority works to improve outcomes for the entire Chatham County area, it also focuses particularly on the Area B neighborhood of Savannah, with the goal of having a cumulative effect by sustained effort over many years. Using a Family Resource Center in this neighborhood as the focal point, the Authority has partnered with neighborhood residents and parents to promote a wide range of new opportunities and services for Area B families. The Authority has adopted a community development perspective in this work, recognizing that jobs and housing opportunities are essential in order to improve neighborhood outcomes, as well as good schools and effective human services.

The Youth Futures Authority has served as the foremost example of a community partnership as Georgia's state agencies and legislature have decided to implement this approach statewide. The Authority, and its state partners, recognize that all levels of government and a broad spectrum of local residents must work together if children are to be healthier, safer, more successful in school, and prepared to enter productive adulthood.

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Step Two: Decide where to locate this responsibility. Look around at existing groups and collaboratives. Are any of them prepared and positioned to accept this new responsibility? Could several collaboratives merge to take on this task? If no existing group can perform this role, consider forming a new local governance partnership, especially if a new entity is necessary to bring in the neighborhood, business, and civic voices that are critical to the success of local governance. If a new partnership is formed, are all the other collaboratives in a community still necessary?

Step Three: Develop strategies, not programs. Think results, not structure. The governance partnership should resist the temptation to launch one or two more programs, and instead take a fresh look at the underlying conditions which most affect children and families. What will it take to improve these conditions? How can different levels of government work together to solve problems — for example, schools and county government, or cities and community organizations? How can public and private groups, and formal and informal organizations, join forces to work on problems that don't "belong to" any one agency, such as reducing juvenile crime, preventing child abuse, making sure children start school ready to learn?

Don't become obsessed with the structure of the governance partnership too soon. Focus on developing effective community strategies, and let the structure of the partnership evolve as people get used to working together.

Step Four: Stay accountable. Share information with all constituencies. Let people know what the governance partnership is doing. The movement toward accountability for a local governance partnership can be easier if it begins early and in simple ways. For example, if partnership members at each meeting review one to two indicators of the problems they are addressing, and their progress (or lack of it), the precedent of "tracking

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progress” can become established. Members begin to see that their role in the partnership is not to defend certain interests, or advocate preset positions, but to continually ask “How are children in the community faring?” And to take steps to improve results.

How Do We Know it Works?

We don't yet, but the signs are promising. Leaders in states as diverse as Missouri, Vermont, Michigan, and Georgia believe that local governance partnerships are building stronger, more preventive services for children and families. In Vermont, for example, preliminary data suggest

that local governance partnerships are contributing to an overall increase in children's safety and a decrease in child abuse and neglect reporting. In Kansas City, Missouri, more job placements and high job retention rates demonstrate the local governance partnership's effectiveness in welfare reform.

In most places, however, local governance partnerships are too young to have shown hard evidence of progress. But word of mouth and the sense of “success in process” is leading more and more communities to adopt this approach with the confidence that it can work for them. ■

More Information

Resources:

Child and Family Policy Center
Fleming Building, Suite 1021
218 Sixth Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50309
(515) 280-9027
(515) 244-8997 Fax

Frank Farrow, Director
Children's Services Policy
Center for the Study of Social Policy
1250 Eye Street, NW, Suite 503
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 371-1565
(202) 371-1472 Fax

Sid Gardner, Director
Center for Collaboration for Children
CSU Fullerton, EC-324
800 N State College Blvd.
Fullerton, CA 92634
(714) 278-2166
(714) 278-3314 Fax

Program for Community Problem Solving
915 15th Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 783-2961
(202) 347-2161 Fax

Publications:

Changing Governance to Achieve Better Results for Children and Families. Center for the Study of Social Policy, December 1995.

Creating a Community Agenda: How Governance Partnerships Can Improve Results for Children, Youth and Families. Center for the Study of Social Policy, February 23, 1998.

The Transformative Power of Governance: Strengthening Community Capacity to Improve Outcomes for Children, Families and Neighborhoods. Program for Community Problem Solving, January 8, 1998 (Draft).

A View from the City: Local Government Perspectives on Neighborhood-Based Governance in Community-Building Initiatives. The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, March 1997 (Draft).

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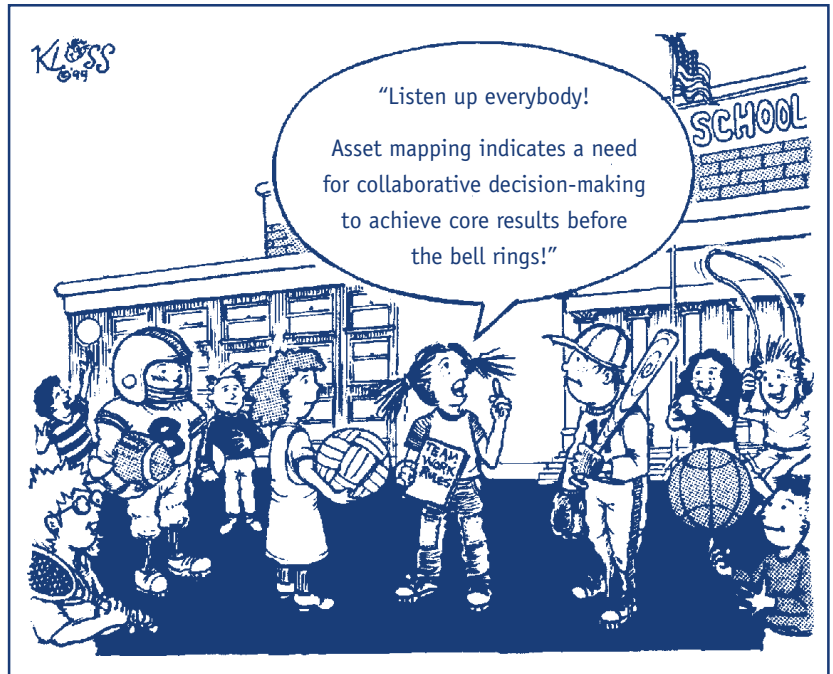


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2295 Gateway Oaks Drive
Suite 100
Sacramento, California 95833-3224
916 646 3646

The Foundation Consortium is a change-agent promoting the **Community** approach: schools, communities and government working together to improve child and family well-being. Eight corporate, private, community and family foundations, diverse in scope and purpose formed an alliance in 1991 to establish the Foundation Consortium. Now fourteen in number, Consortium members are united by a shared vision, the **Community** approach, which promotes cooperation across organizations, embracing the key principles of family involvement, community partnership and shared accountability for results. It includes programs that foster health and self-sufficiency by devoting resources to family supports and core services rather than acute care and crisis intervention and by focusing on the strengths and needs of children, family and communities rather than isolated issues.



The Lunch Recess Governance Partnership

First in a four-part series — March 1999

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Information for schools, communities and government working together to improve the well being of children and families.