

what works

policy brief

Making a Difference for Children and Families: The **Community** Approach

Tia Melaville

What is the **Community** approach?

This document is written to help local elected officials and their partners in schools, cities and counties, build, maintain and strengthen an integrated system of care for children and families in their communities. *It focuses on developing comprehensive services, supports and opportunities — the **Community** approach.* The **Community** approach brings together the whole range of services and supports that families need. They run the gamut from a “helping hand” to more structured activities and assistance offered by public agencies, private organizations, and community groups. The **Community** approach addresses problems *before* they hit the crisis point. Comprehensive services, supports and opportunities are designed to prevent and solve problems and also to help children and families succeed — in school, at work, as parents, and as contributing members of their community. In addition, the **Community** approach aims to provide supports, services and opportunities at times and places that are easy for families to access. Partnerships among health, youth development, and social service providers, educators, employers, community

and faith-based organizations, citizens, their associations and local officials make comprehensive services and supports available, accessible, affordable and acceptable to diverse cultural and ethnic communities.

Why Bother?

Where comprehensive services, supports and opportunities like these exist, there is less chance that a job loss will escalate into domestic violence. That an untreated allergy will turn into a full-blown respiratory attack and missed days at school. Or that a neighborhood or school in transition will continue to erode and weaken the whole community. More and more elected officials are using their leadership to move in this direction. They know if they do not, families and their communities will be left behind.

California has been in the vanguard of this effort. But in many communities, services, supports, and opportunities fall far short of the comprehensive interlocking array that could really make a difference to children and families. In addition to high quality *health and social services*, families look to their communities for a range of *supports*. What family at some time or other hasn't sought out day care or an afterschool program, tutoring

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The **Community** approach:

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San Francisco, CA

Sunset Neighborhood Beacons Center

The Sunset Neighborhood Beacons Center (SNBC) in San Francisco crackles with the energy of young people, adults, organizations, and community agencies — all working to improve life for everyone in the city's Sunset District. Adapted from New York City's pioneering Beacons program, SNBC is administered by a private nonprofit organization, Aspira Foster Family Services, and is permanently housed at the A. P. Giannini Middle School. More than 150 young people and adults participate each day in activities that foster positive youth development, support the school's academic mission, and provide health and social services.

Youth development is at the heart of Sunset's efforts. Self defense classes and support groups for young women, academic assistance targeted at Asian youth, Russian language and culture classes, as well as over a dozen recreational, arts, and cultural activities provide positive outlets for expression. A unique Urban Music Production program using state of the art equipment and close adult guidance is successfully attracting hard to reach teens. A Youth Coalition with members from several neighborhood schools engages youth in leadership and community work and a full-time, bilingual community organizer trains teens and supervises their outreach efforts.

A Family Advocate offers family support services and referrals, as well as follow-up for youth and families in crisis. A case manager works with teens in or at risk of entering the Juvenile Justice system. The program also provides translation services so the school's diverse student body can more easily communicate with the school nurse.

The Center supports the school's academic mission through afterschool tutoring, math study groups, and daily homework sessions. It sponsors joint programs with the PTA and planning with school faculty to help low-performing students is on the rise. The Center's Family Advocate also sits on the school's Student Care Team.

The whole community participates in parent resource and drop-in room services. Residents come to consult the full-time Information Specialist, post a notice, meet friends, or take advantage of free Internet access. Seminars focus on topics like immigration law, communication skills, and financial advice on college, careers and retirement planning. Computer literacy and ESL courses are ongoing. The Center also hosts the NeighborNet project — a community organizing effort using the worldwide web and fax broadcast. Representatives from the local neighborhood coalition and city departments sit on the Center's advisory board and play an active role in setting policy.

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for a child struggling in school, or a parenting class, a workshop on financial management, or an intergenerational literacy class for a family struggling at home. Families never know when they might need mediation and legal advice on divorce, immigration and naturalization matters, caregiver respite for families with special needs children or ill or elderly members. Services like these can be expensive and hard to find — even for middle and upper class families. In working class and lower income neighborhoods, they are often scarce and hard to access. Reality bites hard when you don't have a car, bus routes are long and indirect — as they are in many rural and suburban as well as inner city areas — or when providers don't feel comfortable entering your neighborhood, much less making "house calls."

Young people clearly suffer from the absence of a comprehensive system. Children and adolescents develop their interests and talents through organized sports and recreation, the performing and fine arts, and volunteer and leadership activities. They flourish when they feel safe and secure and when there are places — before and after school hours — where they can have many kinds of positive experiences. But *opportunities* like these are distressingly absent in many low-income neighborhoods and rural areas. In the suburbs they are out of reach to many young people without a parent on call to act as chauffeur. Even when opportunities are available and accessible, they too often fail to ignite young people's interest, especially those who most need to be involved. They too seldom mine — or help unite — the rich resources of a neighborhood's cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. And the rich connection between out-of-school experiences and academic success is frequently overlooked in program design and implementation.

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Why should we bother to revamp what we already have? Because — as localities all over the country are already proving — *we can do a much better job*. Communities are markedly improving the access of young people and adults to an expanded array of high quality activities and relationships. They are making them available in places like neighborhood centers, schools, and faith organizations. Most of all, by building on the strengths of young people, their families, and residents, and by holding everyone in the community more accountable, comprehensive systems are beginning to make measurable improvements in the well-being of children and families.

How Do We Know They Work?

The stories of a growing number of children, families, teachers and other community members say best what a comprehensive system of services, supports and opportunities really means — and what it can accomplish. *But the evidence isn't just anecdotal*. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the precise impact of comprehensive strategies on broad outcomes, promising findings are mounting. Research in a variety of areas suggests a powerful positive relationship between parental involvement and children's school success.¹ Other studies show that effective programming, especially in afterschool hours, has a positive impact on children and youth at-risk for delinquent behavior and can decrease crime, victimization, and substance abuse. These activities can also lead to better grades and higher school achievement.² A variety of school-linked initiatives, currently in the midst of long-term evaluations, are expected to confirm and strengthen these findings and other positive results. For example, statewide evaluation of the first three years of California's Healthy Start initiative showed:

- Schoolwide improvements in primary grade standardized test scores;
- Increased numbers of parents actively involved in their children's education;
- Decreased rates of school violence, suspensions, unexcused absences and grade retentions at Healthy Start schools;
- Unmet needs for food and clothing were cut at least in half and access to preventative health and dental care increased significantly; and
- Employment of parents and teenage family members grew by 6 percent.

A second statewide evaluation was recently released. It confirms the findings of the first study and uncovers especially significant increases in the lowest performing schools with Healthy Start programs. Reading scores for these elementary schools increased by 25 percent and math scores by 50 percent.³

How Do You Know When You Have It?

A system of comprehensive services, supports and opportunities changes the way a community and its institutions understand and respond to its young people and families. And it changes how families contribute to and benefit from what their community offers. You know you're making progress when every new strategy and program reflects the core operational principles of a comprehensive system of care: A commitment to individual and community strengths rather than weaknesses, the importance of relationships, and accountability for results.

A comprehensive system is too complex to launch all at once. Successful efforts are more likely to develop in incremental steps — as long as each increment clearly relates to a long-range vision of what a better system should look like.

Healthy Start Works

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Oceanside, CA

Partners for Healthy Neighborhoods

In the mid-1990s, neighborhoods in the City of Oceanside, San Diego County, were buffeted by rising crime and violence. Activists joined with local police in community patrol and neighborhood watch efforts. Out on the street, they saw underlying problems: A lack of health and social services; community parks and recreation buildings standing dormant; piles of trash collecting in unswept streets. Residents took their concerns and ideas to city and county agencies. Soon, Partners for Healthy Neighborhoods was born, a public/private collaborative of 58 community agencies, local government and neighborhood representatives serving the Oceanside communities of Mesa Margarita, Crown Heights, and Eastside.

In Mesa Margarita, the collaborative's impact is everywhere. What used to be a nearly vacant strip mall is now a neighborhood complex. The Vista Community Center, which includes a neighborhood service center, a separate wellness center, an afterschool program for boys and girls, and a community policing satellite office, takes a broad approach to community health. Center staff help people find jobs, learn English, avoid an imminent eviction or overcome more subtle cultural and social challenges. Instead of spending more than an hour taking multiple buses to county offices, families enrolled in the county's welfare to work program now have a county caseworker and an employment counselor outstationed right at the Vista Center. In response to school concerns, vans ferry families and children to full-service community health centers three days a week.

The collaborative works on two levels: with public and community agencies to provide services, and with policy makers to improve them. For example, when the collaborative identified multiple abandoned houses left open to vandalism and arson, county partners decided to revisit local housing codes. Now abandoned buildings are expeditiously boarded up — and painted — so children are kept safe and the neighborhood looks and feels cared for.

The collaborative is making sure that it can sustain its energy and accomplishments. Instead of draining the energy of a few activist leaders, the Partnership continually renews itself by bringing in new participants and building its core leadership base. It is especially working to involve more young people in decision-making roles and ensuring a forum in which people who live in the community have a continuing and forceful voice in its future.

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Over time, a core set of services, supports and opportunities gathers force and direction as partners knit together a variety of advocacy and reform strategies — including those designed to make health and social services more responsive; improve educational excellence; foster positive youth development; and build communities. (See sidebar on right). Each of these reform approaches is a good place for partners to start moving toward a more comprehensive system — but not to finish. You'll know you've really arrived when your community is making progress *in all four areas* and community-wide results are improving.

Getting Started

Convinced of the importance of acting now, more and more school, city and county leaders are looking beyond election cycles and public/private boundaries to invest more strategically in children and families. Here are some of the steps you can take to get started.

Step One:

As a school, city or county leader, seek out the wisdom and leadership of parents, community residents, and their associations.

- *Build a “culture of conversation.”* Create opportunities so that those who use supports and services and those who provide them understand what each other needs and can contribute to better results for children and families.
- *Think small!* Use informal “house meetings” to bring together intimate groups of parents, residents, neighborhood and community association leaders, school people, community-based organizations, and providers to talk about problems and solutions. This approach sets a personal tone, minimizes the distance between community residents and professionals, and helps identify and encourage the emergence of natural leadership.

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- *Be prepared for surprises — and conflict.* Some participants may want to concentrate on school matters. Others may think community issues like safety, jobs or race inequities are more important. Feelings can run high.
- *Understand that struggle means that people are being honest.* Encourage open, mutually respectful exchange. Remember this work is not just about connecting institutions; it is about building relationships and invigorating communities.

Step Two:

Use an inclusive process to develop a long-term, results-driven, strategic plan.

- *Agree on priorities.* Work with community groups and existing collaboratives to develop a short list of desired results. Identify key indicators to measure progress.⁴
- *Establish a programmatic framework.* Plan the connected set of activities and programs in health and social services, education, youth, and community development that research says is needed and will get you to the results and interim measures you want to achieve.
- *Avoid scattershot programming.* Focus on a core set of services, supports and opportunities. Target scarce resources toward activities that directly relate to specific results.
- *Phase in whole systems not just services.* Many localities have begun to implement their framework in one or more neighborhoods or districts at a time. Often schools, community centers, or housing complexes serve as hubs around which to develop activities. The neighborhood provides the geographic and social context of the effort and makes it easier to connect to both systems-level institutions and natural support networks.

Step Three:

Concentrate on sustainability.

- *Think financing.* What resources must be tapped, expanded, tied together, or created to make changes permanent? Develop a long-range plan to fund new approaches that begins now.⁵
- *Build community-wide capacity.* Provide nontraditional, community-based organizations with the technical assistance they need to play an expanded leadership role in designing and implementing more comprehensive services. Use continuous professional development to incorporate pro-family principles across the system.
- *Show that new approaches work.* Collect hard evidence. Evaluate the performance of individual programs and their combined impact on key indicators. Track and publicize successes.
- *Refine and expand your range of strategies.* Continuously strengthen and expand a core set of essential activities. Methodically move into other areas of your strategic framework as you build credibility and expertise.

If you haven't already, get started! The ideas in this brief don't come out of thin air. They reflect the hands-on experience, hard work, and promising efforts of thousands of communities — across the country and throughout California. In dozens of states and countless localities, in urban and rural areas as well as in the suburbs, communities aren't just "talking the talk." They are methodically — relentlessly — doing a better job working with and for the success of their families and children. They are making a difference. So can you. ■

Moving Toward a Comprehensive System For Children and Families Includes:

Services Reform: to make health, social services, mental health services and supports more responsive and available in settings where and when children and families need them as well as to make the systems that provide services more efficient and effective.

School Reform: to improve the institutional operation of schools including strengthening parent participation, creating safe and supportive school environments conducive to learning, and strengthening policies, curriculum and instruction so that all children succeed.

Youth Development: to increase opportunities, relationships, and attitudes throughout the community in which young people are enabled to work with peers and adults to develop new skills and abilities, try on new roles, master challenges, and contribute to their communities.

Community Development: to enhance the social networks, physical safety, economic vitality of communities and neighborhoods and to improve communication between residents and the institutions that serve them.

Kern County, CA Lamont/Weedpatch Neighborhood Partnership

On a sunny, blue-skied day, the rural communities of Lamont and Weedpatch in California's Kern County seem untouched by the problems of their urban neighbors. But most of the area's 14,000 residents work in orange groves made famous in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Even though families put in long hours of hard physical labor, 70 percent earn income 200 percent below the federal poverty line. Up until recently, health and social services located 15 miles away in Bakersfield were largely out of reach. Despite their agricultural setting, the communities and schools of Lamont and Weedpatch began to develop the same kinds of gang violence and youth crime once thought to be strictly city problems.

Several years ago, superintendents of two different school districts started meeting with heads of other agencies in the back room of a local restaurant. What, they wondered, could they do to begin turning things around? They decided to form the Lamont/Weedpatch Neighborhood Partnership and to conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment to find out what families, young people, and residents had to say. Working groups on transportation, community health, emergency planning, economic development and other major areas of concern continue to identify and respond to issues. At the county level, a similar collaborative effort among key agency heads supports and enables local work.

Today, a Family Service Center located on the grounds of a public school brings together redirected county workers to provide a range of social service and afterschool activities. Family Advocates reach out to families, troubleshoot problems, orchestrate available services, and provide feedback to the collaborative by participating in one or more working groups.

The active involvement of the Kern County Regional Transit Authority (KTA) has increased the area's bus system fourfold. Ridership and satisfaction have grown commensurately, along with a new "dial-a-ride" van service residents can use to schedule special trips. During the recent citrus freeze, special buses helped ferry residents to the disaster relief center located in the community of Arvin, 11 miles away. Planners hope to make this bus service permanent. Since Arvin is also home to the area's regional high school, a new bus route will allow many more parents to participate in school functions.

Young people, too, are learning to work better with each other. In the past, rivalries among feeder schools often turned violent when students entered the area's single regional high school. Mentoring, recreational activities, youth conferences, speakers bureau and Saturday programs designed to bring young people together from adjacent schools — before entering high school — has

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More Information

Resources:

Community Network for Youth Development
657 Mission Street, S. 410
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 495-0622

CNYD promotes the principles and practice of youth development in the Bay area by working to strengthen high quality youth development organizations, promote collaborative efforts to connect young people with both formal and informal community systems, and advocate for policies that support young people's positive and healthy development.

Family Resource Coalition of America
20 N. Wacker Drive, S. I 100
Chicago, IL 60606
(312) 338-1522

Family Support California
1730 Franklin Street, Suite 300
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 588-1200

FRC and FSC develop networks, advocate for public policy, and provide resources and consulting services to help communities support families and foster the optimal development of young people and adult family members.

Healthy Start
UCD/Education CRESS Center
Davis, CA
(530) 754-4307
Irvillarreal@ucdavis.edu

Healthy Start is a state effort designed to remove the barriers to young people's academic performance by assisting local communities to improve access to a comprehensive range of high quality support and services. Nearly 300 operational grants involving more than 800 schools have been awarded.

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Institute for Educational Leadership
1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW S. 310
Washington, DC 20036
Blankm@iel.org

IEL works to improve the systems and policies that educate and support children, youth, and families. It focuses on leadership development, governance, coalition-building, and the exploration and analysis of emerging trends and policy issues.

National Center for Community Education
1017 Avon Street
Flint, MI 48503
www.nccenet.org

NCCE provides leadership development, training and technical assistance focused on community and educational change emphasizing community schools.

National Community Building Network
839 Temple Terrace
Los Angeles, CA 90042
213-254-2121
www.ncbn.org

The National Community Building Network is an alliance of locally driven urban initiatives working to reduce poverty and create social and economic opportunity through comprehensive community-building strategies.

Publications:

Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America by Lisbeth B. Schorr. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1997.

Learning Together: The Developing Field of School Community Initiatives by Atelia Melville. Flint, MI: C. S. Mott Foundation, 1998. Available free of charge through the Mott Foundation (800-645-1766), the Institute for Educational Leadership (202-822-8405); or in full text at www.mott.org

The Eye of the Storm. Ten Years on the Front Lines of New Futures by Joan Walsh. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1998. Available free at the Annie E. Casey Foundation (410-547-6600) or at www.aecf.org

Reflections on a Decade of Promoting Youth Development by Karen Pittman and Merita Irby. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Center (202-775-9731). Available separately or as Chapter Nine in *The Forgotten Half Revisited: American Youth and Young Families, 1988-2008* edited by Samuel Halperin. Washington, DC: AYPF.

Lamont/Weedpatch Neighborhood Partnership, continued

lessened conflict. Community dances, far from just recreation, are part of a conscious strategy to build relationships among preteens who might otherwise never learn how much they have in common. According to one active participant who is now in high school, it's a good idea: "It's easier to get to know each other in grade school. Then in high school you don't have to worry so much about who you are going to school with — and that makes it much easier to learn."

¹ Baker, Amy J. L.; Soden, Laura A. *The Challenges of Parent Involvement Research*. ERIC/CUE Digest Number 134. ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY. ED419030 98

² See: *Safe and Smart: Making the After-School Hours Work for Kids*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education; Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, 1998.

³ *Healthy Start Works: Statewide Profile of Healthy Start Sites*. California Department of Education, Healthy Start and After School Partnerships Office, March 1999.

⁴ See another technical brief in this series: *Getting Results: Data Driven Decision Making*.

⁵ See forthcoming *What Works Policy Brief on Finance Reform*.



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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.



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