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Continuity Counts

Coordinated Education Systems
for Students in Transition



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Executive Summary

At any given moment, our nation's social service agencies are caring for nearly 5 million children and youth.¹ These kids are showing up in our schools while they face a host of challenges in their lives, including homelessness, foster care placement, incarceration, unmet mental and physical health needs, and other drivers of chronic instability. They are also navigating a complex web of adults — including caseworkers, social workers, teachers, probation officers, mentors, therapists, judges, and lawyers — all acting on their behalf simultaneously. When these adults do not proactively and effectively communicate, services are duplicated, resources are wasted, and additional burdens are placed on the child to make sense of competing (and sometimes contradictory) agency and programmatic demands.

This problem is a direct consequence of fragmentation within and across the schools, agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations that serve young people. Mitigating, and ultimately eliminating, agency fragmentation is crucial for ensuring that vulnerable youth receive comprehensive, streamlined support services to help them grow into successful, fulfilled adults. Doing so will require dramatically rethinking and restructuring the ways in which social service agencies interact with schools, with one another, and with the children in their care.

This paper offers a new framework for approaching cross-agency coordination, which places the education system at the center. Education is the only system that reaches nearly all young people in this country, and schools are the places where most young people spend their days. As a result, the education system is well positioned to act as a through-line for the children and youth experiencing traumatic life circumstances.

Importantly, the framework offered in this paper was not developed through a traditional policy development process. Instead, we used a human-centered design process that offers strategies for developing policies and systems that are created with and responsive to the people they serve. This process allows us to move away from thinking within a building, agency, or funding stream and instead engage the young people who travel across these borders. Practically, it means that our starting point is understanding the needs, wants, and constraints of the children and youth who experience agency fragmentation firsthand.

Through interviews with young people and with the adults who work in care agencies, we identified two key levers for change: continuity of people and continuity of information.

- **Continuity of people:** Young people receiving services from multiple agencies are bombarded with a myriad of adults working on their behalf simultaneously and largely without coordination. Improving systems and lessening the burden on young people and their families will require both a decrease in the number of adults with whom a child must interact and improvement in the consistency of the adults with whom a child does interact. One way to do this is by identifying a single adult to be in charge of coordinating all aspects of care for a child driven by that child's unique constellation of needs, similar to a "chief of staff" who might support a busy adult so that they can focus on their substantive goals.
- **Continuity of information:** Fragmentation among agencies also means that each individual child's data are stored in multiple databases in several agencies. Developing a comprehensive data management system to house all of a student's data and information in a single place will eliminate much of the information-related frustration felt by youth, their families, and the adults working in care agencies.

Policymakers and agency leaders working to improve cross-agency coordination have a significant amount of work ahead of them. However, the long-term outcomes of children and youth whose educations have been significantly disrupted are, in large part, dependent upon the quality of support that schools and other care agencies can provide. Greater communication and coordination among existing child-serving agencies and programs is imperative to improving that support. And as policymakers and practitioners undertake this work, they must carefully consider the needs, wants, and constraints of the youth they are serving to develop a solution that truly meets the needs of the nation's most vulnerable youth.

Introduction

At any given moment, our nation’s social service agencies are caring for nearly 5 million children and youth.² These kids show up in our schools while they face a host of challenges in their lives, including homelessness, foster care placement, incarceration, unmet mental and physical health needs, and other drivers of chronic instability. And many students are navigating several of these circumstances simultaneously. For example, young people who age out of the foster care system are more likely to be homeless, experience unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, or end up in jail.³ Youth who are incarcerated are more likely to be homeless after release.⁴

In addition to the immediate and obvious effects, traumatic life circumstances further destabilize students by disrupting their education pathways. Lacking stability in school and a consistent education plan, students whose educations are significantly disrupted are more likely to achieve far below grade level, drop out of high school, be excluded from postsecondary and career training institutions, be unemployed or employed in insecure, low-skill, low-wage jobs, and enter (or return to) the criminal justice system.⁵

“Following 8–10 moves between New Orleans and Texas after Katrina] I needed a social worker or someone during that time but I didn’t have one since I was moving so much. The schools never had my records and no one knew [what was happening at home]. They put me in classes I didn’t need. I was in the wrong grade once and had to switch in the middle of the year. – Student”

The youth experiencing traumatic events often find themselves navigating a complex web of governmental agencies, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and individuals, all acting on their behalf simultaneously. As a result, youth are bombarded with countless caseworkers, social workers, teachers, probation officers, mentors, therapists, judges, lawyers, and other well-meaning adults all attempting to provide them with services and supports like access to housing, health care, education opportunities, life skill development, and academic remediation.

These services are crucial, but far too often the myriad of agencies and adults involved in providing them to an individual child are acting in silos, independent of one another and generally without coordination. Even when these agencies are all delivering high-quality care, the fragmentation created by these silos can create further confusion and instability in the lives of these already-vulnerable students and can make it inefficient and challenging for youth and families to access necessary services. Moreover, this fragmentation creates unnecessary complexities, wastes resources, duplicates services, and loses information.

“I’ve had six or seven social workers. They keep changing. So it’s not really worth asking them for help, because when I do they’ll be gone and the next one won’t know what I need. I hate starting over all the time.” – Student

When the adults working in various agencies do not proactively communicate and collaborate, the children themselves become the only common denominator across service agencies. In other words, the only person who fully understands the whole ecosystem that a young person has to navigate is the one person least prepared to do that effectively: a child who has experienced significant adverse events and who may not have any one adult in their lives to see them through high school graduation. This places an unsustainable and inappropriate burden on a child already living in the midst of uncertainty and instability and can have catastrophic effects on children’s educational outcomes and subsequently, on their long-term ability to be active, productive participants in their communities.⁶

This problem is a direct consequence of fragmentation within and across the schools, agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations that serve young people. Mitigating, and ultimately eliminating, agency fragmentation is crucial for ensuring that vulnerable youth receive comprehensive, streamlined support services to help them grow into successful, fulfilled adults.

This paper introduces a new framework for addressing agency fragmentation, which places education as the core centralizing system. This paper is one part of a larger body of work that Bellwether Education Partners launched in summer 2016 that is aimed at better understanding the needs, wants, and constraints of the children and youth served by our nation's social service agencies. The goal is to identify the barriers and constraints that exist for students who are served by multiple agencies simultaneously or in short succession, in order to identify opportunities to improve cross-agency communication and collaboration and ultimately develop a more coherent, streamlined path to high school graduation for this group of children and youth.

This document begins with an overview of the existing research that informed the development of this framework. It then offers a discussion of our overarching hypothesis and our unique approach to developing solutions and improving cross-agency coordination. We then discuss two key levers for change and close with important considerations for policymakers and agency leaders as they seek to address the problem of care agency fragmentation.

What We Already Know

The framework provided here is intended to provide a map for education leaders to re-engage in the work of cross-agency coordination. The ideas and recommendations offered in this document are built on three important bodies of literature within the field. First, there is a long history of efforts to improve service agency coordination. The effort to develop “coordinated” or “integrated” services for youth and families is not new. The first White House Conference on Children and Youth was held in 1909 and brought together professionals from various sectors, including physicians, social workers, educators, community leaders, religious leaders, members of civic and labor groups, and parents.⁷ Many of the recommendations resulting from this conference mirror issues we continue to struggle with today: ensuring high-quality educational opportunities for children in care, collecting data and records about children’s outcomes, providing quality health care, and “the necessity for cooperation between child caring agencies.”⁸ Though the recommendations resulting from this conference remained the ideal standard for child care agencies, little concrete coordination was achieved over the next several decades.⁹

In the early 1970s, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (which later split to become the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education) made services integration a top priority. It undertook several initiatives to promote greater coordination and integration among care agencies, including the development of several task forces to conduct research, identify barriers, and craft legislation.¹⁰ In particular, a series of Services Integration Targets of Opportunity (SITO) projects were launched with

the goal of conducting research and demonstrating the success of services integration at a more local level, but difficulty assessing the success of the projects coupled with political and social realities in project communities eventually led to their demise.¹¹

“We work in silos. It’s not that we don’t have what we need to get the job done, we just aren’t working together.”

– Probation office staff member

The termination of SITO signaled decreasing federal enthusiasm for services integration efforts, a fact that was later supported by a 1991 report. This report found that while efforts at services integration were “instrumental in making human services more accessible to clients and more responsive to their needs,” they had “little institutional impact on a highly fragmented human services system.”¹² In other words, despite concerted effort over nearly two decades to produce greater coherence among existing child care systems, little had been accomplished in terms of fundamentally altering the structure of how care agencies operate.

The report identified six fundamental barriers to services integration: 1) size and complexity of the human services system; 2) professionalization, specialization, and bureaucratization; 3) limited influence of integrators; 4) weak constituency for services integration; 5) funding limitations; and 6) insufficient knowledge.¹³ The report also outlined several guiding principles for future services integration efforts, indicating significant pessimism for the future of services integration. It concluded, “Given the enormity of the barriers they face, [services integration] efforts that call for major institutional reform should be initiated selectively, if at all.”¹⁴ It is no surprise, then, that wholesale, concrete efforts to restructure how social services are deployed to youth and families have been largely nonexistent in recent decades.

In the meantime, individual agencies have forged ahead with their specific work. Over time, each of the agencies a child might come into contact with has developed its own narrow goals and sets of policies and procedures to support these goals. The policies and practices of a child welfare agency, for example, were all created in an effort to keep children safe from abuse and neglect. The policies and practices used by a state department of juvenile justice were crafted to rehabilitate youth who have committed offenses. And the policies and practices that govern the department of health were established to prevent and treat illness and disease.

The shift away from overarching integration efforts has led, in some ways, to a narrow and constricted focus on the label that a child receives when entering the system; this label defines what services a child is entitled to and what supports they can and cannot access. It also creates silos of data based on the definitions of each group, making it incredibly difficult to look across programs at the whole child.

The literature mirrors this focus on subsets of youth. For example, there are significant bodies of work related to youth with particular labels, including youth in foster care, those who are homeless, those who are pregnant and/or parenting, and those who are or have been incarcerated. For each subset of children, there is a body of literature that includes best practices for addressing their unique needs and ensuring educational success. However, there is precious little on best serving the needs of young people in foster care who are parenting their own children and struggling with unstable housing. There are also subgroup-specific laws in place both at the federal level and the state level to protect students and help them access education. For example, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act helps ensure enrollment and educational stability and continuity for students experiencing homelessness.¹⁵ In California, state law requires school districts to employ foster care liaisons to support students who are in the foster care system.¹⁶ A child who fits into more than one of these categories is served by two separate and independent programs, often with no coordination at all.

Despite the lack of federal action, local efforts to provide wraparound services have become popular in recent years. The wraparound services literature emphasizes the need to create a support system for youth that includes resources in the family, school, and community. Sometimes wraparound services are provided on an as-needed basis for individual students experiencing behavioral or other difficulties in schools. Other models provide a more holistic set of services to students. The community schools model seeks to create partnerships between the school and community resources, including health and social services and youth and community development.¹⁷ The Harlem Children’s Zone provides students living in a defined geographic area a set of educational, familial, health, and social service supports to help break the cycle of generational poverty.¹⁸ The integrated student supports (ISS) model seeks to support students’ academic achievement by coordinating wraparound services with the family, school, and community and collecting and tracking pertinent data on each student.¹⁹ These models all seek to use family and community assets to support students’ academic progress. However, wraparound services initiatives tend to target health and social needs, but less frequently engage education institutions at the level they should be included.

While it is wonderful to see the myriad services currently in existence for marginalized youth, it is evident that more must be done to ensure the youth who are most in need are actually aware of and in receipt of these resources.

– Lynette N. Tannis, Education Consultant; Author, “Educating Incarcerated Youth: Exploring the Impact of Relationships, Expectations, Resources, and Accountability”; Adjunct Lecturer on Education, Harvard University Graduate School of Education

A New Approach to Cross-Agency Coordination

A renewed effort to integrate services, including working to dramatically rethink and restructure the ways in which social service agencies interact with one another and with the children in their care, is the only way to truly address the needs of the young people who are served by multiple care agencies. This is challenging, long-term work that must include an evaluation of how agencies function, programs are designed, policies are implemented, and funds are distributed.

A wholesale restructuring of the social service system is the only way to fully ensure all children have the supports they need to become successful adults. In particular, the education system, which is too frequently left out of discussions about service agency integration, is well positioned to become the driving force for greater continuity across all services. It is the only system that reaches nearly all young people in this country, and schools are the places where most young people spend their days. Schools – and more specifically, the school pathway for a student’s entire K-12 education trajectory – can be the through-line for students as they navigate challenging life circumstances and can serve as a grounding and stabilizing force for young people.

“The quality of support youth receive from caseworkers and other professionals in the child welfare system can directly affect their education, for example by ensuring that students are enrolled in appropriate schools and receiving needed services. It can also affect their readiness to learn and ability to thrive in school by contributing to — or detracting from — the quality and stability of their life outside of school. When, for example, there are pervasive concerns about the child welfare system, and caseworker turnover in particular, it is not surprising to see this affecting the educational experiences of youth involved in the child welfare system.” – Lisa Pilnik, Director, Child & Family Policy Associates

In addition to placing education at the center of efforts to improve cross-agency coordination, this work must center on the people most affected by the issue: students themselves. This means we must begin by understanding the problem as the children and youth served by care agencies experience it. This requires time spent on the ground, talking with youth about their needs, wants, and constraints as they relate to the services they receive (or still need).

This approach, called human-centered design, offers strategies for developing policies and systems that are created with and responsive to the people they serve. It allows us to move away from thinking within a building, agency, or funding stream and instead engage the young people who travel across these borders.

Our hypothesis — that school can be a centralizing force in the work of improving cross-agency collaboration — and our human-centered design approach led us to launch a first-ever, two-year-long cohort of three jurisdictions that partnered with us to undertake the work of redesigning their systems of care from an education point of view. While the exact contours of solutions will differ across jurisdiction based on each place’s unique history, demographics, and existing policies and practices, the interviews with youth and agency staff members in each jurisdiction led us to identify two key levers for change: continuity of people and continuity of information. Our work to date suggests that these two components are consistent regardless of jurisdiction and thus addressing them is key to designing a new, more successful, coordinated system of care centered on long-term education success.

“My social worker never answers her phone because she has so many cases. I’m on my fifth social worker now, in about three years, but I haven’t seen her in a few months.” – Student

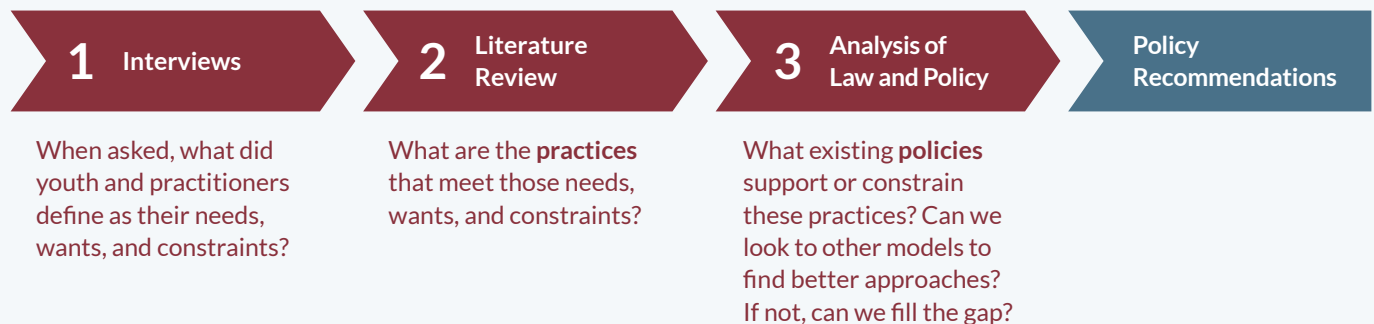
Human-Centered Design

Human-centered design is a process that begins with learning from the people experiencing a specific problem and building solutions that meet their specific needs. It differs from traditional research and policy processes in that it starts with the unique perspectives and needs of the “end-users,” or the beneficiaries of the tool or product, and designs for these needs. Human-centered design originated in the private sector and has been used in the public sector, including education, to create products, services, and experiences.

To undertake our research using this approach, we adapted ideas from the technology and design fields to craft a tailored version of a human-centered policy design process. This process was based on five principles:

- 1 At every stage of the work, the needs, wants, and constraints of the people we are serving guide our work.
- 2 People are experts on their own lives and can be the source of solutions.
- 3 We can translate the things people tell us into smart policies by identifying gaps and connecting to best practices.
- 4 Good policies enable cross-context practices that are responsive to the articulated needs, wants, and constraints of individuals, irrespective of existing bureaucratic boundaries.
- 5 The needs and wants of young people aren’t the only ones that matter, but they are the ones that matter most to this work.

In our ongoing work with our cohort partners, we are using a three-step approach to conduct research and develop recommendations. The graphic below summarizes these steps.



These three steps help us ensure that we begin with the problem as it exists for those experiencing it and that we ground our recommendations for policy and practice in this context. In practice, this means that we began our work by listening to the students for whom systems aren’t working well. We had conversations with nearly 30 students in traditional schools, alternative schools, and juvenile justice facilities in three states. These students shared their thoughts, experiences, and frustrations with us to help us gain a more complete understanding of the problem of agency fragmentation as they experience it. The ideas and recommendations presented in this document are a direct reflection of the challenges we heard from the youth with whom we spoke.

For more information about human-centered design and policymaking, see: Jason Weeby, “Creating More Effective, Efficient, and Equitable Education Policies with Human-Centered Design,” Bellwether Education Partners, February 2018. <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/creating-more-effective-efficient-and-equitable-education-policies-human-centered-design>

Levers for Change: People and Information

The interviews we conducted with students and agency staff members led us to identify two key levers for change: continuity of people and continuity of information.

Continuity of People

One of the biggest challenges facing the youth who cross agency boundaries is the sheer number of adults with whom they must interact. These students often come into contact with dozens of adults — case managers, social workers, probation officers, lawyers, doctors and therapists, etc. Too often these adults are not communicating with one another, leaving the child to be the only common element across systems. And even where those systems function relatively well, they are arranged in silos of expertise and constrained by financial, regulatory, or mission boundaries like privacy statutes and limitations on agency funding. Without a formal system in place to enable cross-agency communication and information sharing, important information can be lost, overlooked, forgotten, or miscommunicated. Added to this is the fact that many students who are receiving multiple services from a variety of public agencies and community organizations change schools frequently, further disrupting any continuity in their education. Lacking the appropriate medical records, school records, housing forms, personal identification, or other pertinent documentation can meaningfully delay enrollment and re-engagement in school for these children, youth, and young adults.

[It is clear to me] how aware the students are of problems in the system. They know the programs, case managers, and other adults are there to help them, and recognize when they were failing to do so or, worse, making their lives more difficult. Although research tells us that the presence of a committed, caring adult can do wonders for these children's lives, we are spending precious resources and time to again prove to these children the opposite — that they cannot depend on us. – Katherine Astrich, President, Weaver Strategies

In order to improve systems and lessen the burden on young people and their families, there must be both a decrease in the number of adults with whom a child must interact and improvement in the consistency of the adults with whom a child does interact. One way to do this is by identifying a single adult to be in charge of coordinating all aspects of care for a child, similar to a “chief of staff.”* Though this model does not yet exist in any jurisdiction to our knowledge, it is a promising concept that could alleviate significant burdens for children and their families. Their role is not to be another adult in the crowded mix, but rather to stand between the young person and many of the other systems and people, helping to coordinate. A chief of staff is not a decision-maker, but rather a knowledgeable and experienced supporter tasked with helping a student to reach their goals. Primarily, this person would be dedicated to managing students’ education trajectories, beginning at the moment of first contact with any child-serving intervention system and continuing to (or ideally through) postsecondary enrollment.

Kids complain about having too many ‘parents.’ Anywhere from five to 10 adults are trying to say what’s in that child’s best interest. Usually the case team agrees, but when they don’t the kid can get caught in the middle. Kids just want out of care so all the voices will go away, and they’re reluctant to come back when they need help. – Social worker

A child’s chief of staff could be charged with, for example, ensuring the collection and centralization of students’ records and related data and the ongoing monitoring of students’ success. Upon a change in school placement, chiefs of staff would be responsible for ensuring records, grades, and assessment scores from the previous school are

* We first heard this term used in this context by one of the agency staff members we interviewed. The role shares some similarities with the role of “Navigator,” developed by the nonprofit EdNavigator. This organization partners former teachers, school leaders, counselors, and other adults (called Navigators) with a family to help that family navigate the local education systems for their children, from preschool through college. Navigators can help set clear learning goals, choose the right school for each child, explore financial options, communicate with teachers and other school staff members, and provide support analyzing a child’s academic progress. The “chief of staff” role as we envision it would provide many of the same school-based support roles as Navigators and take on additional roles related to coordinating services beyond the school, such as with a parole officer or foster care agency, as needed for each child. One critical difference, however, is that the chief of staff would be a service provided directly to students, rather than for adults/caregivers. That way, young people who lack a consistent adult in their lives can still access the support of a chief of staff.

expeditiously transferred to the new school. Chiefs of staff can research school options and facilitate enrollment in a new school as necessary, ensuring all school personnel are prepared to welcome the student on their first day.

A chief of staff could be in charge of keeping updated records of each student on their caseload. These records will include any academic performance indicators from all previous schools and any relevant data gathered from probation officers, lawyers, social workers, mental health workers, and others. Chiefs of staff would be responsible for collecting this data from the various agencies and then communicating accurate, relevant information to the various parties as needed. Further, chiefs of staff would work directly with each youth and, as appropriate, with students' families and/or legal guardians.

Most importantly, a chief of staff would remain on a student's case until that student enrolls in a postsecondary institution and/or is securely employed in a job at a family-sustaining income — regardless of any number of school, district, or placement changes during that student's K-12 trajectory. This type of continuity can help mitigate some of the instability that highly mobile students experience.

A chief of staff is not an enforcement officer, but they can ensure that services are always available to all eligible students, including students who express a desire to opt out of some available services. Caseloads can be variable but they must be informed by both the number of students and the relative intensity of each case.

Critically, this model will release students (and their caregivers) from being the only common denominator between systems. Because chiefs of staff will have access to data organized by student, rather than by agency, they will facilitate greater communication within and across systems. Enabling one-stop access to information in this way will allow the specialists to better direct any supports necessary for disrupted youth to experience educational success. The chief of staff will similarly be responsible for communicating with the adults in other agencies and satisfying their demands for information, rather than expecting the child to play this role.

It may seem counterintuitive that in order to lessen the burden on youth and families of coordinating multiple adults and agencies, we are proposing to add another adult to the equation. But so long as the chief of staff assumes the role of coordinator and intermediary over the long term, including an additional adult in the young person's ecosystem will lift a burden that students currently carry themselves.

The ultimate goal for this role, and for each individual chief of staff, would be to ensure that students whose educations are significantly disrupted are provided the supports necessary to graduate from high school and continue on to postsecondary education or secure employment at a family-sustaining income.

Continuity of Information

The other major challenge highlighted during the interview stages of our work with our cohort participants is the lack of transferable data. Youth described the frustration and dismay they experience each time they have to recount horrific experiences or bad decisions to yet another adult in yet another agency. Agency staff described frustration with the inability to quickly and efficiently access information about a child from other agencies.

“Too often schools don’t want to release the information [to a student’s social worker]. Consent of release can be difficult to get, so we’re not always able to get things like IEPs. So, setting education goals without all the right information is hard. We might be setting goals that are irrelevant. It’s hard to have honest conversations with families about what’s realistic for a kid’s goals without all facts.” – Social worker

The ability to share data across systems and stakeholders is imperative for the success of any cross-agency coordination effort. Currently, individual systems (and agencies and organizations within systems) use their own unique databases to capture data on the children and youth they serve. When children are served by multiple systems, their information becomes dispersed, duplicate information may be collected and maintained unnecessarily, and outdated information may not be updated across all systems. For example, a high school student who is in foster care and has spent time in the juvenile justice system likely has records in education, juvenile justice, and social welfare databases. If that youth moves, he is expected to update his address across all three systems. And if he is moving frequently, that burden becomes significant.

A streamlined database that allows the sharing of information across systems would eliminate duplicate records and facilitate one-time updates to information, ensuring that youth receive the services they need and full credit for all of the work that they have done. Such a system could be much more powerful than simply housing a youth’s contact information, however. Done well, it could be a trove of powerful information about how best to serve a particular child. Over time, sophisticated analytics could reveal the most promising pathways for young people with shared traits, interests, strengths, or challenges. Teachers could input data on academic outcomes and any supports that are in place in school. School-based counselors or social workers could input information about how best to support that child’s behavioral or emotional development. Social workers from the foster care system could provide updates on that child’s placement or upcoming meetings. Probation officers could input appointment dates and other relevant information. The child could have access as well, to check on dates of appointments or to add supplemental information.

“My dad took me out of school for four months because he was on drugs. No one came looking for me. I just showed up [at this school] one day and they let me stay. – Student”

This system ought to be utilized as the first point of contact for the various adults involved in a child’s case. Social workers could access the database to get updates on the child’s visits from the probation officer, mental health counselors could get updates on the child’s academics, teachers could access information about a child’s new foster placement, and so on.

Ultimately, the benefits of a system like this are threefold: First, it streamlines data collection into a centralized system that all relevant parties can access. Second, and perhaps more importantly, if all key people have access to appropriately filtered information, it creates a common information access point – other than the child – for the adults, thus easing the child’s burden of communication across adults and agencies. Finally, it cumulatively builds a knowledge base that will provide for an increasingly evidence-based approach to each child’s unique needs.

While the creation of such a system sounds like an obvious quick fix, there are real barriers to its development. First and foremost, student data are necessarily protected by a number of complex privacy laws (like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA). Building a system that is able to navigate these laws and ensure compliance while also enabling adults to access pertinent data on a particular youth is an incredibly intricate – and expensive – undertaking. In addition, agencies already have databases that they use to store client data; some of these have been developed for the specific needs and desires of the agency and at great financial cost. Simply eliminating existing systems is not a realistic solution. Developing a tool to meet the needs of all users will require a significant investment of time and money, which is an investment that many jurisdictions are simply unable to make.

Despite these real challenges, creating a tool to allow for the sharing of student data across agencies is an imperative component of improving cross-agency coordination and ultimately, of ensuring that youth have access to the supports they need to be successful.

“[Often] there is an abundance of data, but in organizational systems where every agency, every school, and every care provider gathers information and stores it on their own platform which does not “speak” to anyone else’s platform ... what use, really, is all of that data? ... We would do well to strategize and design systems that allow us to gather all pertinent information about our at-risk youth, then collaborate to turn our insights into decisions and actions that will improve their lives. – Amy Lopez, Deputy Director, Washington DC Department of Corrections; former Chief Education Administrator, Federal Bureau of Prisons, former Superintendent of Education, Texas Juvenile Justice Department”

Conclusion

Students who face chronic education disruption resulting from homelessness, foster care placement, incarceration, health crises, or any other traumatic event would benefit from increased communication and collaboration among the people and agencies already working on their behalf. Importantly, they need policymakers and agency leaders to listen to them, engage with them, and advocate for them. While there are unique and targeted strategies that will be needed in any specific jurisdiction, the two levers we identified here are the broad categories that all who work on this issue should seek to address.

State-level policymakers and agency directors, from superintendents to chief probation officers to public health directors, working to address agency fragmentation and improve service and program delivery for youth who experience significant disruption certainly have their work cut out for them. This work is not easy, it will not be quick, and it will not be painless. However, we offer four recommendations for those who feel strongly about moving forward.

First, policymakers and agency leaders must begin to think outside of their current position and current agency as they craft a set of action steps. They must talk with leaders and staff members of other agencies and make sure to include representatives from all service providers, prioritizing schools. Policymakers and agency leaders committed to addressing agency fragmentation must begin with an inclusive discussion ensuring that the problem is defined from all sides and that existing policies and procedures from all relevant agencies are on the table.

Second, policymakers and agency leaders must conduct an in-depth analysis of existing programs and policies in their specific jurisdiction, including their funding streams. More than likely there are a variety of services tailored to specific student groups (incarcerated youth or homeless youth, for example) that could be expanded to benefit more youth, rather than starting from scratch.

Third, it is imperative that education leaders be “at the table” for all efforts to address care agency fragmentation. Because human services agencies are often tackling matters of basic safety, education is too often relegated to a simple checkbox — is a child in school or not — rather than viewed as a critical partner or, as we believe, the driving force for and a place to situate much of this work. Policymakers and education leaders must engage education leaders in this work, and education leaders must step up to the challenge.

Finally, ownership of this work is crucial to its success. It must be clear to all involved who is driving the work, who is responsible for various pieces, and who has authority to make changes and troubleshoot challenges as they arise.

“These endeavors are incredibly important, but they will not succeed if each state/community does not have an empowered individual who is leading the work to align systems. There has to be someone who wakes up every morning thinking about this and this only! They have to have authority to actually make things happen. Every agency/entity involved has to be regularly held accountable and relationships have to develop within and amongst the entities, so that trust and confidence builds. People have to believe they can actually work together and create better outcomes for these kids.” – Hanna Skandera, Former State Superintendent of Education, New Mexico

Ultimately, the long-term outcomes of children and youth whose educations have been significantly disrupted are, in large part, dependent upon the quality of support that schools and other care agencies can provide. Greater communication and coordination among existing child-serving agencies and programs is critical to improving that support. And as policymakers and practitioners undertake this work, they must carefully consider the needs, wants, and constraints of the youth they are serving to develop a solution that truly meets the needs of our most vulnerable youth.

Endnotes

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- 2 Author's calculation based on subgroup data from federal agencies.
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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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