New Haven's School-Community Connection

A 19-year-old collaboration between New Haven schools and their communities shows how a support network for at-risk students can enhance their academic and social success.

A significant segment of the American population today is at risk. For the first time in history, people must obtain a formal education to stand a good chance of successfully accomplishing adult tasks. Thus, improving the education of high-risk children is one of the most important tasks our nation faces.

By "high-risk children," I mean those who underachieve in school despite adequate intellectual endowment and, as a result, will underachieve as adults.

Sources of Risk

The sources of risk are in societal conditions within the community, family, and the school. As the United States moved from a primarily agricultural economy through the industrial to the current technological economy, the job market has dictated each era's educational needs. Today, those needs require a very high level of psychosocial and academic development for children to be successful both in school and later in adult life.

History demonstrates that people able to participate in the primary job market have the best chance of living successfully in families, rearing their children adequately, acting as responsible citizens, finding satisfaction and meaning in life, and thereby experiencing as individuals a powerful sense of control and belonging within the society. Families who once functioned adequately under social and economic conditions of earlier eras can no longer do so, and poorly functioning families have always been less able to provide their children with the preschool development necessary for success in school. In addition, the level of psychosocial and academic development necessary for children to be successful in school and in the primary job market has increased dramatically.

Blacks, in particular, have been excluded from primary job opportunities, but the increased complexity of living has put families and children from every socioeconomic level and racial and ethnic group at greater risk today than in the past. The risk began its upward spiral after World War II when education became the ticket of admission to good jobs, and television and rapid transportation fragmented the sense of community that once gave support and direction to families.

Educators responded to postwar conditions by raising credential standards and improving course content and teaching methods, but they paid...
little attention to the affective context of education, to the quality of relationships between teachers and students, among school staff, and between staff and community, particularly parents. This skew developed mostly because learning was, and still is, thought of primarily as an isolated, almost mechanical, cognitive operation that the student can engage in or reject at will.

When affective and behavior problems increased in the 1950s, educators and social and behavioral scientists focused on student behavior without appreciating the supportive function of prewar community relationships. Although mental health personnel were added to school staffs, their work was peripheral to the school's program. They diagnosed and treated students without adequately addressing the quality of relationships among and between community, parents, staffs, and students.

In addition, school organization and management has remained hierarchical and authoritarian, even while corporations and other organizations have been moving toward shared power, collaboration, and cooperation to address relationship issues relevant to their mission. In schools today the teaching and learning mission requires collaboration.

Hierarchical and authoritarian organizations are unable to create a supportive climate at the service delivery or school building level because this structure cannot adjust easily to groups or individuals with needs different from those of the majority. For this reason, children from families under stress, children who are underdeveloped, or those who are less likely to learn and behave as expected are at greater risk in the school structure. The sources of risk, therefore, are in the schools, as well as in societal and family conditions outside the school.

Improving Learning for Children At Risk
Economic and social risk-producing factors in the larger society cannot be greatly modified by school people. But educational policy and practice at every level of government, preservice training, and school district and building can be modified to improve the learning of students at risk. To do so requires at least three major changes.

First, adequate academic learning must be understood as a product of overall child development and not an isolated mechanical function determined almost entirely by the child's innate intelligence and will. Second, teachers, administrators, and support staff need to receive preservice and in-service training that gives them the skills to create a school-relationship climate that promotes development and learning. Finally, and most important, all school personnel should be screened and selected for their capacity to work in a collaborative fashion with colleagues, parents, and community as well as for their mastery of academic content and teaching methods. A teacher or administrator who was a brilliant student is of little value to students if he or she cannot relate well to them and thereby motivate desirable behavior and learning. Several changes in education policies and practices could serve these ends.

Improving Preservice Education
State and local requirements for preservice education should include a sufficient number of both theoretical and applied courses in child development and behavior to permit all future educators to understand and promote adequate development and behavior. With such knowledge, most teachers could help children at risk close the developmental gap that prevents them from performing well academically and socially. This training should begin early in preservice education to give future educators opportunities to develop sensitivity, gain knowledge, and acquire skills in applying child development and behavioral principles; to demonstrate their competencies, or to be counseled out of education if necessary.

Preservice education should also prepare future educators to work collaboratively with support staff such as psychologists and social workers. Support staff are generally called on to "treat" children after a problem has arisen. This is a costly and inefficient approach used largely because classroom teachers and support staff are trained separately and have limited understanding of each other's professions or how to work together most effectively.

It has been my experience that where the knowledge and skills of support staff are used to strengthen the child development knowledge and behavior of classroom teachers and to create a desirable social climate in a school, many behavior and learning problems decrease. Teachers with adequate child development and behavioral knowledge refer fewer children for special services. This permits the support staff to give sufficient time to children at greatest risk. Within a good school climate children are better able to imitate, identify, and internalize the attitudes and values of the staff, including valuing learning and appropriate behavior.

Preservice education should also help future teachers understand the reasons for distrust and alienation between home and school. They need to understand how a power-sharing organizational structure and a collaborative management style—with strong administrator leadership—reduces parent and student distrust and alienation. They also need to know how to create and participate in this climate.

Appropriate parental involvement in schools prevents children from viewing learning as a value of the school but not a value of home and community and, therefore, as something that can be rejected easily. Future educators need to understand how to promote desirable home-school relationships so they can mini-
mize the anxiety about school that undergirds parents' and students' distrust and alienation. If fewer parents are intimidated or excluded from the work of schools, children at risk will have added resources, and school people will have added allies.

Even so, future educators trained in this way will need reinforcement and support. In addition, educators now working in the schools will need inservice training to work differently. One approach to providing inservice support for change and for improving learning conditions for students at high risk is that of the Yale Child Study Center School Development Program in the New Haven, Connecticut, Public School System.

The New Haven Schools Project

We began our work in collaboration with the New Haven, Connecticut School System in 1968 in two elementary schools, and our approach evolved gradually. Seminars and other inservice work with personnel in the pupil service group helped them begin to work in a preventive way while carrying out their traditional functions.

A unique feature of the New Haven approach is the mental health team, the group that shares their knowledge of child development and behavior with parents, teachers, and administrators.

We intervened at the systems level, acknowledging that the school building is a modifiable social system and one that is as much a potential factor in continued student underdevelopment as are the students, families, and community. It is a process model in which administrators, parents, teachers, and support staff work collaboratively through three mechanisms: a governance and management group, a mental health or support-staff group, and a parents' group. The goal is to create a social climate that helps to close the student development gap, to create an academic program based on achievement data, and to carry out a staff development program based on social and academic goals established at the building level. The coordinating element is the governance and management group, which, with the support of the school staff, develops and carries out a comprehensive building plan to address school social climate, academic performance, and staff development.

The unique feature of our approach is that the mental health team shares child development and behavior knowledge, skills, and sensitivity with parents, teachers, and administrators.

They, in turn, apply their development and behavioral knowledge to social and academic program planning and to their interactions with students. In this way, the mental health staff work in a preventive fashion as well as in a traditional treatment mode. This work permits a wedding of academic and social, cognitive and affective resources in a way that can best meet the needs of a growing child and close the developmental gap for children at risk.

The building-level governance and management group representing all the adults in the building—teachers selected by teachers, parents by parents, the Child Study Center social worker, and the principal acting as group leader—emerged as the critical intervention mechanism. The comprehensive representation within this group enabled issues which arose from pupil personnel service work to be brought to the attention of the governance and management group and helped members plan programs sensitive to child development and behavior principles. As the school staff addressed problems and perceived the opportunities inherent in this model, they began to value and internalize it.

Social Skills Curriculum

Once the staff established the value of working in this way, a comprehensive building plan in social, academic, and staff development was developed. The program, called A Social Skills Curriculum for Inner City Children, integrated the teaching of basic academic skills, social skills, and art appreciation. It was carried out during elective time and included units on politics and government, business and economics, health and nutrition, spiritual and leisure time—all areas, in fact, in which children need social and academic skills to be successful as adults. This program permitted low-income, disproportionately high-risk children, to gain some of the same skills that children from better-educated and higher-income families often gain simply by participating in the activities of their families.

Several important principles undergirded this work. A "no fault" philosophy put the emphasis on problem solving rather than on fault finding. Decisions were made by consensus.
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The New Haven program helps low-income children gain some of the same skills that children from better-educated and higher-income families acquire outside of school.

with an understanding that the leadership capacity of the principal could not be paralyzed. Equally important was the understanding that suggestions and interests of parents, teachers, and other participants must be taken seriously, and that representatives of these groups must have meaningful roles in the school program. School elective-time activities need to build on individual and group strengths. The kind and level of activities need to match group skill and confidence so that success becomes almost inevitable. Participants need coaching to assume their new roles; thereafter, success can breed success.

In 1969, our first year, we worked with two schools in which the level of achievement of fourth-grade students was ranked 32nd and 33rd in the city. Students were about 18 and 19 months behind national achievement levels on standardized tests. The attendance was among New Haven’s lowest, and students in both schools exhibited severe behavior problems. In 1986, the original project school—with no change in its socioeconomic makeup—ranked third in achievement out of 26 elementary schools, and students ranked about a year above grade level by the fourth grade on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. This school has ranked among the top five schools in attendance for the last seven years, and there have been no serious behavior problems in the school for well over a decade.

Under the direction of John Dow, superintendent of the New Haven Schools, the model is being used in all of the low-income elementary schools as part of his overall school improvement plan, Project Excel. It is also being developed in two middle schools in preparation for application to all New Haven middle schools. In addition, a modification of the original model is being used in one of the high schools and in several other school systems.

**Internalizing Intervention**

Almost any school improvement effort carried out in a systematic way with sufficient energy will be temporarily effective. We designed our intervention so that the staff could conceptualize and accept the underlying rationale for change, internalize the methods, and carry on after our intervention-inservice team was no longer present. In fact, most of the academic gain took place after the intervention team officially left the schools.

As our experience in the New Haven School System shows, educators can motivate high-risk students to achieve at a much higher level both academically and socially. Prospective teachers can learn how to stimulate this motivation by experiencing different preservice training and adapting to different requirements and practices. Inservice programs that apply child development and behavioral science principles to every aspect of an education program, particularly at the building level, can ensure higher achievement for teachers, administrators, and students now in the schools.

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