

Evaluation of a School—Juvenile Court Team Approach to Delinquency Prevention

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Abstract:

The School-Juvenile Court Liaison Project was designed to assist schools and courts in working cooperatively to intervene in and prevent delinquency. Results of the evaluation indicate increased communication and joint service planning between the systems. School and court personnel are talking to each other more often about students who are involved with the court, as well as about general issues of school-court cooperation, and school and court staff are working together more frequently to develop treatment plans for such students. School-court teams have also been successful in developing interagency case staffing councils and prevention-oriented projects in their communities. Factors contributing to the project's success are discussed.

Article:

Communities face a twofold challenge in addressing the problems of alienated and delinquent youth: how to deal effectively with delinquent youth to reduce the likelihood of future offenses and how to prevent or minimize the occurrence of delinquent behavior by youth who have not already committed such acts. This paper describes the results of a 2-year project, the School—Juvenile Court Liaison Project, which assisted personnel from five school systems and juvenile courts in Georgia to work together to meet these challenges.

The importance of school involvement in delinquency prevention and intervention derives from the school's role as one of the primary social institutions responsible for young people's development. Although schools contribute to the successful socialization of a majority of youth, for a substantial minority of students, schools are a high-risk environment. "While the main sources of most serious offenses almost certainly lie in the features of the broad society, we feel that schools can aggravate the problem or reduce it" (McPartland & McDill, 1977, p. 22). Factors such as academic competition, perceived irrelevance of coursework, psychoeducational labels, school violence, school governance policies, and the role of authority and disciplinary procedures contribute to failure, alienation, and delinquency (Johnson, Bird, & Little, 1979; Phillips & Kelly, 1979; Shaefer & Polk, 1967; Wenk, 1976).

Furthermore, schools are inextricably linked to delinquency because a significant portion of delinquent and unruly acts occur in and around school facilities (Isralowitz, 1982). School-related offenses are a major reason for taking youth to juvenile court, and court dispositions for delinquent students frequently stipulate such school requirements as regular attendance and a reduction in school misconduct. Despite the critical role schools play in the lives of students involved with the court, rarely do school and court staff collaborate to address the needs of these youth. A review of the literature on this subject by the authors found only one article that dealt directly with interagency cooperation between school and court (National School Resource Network, 1980). The lack of school-court communication and cooperation within the state of Georgia was highlighted in recommendations from a statewide invitational conference, Juvenile Justice, Education, and the Community (Georgia Department of Community Affairs, 1983).

The three goals of the School-Juvenile Court Liaison Project, based on gaps identified at this conference, were

a) to develop linkages between schools and courts so that services to youth involved with both systems can be coordinated and early intervention rather than remedial/rehabilitation services can be increased

b) to assist school and court personnel in reaching out to other human service agencies to develop a community-wide system of service coordination for young people

c) to enable school and court personnel to address youth-related community problems with preventive rather than reactive approaches (Kurtz & Lindsey, 1986, p. 10)

These goals are based primarily on the systems theory approach to primary and secondary prevention of delinquency. The systems approach focuses on "those forces and factors which maintain the delinquent subculture, which may represent 'ports of entry' for effective intervention into the delinquency system" (Cohn, 1977, p. 18). The liaison project focused on the school as a port of entry. The assumption is that if the school worked more with truants and other youth who have not committed serious crimes on school grounds, then many of these youth will not become involved with the juvenile system. The structure, organization, and policies of a school affect its ability to function as a support system to these youth. Schaefer and Polk (1967) warned that "there are fundamental defects within the educational system, especially as it touches the lower income youth, that actively contribute to these negative experiences, thereby increasing rather than decreasing the chances that some youth will choose the illegitimate alternative" (p. 224). Furthermore, Phillips and Kelly (1979) found that school failure seems to be related to the onset of delinquency.

Another aspect of the systems approach is the interaction of school and court policies and procedures. In some respects, the aims of the school and court are different, and consequently they work at cross-purposes. For instance, educators tend to focus on maintaining order and discipline in the schools and find it in their best interests to suspend or expel chronic "troublemakers" from school. Court staff, however, concerned about the trouble these students can become involved in when they are out of school, push hard to keep them in school.

Such problems are compounded by the fact that school and court personnel are often not aware of the constraints of each system and by the lack of formal policies and procedures governing collaboration between the two systems. The working relationship between them is usually dependent on the personalities and goodwill of individuals, which leads to more inconsistencies and misunderstandings regarding the treatment of high-risk and delinquent youth. Since school is a port of entry, collaboration between the school and court can provide opportunities for effective early intervention (Romig, 1978). However, these opportunities are often neglected.

Intervention

Seventy nonmetropolitan school systems and 49 juvenile court systems in northern Georgia were sent information packets and invited to apply. Fifteen joint applications—(one from each school system and juvenile court in the same county)—were received. Site visits were made to selected applicants to determine the nature of the school-court relationship, community-wide mechanisms for coordination of services to troubled youth, and youth-related problems in the communities that could be addressed using preventive approaches. On the basis of need for assistance and commitment to the three goals of the project, five counties were selected to participate: Columbia County, Dalton/Whitfield County, Gainesville/Hall County, McDuffie County, and Walker County.

A locality development form of community organization (Rothman, 1979) was used to empower local communities to bring about lasting changes dictated by the goals. The primary strategy for achieving these goals was the development of local school-juvenile court teams, ranging in size from two to five members and composed largely of school social workers (SSWs) and court service workers (CSWs). The teams worked on local needs assessment, goal setting, program planning, implementation, and evaluation of goals. Education and consultation were the primary methods used to develop and build the capacity of the school-court teams. A series of four workshops was held over an 18-month period, during which time the team members were exposed

to concepts and strategies related to school-court relations, interagency councils, and delinquency prevention. Interspersed with the workshops were site visits and telephone consultations to provide technical and problem-solving assistance to the teams.

Key principles for effective organizational and community change were followed throughout. Greiner (1967) cited the importance of gaining approval from the top and input from all levels if organizational change is to be successful. Prior to selection for participation in the project, meetings with judges, superintendents, and other key personnel in both systems were held. They provided an opportunity both to inform key individuals about the goals of the project and to gain their input regarding local needs. The sanction of judges and school superintendents was required before a system was accepted into the project. Once the project began, the school-court teams conducted a needs assessment related to project goals, using a key informant approach to gather information from many levels within each system.

Rubin and Rubin (1986) stressed local control as a key element in any type of community development effort. In this project, control was vested in the teams, each of which developed its own goals and action plans with respect to each of the three project goals. Thus, the teams were working toward objectives based on local input and decided upon by the team members themselves with the sanction of the judge and superintendent.

Method

The project was designed to enable each team to tailor its activities to the needs of its individual communities. The goals of the project guided the teams to focus on improving school-court relations, developing a community-wide network for coordination of services to youth, and implementing prevention programs directed at children and youth. How these goals were accomplished, was left to the discretion of the teams. Thus, the evaluation of the project involved examination of the degree to which specific team objectives were met. To determine progress toward each goal, the teams provided written and verbal reports of their accomplishments (see Table 1 for examples).

Since the principal purpose of the project was increased involvement of schools in the prevention of and early intervention in delinquency, as well as heightened cooperation between schools and courts, the evaluation also entailed an examination of measurable changes in these areas. The CSW from each team was asked to draw a sample of 20 referrals—(10 school and 10 nonschool referrals)—at Time 1 (preintervention) and Time 2 (postintervention). For each referral, the school and court staff completed an instrument that indicated the type of action each system (school and court) took to assist the youth or the type of service it provided. In addition, the team members reported the extent to which the school and court staff collaborated on each referral.

There are two noteworthy limitations of the data-based evaluation of the project: the absence of a random sample of cases and the absence of data from one county. The team members were responsible for drawing samples and collecting data. Since the project emphasized team members devoting most of their time to the pursuit of their goals, it was not feasible to implement time-consuming sampling procedures. Consequently, random sampling of cases was not employed. Even with the simplified data-collection procedures, one county did not provide complete postdata. Thus, the prepost comparisons are based on four rather than five counties. The data were analyzed using the chi-square test for nominal level data and Kendall's tau b for ordinal level data. The chi-square test indicates significance only, while the Kendall's tau b indicates the direction of the relationship. Student's t-test was used to test for significant differences in means.

Results

School-Court Relations. Four of the five teams developed formal communication systems between the two institutions. For example, Team A (see Table 1) prepared a 30-page manual that included sections on the legal philosophy of the juvenile court, on the description of treatment programs available through the court, juvenile court jurisdiction and procedures, on guidelines for referral by the schools, and on the description of how school and court staff will cooperate (Dalton Schools, Whitfield Schools, and Whitfield Juvenile Court, 1985). The manual outlined a series of steps school personnel should take prior to referral of truants to the juvenile court

for action. Thus, it included steps for preventing court involvement, as well as descriptions of how school and court staff should collaborate when youth are referred to court.

TABLE 1
School-Court Goals and Accomplishments: A Sample

Team	Goals	Accomplishments
	<i>School-court relations</i>	<i>School-court relations</i>
A	Develop policies and procedures for information sharing, court referral, and other forms of cooperation	A 30-page policies and procedures manual was developed by team, sanctioned by superintendents and judge, and introduced at joint meeting of court and school staff
B	Refer students who commit criminal acts on campus to the court Refer students who are seen as potential truants or delinquents to the CSW for counseling	School refers students who commit criminal acts on campus to court School refers potential truants and delinquents, but no petition is filed and formal case is not opened; CSW counsels with these students and their families (thus far, no one seen through this process has been formally referred to court)
	Designate school person for CSW to contact when students are involved with the courts or Youth Development Center (YDC)	Each school has designated liaison person, who receives information concerning legal, academic, and social information status of youth involved with court or YDC
	<i>Interagency Cooperation</i>	<i>Interagency Cooperation</i>
A	Revive the ailing Troubled Children's Committee (TCC)	Team was instrumental in the TCC incorporating new procedures; one team member is vice president of the TCC and several other team members chair subcommittees
B	Start an interagency council to conduct case conferences and plan services for youth	An interagency council composed of nine agencies began meeting regularly in January 1985; president and vice president are members of team
	<i>Prevention Programs</i>	<i>Prevention Programs</i>
A	Develop program to strengthen bonding between middle-school students and school, and program to work with delinquent students in school	Team wrote two grant applications: for school climate program and for in-school climate probation officer program; both grants were funded
B	Introduce RAMP program (empirically tested substance abuse education program) into school curriculum	School system plans to train teachers to begin using RAMP material, with partial financial support offered by civic organizations; ultimate goal is to train all teachers to integrate it into school curriculum

In addition to the development of policies and procedures, it was expected that the extent of case coordination between the two systems would increase. Table 2 presents the percentage frequencies for each category of

contacts concerning students involved with both systems. The chi-square test for significance indicated a change in service planning from Time 1 (1983-84) to Time 2 (1984-85). Kendall's tau b was not significant, so the direction of the change was not evident from the statistics. However, the apparent trend was for a smaller percentage of cases to receive "none" to "periodic" contact and a larger percentage to have coordinated service plans at Time 2 than at Time 1.

TABLE 2
Service Coordination Between Schools and Courts (Percentages)

Frequency of Contact	Time 1 (n = 63)	Time 2 (n = 77)
None	0	6.6
One to two contacts	27.9	11.8
Periodic contact	29.5	23.7
Coordinated plan	9.8	19.7
Coordinated plan with follow-up	32.8	38.2

Note: chi-square, $p \leq .02$.

Another variable used to measure the effectiveness of the teams in coordinating the services available to students was the total number of school and court actions/services provided for students involved with the court. The results show there were significantly more total school services received by students at Time 2 than at Time 1 (Kendall's tau b, $p \leq .03$). There was no significant difference in the total number of court services offered between the two times. Table 3 compares the percentage of cases in the sample for whom specific school and court actions were taken at Time 1 and Time 2. Among the school actions, there were significant increases in three categories: disciplinary actions, school staffings, and referrals to other agencies. Among the court actions there were significant increases in parent conferences and referrals to other agencies.

Table 4 breaks the sample down into school and nonschool referrals. It compares school and court actions taken on cases referred by school and nonschool sources for Time 1 and Time 2. There were significant differences between school and nonschool referrals for all school actions at Time 1. This finding is not surprising, since schools typically utilize internal resources prior to referring a student to court. On the other hand, school personnel are often unaware when students have been referred to juvenile court by other sources and are thus unable to offer services to these individuals. It was hoped that project success in encouraging heightened collaboration and communication would increase the percentage of both school and nonschool referred cases that receive direct service from the school. At Time 2, there was no significant difference between school and nonschool referrals on four school actions. Thus, schools were just as likely to provide counseling, develop a modified instructional program, staff the case, and conduct a psychoeducational evaluation regardless of whether the student was referred to the court by the school or another source. These findings indicate an increase in the number of school services offered to students who are referred to the court by a non-school source.

TABLE 3
School and Court Actions Taken at Time 1 and Time 2 (Percentages)

Actions	Time 1 (n = 70)	Time 2 (n = 78)
School actions		
Counseling	64.3	60.3
Modified instruction	17.1	16.7
Disciplinary action	47.1	60.3 ^a
Parent conference	60.0	73.1
School staffing	24.3	34.6 ^a
Psychoeducational evaluation	21.4	21.8
Referral to other agency	27.1	56.4 ^a
School person went to court	27.1	39.7
Other service	8.5	9.0
Court actions		
Counseling	70.0	67.9
Detention	50.0	46.2
Parent conference	78.6	88.5 ^a
Court staffing	52.9	61.5
Referral to other agency	31.4	62.8 ^a
Psychological evaluation	27.1	21.8
Other service	32.9	35.9

^a Student's t-test shows significant difference in this variable between Time 1 and Time 2 ($p \leq .05$).

At Time 1 there were only two court actions in which there were significant differences between the two groups. Cases referred by nonschool sources were much more likely than school cases to receive counseling by court staff and to be discussed at court staffing sessions. Differences between the two groups in the numbers of students placed in detention approached significance, with nonschool referrals more likely to be detained than school referrals. At Time 2, there continued to be a significant difference between school and nonschool referrals with respect to the court staffing variable; in addition, there was also a difference between the two groups with respect to the detention variable, with school-referred cases being less likely to be detained. However, school-referred cases were no longer less likely to receive counseling by court staff, indicating increased involvement by the court staff in dealing with these cases.

TABLE 4
Actions of School and Court by Referral Source (Percentages)

Actions	Referrals			
	Time 1		Time 2	
	School (<i>n</i> = 24)	Nonschool (<i>n</i> = 46)	School (<i>n</i> = 40)	Nonschool (<i>n</i> = 38)
School actions				
Counseling	83.3 ^{ab}	54.3 ^a	67.5 ^b	52.6
Modified instruction	29.2 ^a	10.9 ^a	20.9	13.2
Disciplinary action	70.8 ^a	34.8 ^a	77.5 ^a	42.1 ^a
Parent conference	83.3 ^a	47.8 ^a	92.5 ^a	52.6 ^a
School staffing	41.7 ^a	15.2 ^{ac}	40.0	28.9 ^c
Psychoeducational evaluation	37.5 ^a	13.0 ^a	25.0	18.4
Referral to other agency	45.8 ^{ab}	17.4 ^{ac}	75.0 ^{ab}	36.8 ^{ac}
School person went to court	54.2 ^a	13.0 ^a	57.5 ^a	21.1 ^a
Other service	16.7 ^a	1.4 ^a	15.0 ^a	2.6 ^a
Court actions				
Counseling	27.7 ^a	77.0 ^a	67.5	68.4
Detention	37.5	56.5	35.0 ^a	57.9 ^a
Parent conference	75.0 ^b	80.4	87.5 ^b	89.5
Court staffing	29.2 ^{ab}	65.2 ^a	50.0 ^{ab}	73.7 ^a
Referrals to other agencies	37.5	28.3 ^c	57.5	68.4 ^c
Psychological evaluation	16.7	32.6	15.0	28.9
Other service	33.3	26.1	32.5	39.5

^a Kendall's tau b shows significant difference in this variable between the two groups for each year ($p \leq .05$).

^b Kendall's tau b shows significant difference in this variable within school referred group across time ($p \leq .05$).

^c Kendall's tau b shows significant difference on this variable within nonschool referred group across time ($p \leq .05$).

Table 4 also shows differences in actions taken within each group (school-referred and nonschool-referred) between Time 1 and Time 2. Among school referrals to court, the only significant differences in school actions between Time 1 and Time 2 were a decline in school counseling and an increase in referrals to other agencies. There were two significant differences related to court actions, with both parent conferences and court staffings increasing from Time 1 to Time 2. Among nonschool referrals, school staffing and school referral to other agencies increased, as did court referrals to other agencies.

Another finding is that at Time 1 there was an inverse relationship between the number of school actions/services and the degree of service coordination: Higher levels of service coordination were associated with lower numbers of school actions/services directed toward students (Kendall's tau b, $p \leq .01$). At Time 1 the relationship between the number of court actions/services and the degree of service coordination with the schools was not significant. By Time 2, there was a significant positive relationship between the extent of coordination and the number of both school and court actions/services directed toward students involved with the court (Kendall's tau b, $p \leq .01$). Thus, the increase in coordinated service planning that occurred as a result

of participation in the project seems to have resulted in more school and court services being offered to students involved with the court, regardless of the source of referral to the court.

Interagency Cooperation. Another goal of the project was to assist school and court personnel to mobilize or become part of already existing local interagency groups concerned with the needs of youth. Team A members were instrumental in revitalizing their already existing Troubled Children's Council (TCC). They arranged for consultants who had given a presentation on inter-agency councils during the first project workshop to give a similar presentation to their TCC. One of the team members was elected vice president of the TCC. In County B, where no interagency council had existed, the CSW took responsibility for organizing an interagency council. Subsequently, she was elected president and another team member, an assistant principal of the high school, was elected vice president. In County E, three team members played significant roles in the initiation of two councils in conjunction with Project RESHAPE, sponsored by the State Department of Education to develop local coordination of services to handicapped children, and CASSP (Child and Adolescent Support Services Program), sponsored by the State Division of Mental Health.

In County C, the SSW joined an existing interagency group and assisted in the development of a human services team to staff cases. However, primarily because of a lack of leadership, this team never functioned. Members of Team D did not become involved in the existing TCC in their community, but the school and court continued to be represented on the TCC by other system personnel.

In summary, three of the five teams made significant contributions to the initiation or revitalization of their local interagency councils and assumed leadership roles. Although evaluation of the effectiveness of these councils was outside the scope of the present project, anecdotal information indicates each is still thriving and successfully finding resources and coordinating services to multi-problem families.

Prevention Programs. The third goal—the development of primary prevention programs—was difficult for team members, few of whom had previously been exposed to concepts of primary prevention. Only two of the five teams were successful in implementing their prevention programs. Team A developed a school climate improvement program in two middle schools and an in-school probation office program (an early intervention effort). The team received grants from the Georgia Governor's Advisory Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. At present, the school climate improvement program, the only one of its kind in the state, is in its second year and has expanded to two elementary schools.

Team D chose to introduce an empirically validated law-related education program to fifth graders. Several teachers were trained, and the three SSW team members cotaught a pilot version of the program to the teachers. The SSWs offer additional credit classes to other teachers interested in learning the curriculum.

The other three counties were not as successful in their prevention efforts, largely because of too lofty goals, changes in school administration, and lack of funding. County B planned to introduce a substance abuse education program into the school system, but thus far the necessary funding has not been secured. Team C took on the goal of developing recreation opportunities in an unserved low-income area of the county. Although the CSW did arrange for a karate class to be taught at a local church (based on a survey of student interests), no viable program supported by the county recreation department was established, primarily owing to lack of facilities, land, and money. In County D, a peer counseling program was planned to help high-risk students with the transition from middle to high school. Owing to a change in school administration, implementation of the program was postponed. However, a collaborative school-court program has been started to supervise students suspended from school and to enable them to continue earning school credit during the time they are suspended.

Discussion

The School—Juvenile Court Liaison Project demonstrated that, given certain conditions and training, schools are willing and able to assume an active role in the prevention and early treatment of delinquency, schools and courts are willing and able to enhance their collaboration, and, working as a team, both systems are willing and

able to provide leadership regarding delinquency prevention to the community at large. Taken as a whole, the case data and team accomplishments reveal substantial changes in the court's and especially the school's involvement in juvenile justice and delinquency prevention.

Most of the changes in early intervention services occurred within the schools. The schools showed substantial increases from Time 1 to Time 2 in services to cases referred to court by both school and nonschool sources. Schools also assumed the major responsibility for implementation of the prevention programs. There were fewer changes from Time 1 to Time 2 in the court service role. However, greater collaboration did result in an overall increase in court services. Furthermore, several CSWs started to provide informal counseling services to youth who were at high risk for referral to the court. The court assumed less responsibility for primary prevention programs. In three of the five counties, both school and court workers became involved in their TCCs. In sum, given an opportunity for team building and collaboration, schools are willing and able to work with the courts to increase their involvement in delinquency prevention.

Underlying the goal achievements were intrapersonal, inter-personal, and organizational changes. The intrapersonal changes were evident in the team members, who demonstrated increased knowledge, additional competencies, and heightened confidence. They became empowered enablers in pursuit of a mission. Inter-personally, the project facilitated professional and personal relationships between the two systems.

Finally, the organizational changes are perhaps the most note-worthy. The goals of the project were to improve services to both delinquent and high-risk youth through organizational and inter-organizational changes and to prevent delinquency through the initiation of programs based on local needs. Both schools and courts committed themselves to a new organizational structure, the school-court liaison team. Other organizational benchmarks were the new school-court policies and procedures that affect much of the daily operations between the two systems. The organizational changes were not limited to the interface between school and court, but extended to the coordination of cases with other local human services agencies. Interagency councils are now essential fixtures in four of the five counties involved with the project. A final significant organizational change occurred in two of the participating school systems. In an effort to prevent delinquency, they initiated unique school-based programs to improve school climate and teach law-related education courses.

Several factors were instrumental to the success of the project. From the outset, juvenile court judges and superintendents were informed of and endorsed the project. By gaining input from various levels of both systems, the team members became aware of concerns and issues outside their own and incorporated these into their goals and intervention plans. Thus the team members, in most cases, had the necessary power and the support of their system to negotiate with staff from the other system. Throughout, the project stressed selective, incremental organizational change. No pat or "canned" solutions were offered. Rather, teams were encouraged to identify goals and design interventions to address the unique needs of their respective communities.

The project enabled staff, acting as a team, to undertake tasks that they could not do as individuals. Often in the past these professionals have felt isolated and powerless in their attempts to deal with troubled children. The intervention process, especially the workshops, enabled each team to air common feelings and concerns, build cohesion, and become empowered to act. Acting separately, it is doubtful if either system could have effected the changes that have been accomplished thus far. It is also doubtful whether the two systems could have been as successful without the intervention of project staff who provided a framework within which cooperation was achieved and who also mediated and helped resolve conflicts when necessary.

Experience teaches that programs and services are more likely to be sustained if they are based on local rather than temporary state and federal support. Once the external, artificial supports cease, the great majority of such programs for troubled youth terminate (Whittington & Brand, 1980). The project provided no funding for the teams' local programs. Thus, out of necessity teams primarily sought local support for any initiatives that required funding.

One team member stressed that he felt the most important project outcome for the schools and court in his county was not the specific agreements and programs they produced, but the interaction process the team learned so that future issues can be addressed in a constructive fashion. This participant's comment strikes at the heart of the project and will be the test of its ultimate success.

As a postscript, four additional school and court systems have become involved in the project. Work with this second group of teams will enable the staff to refine the model that has been developed and conduct additional evaluative research to determine the impact of this model on the lives of students, as well as on the communities in which the teams live and work.

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