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Toward an Integrated, Whole Community Model of Dropout Prevention

by Michael Baizerman and Donald Compton

Introduction

AS A PART OF a statewide evaluation of dropout prevention programs in Virginia, survey data were collected statewide from school district dropout prevention coordinators. Ninety-four of the 103 school divisions (91%) receiving state funds for dropout prevention responded to the survey. In addition, school staff were interviewed as part of a case study of seven schools to identify approaches to improving parent and community involvement, and focus groups were conducted with community agency representatives and parents. The interview data were analyzed using Joyce Epstein's model (see Table I) which organizes practical actions and likely outcomes for five types of parent involvement (1989): Type 1 -Parenting; Type 2 -Communicating; Type 3 -Volunteering; Type 4 -Learning at Home; and Type 5 -Representing Other Parents. Using this approach showed that most parent involvement activities were of Types 2 and 3, and then 5, and that more talk than action is given to Types 1 and 4, both among school professionals and among parents.

Epstein's model was thought-provoking and invited a dialogue, with other data collected, on the interactions between and among schools and community human service agencies. These data on the flows of students (referrals), funds, staff, equipment, facilities, and information presented a way to understand to what extent a local school was part of a larger local youth service system.

How is the School Part of the Local Youth Service Community?

The statewide survey data showed that a relatively small number of local agencies typically constituted the school's organization-set and determined how and to what extent the school was part of the local youth-serving system. For example, other agencies used most often were in the domain of guidance and counseling, and included the Virginia Department of Social Services, the Virginia Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, and the Court Services Unit.

Reflecting on these findings brought us back to Epstein's work. How is the school part of the community? What is its "community," as the school sees it? From revisiting Epstein, we created five types of community-school involvement possible for dropout prevention, as well as for other issues and problems (see Table II). Where Epstein's model is based on long-time research, our's is theoretical and sug-

gests the kind of research that could be done, policy that could be developed, and action that could be undertaken.

Using our model, most interactions reported by dropout prevention coordinators were of Type 4, providing ideas and services. Some attention was given to recruiting and training volunteers who could help schools prevent dropouts (Type 3), with no work reported in Types 1 and 2.

In this model, each type is another aspect of community-school relations. The school claims responsibility for enhancing community structure and everyday life as part of educating the community. Reciprocally, the community accepts responsibility for being more than the banker and the source of employees for the school; it claims moral responsibility for its children, adolescents, and youth, and acts to support their healthy development and effective schooling.

Towards a Model of School-Community Involvement

Epstein focused on parents and parent groups; we focus on an abstraction, "community," and on the individuals and groups that constitute it. Both models show how the school can recognize and use the people, groups, and organizations in its local environment to help develop effective programs and practices in dropout prevention and intervention.

People recognize and apparently accept the need for, as dropout prevention coordinators might say, "commu-

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Table I
Epstein's Model of Parent Involvement
Examples of Practices to Promote the Five Types of Parent Involvement

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Representing Other Parents
Help all Families Establish Home Environments to Support Learning	Design More Effective Forms of Communications to Reach Parents	Recruit and Organize Parent Help and Support	Provide Ideas to Parents on How to Help Child at Home	Recruit and Train Parent Leaders

A Few Examples of Practices of Each Type

School provides suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level.	Teachers conduct conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-up as needed.	School volunteer program or class parent and committee of volunteers for each room.	Information to parents on skills in each subject at each grade. Regular homework schedule (once a week or twice a month) that requires students to discuss schoolwork at home.	Participation and leadership in PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, including advisory councils or committees such as curriculum, safety, and personnel.
Workshops, videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting and child-rearing issues at each grade level.	Translators for language-minority families. Weekly or monthly folders of student work are sent home and reviewed and comments returned.	Parent Room or Parent Club for volunteers and resources for parents. Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.	Calendars with daily topics for discussion by parents and students.	Independent advocacy groups.

A Few Examples of Outcomes Linked to Each Type

Parent Outcomes				
Self-confidence in parenting.	Understanding school programs.	Understanding teacher's job and school programs.	Interaction with child as student at home.	Input to policies that affect child's education.
Knowledge of child development.	Interaction with teachers.	Familiarity with teachers.	Support and encouragement of schoolwork.	Feeling control of environment.
Understanding of home as environment for student learning.	Monitoring child's progress.	Comfort in interaction at school.	Participation in child's education.	
Student Outcomes				
Security.	Student participation in parent-teacher conferences, or in preparation for conferences.	Increased learning skills receiving individual attention.	Homework completion.	Rights protected.
Respect for parent.		Ease of communication with adults.	Self-concept of ability as learner.	Specific benefits linked to specific policies.
Improved attendance.	Better decisions about courses, programs.		Achievement in skills practiced.	
Awareness of importance of school.				
Teacher Outcomes				
Understanding of family cultures, goals, talents, needs.	Knowledge that family has common base of information for discussion of student problems, progress. Use of parent network for communications.	Awareness of parent interest, in school and children, and willingness to help. Readiness to try programs that involve parents in many ways.	Respect and admiration of parents' time, ability to follow through and reinforce learning. Better designs of homework assignments.	Equal status interaction with parents to improve school programs. Awareness of parent perspectives for policy development.

Table II
Towards a Model of School-Community Involvement

Model	Type of Involvement				
	1	2	3	4	5
Epstein	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Representing Other Parents
Community	Caring Community	Community Organizing	Voluntary Involvement	Community Consultation and Services	Community Involvement
Description	Support a community culture of justice and caring	Support a community structure characterized by an array of interactions, formal and informal, and communication channels between and among groups, agencies, and the schools	Recruit and organize support of a wide variety of organizations, groups, and individuals to help school	Provide ideas and services to school	Recruit and train community leaders to help schools

nity in-put into the schools" and for "partnerships" between the school and community. Typically, schools usually want the community to help them do their work. Missing is a powerful alternate concept: the school's students are the community's youth, and the school is the community's agent for schooling and learning. We need a broader, richer concept of school-community relations — of how we design, implement, and assess such concepts, and create incentives to encourage and support these new school-community efforts. For example, we found the schools' knowledge and use of youth groups to be limited. These are important groups in many communities, giving children a chance for healthy development through supervised, appropriate activities. A strong case can be made that non-formal youth organizations, particularly those that use experiential education processes, must become key players in any community-based model of dropout prevention.

The ideas and findings on parent and community involvement for dropout prevention leave room for deeper socio-cultural and socioeconomic intervention. Unless communities and families change in positive ways, there will never be a sharp

reduction in the number of children who enter school, or come to be, at-risk of failing and dropping out. We need a model of community-based prevention, control, and rehabilitation that weaves together the school, parents, and community.

At least three pieces are missing from current efforts to work with these students. One is a systematic effort to build and sustain caring communities. The second is to develop a structure to rationalize, coordinate, and integrate existing community efforts. The last is to train parents and other citizens to help their children, the schools, and the community itself. Once in place, these pieces can work together to revitalize the community, allowing it to better serve children, youth, and families.

Expressed schematically, community education for dropout prevention, control, and rehabilitation functions as a bridge, connecting the school, parents, and community.

In practical terms, parents can learn how to build a home environment that supports healthy development and learning (Type 1); help their children learn (Type 4), and be more effective parents (combined Types 1 and 4). These actions lead to prevention.

Parents can also learn how to revitalize their community by forming groups and becoming active players in local schools and in the local youth development policy, planning, and service integration process.

A structure could be designed to rationalize, coordinate, and integrate all community services — school sponsored, school-based and others — for the limited purpose of preventing students from dropping out of school and for the greater purpose of enhancing healthy youth development.

Conclusion

Dropout prevention programs in the schools cannot adequately do the job alone. They must reach out to community-based agencies and programs if they want to meet the needs of students and their families. This is being done, to some extent at least, in Virginia.

On a more analytical level, data collected for an evaluation of dropout prevention programs in Virginia suggest that some high-school faculty and staff recognize their students' non-education needs and seek to have these needs met inside and outside of

the school. Referrals for outside services are expected to show marked increases when school faculty and staff learn more about students' and families' needs and the availability of community-based services, and when there are designated professionals, such as social workers and counselors, to facilitate referrals.

This is a beginning, as is the work being done under Virginia's Comprehensive Services for Youth and Families Act. But more is needed.

Services typically are of limited primary preventive efficacy, because too few exist and they are used too late. While these services and programs obviously have a crucial role in dropout prevention and intervention, we must work for more basic social, economic, and often cultural changes. We must invite the entire community to accept responsibility for its youth by engaging members in conversations on local politics and school practices. Out of this involvement we should see more effective

community efforts to prevent dropping-out. This is what school-community partnerships should become. □

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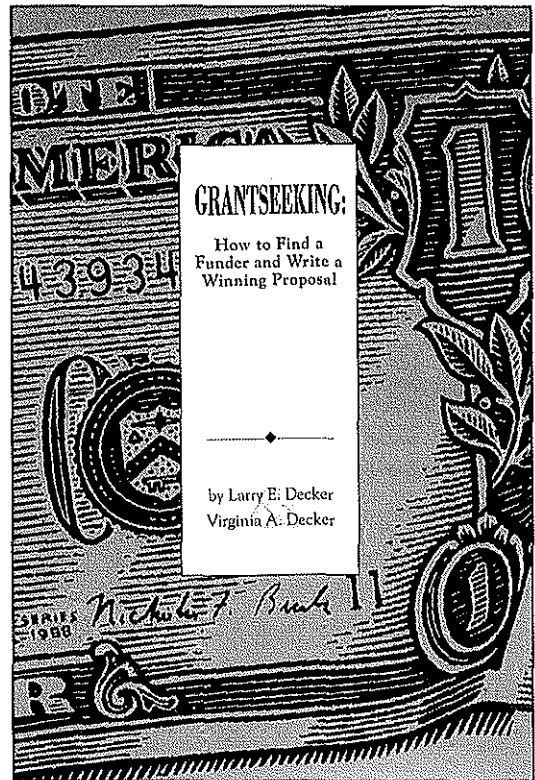
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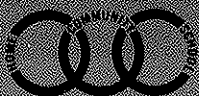
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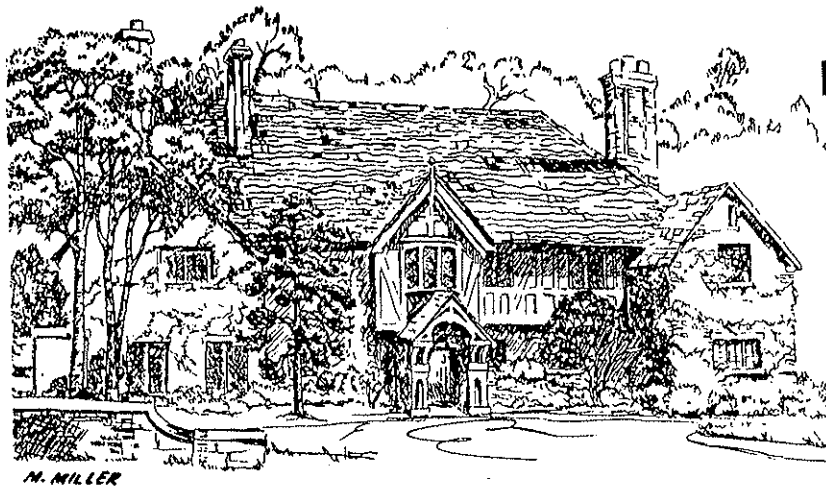
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