Ready by 21® Policy Alignment Series

Overview and Rationale | *Thaddeus Ferber, Forum for Youth Investment*

Across the country, community leaders face two stark realities. On one hand, they understand the vital importance of providing children and youth with a seamless continuum of supports from cradle to college and career. On the other hand, they are handed a fragmented set of funding streams with which to do the job (see figure 1, a graphic representation of the multiple, disconnected services in Los Angeles). When fragmented policies are implemented unchecked, young people suffer the consequences. A child struggles to complete his homework, never realizing that he needs glasses because his teachers were trained to focus on academic test scores, not healthcare needs. A homeless youth spends her nights in the hospital waiting room because the doctors and nurses do not know that there is a transitional living program down the street. Other children receive foster care but not health care, shelter without education, counseling yet no daily adult supervision. Promises are made, but not kept. Young people fall through the cracks. This is the norm, but it does not have to be the rule.

To help address this fragmentation, a number of states and localities have created "Children's Cabinets" (variously called taskforces, commissions, councils, partnerships or collaborations) that bring senior government officials from multiple departments together to transform the disjointed set of funding streams into a seamless and coherent set of services. Children's Cabinets play a vital role in weaving fragmented policies together so that children and youth experience consistency instead of bureaucracy; a community of people who say "I'm here to help," instead of "that's not my job."
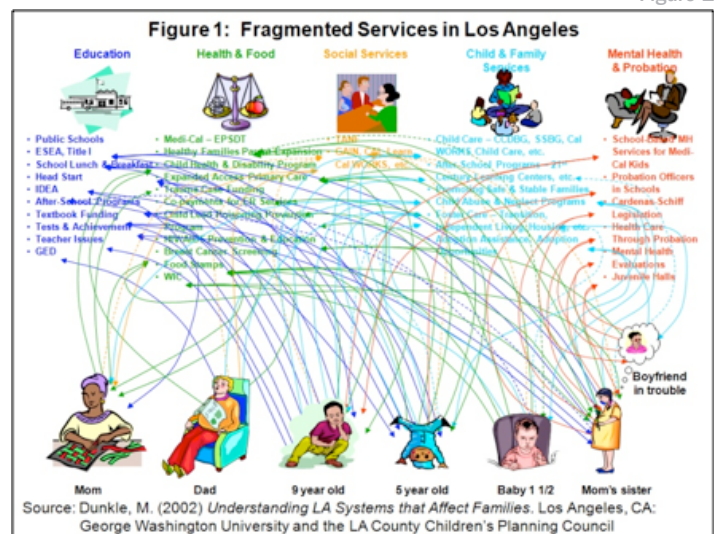
Do our policies really need to be so disjointed in the first place? Some level of fragmentation is inevitable: legislatures are divided into committees and executive branches are divided into departments for a reason—if every policy had to be comprehensive, nothing would ever get done. Even so, there are sensible steps policymakers can take to make it easier for people on the ground to align the myriad funding streams, programs and regulations into a comprehensive solution for children and youth.

The Ready by 21 Policy Alignment Series helps policymakers ensure that new child and youth policies align with existing efforts to create a seamless system of supports. The series can be used to inform any policy that creates a funding stream related to children and youth, no matter what specific topic it addresses (e.g., education or youth employment or juvenile justice) and no matter what form it takes (e.g., a legislative statute, an executive order, or an agency or foundation Request for Proposals).

This *Overview and Rationale* for the Series makes the case for policy alignment and provides an overview of strategies to ensure that policies aligns with existing efforts to: collaborate, establish big-picture goals and long-term plans, administer grants, engage young people in decision-making, improve quality and accountability, collect and use data to drive decision-making and provide a flexible set of child and youth services.

Forthcoming *Series Strategies* will provide concrete examples and specific policy language that can be used when drafting or amending legislation.

Figure 1

Figure 1: Fragmented Services in Los Angeles

Source: Dunkle, M. (2002) *Understanding LA Systems that Affect Families.* Los Angeles, CA: George Washington University and the LA County Children's Planning Council

Overview of Policy Alignment Strategies

Tips for aligning new policies with existing efforts to…

→ collaborate

Over the years, policies requiring the creation of a new collaboration focused on a narrow topic have left many communities with dozens of separate concurrent collaborations. As one local leader put it, "I used to have to bridge 17 different departments; now I have to bridge 17 different coalitions!"

Instead of this: a policy creating a new topic-specific collaboration (such as a state interagency coordinating council on educating individuals with disabilities).

Consider this: a policy ensuring that the topic in question gets adequately addressed by an existing collaboration.

→ establish big-picture goals and long-term plans

Innovative leaders work to engage partners around a broad, long-term vision for children and youth, which they hold themselves collectively accountable for achieving. Policies requiring the creation of a new strategic plan focused on a narrow topic lead to the proliferation of separate sets of goals and plans that fragment efforts.

Instead of this: a policy requiring a new strategic plan (such as a dropout strategy).

Consider this: a policy ensuring that the topic in question is adequately addressed by a community's existing goal-setting and strategic planning processes.

→ administer grants

Most policies include a predictable set of elements dictating funding mechanisms, how and when to apply, regulations, and reporting requirements. When each element is implemented independently, grantees lose valuable time cutting through red tape which could better be used to advance their missions.

Instead of this: a new application process and reporting requirements.

Consider this: a joint application process and reporting mechanism that could be used to satisfy the requirements of multiple funding streams simultaneously.

→ engage young people in decision-making

Too often, decision-makers shape youth services without bringing young people themselves to the table to share their unique perspectives and insights. It is difficult to build and maintain the depth of experience needed for authentic youth engagement when the role of young people is added as an afterthought to multiple single-topic policies. Successful youth engagement efforts include a significant level of training and support (for both the young people and the policymakers working with them).

Instead of this: a policy creating a topic-specific youth engagement effort (such as a foster care youth advisory board).

Consider this: a policy calling for an existing youth engagement effort to include the topic in question as one piece of its work.

Overview of Policy Alignment Strategies

Tips for aligning new policies with existing efforts to…

→ improve quality and accountability

Researchers have found remarkable consistency between "what works" in programs designed to prevent negative outcomes and help young people reach their full potential. Yet instead of collectively focusing on this core set of "essential ingredients" of good programs, most policies establish their own criteria for evaluating effectiveness, their own approaches to building capacity, and their own methods of ensuring accountability. Many states and localities have built completely separate quality assurance systems for early childhood programs, afterschool programs, schools, and more. This creates significant duplication of effort, wasting scarce resources that could be better spent investing in the common pool of early-career professionals that often staff a wide range of child and youth programs over time.

Instead of this: a policy requiring that a new initiative create its own quality improvement system.

Consider this: a policy calling for an existing quality improvement system to be enhanced and expanded to incorporate new programming.

→ collect and use data to drive decision-making

Instead of pooling resources to develop one effective, interconnected, interagency set of data systems, many states and localities have parallel data systems – one for each federal, state, local and foundation-funded grant. These parallel data systems often make redundant technological expenditures, collect overlapping sets of information, and are built in ways which inhibit the flow and transfer of data among them. As a result, despite new resources devoted to data systems, most state and local policymakers and practitioners still do not have the information they need to be make informed decisions.

Instead of this: a policy requiring the creation of a new data system focused on a single topic (such as tracking the number and location of homeless youth, and services provided to them).

Consider this: a policy calling for particular data elements to be included within existing data systems.

→ provide flexibility to meet local needs

A seamless continuum of services from cradle to college and career should be available for all young people. Policies with restrictive eligibility criteria and narrowly-defined allowable uses leave local leaders shaking their heads, wondering if they really have to close the door on a young person in need just because he or she doesn't fit the right category or because what it takes to help him or her isn't the exact intervention for which the funding was intended.

Instead of this: a policy creating a narrow type of service for a narrowly defined population (such as tutoring for male citizens ages 14 to 21 who have registered for the selective service and are homeless, runaway or in the foster care system).

Consider this: a policy that allows for an inclusive target population and the flexibility to fill service gaps, and that provides incentives to align with and improve existing services.

About Ready by 21

Ready by 21 is a set of innovative strategies developed by the Forum for Youth Investment that helps communities and states improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life.

The Forum for Youth Investment developed Ready by 21 standards and strategies to help state and local leaders create stronger partnerships committed to improving the quantity, quality and consistency of supports, opportunities and services available to all children and youth along the "insulated education pipeline"—the full complement of settings where learning and development happens. State and local school administrators, policymakers, and agency directors are using these strategies to make a difference.

This document does not necessarily reflect the positions of any individual member of the Ready by 21 National Partnership, nor those of the Ready by 21 Partnership as a whole, which does not take official policy positions.