

Strengthening Whole Child Communities through Interdisciplinary, Place-Based Systems



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In communities across the United States, students and their families have to navigate multiple disconnected systems in order to access the resources and services they need to ensure students are healthy, secure and ready to learn. Systems are often siloed within sectors whether schools, transportation, housing, health, social services or others. These systems force students and families to jump through multiple hoops in order to utilize a given service, causing many to become inaccessible. Among other challenges, this has resulted in an increase in chronic absenteeism, where students are not able to attend school because of the myriad environmental factors in their community ranging from the lack of basic needs, hunger, housing instability, lack of reliable transportation, and more. These siloed systems have led to challenges in students' educational, health, and economic outcomes.

Kresge, along with the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Domestic Policy Council, as well as philanthropic and nonprofit partners, convened a series of conversations with community leaders to identify place-based solutions to better serve the whole child, using issues of chronic absenteeism as a case study. This brief provides a summary of key practices of place-based approaches that work across systems to serve the needs of the whole child and whole family.

The Imperative for a Place-Based Approach

A place-based approach that works across sectors and issue areas is essential to address the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism and improve whole child well-being. Three themes undergird this finding:

Understanding the needs of children and families requires a deep understanding of place and of the institutions that already exist in communities to address the needs in place.

- Understanding the intersecting needs that families face – whether transit, safety, physical health, behavioral health, basic needs, housing or others – requires a deep knowledge of place and of the institutions that already exist in that place. Those institutions are most proximate to families and aware of the intersecting racial, socioeconomic and other systemic factors that have contributed to problems such as chronic absenteeism.

Supporting the whole child and whole family requires deep, trusting relationships built over time in place.

- Community organizations – many of whom do not work directly in education but provide a range of services across housing, community organizing, youth development and more – are often the trusted messengers who can deliver critical information to families, and ensure that those messages are heard and received by those families.
- These community organizations, because of longstanding relationships built over time, are also able to serve both the child and their families; a multi-generational approach ensures that both child and adult-facing root causes are addressed.
- In some communities, these are community development organizations, neighborhood associations, block clubs or social service agencies. In rural communities, especially, these can be service organizations like Rotary and Lions clubs.

Place-based civic infrastructure can act as the glue to connect families to services and ensure that resources critical to child well-being reach families that need it the most.

- Families that have experienced challenges navigating multiple government systems often seek out community organizations for assistance to navigate those systems.
- These community organizations act as the glue both “vertically” and “horizontally.” They support families with children from cradle to career (“vertically”) and across the range of needs they need at any given time (“horizontally.”)

- Oftentimes, the civic infrastructure hinges on individuals who have built long-standing relationships to help families navigate systems and services. They provide information, offer case-management and act as advocates for a family to receive the supports they need.
- The civic infrastructure, however, is understaffed. Capacity to connect families to resources is often not included in funding for those services. That navigation role is resource-intensive and requires sustained funding.
- Moreover, many federal and state programs do not consolidate information about services in ways that are easily digestible by families. Thus, community partners are responsible for navigating through differing eligibility criteria, enrollment processes and program information – and even provide transportation – to help families access the range of programs they need.

FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION

- In both Baltimore and Detroit, organizations like **Tendea Family Programs, Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation and Urban Neighborhood Initiatives** play navigator and case manager roles to support students and families access government and nonprofit-provided resources. In rural communities, coalitions like the **West Kern Consortium** play a similar role. These organizations are neighborhood-based and often serve specific geographies, and are led by leaders that are from and reside in those neighborhoods.
- In both communities, community schools also act as one-stop resource hubs for families to access services and programs including housing, legal aid, basic needs, food access, and health. **Detroit Public Schools Community District's Health Hubs** integrate whole-child, whole-family services at neighborhood high schools that can be accessed by all students, families and community members. Each hub includes a school-based health center that offers physical and behavioral health services, a basic needs and supplies center, and resource navigation to community services such as housing, legal aid, immigration counseling, and more.

Systems Solutions

While efforts to support the whole child are deeply place-based, they also require solutions that work across sectors to address the full range of needs of children and families. These systems, such as housing, transportation, health and education, often work in silos; those silos negatively impact the “client” – the family. There are several systems solutions that can incentivize and catalyze efforts to work across sectors in service of a common goal, such as reducing chronic absenteeism. Three themes undergird these findings:

Connecting issue areas through shared language and outcomes

- Oftentimes, the disconnect between sectors and systems that serve children and families is the product of a disconnect in language. For example, when chronic absenteeism is framed as an issue of school attendance, housing and transit agencies do not see how their work contributes to these challenges.
- Having shared language between sectors to talk about the same issue is critical. For example, reframing chronic absence not as an education issue but as a symptom of child well-being can broaden the tent of advocates – seeing how, for example, transit access or environmental health can be an issue of child well-being that contributes to school attendance, rather than solving for school attendance in and of itself.
- Moreover, there is an opportunity for shared outcomes across sectors. To continue the absenteeism example, while school systems are held accountable for school attendance, they are not in control of the other societal factors that impact a student’s ability to attend school. However, the other sectors that can contribute to solutions, such as housing or health, are not held accountable to indicators like school attendance, which can be lagging indicators of their efforts. By utilizing the same set of outcome indicators across sectors, we can ensure accountability of each sector to contribute their part to a broader set of challenges.

Examples of shared outcomes that have been used across sectors include:

- » School attendance data, disaggregated by zip code or neighborhood, as a measure of not only school performance but as a public health and child well-being indicator taken up by various city agencies.
- » Housing instability, disaggregated by zip code or neighborhood, as well as by school, to connect student attendance with housing instability.
- » Transit access and length of commute, disaggregated by school, as a measure of the burden on students to travel to and from school.
- » Food and basic needs access, disaggregated by school, to connect between basic needs and school attendance.

Operationalizing shared outcomes through comprehensive data systems and ways of communicating

- Even if a community is able to agree on a set of shared outcomes, it requires a comprehensive data system to operationalize those outcomes into a shared measurement system that is action-oriented. These data systems require data-sharing across multiple federal, state and municipal agencies, and in many cases, requires legislation to authorize data-sharing, and a community-based oversight committee to ensure the sharing and use of data is centered on principles of equity and transparency.
- These data systems also serve as an accountability system – creating real-time feedback loops for community to hold government and civic leaders accountable for agreed-upon outcomes and measures. These data systems can measure multiple outcome areas, but more importantly, should be able to compare services and outcomes across groups by gender, race/ethnicity, place, and subpopulations specific to issue or program areas.
- Development of these comprehensive data systems is labor-intensive and requires a complex web of data-sharing agreements across multiple jurisdictions that take years to build. A longstanding commitment of time and financial resources is necessary to develop these systems.
- Especially in rural communities, developing these systems to serve layers of integration can encourage independent school districts within a county to collaborate with one another, or individual school buildings within a county school system to collaborate across less densely populated areas.
- In addition, federal and state agencies that hold these data can support the development of these systems by improving data quality and data-sharing to allow for greater interoperability of data.
- Federal and state agencies that communicate about resources and programs can also adopt shared language and outcomes to share information about agency rulemaking or guidance, or funding opportunities, using the same language and outcomes articulated through the lived experiences of families and differentiated by audience, rather than traditional agency silos, to ensure that information is received and understood in ways that best reflect how families' lives are impacted.

Sustaining integration through narrative shift and incentives

- Even with a system to support integration and shared measurement, sustaining that integration requires a fundamental narrative shift. This requires ownership across sectors to recognize that these intersecting issues are a collective responsibility.

- Child-adjacent systems need to include measures of child well-being into their work. This also requires case-making with other sectors, such as the business community, to consider how their work contributes to these solutions.
- A longstanding, sustained narrative shift ensures that the intersectionality of these issues becomes part of the norm in a community. In addition, however, it may require further incentives to build these narratives into the foundation of a community's norms.
- Additional narrative shift could occur through cross-sector training within a catchment area around interdisciplinary shared practices like person centered planning, family based advocacy or other strategies suitable for adoption in multiple service sectors. In rural areas, this increased interoperability of practice aligned with data sharing reduces the capacity necessary to sustain best practice and encourages shared ownership through teaming, data and actual service delivery models.
- These incentives can include additional points in federal or state funding applications, opportunities to include community-based nonprofits in grant applications or eligibility criteria for discretionary or formula funding, or language explicit in federal or state grants to require partnerships across sectors or with place-based organizations.

FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION

- **Baltimore's Promise**, a collective impact organization in Baltimore, convenes a coalition of partners to develop a shared measurement framework, which also includes a comprehensive landscape scan of the youth development system in Baltimore.
- The **Baltimore City Youth Data Hub** is an integrated data system that compiles data from government and non-profit agencies to track who is being served, where, and outcomes of those services. The complexity of the data hub has required state legislation to permit data sharing between government agencies and nonprofits.
- **Wayne State University's Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research** has published several critical reports that demonstrate clear linkages between housing, transit, economic development, and school attendance. This research also strengthens and shifts the narrative to more explicitly connect student attendance and school performance with neighborhood factors.

Opportunities for Federal and State Engagement

There are opportunities for federal and state agencies to better support place-based, cross-systems approaches to address the needs of the whole child and whole family. Some of these practices can also be utilized by other grant-making entities, such as foundations. These include:

- ***Discretionary grants criteria***

- » There is an opportunity to add priority points in discretionary grant applications that incentivize applicants to incorporate best practices around cross-sectoral collaboration, shared measurement, partnership with place-based organizations, and more. For example, discretionary grant programs can prioritize applications that include both government/school district entities in partnership with place-based organizations. It can also include as criteria or award priority points to incentivize government agencies and non-profit partners to use a shared measurement system with shared indicators across sectors, with further priority for applications that go beyond shared indicators to data-sharing and data inter-operability.
- » Grant applications can also require explanation of how organizations are working in place, especially how deeply place-based, community organizations are leading efforts. Notices of Funding Opportunity can require applicants to provide detailed strategies for working in place and how statewide or citywide efforts leverage the relationships and longstanding work of neighborhood-based organizations.

- ***Access to data***

- » There is an opportunity to evaluate access to data available from federal and state sources to support shared measurement across sectors.

- ***Landscape of programs or dashboard of public programs***

- » There is an opportunity for federal or state agencies to provide a landscape summary or dashboard of public programs, organized not by lead agency but by the specific need of a child or family, such as chronic absence, health, housing or others. These dashboards can provide real-time information about how families can access the program, how to enroll, eligibility, and more. This could include tools such as a regularly updated dashboard, disaggregated by key outcome indicators that lists both: 1) grant programs offered by various federal agencies that addresses that need; and 2) federal programs that families can enroll into, either directly with a federal agency or through states. State agencies can also consider developing similar dashboards for state-led programs.

- ***Adopting shared indicators across agencies***

- » There is an opportunity for federal and state agencies to adopt consistent indicators of child well-being as an accountability mechanism and to incentivize agencies to work together to consider how programs can be braided to achieve shared goals across issue areas. These shared indicators can also be used as a North Star to enable a whole-of-government approach to interdisciplinary challenges such as chronic absenteeism. Examples of these shared indicators include:

- School attendance and completion, which can be used across ED, HUD, DOT and HHS.
- Number of children living in poverty, which can be used across ED, HUD and HHS.
- Number of children experiencing housing instability, which can be used across HUD and HHS.
- Number of children experiencing housing instability but not receiving housing services or resources, which can be used across HUD, HHS and ED.
- Number of children experiencing a lack of access to food or basic needs, disaggregated by those receiving benefits to identify gaps in benefits access, which can be used across HHS, ED and USDA.

- ***Engage young people in review***

- » There is a need to center the voices of young people and their families in rulemaking, grant development, and grant reviews, to ensure that those impacted by these resources can inform how programs are designed.
- The U.S. Department of Education has recently developed a youth review panel, which includes compensation for youth grant reviewers, for several programs.

FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION

- The **Performance Partnership Pilot** – an interagency partnership between ED, HUD and DOL – allows for state and local governments to apply for flexibilities in federal funding to address intersecting needs across these agency programs.
- **HUD's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program** provides regulatory flexibility for grantees to address youth homelessness through innovative, cross-sectoral partnerships.