

Early Care and Education: Beyond the Schoolhouse Doors

In order to reform and improve education significantly, schools must reach beyond the schoolhouse doors to families, to communities, and to other social institutions that serve children and their families, Ms. Kagan reminds us.

BY SHARON L. KAGAN

THOUGH SOME of us have grown wary (and others weary) of efforts to reform education, there is little doubt that "restructuring" is this era's main contribution to improving America's schools. More than just a buzz word or a new twist on old concepts, restructuring refers to not-so-subtle changes that alter the balance of power within schools. Our growing experience with efforts to restructure schools suggests that teachers, parents, and communities must be more involved in school decision making and that children must be allowed more choice in curricular decisions.¹ At the heart of the restructuring movement, as at the heart of early

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EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

Policy makers are calling for the strengthening not only of family ties but also of ties among agencies that serve young children.

childhood education, is a commitment to engage children, adults, and communities more actively and meaningfully in the decisions that affect education.

My aim in this article is simple. I wish to suggest that, in order to reform and improve education significantly, schools must reach beyond the schoolhouse doors to families, to communities, and to other social institutions that serve youngsters and their families. I will show that a similarly open and holistic approach to classroom pedagogy and program practice has historically characterized the care and education of young children and suggest that early childhood education may have some lessons to share with those who are concerned about the general restructuring of our education system. Finally, I will extract the lessons learned from two promising early childhood efforts (family resource and support and cross-program collaborations) and shape them into 10 "commandments" that may be useful in our efforts to restructure general education practice and policy.

SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL REFORM

The current efforts to expand early care and education and to restructure schools, though they use different nomenclature and appeal to different audiences, share common roots, goals, and strategies. Each stems from a concern that children are entering an increasingly pressured and technologically advanced world that will require complex social and cognitive skills. To ready children for the demands imposed by such a world and to enable them to cope with the effects of pervasive drug use, increasingly fragmented family structure, and widespread poverty, educators recognize that schools must do more than simply teach the basics. Motivated by changes in demographics, in values, and in perceptions of social responsibility, schools are addressing the problems of society and are becoming effective agents of social reform.

Such responsibility forces schools to realize that they cannot remain isolated

from other social institutions. Unquestionably, moving beyond the basics to embrace social and cognitive competencies broadens education's mission and expands its perspectives and strategies.

Broadened mission. Throughout the history of American education, debate has focused on the purposes of schooling. To be sure, those working in the field have changed their visions of the aims of education radically over the centuries. The role of schools in Colonial times was narrowly defined: teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Totally separate from schools, the family and the church were responsible for the ethical and moral development of children. By the time of Horace Mann in the 19th century, these aims were deemed narrow and dysfunctional. Encouraged by women activists, schools broadened their mission in order to improve life for new immigrants and children of the poor. Gradually, many parents formed coalitions and pressed for the introduction of play gardens and kindergartens; formal parent/school organizations were established to improve education. By the 1930s the community school movement had emerged. Though not widely accepted at the time, it advocated more active learning for children, greater involvement for parents, lifelong learning for adults, and the redefinition of the school as a hub of community services.

Over the past 25 years, three separate forces have hastened the realignment of relationships among schools, parents, and communities. First, the force of mandate — enunciated through the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, through Head Start policy, through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) — moved the spirit and molded the structure of various programs. Opportunities arose for more equitable and community-sensitive strategies. A second force, research in education and child development — guided by Urie Bronfen-

brenner and others — provided an ecological perspective that underscored the interdependence of parent, child, and community.

Emerging more recently, the final force is perhaps the most potent. Steeped in a growing uneasiness about the quality of family life in the U.S., liberals and conservatives alike have become concerned about the state of the nation's children and about the high cost of delivering public services in uncoordinated and fragmented ways. Concerned policy makers recognize that today's complex problems often cut across the rigid lines drawn to separate the authority of education, health, mental health, and social service agencies, and they are calling for the strengthening not only of family ties but of ties among agencies as well.

For most early childhood educators, commitments to uniting children, parents, families, and communities are hardly novel. Early educators have for a long time loudly proclaimed that parents are the first and most important teachers of their children. The long-standing commitment to involving parents in early care and education programs is manifest in the very structure of those programs, be they parent cooperatives for the children of the affluent or Head Start programs that mandate parent participation in decision making. The presence of parent coordinators and family and community workers in high-quality early childhood programs — particularly those for low-income youngsters — underscores the field's commitment to a linked mission: serving families and children together.

Equally important, early childhood educators recognize that the domains of development are intertwined. Fostering cognitive development in young children necessarily involves a simultaneous commitment to social, emotional, and physical growth. Consequently, the language of early childhood education is the language of the "whole child" and of integrated learning.

Although part and parcel of early care and education, such beliefs can pose considerable challenges for many educators and policy makers.² Burdened by tight budgets or overloaded agendas, some parties are reluctant to make more than rhetorical commitments to the whole child and to educating the child in the context of family and community. Understandably, others are unclear about the strategic consequences of such commitments.

Expanded perspectives and strategies. What do such commitments to the whole child in an ecological context really require in terms of altered perspectives and strategies? Clearly, they entail a vision of education as a shared responsibility: shared with parents, with businesses, and with other agencies and providers of services. When education is viewed as a cooperative venture, with mandatory and meaningful input from the community, closed schoolhouse doors, barred gates, a quest for the one best system, and other forces that keep families, schools, and communities apart are excluded. Within this perspective, shaping the culture of the program so that it is sensitive to parents, teachers, and the community is not only a democratic ideal but also an imperative for effectiveness. At a minimum, such a perspective demands a dedication to forging links between the school and its community, a revamped training program for school staff members, the establishment of vehicles for shared decision making, and regular communication with other service providers in the community.

Just as commitments to the child within the context of family and community have strategic implications for programs, so a commitment to the whole child has implications for pedagogy. Young children don't separate their learning by topic; they don't distinguish science or math as disciplines, distinct from one another or distinct from play. Blocks and sand, venerable tools of integrated learning, know no disciplinary boundaries. Withstanding decades of curricular fads in upper levels of education, integrated experiential learning has been the constant cornerstone of early care and education. With Dewey, Froebel, Piaget, and Pestalozzi as its pedagogical pioneers, early childhood education espouses the development of social competence, embracing and integrating children's physical, social, emotional, creative, and cognitive development.

Paradoxically, the very principles that have been treasured by early childhood education and that have traditionally set it somewhat apart from elementary education — extensive commitment to family, to community, to student choice, and to integrated learning — are now considered hallmarks of reform. As such, they are being incorporated into a variety of reform reports, projects, and laws, including *Right from the Start*, from the National Association of State Boards of

Education; the Casey Foundation's New Futures Project; the Joining Forces initiative; school-business partnerships; Schools Reaching Out, from the Institute for Responsive Education; and P.L. 99-457. Indeed, a new ethos is developing, one that supports integrated learning, interagency collaboration, and partnerships between schools and families.

Two promising efforts that are closely related to early childhood education — the family resource and support movement and early care and education collaboratives — are examples of important new approaches emerging from this ethos. Though distinct in purpose and structure, family resource and support programs and early care and education collaboratives both see schools as key levers in shaping services designed to improve child development, in enhancing the functioning of families, and in improving the delivery of social services to children and families. Both movements acknowledge the schools' potential as direct deliverers of service to parents and children. Finally, both movements, whether their programs are rooted within or outside the school walls, see themselves as potential vehicles for positive change.

Just what are these movements? What can we learn from them? And how do they further school reform?

FAMILY RESOURCE AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Family resource and support programs are inventive responses to changes in the lives of families. Propelled into existence by changes in our social fabric that have left families more stressed, more isolated, and often poorer than ever before, thousands of family resource and support programs throughout the country offer services for parents (parent education, job training, respite care, adult education, employment referral, and emotional support) and services for children (health and developmental screening, home-based programs, and child care).

Recognizing the importance of this movement in its own right, as well as its importance to the education system, schools across the nation have begun to take part in it. To date, nearly one-third of the states include some form of parent education — an important component of family resource and support services — within their early childhood programs.³ Not all of these efforts offer the

complete array of services listed above. Indeed, many do not even call themselves "family resource and support programs." However, it is clear that educators are increasingly recognizing parents' substantial influence on their youngsters and are seeking innovative and practical ways to involve parents as educational partners.

This thinking has emerged, in part, from research on the relationship between children's home environments and family characteristics and their subsequent school performance. From James Coleman's work that suggested the important relationship between family status and student achievement to more recent studies that explore the differential effects of parenting styles on school performance, the case for closer ties between the home and the school has continued to grow. While research may not be sufficiently sophisticated to explain why such relationships occur or to pinpoint precisely which behaviors affect which outcomes, the evidence supports the critical role of families in the educational process.⁴ Evaluations of early intervention programs that work directly with parents indicate that, despite variations in intent and strategy, they can have a considerable positive impact on children's lives, both in school and out.

Beyond their roots in research, family resource and support programs owe a debt to the self-help and parent education/parent involvement movements.⁵ From the self-help movement, family resource and support programs have learned the importance of empowering individuals to improve their own lives.



"He graduated from kindergarten magna cum laud."

From the parent education and parent involvement movements, family resource and support programs have developed a strong commitment to enhancing the competence and confidence of parents.

Yet, in important ways, family resource and support programs are quite distinct from their historical antecedents. Family resource and support programs are not like the old-fashioned kinds of parent involvement that asked parents to bake cookies or accompany children on field trips; nor are they like more recent and often confrontational kinds of parent involvement that asked parents to concentrate not on themselves or their own families but on school reform in general.

ers contribute knowledge of educational processes and systems. Working together as equals, parents and teachers plan and execute programs. Such realignment of relationships and roles alters the balance of power in schooling and challenges conventional working arrangements. Indeed, new job descriptions and new training programs may become necessary.

However, the greatest challenge, practically and financially, is integrating family resource and support programs into the mainstream of school life. Such programs report that, while acceptance is growing, they are still seen as *in* but not *of* the schools.⁶

Like tugboats, family resource and support programs are small but mighty. They have the power to move entities many times their own size.

While family resource and support programs may remind us of many earlier efforts to link families and schools, they construe past lessons in new ways and represent the next frontier in home/school relations.

Two characteristics that distinguish family resource and support programs from past efforts are particularly important for schools. First, family support is seen as a developmental service for all parents. Family resource and support programs recognize that, even though families of all economic levels share such common concerns as drug abuse or sibling rivalry, not all families need precisely the same support at the same time. Thus, to meet the changing needs of families, family resource and support programs must be individualized, adaptive, and flexible. In addition, they must respect parents' values and schedules. Gone are the days when two daytime parent meetings per year constituted parent involvement. In their place, family support substitutes ongoing flexible programs that encourage parental input in planning.

Second, family resource and support programs stress egalitarian relationships between parents and school staff members. Parents are respected for their rich knowledge of their children, their culture, and their community, while teach-

Part of this separation stems from the lack of a well-defined place for the programs in the educational bureaucracy. They may be part of early childhood education, or of vocational or adult education, or even of the social-service division of a school system. These tenuous links are further weakened by the precarious funding that characterizes many of the programs. The stability of family resource and support programs is sometimes threatened annually, a situation that requires staff members to devote valuable program time to fund-raising activities — perhaps even in competition with the school district. In some cases, funds for family support have been diverted from other funded programs, a practice that generates considerable animosity within school systems.

In spite of these challenges, school-based family resource and support programs are gaining currency in cities and states throughout the nation because they make important contributions to school life and to school reform. In addition to generating much community support, school-based family resource and support programs have rendered important services to children and families. They have demonstrated that it is possible and beneficial for schools to collaborate with community service agencies, and they have

opened the schoolhouse doors a little wider, promoting the meaningful involvement of parents and other community members.

Likened to tugboats by David Seeley, family resource and support programs are small but mighty. They have the power to move entities many times their size. Just as tugs steer mighty ocean liners out of congested harbors toward open seas, family resource and support programs are one vehicle for guiding schools toward educational practices that are more open and responsive to the needs of families and communities.

COLLABORATION IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

As schools embrace a more comprehensive vision of the nature of the child and of their own role in society, the schoolhouse doors swing open ever wider. To meet the comprehensive needs of children, contacts with agencies rendering health, welfare, and social services have become routine. Special education legislation has propelled interagency collaboration to a new level, and the need to meet the before- and after-school child-care needs of children has fostered many connections between schools and communities. Collaborations between university scholars and school personnel have also helped mend town-gown schisms. And the existence of 40,000 partnerships between businesses and schools clearly indicates that the conventional vision of schools as isolated entities is outdated.⁷

Interestingly, such collaborations often involve agencies that deliver services that augment, but are clearly distinct from, the primary services offered by schools. For example, in addition to "special project" dollars, the private sector often brings new fiscal and management strategies to schools. Health agencies and the schools collaborate to provide health education, screening for health problems, and services to meet youngsters' specific health needs. Although each agency's *raison d'être* is distinct, through collaboration each enriches the services offered by the other.

A second type of collaboration that is beginning to emerge in early care and education could have a dramatic impact on schools and school reform. These new collaborations involve agencies that share the same goals and missions and provide direct services to young children. In com-

munities throughout the country, early care and education collaboratives are being established to bring together child-care programs, Head Start programs, profit and nonprofit programs, and the public schools.

Though still fragile, these collaborations in early care and education take the form of community councils, advisory groups, and resource and referral centers. In some communities, ad hoc councils have been converted into permanent bodies. Some collaborations have full-time staff members and funding; others have neither. But whatever their structure, these collaborations typically aim to: 1) increase the quantity and quality of available services, 2) insure more equitable distribution of services, 3) minimize expenses, 4) address shortages of staff and space, 5) equalize regulations across early childhood programs, 6) improve training opportunities, and 7) insure continuity for children. Many early childhood collaborations sponsor joint training for staff members in Head Start programs, child-care programs, and schools; others encourage cross-site visitation by staff members; still others join forces to buy materials and supplies. Collaborations often engage in community-wide data collection, cooperate in short- and long-term planning, and participate in advocacy efforts.

Given that public schools have played a comparatively minor role in the provision of preschool services and given that preschool services have remained quite distinct from one another, we might wonder why such interest in collaborations has arisen now and what schools might gain from getting involved. Interest in collaboration has peaked for several reasons. First, funding for early care and education has increased. Second, because no empirical evidence has indicated a single "best" system and because of our national commitment to diversity, schools, child-care centers (public and private), and Head Start programs are all potential recipients of the new benefits that have been earmarked for early childhood education.

Inevitably, this situation fosters competition. The stakes, after all, are quite high. To the victor go not only more slots for children but also typically the authority to control program regulations and staff requirements. Meanwhile, the losers lose doubly: they do not get program dollars, and, because of shortages of professionals in the field, their existing pro-

grams often lose staff members to better-funded programs. In truth, though they are conceived as separate entities, early care and education programs function on common pedagogical and physical grounds, a fact that makes collaboration all the more necessary.⁸

And finally, more important though less apparent, early care and education collaborations are emerging because communities are rejecting the segregated approach to funding and regulation that has yielded an inequitable system. Even the most cursory review of early care and education in the U.S. today reveals vast inequities and discontinuities for children, parents, and programs.⁹ The children of the rich and of the poor do not have equal access to services. And even those youngsters who do receive services are blatantly segregated by income, with low-income children in subsidized programs and middle- and upper-income children in fee-for-service programs. Inequities exist, too, for providers of early care and education; those who work in public schools typically receive better salaries and benefits for fewer workdays per year and fewer working hours per day. Consequently, new school-based programs often act as magnets, attracting children and staff members away from other programs. Paradoxically, such competition for children, for staff, and for space, which is now well documented,¹⁰ has spurred the drive for collaboration.

Interestingly, the challenges inherent in implementing early care and education collaborations are similar to those faced by public schools when they collaborate with community-based agencies. Often the goals and strategies of the collaboration are ill-defined, staff members and funds are not adequate to the task, and the participants remain committed to agendas of their own agencies rather than to any overarching goal of the collaboration.

Yet early care and education collaborations are even more complex than public school collaborations because they involve more parties, many of which have longstanding acrimonious relationships. In addition, these collaborations can be somewhat suspect because they often act as external agents of change, initiating reform outside the school. Though this may sound ominous because the schools appear to forfeit control, such collaborations have been remarkably successful in broadening the schools' understanding

of their important role within the early childhood system. Collaborations legitimize the sharing of responsibility. They do not allow any of the parties to avoid accountability, but they free schools to act as equal partners in crafting an equitable system of service delivery. Collaborations give schools options: they can improve their own early childhood services, they can add services, or they can join forces with community agencies. Furthermore, these collaborations give schools the opportunity to work in extremely productive ways with communities and providers who have tended to see the schools as rivals in the scramble for funding.

Whatever the motives, communities, cities, and states are embarking on collaborative strategies to influence the delivery of educational services. For example, Florida is notable for its cooperative agreement between the departments of education and health and rehabilitative services; for its work on P.L. 99-457; for its prekindergarten Early Intervention Program, which was passed by the state legislature; and for its Central Agency system, which establishes city, county, and state collaborations that offer training, engage in joint planning and siting of programs, and coordinate service delivery. New Jersey's Urban Prekindergarten Program links Head Start, child care, and the schools. In New York City, the Mayor's Office of Early Childhood Education, the board of education, and the Agency for Child Development plan the implementation of services for 4-year-olds.

Moreover, efforts such as these are not unique. They are taking root throughout the country, as services for preschoolers expand. Meanwhile, such efforts will increase as many pieces of federal legislation and most state legislation related to children and families call for establishing local or state-level collaborations or committees to address these issues.

GUIDING EDUCATION REFORM

Clearly, we need more experience with the programs before we can draw definitive conclusions regarding the efficacy of school-based family resource and support programs and early care and education collaborations. Yet each provides a stunning glimpse of the "restructuring" of American education. While neither effort originally set out to reform schools directly, each views education as a col-

lective responsibility, each seeks equity for children and adults, and each recognizes the value of families and communities. Both efforts challenge conventional strategies, both ask schools to open their doors a bit wider, and both have altered the nature and amount of contact with parties one step removed from the schools.

However, more important than common intentions or creative strategies, family resource and support programs and early childhood collaborations share with each other and with advocates for reform a set of beliefs about the future of education in general and about the future of early care and education in particular. Though the following 10 "commandments" are not delivered from on high or carved indelibly in stone, they encapsulate lessons to be learned from these efforts.

1. *We cannot separate care and education.* Together with the schools' involvement with young children and their families must come the recognition that high-quality care and education are inseparable. Whether labeled *care or education*, high-quality programs for preschoolers provide both. In spite of the similarity of services, we have seen that, within a community, different qualifications and salaries for teachers and different regulations for programs exist, diminishing the quality of care and education for children. To mitigate such differences, we must strive to link care and education.

2. *We cannot segregate children according to family income.* In many communities young children have unequal access to care and education, and, once in programs, youngsters are segregated according to family economic status. Thus our reforms will need to include strategies to foster access to programs and to integrate services more equitably. Such is the spirit and the law of the land.

3. *We cannot expect too much from poorly funded services.* As discussed above, the inconsistent — and consistently low — funding of family resource and support programs has been one factor limiting their success. To permit early childhood services to achieve their proven potential, we must insure the stability and high quality afforded by sufficient and stable funding.

4. *We must improve the infrastructure of early care and education along with increasing the number of slots.* Because the expansion of services can exacerbate

shortages of staff and space and because new slots and new needs generate increased demands for a coordinated system, funds must be devoted to planning and collaboration.

5. *We must honor parents.* Parents have a great influence on their children's development. Whether through Head Start's mandate for parent involvement or through family resource and support programs, educators must incorporate the family and the home culture into programs for children.

6. *We must honor staff members.* In early care and education programs, staff members are perhaps the most crucial component of program effectiveness. They facilitate learning, nourish active thinking and doing, and create environments in which children are cherished. We must support staff members by providing opportunities for continued professional growth, by involving them in decision making at the levels of program and school, and by compensating them fairly.

7. *We must serve the whole child, within the context of family and community.* Meeting children's needs demands that we address social, cognitive, emotional, and physical domains in an integrated fashion. Thus health, nutrition, psychological, social, special education, and parent support services must be included in early childhood programs.

8. *We must foster developmentally appropriate pedagogy.* Classroom practices that respect individual differences, that give children choices, and that foster the development of lifelong learning should be implemented. In addition to advancing the acquisition of skills, we must craft programs that foster social and cognitive growth and the development of curiosity, motivation, and other dispositions toward learning.

9. *We must strive for the involvement of business, industry, and other groups.* Recognizing that education is a shared responsibility, we need to make use of strategies that actively involve community members and organizations in school life. Although we should not allow the financial support of business to substitute for public responsibility, we must allow business to take its place along with other community organizations in our efforts to improve school effectiveness.

10. *We must work together, not covet the resources or children of other programs.* Because policy strategies and funding have been largely categorical,

early childhood education, like education in general, has matured in isolation. However, tighter resources, coupled with growing needs, make cooperation a necessity today. We must acknowledge that, as our problems transcend institutions and domains, so must their solutions. Reaching out is the key to reaching reform.

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