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Success: *The conscience for systemic reform*

Introduction

Much of the juvenile justice and child welfare system focuses on the failure of youth and families to meet societal expectations. Promoting rehabilitation and positive social growth stable enough to move an adolescent to adulthood is the work of this system. Its primary measurement, however, is “recidivism,” a process to label when necessary stability is no longer present and why previously negative behavior recurs. Recidivism measures failure. It has become a self-fulfilling instrument that discredits innovation, stigmatizes the juveniles and families it intends to help and weakens services by discouraging constructive funding. Promoting failure is not a productive way to rehabilitate. Inevitably, systems focused on failure tend to reinforce themselves by requiring increasingly more punitive responses for failure and by irreversibly labeling those they are supposed to serve.

Four years ago, Wayne County officials recognized the traditional state-run juvenile system was failing. Because so many youth were graduating into the adult correctional system and demand was growing for more such facilities, the county decided to create an alternative community-intensive human investment system which would emphasize achievement, apply the principles of restorative justice and focus on preparedness for adulthood.

The new system would identify a youth’s needs and strengths, focus on teaching ways to be successful and engage families, citizens, faith organizations and local service agencies to help their juveniles become positive participants in their own communities. Wayne County expected this approach to better achieve the twin goals of juvenile law -- the rehabilitation of youth and the protection of community safety.

Because Wayne County’s new system focuses on juveniles, their families and the communities in which they live, this paper will focus on six behavioral skills juveniles, their families and communities are learning to strengthen in order to compete and thrive in society. These six are the critical ingredients of success most likely to lead a juvenile to becoming a positive person and less likely to graduate into the adult correctional system.

1. Accountability

When laws are broken and citizens harmed, we have a right to expect that justice will be done and those proven guilty punished. The juvenile system is not exempt from this expectation. It must, however, take into account the unique developmental circumstances of children and youth, while still holding them accountable for their actions and rehabilitating them before they attain adulthood.

We live in a society that is very confused about “childhood.” For all our knowledge about child rearing, developmental psychology, behavioral growth and stages of moral growth, we can’t manage to accept that children are complex organisms who unfold physically, emotionally and socially over many years, and that the laboratories where they mature are the myriad environments controlled by the adults involved in their lives.

Because our social systems seem unable to quantify and define the stages of growth when designing disciplinary responses, they waste the many tools available to nurture children through the tests, trials, storms and stresses of their growing up years. Though the failure is ours, educational, child welfare and juvenile justice systems tend to blame the children and excuse those responsible for their lives.

Wayne County’s reformed juvenile system refuses to blame or excuse, but has figured out a way to couple accountability with rehabilitation by first grounding it on concrete, individualized assessments of every youth and family. Using a host of professionally proven interviewing and assessment tools to determine each youth’s level of knowledge and aptitude for learning, it sets the stage for reshaping the environments that are supposed to nurture, supervise, engage and teach them how to become responsible adults.

In the new system, accountability starts with understanding who the juvenile is, what the family’s strengths and needs are, what happened to bring them before the court, why it happened and what can be done about it. It recognizes the offenses that land a youngster in the juvenile system necessarily involve their parents (or lack thereof), their schools, peers, family members and neighborhoods.

Because accountability touches all of these environments, solutions need to be tooled to the radically different needs of each youth’s circumstances. Large systems can’t be this flexible – they lack accurate, reliable information; have a very limited array of expertise and fail to closely structure and monitor services. In fact, their inability to individualize services is one reason many of them show continuing signs of collapse.

Wayne County has taken a huge system and made it more manageable by dividing it into five regions, each administered by a Care Management Organization required to respond to the unique features of their section of the county. They are able to take into account such factors as ethnicity, income, social expectations, peer pressures within neighborhoods and the strengths and weaknesses of specific schools. Being able to assess and manipulate these many options makes it more likely that individually-assessed youth’s unique needs are met using resources already available within

their locales. By individualizing services, the Care Management Organizations make the big world manageable for each youth and every family served.

Improving accountability also requires offering better choices. CMO Case Managers, because they have small caseloads, are able to create and introduce juveniles to such choices. By staying available round-the-clock, they can coach them toward these choices, showing them how, even when they fail, to get back on target. This is a core ingredient of accountability -- *community choices coupled with adult coaching*.

The approach, which begins with a comprehensive assessment to set the baseline for treatment, is developmentally tailored to the particular stages of growth of the youth. While it deals concretely with mistakes, failures, misjudgments, bad decisions and harmful lapses in behavior, it is at the same time encouraging, recognizing and supporting good effort and positive achievement. *Learning to be accountable inevitably introduces a youth to another important behavioral skill of competent adults: resiliency.*

2. Resilience

A youth considered sufficiently capable of reentering the daily life of his or her family and community is going to make mistakes, even with the skills acquired and strengthened during a time of intense supervision. Making mistakes is not unique to any particular age group; it is part of the human condition.

Juveniles who've been involved with the system are there because they have made mistakes so threatening to themselves or others that their freedoms have been constrained or taken away. Once released, one important skill we want them to have is the ability to see where the dangerous ledge is before they jump impulsively into unknown situations. Knowing how to avoid coming too close to the ledge or how to get back up if they've slipped requires resiliency -- the capacity to bounce back rather than quit.

Wayne County's new system has Case Managers available around the clock to assist, intervene, resolve, protect and defend -- whatever it takes to help a youth and family keep from falling off the ledge. By intensely supervising a youth's life in the community through tethering, counseling, group sessions, drug screens, meetings with community groups and a whole host of monitoring and feedback encounters with significant adults, they are able to invite and engage local interested parties such as church members, recreation staff, school employees, neighbors and community police officers to name just a few, to be part of each youth's community program. By agreeing to help juveniles take responsibility for their actions, these adults enter their daily lives, encouraging them to pursue productive goals, ready to engage and help the youth and family when possible, practical or necessary.

The level of accountability that pervades such a network of supervision has a productive by-product -- it teaches a youth to be and to practice being resilient. A resilient juvenile must stand on "two legs" -- "not quitting" and "recovering quickly from a lapse." *Wayne County's human investment system shows juveniles how to exercise both these legs so they can stand tall and accept responsibility for what they say and do.*

3. Responsibility

Being "able to respond" to the unexpected, unintended, interesting or forbidden, curious and enticing is part of what makes a person human. Doing so without harming oneself or another is what makes a person responsible.

Teaching responsible behavior starts with showing youth how to recognize and tap into their strengths. It reinforces good decisions until they are confident enough to make them on their own. It means learning, by trial and error, what is acceptable and what it not. Adults sometimes like to think there is an end to learning responsibility -- there isn't. Such lessons are lifelong; they start in early childhood and never end. Behaving responsibly is a condition of living and the foundation for successful relationships. It requires that adults who engage children routinely show them how to use daily situations to continually practice making responsible choices.

This is a "strength-based" approach to working with children. It is valid and useful at every stage of their maturation, however, because they are still children or adolescents, they require guidance in their choices, safe havens where they can make mistakes without undue harm to themselves or others and constant coaching and experimenting to internalize a positive life-pattern of personal and social responsibility.

Juveniles placed in the justice system have made too many bad choices. It is the one habit they've learned too well. It leads to continuing failure, not success. This is where Case Managers enter as critical guides who understand the youth's developmental strengths and weaknesses; know the circumstances of their family life, neighborhood school and peer groups and the tempting life pressures that surround them.

The Case Manager's role is "critical" because they become coach, disciplinarian, cheerleader, reinforcer, facilitator -- they are the reliable adult consistently engaged with the youth in their daily lives. Case Managers must know how to use whatever is available as teaching tools -- common mistakes, errors of judgment, successful achievements, quiet moments, angry moments, happy ones, harmful dependency on peers, abuse of drugs, struggles with siblings or relatives or positive friendships. Everything is their textbook to teach the youth and family the "ability to respond" in such a way that they realize they are acting in their own best interests by acting responsibly.

Wayne County's Care Management Organizations have demonstrated imaginative ways to teach juveniles how to behave responsibly and what to expect when they do so. On the western side of the county, for example, one CMO has developed community teams (police officers, school principals, parents, local citizens, elected officials) with whom a youth and parents must meet periodically and account for their behavior, report on their goals and identify what they need to be successful. On the east side of Detroit, another CMO has created and trained a "Council of Sages" -- people from a youth's neighborhood who meet with them, discuss what they are doing and how they are progressing, holding them up when they succeed and guiding them back when they slip. Each CMO uses a different process. Each process is ethnically relevant to the youngster's life. The people involved are commonly aware of the neighborhoods these youths live in and what kinds of choices they must make to develop and strengthen responsible behavior.

By taking into account that these young people are not yet fully matured, their mistakes are used as opportunities to learn better ways to avoid future mistakes. Instead of objectifying the misbehavior, divorcing it from its environment and responding with ineffective punishment, these citizens connect the behavior with the youth and show them how it hurts them, damages others and limits their choices to become fully independent adults. This approach awakens youths and their parents to see the human costs of bad choices and to face the human consequences that include remorse, apology, restoration, and forgiveness, and the desire to behave better: *from these human activities an irresponsible adolescent learns how to emerge into a competent adult.*

4. Competency

Faced with an abusive parent, drug-using peers, indifferent teachers, hostile shopkeepers, the demand for peer acceptance, how does one become competent? These youngsters are trying to survive in a crazy life situation using self-destructive life skills like tolerating abuse, using illegal drugs, “fronting” teachers, ripping off stores and trying to “fit in with the crowd.” None of these are worthy lessons or right-building activities; all of them lead to harmful relationships and high risk behavior. Bad as they are, however, some juveniles are convinced these are essential survival skills. Many operate with the belief that “if you don’t take care of yourself, no one else will.” They can’t look ahead enough to know that such behavior destined them to repeat what they’ve learned and will shove them into an endlessly repetitive cycle as socially damaged adults destined to damage their own children.

Such is the challenge of the care managed, human investment approach. The services offered by the Care Management Organizations are designed to teach by direction as well as by trial and error, using the youth’s daily situations to show them how to stop cyclical misbehavior and replace it with better choices that encourage them to master more productive survival skills. Trying to create a common list of appropriate survival skills will not achieve much without teaching a youth competent behaviors for daily living.

The old saying, “we learn by doing” is especially true for children and youth; activity is their imperative; they like doing things. If we learn by doing, then an effective juvenile system must require youths to do things that let them discover how to use their best assets productively.

Oftentimes, a person’s weakness is an exaggeration of a strength. For example, a juvenile who “acts up” to cope with an alcoholic parent, an abusive adult or a hostile teacher, is trying to protect herself from harm. Such self-protective behavior, while seemingly a strength, only weakens the juvenile. It requires nothing from the dangerous adult except withdrawal from the acting up juvenile. Nothing changes -- the alcoholic parent continues to self-destruct, the abusive adult continues to damage children; the hostile teacher continues to be indifferent to a challenging student. In the long view none of these make a youngster safer or more ready to compete in a world that demands competency, skill, service and self-control. Unfortunately, they may only ready a youth for prison. Instead Case Managers must engage each youth and family, continuously assess their current life circumstances, help them make an inventory of concrete goals and strengths, and then coach them to carry on a practical plan that lets them:

- practice being competent at specific situations
- gain skill by doing useful tasks
- provide service to others
- learn to anticipate potentially harmful relationships and risky behavior
- build self-control in potentially explosive encounters.

What assures that this approach is doable and valid is the fact that it is done simultaneously at home, in the community, in the neighborhood and with peers, teachers and significant adults -- whenever possible, in the circumstances of daily life.

Delinquent youth are frequently ostracized because their personal behavior is so alienating; people avoid them as much as possible. Ironically, this seems good to the juvenile because the most important adults in their lives can be very dangerous people who are best avoided. This is a bizarre twist of a survival skill wherein children who are supposed to be protected and nurtured by their parents are not.

To untwist this skill, these juveniles need to be introduced to safer people. When youth are threatened or harmed by those who are supposed to nurture and care for them, we need to introduce them to other adults who will keep them safe. At the same time, we need to confront, counsel and hold accountable those adults who have miscast themselves. This is an essential task of Wayne County’s new system. The Case Manager carries it out by identifying and engaging the youth and family with positive people in their community capable of providing them safe supervision, responsible choices and productive involvement.

Children learn how to be adults from other adults. To make this a more positive lesson, Case Managers show a youth how to succeed not only by coping with inadequate adults, but also by matching them with capable adults willing to show them ways to use positive skills, experience fair treatment and build self-respect.

Ultimately, competency comes from connecting with others who are likely to help build confidence, practice compassion and recognize good character. *These nest into another essential behavioral skill for a successful life: involvement.*

5. Involvement

A juvenile is at the front end of adult life. Entering adulthood takes years, not months. It involves others -- family members, relatives, neighbors, peers, friends, teachers, pastors, employers, fellow workers. Most of us lead lives filled with other people. We negotiate our needs and wants with theirs. It is an ever-turning road that juveniles must learn to travel, too often alone or with equally unprepared peers, but negotiating their road successfully is achieved only by becoming actively involved with the world they live in, not withdrawing from it.

Oftentimes responses to negative youth have been to “throw them out of school,” “remove them from the community,” “isolate them” or “medicate them.” While overtly such responses may seem ways to make the community safer, they do the reverse because they generate a cadre of young adults competent only in antisocial behavior, with neither the attachments nor inducements to behave any other way.

The new human investment system reverses this approach. Recognizing that the shift from adolescence to maturity occurs steadily,

and that it is marked by new levels of intimacy and the growing capability to support and sustain oneself and often others, Wayne County's Care Management Organizations work feverishly to assist this steady march to responsible adulthood. They use countless tools available in current life situations of the juvenile and his or her family, but the most essential tool is reengaging these youths with their legitimate environments on new terms with better skills.

While it is reasonable to expect families should know what's best for their children and be able to provide for them, the experiences of many juveniles contradict this. Many family members themselves lack the skills and education to be effective parents or to provide a structured, safe home life. Where entrenched substance abuse, exposure to prison life or street values invade a home, the youth's environment is so bent toward failure that CMOs must consider out-of-home alternatives, no matter how temporarily, in order to confront entrenched negative skills and refocus toward positive personal development. Such treatment options have a special reparative function -- their task is to stabilize a youth sufficiently to enable him or her to return and function appropriately at home.

It is remarkable to hear some professionals argue persuasively about how critical it is to train the child during its earliest years and then, in the next sentence, rationalize surrendering the same task when a child becomes an adolescent. Oftentimes, such an argument is meant to excuse poorly performing adult-run systems -- school, home, work, church. Granted, the forces needed to change an adolescent's direction must be more dramatic, more intense and perhaps more costly, nevertheless, the results being experienced by the CMOs refute the lie that it is too late to reclaim a juvenile.

While it is accurate to say that inadequate systems create failure-prone children, it is not accurate to blame the children. Arguing that a failing youth is not salvageable dehumanizes the youth and condemns the arguer. Such self-serving absolutism is only used when speaking about other people's children. No caring professional would admit such a thing about his or her own wounded child. We need to stop saying such things and start engaging these children with our precious time and our best skills.

Clearly it takes years to nurture a child into adolescence, and more years to coach an adolescent into maturity. Both are tough tasks. Each takes different skills. All require intense involvement between youths and adults, which calls for the most valuable resource of the present age: our time. Time, the precious ingredient for human development, is a premium least given to children in a society that demands both parents work, sees more marriages broken, and then expects others to raise its children.

6. Recognition

Behavioral psychology recognizes the fundamental need of each person to "love and be loved." This dual experience is the essence of recognition. It fulfills and compels a person to be better, do more, ask questions and seek clarity in order to become an interesting person, attractive to others and careful about themselves.

Being recognized is one way a person feels worthwhile. Wayne County's new system exercises an incredible array of methods to recognize when a juvenile is maturing and when he or she is slipping back or weakening. It understands the power of recognition in reclaiming a youngster's worth to self and to others.

Exposing youth to ongoing, positive feedback when they do good, act right or achieve honors builds up in them a reservoir of satisfaction that encourages them to continue to explore and experi-

ment with more ways to succeed. To make this happen, youth in the new system are constantly involved in celebrations, special events, recognitions for little and big steps in their young lives; receiving awards, cards, letters, face-to-face praise and asked to complete satisfaction surveys -- all experiences designed to reinforce their value to themselves and to the people around them.

Building on these momentary reminders of self-worth, Case Managers induce the youth to step from their small successes to seek bigger dreams. They offer career exploration and introduce them to college campuses and possible scholarships for higher education. Care Management Organizations arrange for participation in youth-centered conferences, talent shows, cultural events, sports activities, tutoring and speaking engagements where they can meet and talk with peers who've successfully stepped out of bad situations to find brighter futures. This is human investment. It is meant to help youth relish fonder memories of better experiences so they feel compelled to seek more of them and gain acceptance through achievement. This approach recognizes how powerful adult praise is for youth and how important adults are in showing them how to reach independence and value caring relationships.

A Recommendation

This paper has identified six substantive behavioral skills that promote positive social development in adolescents. It suggests the professional and academic communities that focus on juvenile justice and child welfare services zoom in on them as better targets by which to define and evaluate effective programs and to create mechanisms that fund and measure degrees of personal success rather than failure.

Many youth seen in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are trying to survive as best they can with little support and not much useful guidance. Their misconduct or self-destructive behavior is often a natural reaction to an unnatural situation. Their picture of the future is more likely to have a "look but do not touch" sign on it rather than an invitation to partake. It is a dream they dare not have when the adults and systems meant to care for and about them, frighten and harden them rather than invite them.

If there is a core lesson learned from Wayne County's current experiment in care management, it is that investing in children and youth pays off with greater results -- specifically, more positive adults, safer communities, increasingly productive life-choices, more efficient use of limited dollars and more engaged, engaging young people.

What is being learned and practiced in one of the state's most important counties offers public policymakers the enviable opportunity to reshape a juvenile system so it intentionally invests in and reclaims more of our young people. The slow erosion of youth services and the growing default of generally agreed upon public policies to guide how these services are funded have created a vacuum that ends up "blaming the child" for its failure. "Recidivism" is the justification for such systemic failure. *The telling message of Wayne County's attempt to invest in reclaiming its juvenile population is that success is the conscience for systemic reform.*

Much has been learned in three years about what constitutes success. The behavioral skills outlined in this paper emerged from these experiences. Together they plant clear markers by which public policies must be measured and taxpayer dollars should be invested. If we want to ensure the successful emergence of every child into our adult society, we are obligated to remove fear from their lives and replace it with the behavioral skills that will make them more able to compete and relate in a tough, unforgiving, extremely interesting adult world.