

## Family Agency Outreach to Schools\*

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Jewish family service agencies and the network of Jewish schools, by the very reason for their being, share a constituency and a purpose. The constituency is the Jewish family and the Jewish community. The purpose is to enrich and strengthen Jewish life within the family and the community. This mutual interest should link them and serve as a basis for close working relationships. Experience has shown that this is often not easy to accomplish. However, when it is achieved, it can offer a rich and beneficial experience for the agency, the school, and the families served. This paper will examine the purpose of such a program, its function and limitations, obstacles encountered, conditions desirable to maximize effectiveness, and professional practice issues that are of particular importance in such an affiliation.

Bridge-building which extends service to the school by the family agency has numerous advantages for the agency, the school, and the families served. For the agency it helps to connect with a constituency vital to its very existence. It provides a fine opportunity for the agency, with its professional expertise, to combine efforts with the school and its educational program to provide a valuable experience which can enhance Jewish family life. Maladjustment of a child in the classroom will not only compromise the learning process, it can also serve as a barometer of distress within the family unit. This can either be due to stress

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within the family which affects the child and is acted out in the classroom setting, or it may be indicative of organic, developmental, or emotional problems within the child which in turn often impacts upon the family creating stress within the home. Whatever the causes may be, such symptomatic behavior or dysfunction deserves response from the school staff. Most school faculty are sensitive in the recognition of the possible presence of dysfunctional forces within the student, and they are often the first to identify the need for "psychological" services. Whereas counselling and guidance programs have been established in many of the secular school programs, limited budgets and other concerns of the parochial schools have delayed development of therapeutic support services within many of the latter.

By offering the staffing for such an outreach program, the Jewish family agency can work with the school on dealing with impediments to use of its services. Such arrangements can make a real contribution without unduly taxing school budget. Availability of such professional service within the school setting can have the great advantage of providing for early intervention before difficult situations escalate and more traumatically affect child and family. The presence of, and easy access to, the family agency will also help families to become better aware of such a resource. The Jewish family agency thereby becomes more visible, better understood, and better appreciated as an integral component of the Jewish communal service matrix.

Despite the many mutual advantages, it is not a simple matter to develop such joint programs. The family agency is often not fully understood and the role of the social worker as a helping professional is misinterpreted, frequently being viewed as synonymous with the minister of concrete (welfare) services. The school is more familiar with the professional titles of psychologist or guidance counselor. The family focus of our practice also requires interpretation. Like an apple or orange, one can describe it most articulately and graphically, but it is only by handling and tasting it, that it can be fully appreciated. So too, it is not until agency and school have actually had some opportunity to work together that the functions are clarified and appreciated.

In many quarters the values of the mental health practitioner are suspect as being oppositional to Jewish values. Concerns have often been expressed that resolution of problems manifest in a child are frequently at the expense of his Jewish education. Recommendation to eliminate the dual program of religious and secular studies as a means to "ease the pressure" on the child has sometimes made Jewish education expendable by the clinician. Therefore the professional is unwelcome at religious schools which may, for good reason, question his Jewish commitment. In addition, the proliferation of life styles, practices, and values as they find expression among the various subgroups of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform denominations can complicate the choice of a caseworker to be assigned to a school. Jewish educators have strongly voiced their feelings that any professional assigned to this program must meet their standards of "Jewishness" so that there will be no conflict with the philosophy and Jewish family values which they espouse. This is especially true if a program is being developed on an Orthodox or Hasidic campus.

The presence of a mental health clinician can also pose threat to school and faculty. The adequacy, effectiveness and competence of administration and faculty are exposed even as the same is true for the agency, its staff and its program. Experience has shown however, that

what actually develops is an increased appreciation and respect between school and agency staff for their distinct areas of competence.

For the families to be served, there is need to recognize the potential threat to privacy and confidentiality in engaging them through the school program. There can be the fear that "all will know" that they have problems. Sensitive, supportive outreach to the family becomes a paramount professional practice issue which must be addressed in any such program. Confidentiality must be assured even as there may be some need to communicate effectively but selectively with faculty to assure a coordinated approach in working with the child.

To establish an outreach program with a school there must first be a commitment by the agency that this is a valid service and an appropriate role for the family agency. This can be extended to school programs as early as nursery school, continuing through secondary school, and it even lends itself to being interwoven with adult education programs that are school- or synagogue-based. Preliminary discussions are required with the administrative staff, the board of education and other policy-making bodies of the school in order to identify need, address questions, and define the scope and method of the program. It is necessary in the pre-planning stage to agree on office space, preferably with locked file and use of a phone for the caseworker, if on-site services are being planned. This should be in an area that will afford privacy and accessibility. A referral mechanism should be developed to assure optimal use of professional time and provide for screening of referrals for appropriateness. Usually faculty would refer such situations through the principal or some other designated administrator who is familiar with faculty and the students. Faculty should be involved in one or more orientation sessions where they can meet the agency representative, discuss the program, identify their needs, and understand how they will be working together. It then becomes important for the parent body to be informed of the working relationship between

school and agency. No referrals should be made unless it is with parental knowledge and consent, and preferably with their full participation. The school bulletin or newsletter is an effective means for informing parents of this new service to the school. Three major sources of referral are possible. Students and their families can be referred by school faculty through defined channels, students can initiate discussion with the caseworker, or the family can obtain service by calling the caseworker in the school or at the office. Faculty members will also begin to actively utilize these services personally.

It must be recognized that only a small percentage of students and their families will require this service at any given time. Also, the program builds gradually as school and agency arrive at an accommodation, develop mutual trust and respect. Referrals will then peak and afterwards will likely level off or diminish. The student census and staffing pattern of the agency will therefore play a part in determining the type of program to be developed. Several program models are possible. Assignment of a caseworker for several hours weekly or monthly on-site is one possible arrangement. The school is given the schedule of the caseworker and they are encouraged to set-up appointments at certain times. Consultation can be provided to faculty. Appointments with students and their families can also be scheduled.

To be effective, the caseworker assigned to the school should be viewed as responsible for the intake phase with back-up of the full range of agency services for multidisciplinary consultation and on-going service. This frees the

caseworker for maximum availability for additional referrals. For smaller schools, the agency staff member can be available at less frequent intervals or on an as-needed basis. Still another approach can provide assignment of a staff member of the agency for easy access by phone with agreement to offer priority pick-up at the agency, especially if there are lengthy waiting lists.

Fee for service can take many forms. At the Jewish Community Services of Long Island, the caseworker is an employee of the agency. There is no charge to the school for this service, and initial consultation to families on the school site is without fee. On-going service fees at the agency site are set on a sliding scale.

There is an expectation and a need by school faculty to receive some feed-back from the caseworker to whom they have made a referral. It is not surprising that if they have been struggling with a difficult classroom problem, they seek some relief. Sometimes the expectation is of magic, but nonetheless they are due some reassurance that the problem is being handled and, if possible, some suggestion as to how to handle the child in the classroom. The teacher can be extremely helpful in assisting a resistant, fearful parent to utilize service. Also, one measure of successful therapeutic intervention can be the improvement of the child's functioning in the classroom. The school staff can become a valuable adjunct to the treatment team.

Through such an outreach program, the Jewish school system and the Jewish family agency can unite to achieve a common objective, to help strengthen Jewish family life.