



Harvard Family
Research Project



Complementary Learning in Action

The Jacksonville Children's Commission

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About this series: As complementary learning takes root across the country, *Complementary Learning in Action* shares innovative examples and lessons learned from those initiatives. This series documents the ways that diverse cities, counties, and states are employing complementary learning approaches to serve children across ages and across settings. It highlights key themes and emerging strategies to help build knowledge and inform others in the field.

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The Jacksonville Children’s Commission

In February of 2007, 30 youth aged 13–18 assembled in the multipurpose room of the Jacksonville Children’s Commission (JCC) to research and discuss issues in their communities and worldwide children’s rights. With facilitation from two children’s rights advocates from the United Kingdom—a 17-year-old activist and an adult consultant to the United Nations—the youth established six key issues that they wanted to address with the adults in their lives. More effective communication with parents and other adults was at the top of the list because, as one of the youth present said, “If we tackle this first issue, the other five issues would be so much easier.” At the end of the second day, the youth presented these issues in a creative, dynamic way to over 75 community stakeholders. The audience, which had been convened by JCC, included representatives from the School Board, the County Health Department, the University of Florida, the Department of Children and Families, the United Way, The Community Foundation, and local media and nonprofits. Individually and collectively, these stakeholders committed to supporting the youth (now a formalized group called Duval’s Youth Voice Council) and their six issues. One outcome of the meeting was a new effort to provide opportunities and education for youth to serve on community boards and commissions, in order to give them a voice in the issues affecting them. This evolving effort—and the collaborative process behind it—reflects JCC’s efforts to bring diverse community stakeholders together in order to respond to the needs of children, youth, and families across the city and across ages.

Aiming for a more coordinated system of care from birth through adolescence, JCC is changing the way that it—and the community—views and serves families. JCC supports and coordinates city-wide children’s services through grant making, technical assistance, and professional development. In coordinating its prevention and intervention efforts across ages and sectors, the Commission hopes to be a catalyst for community-wide change. In the words of Ginger Peacock Preston, JCC’s Associate Director for School Readiness, “We are working to change the culture.”

What is complementary learning?

Across the country, there is growing recognition that even high-performing schools cannot do it alone. National discussions reflect the need for additional supports to help bridge the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. In this setting, Harvard Family Research Project is leading the national conversation about complementary learning—the idea that systems that intentionally link nonschool supports with each other and with schools can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed.

Complementary learning is taking root in many forms across the country. Some initiatives link two or three supports for children and youth, while others create comprehensive systems. As these initiatives develop, HFRP is learning from their innovations and sharing strategies, challenges, and insights with others in the field.

History: From Separate Services to a System of Care

JCC, one of eight county-based Children’s Services Councils across the state of Florida, was created to develop and fund systems of care for children. While Florida’s other seven councils are funded by a voter-approved children’s tax, JCC has a unique structure and history. In 1990, Duval County voters rejected a children’s tax measure. But in 1994, then-Mayor Ed Austin, a strong supporter of child and family services, used funding from the city’s general revenue to create the commission; he also created an ordinance allowing future mayors to set aside discretionary funds and institutionalize JCC. Lanier explains that this mayoral initiative created a dedicated (although not additional) revenue stream for prevention and early intervention in children’s services that doesn’t have to compete with sidewalks, sewers, or other city services.

With direction from its governing board, whose eleven members are appointed by the mayor, JCC both provides services directly and contracts with local nonprofit providers. JCC was formed by bringing together the city’s existing children’s services and funding streams under one umbrella. Initially, it funded and managed existing programs, including family support, early childhood, after school, and behavioral health services. Over time, JCC’s mission and structure have evolved, adding or eliminating programs based on relevance to the core mission and evidence of effectiveness.

When Chief Executive Officer Linda Lanier began in 2003, many of JCC’s programs and services were well established and operating with quality. However, they were also largely disconnected and operating in silos. Lanier saw both a challenge and an opportunity: to improve JCC’s work by creating a more coordinated system. For the last several years, Lanier and her staff have been working to create a system in which services are aligned from birth through adolescence, sharing common mission, goals, and strategies, all with a focus on research-based best practices. JCC has changed the way that it, and the community, views its work, from “buying services with taxpayer dollars” to “investing in a system of care for all our children.”

Snapshot:

Jacksonville Children’s Commission

Location

Jacksonville, Florida

Start date

1994

Type of partners

State and county health and human services agencies, mayor’s office, city parks and recreation department, cultural institutions, higher education, local nonprofits, local businesses, local and national foundations

Mission statement

To support families in their efforts to maximize their children's potential to be healthy, safe, educated, and contributing members of the community.

Website:

<http://www.coj.net/departments/childrens+commission/default.htm>

“We are working to change the culture ... of Jacksonville and how we view children and families.”

—Ginger Peacock Preston,
Associate Director of
School Readiness

Building Connections: Reflective Practice and Data-driven Decision-making

This shift in perspective has had its share of challenges. In particular, Lanier points to old habits of separation and isolation that are not unique to JCC. The “business as usual” approach to children’s services has historically “set them up to be competitive and stand-alones,” she says. Lanier witnessed this at first hand during one of her early efforts to bring leaders of several community nonprofits together to create a new collaborative project. She discovered that even seasoned nonprofit professionals did not have the experience to work in a truly collaborative manner to establish a continuum of care, in which a child enters at a given point and moves through a seamless system.

In the face of these challenges, one of Lanier’s core strategies has been to build change from the inside out. She quotes Gandhi: “Be the change you want to see in the world.” JCC was one of 61

Jacksonville organizations that received a grant from The Community Foundation and the Jessie

Ball duPont Fund to engage in a year-long process of reflective practice. Through this process, staff and the board took a thoughtful and probing look at how JCC does business and undertook an effort to learn together with the community. As Lanier says, “We have realized that the families we work with, especially the ones who live in poverty, have a lot to teach us and we need to be still, listen, and honor their wisdom.”

“If we wanted our partner organizations and our funded organizations to have high standards... we absolutely had to do that ourselves first.”

—Linda Lanier, Executive Director

Working with reflective practice strategies, JCC has focused on breaking down the silos interdepartmentally. JCC’s multiple strategies for promoting reflective practice include “Leadership Labs,” regular meetings during which managers from all departments discuss relevant readings, new research, and best practices in order to find common ground and seek ways to integrate the work of all departments into the whole. As a result of these efforts, JCC staff engage in critical cross-departmental conversations about their history, perceptions and beliefs about families, philosophies of service, and ideas for innovation. These conversations have helped them to solidify mission and goals, make strategic decisions, and convey consistent messages to external partners and contractors. Step by step, this process is creating a culture of relationships and communication that Lanier calls “a fundamental shift.”

In addition to these internal efforts, JCC is also working to build strategic partnerships with external stakeholders such as the Early Learning Coalition of Duval, the Duval County Public Schools, the Florida Department of Health, The

Jacksonville Community Foundation, the United Way, and Healthy Families Florida. The Commission is also developing partnerships with many local organizations who “very much want to be at the table,” including the public library and the public broadcast station, both of whom are involved in JCC’s family literacy initiatives. JCC welcomes all stakeholders, and is committed to an inclusive governance model, including the voices of Jacksonville youth. In all of its efforts, JCC has a strong relationship with Mayor John Peyton, who has made early literacy one of six

“It really doesn’t matter who sets the table, but somebody’s got to.”

—Brenda Miller, Family Involvement Coordinator

core initiatives for his administration. Sadly, Jacksonville has the highest murder rate in the state of Florida, and city officials realize that the best long-term solution is investing early in children. Sheriff John Rutherford comments, “We can’t arrest our way out of this problem. What we need is to support children and families in their neighborhoods.”

In one example of such complementary support, JCC is building on the success of its family involvement initiatives to integrate family involvement across ages, services, and departments. With a 5-year history of promoting family involvement in early childhood services and community settings, family involvement staff will be working with JCC-supported after school programs to raise awareness of the benefits of and strategies for engaging families in after school. This reflects an organization-wide commitment to families in 2007–2008 school year, and it also capitalizes on JCC’s history of supporting after school programs. (JCC boasts an impressive record of sustainability: Of the 47 after school programs it has funded, none has closed, even after its federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding ended.)

Another example is JCC’s collaboration with the United Way of northeast Florida and the Duval County public school system to support seven Full Service Schools. Based in high schools, these community service sites each serve a network of feeder elementary and middle schools. Services include behavioral health, abuse prevention, family support, and preventive health.

“The principal of one of the ... middle schools said ... ‘I’ve been in this school for ten years, and we’ve really been trying to do everything we can to help these kids, but I didn’t know that there were THESE things that could help!’”

—Linda Lanier, Executive Director

These efforts to create a connected system of care across agencies and institutions are built on a strong commitment to using data and evaluation. JCC uses data to track outcomes for all of the non-profits with whom it contracts, in order to measure program effectiveness and inform funding decisions. Evaluation data help JCC leaders make strategic decisions about their services—for example, continuing support for successful programs and eliminating those with little evidence of success. JCC also uses data to solicit community input and drive program planning, such as a new needs assessment survey that is distributed to parents at family resource centers to increase parent voice and representation. In addition, JCC uses data to inform parents and help them make good choices: One example is a quality rating system for early childhood programs that is accessible and understandable to parents. In many of its evaluation efforts, JCC partners with local universities. For example, the Florida Institute of Education is responsible for assessment and evaluation of the mayor’s 4-year-old literacy initiative and other efforts involving JCC and its collaborators.

Looking Ahead: New Strategies Built on Past Successes

JCC leaders see themselves in a period of development. As they move toward an organization-wide and city-wide system, they are working to build on early progress in certain areas, especially early learning and family involvement. One of their immediate goals is to continue building external partnerships. For example, family involvement staff hope to work with local universities to include family involvement in preservice teacher education.

JCC leaders also hope to continue building their relationship with the public school system. While JCC has developed positive relationships with the school department and individual schools to date, partially through school-based after school programs, the Commission would like to build more collaborative efforts to promote family involvement. They are beginning to see progress: Lanier represents the family perspective at many school district meetings, and JCC's Family Involvement Coordinator is in the early stages of developing a partnership with the school district's community and family engagement representative. However, JCC staff recognize that time constraints and competing responsibilities pose challenges to increased collaboration with the schools, and that both patience and creativity will be necessary to move forward. As they continue to build these relationships, JCC will continue to emphasize its role as a complement, not a competitor, to the school system.

JCC's efforts to build collaboration are occurring not only at the service level, but also at the state policy level. Lanier is involved in a collaboration among Florida's eight Children's Services Councils, ensuring policy advocacy efforts are more coordinated, united, and effective. Whereas previous advocacy efforts were minimally effective because of their diverse focus and competing

recommendations, the new collaboration is designed to provide strategic, coordinated, and specific recommendations to legislators for supporting child and family services and supports. As one example of this work, the Florida Children's Services Councils are developing a public awareness campaign that will communicate to voters the return on investment in children.

As JCC moves forward with both its community-focused and field-building work, its leaders have found complementary learning a helpful framework. As Brenda Miller says, "It's a vehicle for us to begin discussion," which has helped facilitate connections within and across departments and agencies. This is critical to the culture-changing work she and her colleagues are engaged in, because, as she says, "It really doesn't matter who sets the table, but somebody's got to."

"What [the complementary learning] model did for me is it put on paper, something that I, as an educator, believe in... And as I shared it with [others], I've seen the light bulbs come on... it's a vehicle for us to begin discussion."

—Brenda Miller, Family Involvement Coordinator