

Sparrow Lake Alliance: Symposium Report

“What Works! Successful Tales of Service Integration for Children and Youth”

About the SLA Symposium... This year, the Sparrow Lake Alliance is trying to assess the progress we have made in improving the integration of services for the children and youth of Ontario. The daylong Symposium (Feb. 16, 2007) was an opportunity to hear about four success stories from across the province, where communities have made some progress in their efforts, and to identify some of the common themes and success factors shared by these projects. The findings are reported below.

This year’s Annual General Meeting (May 4-5, 2007) will build on these findings as we take a closer look at the challenges of service integration and system change and the impact of policy reforms in Child Welfare, Youth Justice, and Children and Youth Mental Health – positive and negative.

Section One: Common Elements of Success:

The presentations served to illustrate how important it was for each community and its service providers to create a structure and process that ‘fit’ the circumstances, their needs and their abilities. That said, there were commonalities among the presentations, suggesting that successful attempts at service integration seem to be supported by a number of factors:

- ***Create a Vision with Big Ideas:*** Develop a shared and overarching vision that speaks to the aspirations of all the partner organizations and the broader community. Maintaining your focus on the ‘big ideas’ that brought you together helps the group weather short-term problems and allows greater latitude for action as opportunities arise and partners change.
- ***Innovative Leaders:*** Leadership styles that are creative open to risk and change; people who see and think systemically; and those not pre-occupied with compliance, are characteristics of those who participate most effectively.
- ***Work with the Willing:*** The challenge to integrate services and share resources are best undertaken by partner organizations that can buy in to the vision, and who see their organizational interest in participation. After some effort and offers to include all the appropriate potential partners, successful groups get started with whoever is ready and willing to work. Specific partners, and their level of involvement, will continually evolve.
- ***Provide Evidence of Shared Interest:*** Demonstrate that potential partners share a common interest and that their individual needs are in fact complimentary – despite the different descriptions and professional vocabularies they may use.
- ***Partners as Navigators:*** Each participant needs to openly discuss and share the limits, constraints and interests of their organization, helping the others to appreciate and incorporate these interests in the collective strategy.

- ***Trust and Leadership:*** Service integration invariably involves developing a level of trust and goodwill among the participants, despite their differences in size and organizational capacities. Good partnerships seem to recognize this imbalance, and ensure that group leadership in particular, is shared among all the participants.
- ***Foster Relationships:*** Provide adequate time to establish relationships– both personal and professional – and maximize the amount of face-to-face meeting time, especially in the early stages and as participants and organizations evolve.
- ***Create and Sustain Momentum:*** Creating a call to action (e.g. external experts, local research) is critical as is the celebration of any and all early examples of success. Describe the ‘value’ of the work to each organization as soon as possible and tell the stories of children and families who have benefited.
- ***Sharing Opportunities:*** Cross sector integration of services offers a unique chance for participating organizations to share the funding opportunities that are invariably targeted at one sector or another, but require “partners’ to access. Service integration groups improve the access a community will inevitably get to a variety of funding streams.
- ***Maintain the Collaborative Carefully:*** Ensure there are ongoing mechanisms for regularly communicating to all partners, their leaders and front line staff, providing updates and status reports – the absence of apparent problems is not a measure of success.
- ***Getting to the “We”:*** At some ‘tipping point’ in the process of working together, successful groups began applying the (possessive) plural pronoun to describe ‘their’ work. Getting to ‘we’ was driven by different factors including external threats / opportunities, government action / inaction; shared research and/or a local call to action; and the need for collective decision making early on.

No Single Way Forward: While these common principles are important, our presenters did suggest that it was a unique variety of these factors and others, in different combinations, and at different times, that helped with their success – and so a single recipe is not possible. With this in mind, we explored what sorts of behaviors, attitudes and actions, of both community agencies and government funders, seemed to create and support the conditions for success.

Section Two: Agency Roles and Approaches to Successful Service Integration

Although the leadership, methods, incentives and processes differed appropriately in each of the four communities, there were some commonalities in the ways that agencies and their representatives participated that helped to enable and sustain the success of the collective effort. Strategies and suggestions include:

- ***Establish Local Direction:*** Agencies and potential partners need to insist on the latitude to develop a collective, local approach to service integration and appropriate time lines. While funders often bring frameworks and other expectations, successful groups modify plans to reflect their priorities and abilities and are not reluctant to ‘push back’ on methods that are neither suitable nor likely to be effective.

- **Individual and Organizational Commitment:** Creating a personal commitment to the success of a new system or approach is critical although longer term success and sustainable results require strategic efforts to build a broader organizational commitment to the work within each of the participating organizations.
- **Share What You Can:** Regardless of the size, contributions and concrete steps that demonstrate a willingness to share resources and your organizations' commitment to 'doing things differently' can send a powerful message to your peers. Successful groups see participants offering what they can and figuring out the 'how' later.
- **Be Flexible:** Enhancing coordination and integrating unconnected services and sectors necessitates innovative approaches and is poorly suited to elaborate written protocols and formal policies. A big vision, some clear principles, a loose framework, and a few shared project ideas seem the best way to launch what will always be a work in progress.
- **Find the Right People:** Just as organizational leaders need specific attributes, those charged with implementing service integration strategies need to be comfortable with change and ambiguity, willing to innovate, with good listening and strong process skills. This work is not for everyone.
- **Top Down/Bottom Up Communication:** Clear, open and regular communication, both within organizations and between the front line and managerial participants of the project, is essential. Effective groups expect to be involved in problem solving and understand the need to revisit their plans regularly.
- **Sell the Benefits Inside:** Each group that participates should devise and implement a strategy to effectively build support for the work within their own organizations, utilizing wherever possible the strength and commitment of their partners to help them make the case (e.g. cross Board presentations).
- **Not More Work:** Restructuring, realigning or creating more integrated services should not be seen nor understood as an initiative that will be added to the existing workload. Rather, these projects are intended to replace and/or improve existing services and should clearly help to make each organization more effective – this is not an add on.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Agency representatives need to be good partners - appreciating without judging - the unique personal, cultural, historical, strategic, and even irrational imperatives that drive the behaviours of every organization at the table...listen carefully!
- **Ready Fire Aim Aim Aim:** Effective groups do seem particularly comfortable with an approach framed by principles, some sense of direction and a commitment to refining, revisiting and evaluating their success on a regular and ongoing basis. Removing the burden of having to be right every time strengthens the groups' capacity to innovate.

There was one other overarching message to those who run organizations and community agencies in terms of moving forward with service integration and improvements to the system: *'Don't wait for government to lead the process - communities lead - governments follow'*.

Section Three: What can Government / Funders do to Support Service Integration?

Each presentation demonstrated a different sort of relationship between the community and government and highlighted the respective roles they played in supporting the process of service integration. Despite the many differences, there were a number of shared ideas and common suggestions about how government could most effectively support the work of communities with service integration strategies.

- **Policy Incentives:** Governments have an important role to create incentives (both carrots and sticks) that will strongly encourage cooperative action at the local level by appropriate organizations – but should avoid dictating exactly how this should be done.
- **Framework and Principles:** Governments should provide some overarching directions, clear principles and broad outcomes for service integration strategies, allowing and even encouraging local modifications aimed at effectiveness and the best utilization of existing resources.
- **Process Support:** Governments should be involved in supporting the time and efforts involved in redesigning services or building new systems and may need to better recognize the effort that is involved on the part of resource challenged service agencies.
- **Research and Best Practices:** Governments can help communities to identify work in other jurisdictions that may interest, stimulate and encourage local action and/or support local cross sector research and data collection to help frame issues and highlight the need for a collective local response.
- **Don't Force Participation:** Groups that are not voluntary participants in collective projects, particularly service integration strategies, have a harmful effect. Enthusiasm for participating at planning tables and in other service integration efforts will grow or falter as the effectiveness and value of the work becomes apparent. Governments must however, find ways to address uncooperative agencies and deliberate saboteurs.
- **Community Funding Decisions:** At some point, devolving decision making to the group that is involved in planning and service integration at the local level is appropriate, allowing greater ownership and responsibility for outcomes, encouraging and supporting cooperation.
- **Zero-Sum Reward Plan:** Communities should be encouraged to create effective and efficient systems change and service integration with an expectation that at least some of the 'savings' from their work will be redeployed to pressing local needs (e.g. children's mental health).

There was the usual lament that governments consistently fail to model or apply system thinking to the way they interact with communities, so often recommended it did not seem worthy of restating here. It was clear from the presentations however, that part of the success these communities enjoyed was the product of becoming co-conspirators with their government representatives and creating – with varying degrees of comfort – the expectation that innovation is an evolutionary process. Freed from the impossible 'burden of having to be right the first time', the partnership flourished.

Section Four: What Are the Benefits of Doing Things Differently?

As every community brings its own approach to improving and integrating services, the benefits will naturally vary. That said, it does seem important to create an expectation that membership will have its privileges, that the benefits will be widely shared, and that these impacts will be noticeable and measurable in evaluations. Common reported benefits included the following:

- **Better Outcomes:** The most important impact of improved service integration is better, more responsive and more effective services for children, youth and families. Maintaining this focus during process problems, and other challenges, is critical.
- **New Information:** Sharing research and data about children and youth in the community, all collected from different vantage points, provides important insights that are simply unavailable from a single perspective.
- **Opportunities to Learn:** Working together provided people with new opportunities to see and understand how other organizations process information, make decisions and the limitations and constraints of their mandates and legislative frameworks. Previous assumptions about the effectiveness of your partners often change.
- **Collective Responses:** Groups working together to coordinate or integrate services often become a forum for other funding and service opportunities, brought forward by participating agencies from various sectors. Already established, the group can provide a timely, coordinated and broadly supported response to opportunities as they arise.
- **Piggy Backing and Synergy:** Smaller agencies may be able to powerfully extend their reach and impact through service integration strategies with larger organizations. Lending various skills and resources to other successful groups does create new and noticeable synergies. Every organization should be able to identify the intended (and unintended) benefits of their participation and contribution.
- **Innovation:** While it's clearly not for everyone in an organization, some people will especially enjoy the challenges involved in service integration and working with organizations and people from 'outside' their field. Harnessing, engaging and retaining these talents can be a real benefit to organizations.
- **Mutual Support:** Successful groups working on service integration and shared initiatives suggest the ability to provide one another with a support network, and peers from outside your own particular system or sector was a healthy outcome of their participation.

Section Five: What is the Role of Funding in Service Integration?

It became apparent during the presentations that the availability of funding, specifically to support the process and participation in collaborative efforts, does not seem to be a pre-requisite for success and may be divisive, especially where local services are known to be under funded.

Finding resources (new or redeployed) to undertake collective action is important; however, it seems the search for resources is best undertaken once a shared vision and common directions have been established.

Some small amount of discretionary funding that can be allocated by the group and/or provided directly to those charged with implementation to overcome problems and obstacles, encourages progress and helps build a sense of early accomplishment.

In short, external funding is not the dependant variable in successful service integration strategies.