A Complex Partnership to Optimize and Stabilize the Public Child Welfare Workforce

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A Complex Partnership to Optimize and Stabilize the Public Child Welfare Workforce

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How can social work education programs contribute to the optimization and stabilization of the public child welfare workforce during a time when a national workforce crisis has been proclaimed? How do partnerships among higher education institutions, the state office of child and family services, and local child welfare organization contribute to this workforce development agenda? And, more specifically, what partnership-initiated interventions promise to reduce undesirable workforce turnover and facilitate both professional development and organizational development?

These companion questions help structure a complex university-state agency-local child welfare organization partnership system in a northeastern state. This partnership system and one of its special, research and development components are introduced in the ensuing analysis. This special component is a research-supported, complex intervention; it is designed to reduce turnover and, at the same time, facilitate both professional development and organizational development.

This analysis begins with the need for, and contexts surrounding, this partnership. A condensed literature review follows; this literature provides some of the theoretical and empirical support for the logic of the partnership as well as for the logic of one of this partnership's interventions. Next, the complex partnership system is described briefly, and then the aforementioned intervention is introduced. The analysis concludes with implications for workforce optimization and stabilization.

Relevant Background: Contextual Factors and Needs

The child welfare system in this Northeastern state is state supervised and county administered — with one notable exception. The state's global city has its own, huge child welfare system, and it also benefits from state supervision. In all of these systems, the workforce is mixed; it consists of both social workers and workers with higher education degrees in other fields. Some systems, especially rural ones, do not enjoy the services of any social workers. Indeed, their leaders are hard-pressed to remember a time when their systems benefited from front line social work leadership.

This mixed workforce presents special professional development and organizational development challenges.[1] For example, the state's training programs are designed to provide social work-oriented training to persons without degrees in social work. Unfortunately, the transfer of this training to local agency practice is not automatic because local agency training, if it exists, may not be dovetailed with the state's core training; and also because veteran co-workers without social work degrees tend to discredit the state's social work-oriented training during their interactions with new caseworkers. Predictably, this initial training problem snowballs into subsequent professional development challenges, especially when actual practice in agencies has effectively "washed out" social work-oriented practices, ethics, and values.[2]

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[1]   The several claims presented in this paragraph derive from our research, which is described later.

[2]   This "wash-out effect" is especially likely to occur in Child Protective Services Units. Despite the efforts of leading social workers to emphasize family-centered practice aimed at family stabilization and preservation, CPS workers in this northeastern state continue to view themselves as investigators. For many of them, there is no "enforcer-healer paradox."

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One implication for professional development is especially important: Workers without social work degrees lack the basic competence to provide the kinds of interventions and clinical services recommended by the research. Many are prepared to serve only as brokers of services. When they are promoted, they tend to perpetuate a services brokering practice orientation.

In contrast, workers with social work degrees *are* prepared to provide research-supported interventions and clinical services in addition to the service brokering they perform.[3] Consequently, their professional development needs, like their practice competence and orientations, often differ dramatically from those of the co-workers without degrees. Moreover, it appears that, as in other states, the conflation of true social workers with others without degrees who call themselves and are called "social workers" contributes to morale problems and may trigger turnover. As in other states, the challenge of recruiting, retaining, and benefiting from the leadership of social workers comprises both a professional development and an organizational development challenge.

Turnover in this State

Leaders from the state office of child and family services (OCFS) began tracking the child welfare workforce problem in 2000 in part because local County Commissioners alerted them to its importance. Importantly, OCFS leaders used their tracking systems to identify county systems with persistent, high turnover; these systems are described in greater detail in the third section of this analysis.

This state's performance profile under Federal Child and Family Service Reviews also was instrumental in a renewed priority for turnover prevention. Specifically, strategy number seven in the state's Program Improvement Plan prioritizes workforce development and stabilization. This priority derives from the relationship between workforce characteristics and both client and agency outcomes. It also includes the need for more effective approaches to professional and organizational development.

A National Workforce Crisis

As a new century dawned, public child welfare leaders in other states also were reporting a developing recruitment and retention problem. In the ensuing years, several national reports have proclaimed a national workforce crisis in the public child welfare and also in the human services in general.

Arguably, the four most important reports were the Child Welfare League of America's report entitled *Empty Chairs* (co-authored by F. Alwon & A. Reitz in 2000); The Government Accounting Office's report entitled *HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Employees Recruit and Retain Staff* (GAO-03-357, 2003); The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Report entitled *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce* (2003); and, the recently published (2005) report by the American Public Human Services Association.

Risking over-simplification, these national reports and the work they have spawned fall into two categories. The first might be called "the system as it is" because all of the work — cost estimates, turnover research, and the development of retention plans — proceed with the existing child welfare system as a given. In other words, the thinking, the research, and the action planning occur "inside the box;" and both professional development and organizational development follow suit.

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[3] After in depth interviews with both kinds of workers, the senior author for this paper hypothesizes that these differences in practice account in part for the oft-cited distinction between people processing practice (with completed paperwork as the criterion for effectiveness) and people-changing practice (with improved client outcomes as the effectiveness criterion). Of course, more research is needed, but even without this research, it is clear that these fundamental differences complicate both professional and organizational development.

The second category might be called "the system as it might become" because the thinking and recommended action planning are oriented toward dramatic changes. This "outside the box" approach is based on two assumptions: (1) System tinkering alone will not solve the turnover problem; (2) The turnover problem is inextricably connected to other systems problems (e.g., organizational design, job designs and specifications, reporting and accountability procedures) such that solving one problem means solving the others. This multi-faceted problem solving requires penetrating reforms, including professional and organizational development, aimed at systems redesign.

Together these reports have comprised a clarion call for action. Notably, they have identified three urgent needs: (1) The need for more research aimed at determining both the economic costs (e.g., training and replacement costs) and social costs (e.g., the human and community costs of unmet child and family needs); (2) The need for more research aimed at understanding the antecedents, correlates, causes, and consequences of turnover; and (3) The need for action-oriented research designed to help public child leaders do something about turnover — namely, to develop and implement successful, research-supported retention plans and, at the same time, to enhance both professional development and organizational development.

A Snapshot of the Related Literature

Mindful of space limitations, this analysis provides the equivalent of a selective, limited "snapshot" of the relevant literature. This presentation is essential because this body of literature comprises the theoretical and empirical foundation for the partnership and the logic of its interventions. In the interest of simplicity, clarity, and brevity, just three categories of literature will be described: (1) University partnerships — with special interest in partnership facilitators and special partnerships aimed at fostering research and its utilization and dissemination; (2) Child welfare workforce

turnover and retention; and (3) Integrated action research and learning teams for knowledge generation, professional development, and organizational development.

University Partnerships

Three sub-categories of literature inform the partnership and its interventions: (1) The engaged (outreach) university partnership literature, broadly conceptualized (e.g., Holland, 2005; Lawson, 2002; 2004; Soska & Johnson-Butterfield, 2005); (2) The social work partnership literature, especially the Title IV-E child welfare partnership research (e.g., Briar-Lawson & Zlotnik, 2002; Hooper-Briar & Lawson, 1996); and (3) Research-focused university partnerships (e.g., Allen-Meares, Hudgins, Enberg, & Lessnau, 2005; Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Jensen, Hoagwood, & Trickett, 1999).

This diverse literature describes and explains partnership facilitators, barriers, constraints, and desirable outcomes. For example, these facilitators include unity of purpose, the development of interdependent relationships, the negotiation of specialized roles and responsibilities, shared power and authority, conflict resolution mechanisms, norms of reciprocity cemented by social trust, barrier-busting strategies, embedded evaluations for continuous learning and improvement, university responsiveness to community and agency needs, and infrastructures for new ways of "doing business."

Intermediary people (boundary crossers and spanners) and organizations (neutral parties that convene organizations without prior histories of working together) merit special emphasis. Here, the university may serve as an intermediary organization and its faculty, staff and students may serve as intermediary agents. Alternatively, the university may be viewed as controversial and even untrustworthy; in this case, a community organization or state agency serves as the intermediary convening/coordinating entity.

Questions of epistemology — of what counts as important, valid, and useful knowledge, including

the methodologies for generating it — are especially important in some of the partnership literature. While many partnerships emphasize conventional conceptions of research and its application and use ("from the research bench to the practice trench"), a growing number of research partnerships transcend this convention. These more expansive partnerships encompass practice-driven and practitioner-conducted research ("from the trench back to the bench"), along with methodologies congenial to these practitioners and compatible with the settings in which they work.

Last, but certainly not least, some of this literature raises hard questions about whether partnerships deliver on their promises (e.g., Roussos & Fawcett, 2000). The following premise is implicit in this literature. *A partnership is an intervention, and like all justifiable interventions, it needs to be theoretically sound, supported by research, tailored to the theory of the problem, constantly evaluated to determine its efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness, and consistently modified based on this evaluative feedback.*

Some university partnerships appear to fall short of this desirable standard. Many are described as the equivalent of partnerships for the sake of partnerships, i.e., they are merely process innovations. The ideal (e.g., Lawson, 2004) is that partnerships are both process innovations (new operational routines and procedures) *and* product innovations (new structures, interventions, programs, and services, which improve results and provide other tangible benefits to the participating partners).

Child Welfare Workforce Turnover and Retention

Turnover and retention are related, but analytically separate concepts (Lawson, Claiborne, McCarthy, Strolin, Briar-Lawson, Caringi, et al., 2005). Unfortunately, the two concepts tend to be conflated in the literature, resulting in conceptual confusion, flawed research, and limited interventions.

Turnover research tends to be understanding-oriented. Some of it aims to identify the different kinds of turnover (e.g., Lawson, Claiborne, et al., 2005) — for example, functional turnover (i.e., when it benefits the agency and its clients); unpreventable turnover (e.g., retirements); and preventable-undesirable turnover (i.e., when good workers leave when the agency leaders want them to stay). This research also identifies the economic and social costs accompanying this preventable-undesirable turnover (e.g., Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levine, 2001).

Of course, turnover research identifies the reasons why workers leave (e.g., Landsman, 2001; Maertz & Campion, 1998; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Danning, & Lane, 2005). In brief, a complex interplay of reasons for turnover emerges from this research. Some are individual, others are organizational, still others involve community influences, and others can be traced to external regulatory factors.

Retention research tends to be action-oriented. It draws on the reasons why workers leave and also why they stay. But more than this, retention research aims to identify, describe, and explain a comprehensive set of strategies, which reduce and prevent undesirable turnover (Lawson, Claiborne, et al., 2005).

Intervention planning for retention research and evaluations inevitably starts with training. However, Balfour & Neff's (1993) conclusion is especially noteworthy: *Training alone will not solve the turnover problem.* In other words, training is a necessary, but insufficient intervention for the multifaceted turnover problem, a problem characterized by novelty, complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

Integrated Action Learning and Research Teams

Training is maximally effective under the following conditions: (1) The problem, need, or opportunity is well defined; (2) Knowledge and understanding regarding the need, problem, or opportunity are well developed; (3) Expert trainers are available to disseminate this knowledge and understanding; and (4) The prerequisite conditions, follow-up supports, and necessary resources for transfer of training have been established (e.g.,

Lawson, Petersen, & Briar-Lawson, 2001). When these fundamental requirements cannot be met, training cannot be the intervention of choice. Instead, individuals, groups, and entire organizations must rely on innovative learning and development systems.

The implication is that new professional development and organizational development initiatives are needed, interventions that are tailored to "the theory of the turnover problem." Action learning systems are a prime example (e.g., Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Rothwell, 1999). In action learning, problem solving and learning are inseparable, interdependent activities for individuals, groups, or both. The aim is to actively engage adult learners, encouraging them to gain ownership over the presenting need or problem; gain more knowledge and understanding about it; become empowered to solve it; and develop learning-related efficacy and practice expertise in the process. In brief, these systems facilitate individual and collective professional development with opportunities for so-called "contagion effects" that result in organizational improvements.

Design teams add participatory and collaborative action research[4] to this action learning system (Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, & Barkdull, 2002; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lawson, Anderson-Butcher, Petersen, & Barkdull, 2003; Lawson, Petersen, & Briar-Lawson, 2001). These teams earn their names because the systems, models, and interventions they need are not established; teams must *design* them. These action research and learning oriented design teams are tailored for situations manifesting high degrees of novelty, complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. In other words, design teams are suitable for situations in which training

simply is not feasible or in other situations where it is an insufficient intervention.

Action research, knowledge generation, application, dissemination, and use are intertwined in design teams. As this action research proceeds, collaborative action learning is advanced. Theoretically, both individual learning and team learning are facilitated as teams develop "collaborative cognition" — shared ways of thinking, learning, talking, and acting, especially in instances wherein "the knowing is in the doing." As with action learning, individuals and groups gain preparation to direct their own learning and development. Under ideal circumstances, this learning entails a new, generative concept of learning transfer — namely, preparation for future learning (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999).[5]

Teams also develop new resources for both professional and organizational development. For example, as individuals and teams design and implement new systems, models, and interventions, gaining knowledge, deepening their expertise, and developing new systems, models and interventions, they are positioned to identify, describe, and test new competencies. Once competencies and roles are identified, teams have set the stage for future training programs, which derive from their work and for which some team members will serve as trainers (Lawson, Petersen, & Briar-Lawson, 2001).

Furthermore, teams identify learning and training needs, which outstrip their organization's present capacities. For example, when so-called welfare reform was enacted (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996) and employment became a top priority for vulnerable families, design teams in four states recognized that their organizations lacked the capacity to prepare their

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[4] In participatory action research, workers are given voice; in collaborative action research, they are co-researchers and share power and authority.

[5] This difference between "transfer of training" and this new concept of transfer as preparation for future learning has enormous implications for professional development, workforce professionalization, and plans for high performing learning organizations. This is a topic meriting a separate, detailed analysis.

workers to help clients gain employment. These teams solicited external training supports. As this training was delivered, new organizational capacities were built at the same time that responsive professional development supports were provided to staff at all levels of their respective organizations (Lawson, Petersen, & Briar-Lawson, 2001).[6]

In brief, this design team model has particular applicability to the aforementioned workforce optimization and stabilization agenda, including the workforce turnover problem. As indicated earlier, this agenda and its constituent turnover-retention problem are characterized by high degrees of novelty, complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity; and training alone will not solve the turnover problem. The design team model thus occupies a special place in the complex partnership described next.

The Social Work Education Consortium

Starting in the year 2000, two of this paper's authors (Briar-Lawson and McCarthy) worked in close concert with OCFS leaders[7] and social work deans and directors across the state to create a state-wide Social Work Education Consortium (SWEC). SWEC was created in response to the state's aforementioned public child welfare workforce development and stabilization agenda — with the working assumption that social work's leadership in public child welfare, especially education-related leadership, would result in pivotal contributions to this workforce agenda.

Subsequently, SWEC developed into a complex partnership system. Essentially, SWEC is a four-dimensional partnership system. First: It harbors inter-university partnerships involving the state's social work education programs. Second: It is a partnership between the state's social work education

programs and the state's OCFS. Third, and drawing on the Title IV-E literature indicating the import of strategic field placements for BSW and MSW students as well as educational ladders into social work education for veteran practitioners (e.g., Briar-Lawson & Zlotnik, 2002): SWEC harbors localized university-public child welfare agency partnerships.[8] Figure 1 provides an ideal type that depicts these three dimensions and their relationships.

The fourth dimension of the partnership arguably remains in its nascent stages. This partnership system involves partnerships among the state's public child welfare systems with the aim of fostering innovation exchanges, technology transfers, and mutually beneficial research and evaluation systems. In no small part, the future development of this partnership dimension hinges on the identification, deployment, and support of intermediary people and organizations

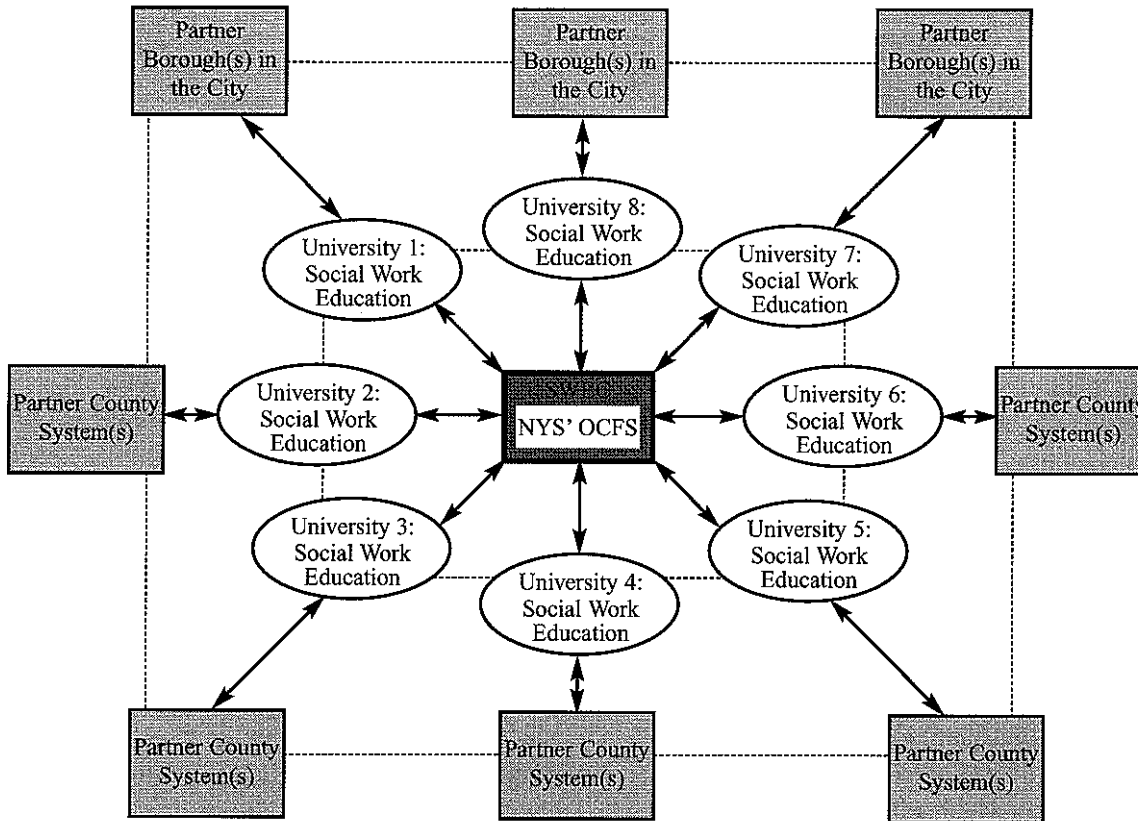### Intermediary People and Organizations

Not depicted in Figure 1, but evident in the routine operations of the other three dimensions of SWEC partnerships, are the pivotal roles played by intermediary people. For example, Briar-Lawson serves as an intermediary for the Deans and Directors and also with OCFS. McCarthy, SWEC's Director, does the boundary crossing/spanning and linkage work with social work education faculty, county commissioners, and OCFS. Miraglia, the Director of OCFS' Training Division, serves as the state's intermediary person, connecting SWEC and its activities with other OCFS priorities and resource development needs. Moreover, faculty throughout the state (including this paper's other authors) serve as key intermediaries in their work with local agencies.

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[6] In the case of the El Paso County (Colorado) Department of Human Services, wholesale systems change also accompanied welfare reform. Under David Berns' leadership, the mission for public child welfare shifted to the elimination of poverty and a front-end emphasis on prevention and early intervention involving family-centered and community-based service delivery models.
[7] Peter Miraglia, Director of Training for OCFS, merits special mention as a visionary leader and supporter.
[8] The concept of simultaneous reform and renewal, popular in the Education profession, captures the need to align social work education in universities with child welfare practice. Innovative education programs without companion changes in child welfare agencies produces "wash out effects" whereby experience eliminates innovations. Alternatively, when agencies innovate and social work education programs do not, every new graduate hired in the agency must be re-trained.

Figure 1: A Complex Partnership System with SWEC as an Intermediary Organization

The School of Social Welfare of the University at Albany, State University of New York, serves as the main intermediary organization in this partnership system. That said, every social work education program participating in SWEC and operating in close partnership with one or more local, public child welfare agencies also functions as an intermediary organization; and its faculty linkage agents function as intermediary people. In brief, SWEC enjoys a distributed and collaborative leadership infrastructure; such an infrastructure is needed in all such large, geographically dispersed partnership systems.

Turnover Research: Expanding the Partnership

Early in this paper, OCFS' leadership role in tracking turnover among caseworkers and supervisors

was identified. Thanks to these new data sets, OCFS was able to gain understanding the extent of the turnover problem. The data indicated that this problem was not as pervasive as local leaders suspected and as some national reports suggested. Rather, it was localized, so much so that OCFS could identify 13 county systems with persistent turnover involving at least 25 percent of their workforces.

Monitoring and tracking turnover and identifying so-called "high turnover systems" comprise one thing; understanding how, why, when, and where turnover occurs, along with its antecedents, correlates, costs, and consequences is another. Arguably, the state's professional and organizational development initiatives, like those in local county systems, could not be advanced without more knowledge

and understanding. SWEC was asked to assume responsibility for this turnover research.[9]

Drawing on the research about emergent best practices in university-agency partnerships, SWEC's leadership opted for a participatory research methodology. In this methodology, county commissioners were consulted about, and enjoyed genuine "veto power" over, every aspect of the research process. In fact, commissioners actively contributed to the development of a large-scale workforce survey, which nearly 400 of their front line caseworkers and supervisors completed. This kind of active engagement by commissioners and demonstrable, genuine responsiveness by university researchers is emerging as a kind of best practice in university-agency partnerships because it facilitates commissioners' and other leaders' ownership and use of research findings. Of course, it also entails trade-offs, including minor sacrifices of rigor in order to enhance relevance and improve ecological validity. Such is the "give and take" of genuine, sustainable partnerships; as negotiations proceed, trust, norms of reciprocity, shared missions and goals, and inter-dependent relationships are developed. Mutual learning and development — professional development by any standard — occur along the way.

Research-supported Retention Plans for Professional and Organizational Development

In close partnership with commissioners and OCFS leaders, SWEC researchers developed a multi-year research and development agenda.[10] After each research iteration, some identified below[11], intermediary SWEC researchers returned to their two constituencies: Commissioners and OCFS leaders, sometimes individually and occa-

sionally together. In each case, a new set of questions and priorities was identified.

For example, on the heels of the large scale survey and the report authored for commissioners — an example of understanding-oriented turnover research — commissioners wanted and needed more detailed information about what they could do differently and better to improve retention. As a case in point, workers completing the survey had penciled in "organizational and administrative concerns" and "lack of respect" as reasons to leave. While these responses are suggestive, they are not definitive bases for action — for research-supported, retention planning, including accompanying needs for professional and organizational development. Additionally, the survey had indicated what commissioners had long suspected: While commonalties existed among these systems, the data indicating that each was unique in important respects, signaling that retention planning for one might not be effective retention planning for others.

Commissioners therefore requested semi-structured, in depth interviews with representative caseworkers and front-line supervisors in their home agencies. SWEC researchers responded by completing 101 such interviews.

In subsequent discussions, important issues were raised about the inherent bias involved when only "high turnover systems" comprise the sample. Aiming for more understanding, and encouraged by both commissioners and OCFS leaders, SWEC researchers completed a comparison study. This study's sample consisted of 12 comparable systems with consistently low turnover. One striking finding: 4 of these systems had workforce profiles, which mirrored the prototype for high turnover systems.

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[9] SWEC thus served as a neutral intermediary for OCFS. Had the state initiated this research the relationship between the researchers and the commissioners would have been different. State-supervised systems often have peculiar dynamics, which can be traced back to the state's regulatory and supervision functions and de facto processes.

[10] The several studies comprising this agenda cannot be detailed here. Contact Mary McCarthy for executive summaries and research supports.

[11] The research program identified below focused on the several county systems. Other studies were being conducted at the same time—for example, an MSW retention study directed by Drs. Brenda McGowan (Columbia University) and Charles Auerbach (Yeshiva University).

This paradoxical finding signaled that retention alone is not necessarily an indicator of a well-functioning organization or a contented, exemplary workforce. And still the question remained: What should commissioners do differently and better to improve retention and, more importantly, to link retention to better outcomes for clients and improved results for their organizations?

A New Dimension to the Partnership:
The Children's Bureau Initiative

Owing to the national workforce crisis in public child welfare, the Children's Bureau launched a much-needed grant program aimed at improving public child welfare workforce recruitment and retention. SWEC's grant was designed to strengthen the four existing partnership dimensions, including the under-developed, inter-county partnerships, while adding a fifth dimension. This fifth dimension entailed partnerships with other universities funded by the Children's Bureau with the aim of fostering mutual learning and professional development as well as innovation and resource exchanges.

SWEC's Children's Bureau initiative enriched the existing partnership in three other ways. First: It

was grounded fundamentally in the need to derive action-oriented retention models, interventions, and strategies from innovative demonstration projects in 5 pilot agencies. Drawing on the research about expanded epistemologies through partnerships, with this new phase in its work SWEC was able to establish a dual research-knowledge system, one that married understanding-oriented turnover research and action-oriented retention research. Figure 2 depicts this dual knowledge system

Second: SWEC's partnership was reframed as a complex intervention. Accordingly, a logic model was developed a priori to guide planning, implementation, research, and evaluation. This partnership logic model is depicted in Figure 3. In addition to making the theory of change explicit, this logic model was shared with diverse stakeholders, and it helped foster mutual understanding and unity of purpose among SWEC's multiple, diverse partners.

Third: with this new grant, SWEC brought net, new resources to OCFS in support of its implementation of the Program Improvement Plan. Such resource maximization and sharing in the pursuit of shared, interdependent goals is a hallmark of successful, sustainable partnerships. Subsequently and

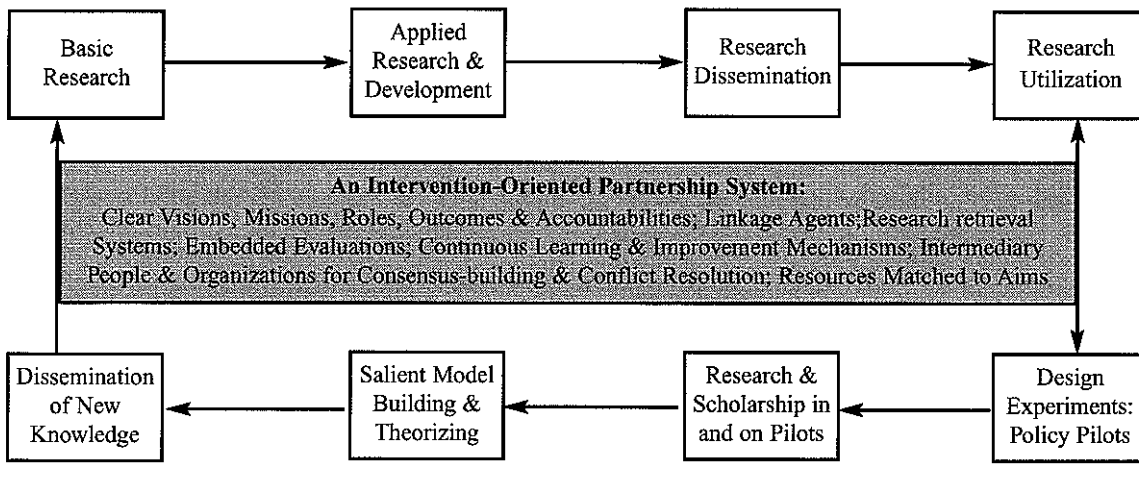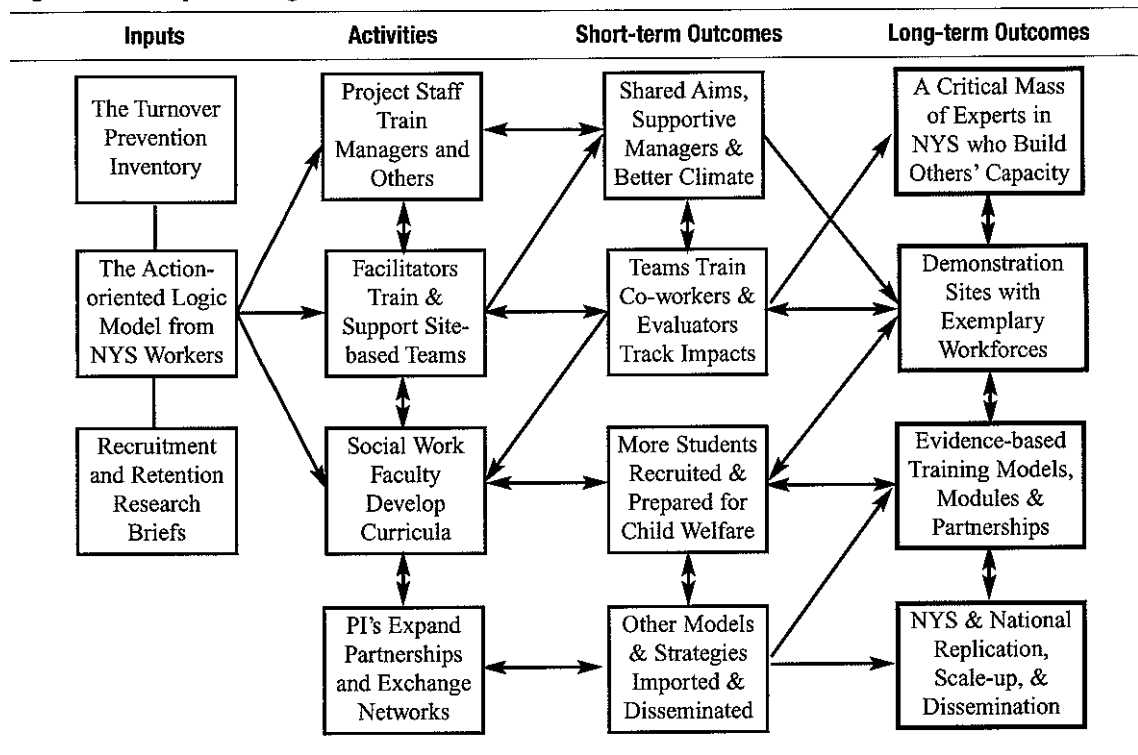## Figure 2: A Dual Knowledge System and Its Infrastructure

Figure 3: A Simplified Logic Model for the SWEC Children's Bureau Initiative

Inputs	Activities	Short-term Outcomes	Long-term Outcomes

The Turnover Prevention Inventory	Project Staff Train Managers and Others	Shared Aims, Supportive Managers & Better Climate	A Critical Mass of Experts in NYS who Build Others' Capacity
The Action-oriented Logic Model from NYS Workers	Facilitators Train & Support Site-based Teams	Teams Train Co-workers & Evaluators Track Impacts	Demonstration Sites with Exemplary Workforces
Recruitment and Retention Research Briefs	Social Work Faculty Develop Curricula	More Students Recruited & Prepared for Child Welfare	Evidence-based Training Models, Modules & Partnerships
	PI's Expand Partnerships and Exchange Networks	Other Models & Strategies Imported & Disseminated	NYS & National Replication, Scale-up, & Dissemination

significantly, the SWEC Children's Bureau initiative became the implementation arm for OCFS' PIP strategy number 7: Workforce development and stabilization. A SWEC-OCFS Advisory Committee continues to function for mutual learning, professional development, and organizational development.

A Complex Intervention for Retention

With Figure 3 as its organizing frame, the remainder of this analysis focuses on just one component of SWEC's Children's Bureau retention partnership initiative — namely, the aforementioned, complex intervention.[12] Three interacting components are especially noteworthy.

First: Specially prepared social workers facilitate intra-agency design teams consisting of representative caseworkers, supervisors, staff developers, and managers.

Simultaneously, social work faculty experts provide management consultations for county commissioners and their deputies. In other words, these two components operate in tandem aiming to achieve multiple benefits. These benefits include better communication, mutual understanding, increased commitments and engagement by workers at all levels of the organization, the generation of new knowledge and understanding, and, perhaps above all, the development of fundamental consen-

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[12] Details about key aspects of SWEC's retention planning initiative are presented in Lawson, Claiborne, et al., (2005). Executive summaries of research completed in county agencies also are available. Contact Mary McCarthy (Mccarthy@albany.edu) for electronically-delivered files of these and related SWEC reports.

sus on the agency's retention priorities, especially a research-supported consensus.

Third: A research and evaluation team has developed new turnover and retention instruments specifically for this initiative. Through their team facilitator, team members learn about the rationale and logic for each instrument. This professional development experience also enables them to share this knowledge with co-workers as they recruit them as participants. After the data are collected and analyzed, the team uses these data for more professional development and organizational improvement planning.

The change logic is thus complex and interactive. It is simultaneously top-down (through management consultations), bottom-up (through design teams), outside-in (through social work faculty facilitators), and inside-out (as knowledge generated in agencies is exported by social work faculty intermediaries to other agencies).

Introducing the Logic of Agency Design Teams

Teams consist of representative caseworkers, supervisors, staff developers (in agencies that have them), directors of services, and managers (sometimes commissioners or their deputies). "Representative team member" means exactly that — all of the agency's workers, especially workers representing co-worker cliques and networks. This means including advocates and enthusiasts as well as pessimists, minimalists, and "troublemakers." Here is part of the underlying logic: To the extent that teams develop collaborative cognition, renew workers' commitments and enthusiasm, convert the representative pessimists, minimalists, and trouble makers, and build members' efficacy, the benefits will spread throughout the workforce and its cliques and networks.[13]

From the outset, this logic is presented to commissioners and their workforces because outside facilitators are guests in their agencies and also because the initiative will not succeed without joint ownership by top level leadership. Team composition and team operation are structured to maximize the probability that agencies achieve these beneficial contagion effects. For, when they do, workers are facilitating each other's professional development; workers teach and learn together with and from each other. As they do so, they're ready to use their new knowledge and understanding in service of organizational development to improve retention.[14]

Getting There: Research-supported, Cognitive Scaffolding

Teams commenced with the important process-oriented work whereby a collection of diverse individuals, including some who don't like each other or want to work together, become a team. This process, along with related tools and protocols, is described in a companion paper (Lawson, Caringi, Strolin, Briar-Lawson, McCarthy, Dorn, & Sherman, under review).

For purposes of this paper, it is important to emphasize that the mixed workforce presents special challenges and opportunities for design teams and their work aimed at professional development and organizational improvement. In contrast to social work education programs, many other university degree programs and the state's core training programs tend not to provide required, core training in research. This lack of training and background is a significant barrier to the development of research-supported retention plans and evidence-based practices.

This obvious need, in combination with the extensive research SWEC had conducted on teams' organizations and the workers' themselves, presented an

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[13] A companion logic comes from innovative work that connects organizational design theory (which emphasizes top-down control and communication systems) with workforce network theory (which emphasizes how cliques and worker communities influence and determine what really happens in organizations). See, for example, Gittell, Weiss, & Wimbush, (under review).

[14] A forthcoming training guide for design team facilitators provides all of the relevant details about team formation, development, facilitation, and benefits. A detailed explanation is not possible here.

important opportunity. Social work faculty facilitators were presented with the opportunity to use each agency's turnover research findings as a professional development experience and, at the same time, the basis for research-supported retention planning. For this to occur, team members needed to be uplifted toward more justifiable, systematic planning and analysis; this uplifting process is called "cognitive scaffolding" because it enables individuals and teams to think and act at higher levels.

Facilitators used two tools for this cognitive scaffolding. The first was a composite of improvements recommended by workers in the 13 high turnover counties. SWEC researchers compiled these recommended improvements from face-to-face meetings with workers in these 13 agencies. Here, in addition to sharing research findings about why workers leave and stay, SWEC staff engaged workers attending these meetings in preliminary retention planning. Figure 4 presents this tool, which matches recommended improvements to research-supported needs and problems.

The second tool was designed to build on the professional development experiences and benefits associated with the first. Aiming to help teams gain consensus; formalize rational planning, systematic thinking, and intervention logic; and, and, at the same time, to quell "rumor mongering" and "he said, she said dynamics," facilitators provided teams with a logic model template. Facilitators helped teams learn how to use these models to gain new knowledge and understanding, identify training and learning needs, and initiate strategic, research supported, retention planning aimed at organizational functioning. Figure 5 provides this logic model template, and it includes actual examples from one of the agencies. This figure signals how this tool and the accompanying process facilitate professional development and, in turn, organizational development.

The Management Consultations

Commissioners, managers, and directors of services, no less than their front line workers, also have professional development needs. Management consultations were designed to assess these needs and respond to them. Additionally, these consultations were designed to link the work of the design teams, both in the home agency and in other pilot agencies, with the commissioners' professional development priorities.

It is noteworthy that these consultations revealed priority areas where neither SWEC researchers nor commissioners and their staffs had the answers. Consistent with the participatory action research tradition, the partners structured two search conferences (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In contrast to a re-search conference (where available knowledge is brought to bear on pressing needs and problems), a search conference proceeds where there is little or no available knowledge for pressing needs and problems requiring immediate action. Aided by outside consultant-facilitators, two successful search conferences paved the way for professional development, and in turn, organizational development involving SWEC and its child welfare agency partners. In fact, design team members joined the commissioners in the second search conference.

These two search conferences and the management consultations enabled the piloting of several professional and organizational development tools. They appear in a newly published, composite retention brief (Lawson, Claiborne, et al., 2005), a brief that is designed to catalyze additional design team work, future management consultations, and more inter-county partnerships.

The second search conference also afforded the opportunity to facilitate inter-agency networking (the fourth dimension of the SWEC partnership). On the tail end of this conference, SWEC researchers conducted focus group interviews with design team members to extract lessons learned,

Figure 4: An Ideal Type for Improvements Suggested by Workers

Recommended Improvement	Barrier/Problem/Need
Provide more timely hiring, training, agency initiation, and deployment of new workers; do not assign cases to trainees	Many of the problems and "spillover effects" listed in Figure 1, including premature assignment of caseloads to novice workers; and excessive caseloads
Exercise care when making internal transfers; and, consult workers and supervisors before transferring them	Destabilization of workers' lives and loss of their primary work commitments; nested problems stemming from "robbing Peter to pay Paul"
Implement "flex time" and "comp time" arrangements	Conflicts between work and personal life associated with turnover; and some job demands related to burnout
Develop consensus on effective practice and overall job performance	Limitations in training and worker performance; problems with aspects of the agency's organizational climate
Develop a coherent plan for initiation into the agency, including mentoring by expert, veteran workers	Over-reliance on training; individualistic, "sink or swim" socialization, which is associated with lower effectiveness and may sow the seeds for worker turnover
Capitalize on the expertise of effective, veteran workers in local training and agency initiation	Unavoidable selectivity and limitations of state and agency training regarding how to negotiate work demands in our county
Improve training quality and timing	Lack of correspondence between aspects of training and actual work demands ("sugarcoating of the job")
Ensure that workers have access to competent, supportive supervisors	Effectiveness problems, agency climate, and their relations with burnout and turnover
Implement strengths-based, solution-focused, and improvement-oriented supervision and management procedures	Morale and commitment problems caused by perceived lack of appreciation and trust as well as maltreatment
Streamline paperwork requirements and provide clerical assistance	Heavy workloads, together with perceived absence of supports, and their relations with burnout and turnover
Improve caseloads (size and equity)	Excessive caseloads; caseloads that have a disproportionate number of hardest to serve clients; special challenges of open cases inherited from workers who have left
Assign cases, wherever possible, that are close to workers' homes	The challenges of travel in Suffolk County, including the amount of time it takes workers to get home and the stress travel involves
Employ and deploy strategically more parent aides, clerical aides, and transportation aides	Lack of services, especially preventive services, for client systems; problems with paperwork requirements; excessive workloads related to burnout and turnover
Celebrate and reward "small wins" and big success stories	Workers' needs to feel appreciated and rewarded when they have performed effectively, especially good performance under extraordinarily challenging conditions
Convene listening circles, forums, and problem-solving sessions	Perceived lack of input by workers, together with lack of interest and knowledge by administration, including the negative effects of the agency's climate; need to develop the feeling that "we're all in the same boat here."
Improve screening and hiring processes and criteria	Need to increase a sense of professionalism among the workers and improve the agency's climate
Support and promote ethnic-minority workers	Perceived barriers to promotion and development; needs for diverse leaders
Add more county cars	Transportation challenges and needs
Work with the local media to promote success stories and to improve public awareness and appreciation of the agency and the workers	Perceived lack of appreciation and respect, which threaten to make the job "thankless" and reduce commitments to the job and the agency

barriers and facilitators, and achievements. All are presented in a companion paper (Lawson, Caringi, et al., under review).

Selected Implications

Commissioners and managers learned from the consultations, the search conferences, and, above all, from their design teams. As they learned and listened, they made responsive changes whenever possible. Perhaps above all, in structuring, supporting, rewarding, and resourcing these design teams, top-level leaders sent workers an important meta-message about the new manner in which they'd be treated. This new message began with respect for workers' views of key priorities for the agency. Meta- messages like this one, when perceived by workers comprise important preconditions for organizational support (e.g., Shore & Shore, 1995) — a key retention facilitator.

The child welfare design teams developed new knowledge and understanding, reached consensus on important retention planning priorities, developed collaborative cognition, requested and received training that met collective needs (e.g., secondary trauma training), fostered research dissemination and utilization, requested and received more tangible organizational supports, and developed new agency protocols (e.g., for "on call" assignments and overtime; for case transfers between units) and policies (e.g., for safety in the building and in the field). They learned as they developed these innovations, and they helped co-workers learn along with them, including commissioners.

Furthermore, as these examples indicate, team members' professional development can be linked to organizational development. Both kinds of development can be traced back to the university partnership system that surrounds this complex intervention. And because universities are involved, formal knowledge develops.

For example, it now is clear that retention planning is a key component in overall organizational

plans for optimizing and stabilizing the workforce; and, that this workforce-oriented retention planning revolves around three basic questions. How will Commissioners get the most talented and appropriate people into their workforces? How can they subsequently position and support them to do good work? And, how can they encourage and reward them to stay so that the agency, its clientele, and the surrounding community benefit from their commitments and expertise?

While the jury remains out on all of the answers, this much is clear: Everything that public child welfare agencies aspire to do, be, and become hinges fundamentally on the quality and stability of the workforce. Moreover, a narrow, categorical focus on what amounts to retention by any means necessary may succeed in keeping "warm bodies," but it is not a formula for truly optimizing the workforce.

Thanks to the SWEC partnership, it is becoming apparent that eight related components comprise this workforce optimization and stabilization agenda (Lawson, Claiborne, et al., 2005). (1) *Recruitment mechanisms:* What the agency does to attract suitable candidates; (2) *Selection mechanisms:* How the agency picks the best candidates from its pool; (3) *Preparation mechanisms:* State and agency training and other preparation initiatives (e.g., social work education); (4) *Deployment mechanisms:* The extent to which the new workers are placed in the best jobs — ones that match their competencies and aspirations; (5) *Support mechanisms:* Starting with the agency's mechanisms for inducting and socializing new workers, these mechanisms span organizational structures and processes which provide supports, services, and resources to the workforce; (6) *Advancement and enrichment mechanisms:* Mechanisms for supporting promotions, providing professional development, and capitalizing on workers' talents and aspirations to improve the agency; (7) *Succession planning mechanisms:* Mechanisms for stabilizing the workforce in anticipation of retirements, resignations, and leaves; and (8) *Job redesign*

Figure 5: An Example of a Logic Model

Need/problem	Causes	Effects on Retention	Ideal Situation
1. There is a focus on negative feedback rather than positive strengths 2. There is a feeling that what we are doing or the way in which we are doing it is not "good enough"	1. Society as a whole, and Agency x DSS more specifically are focused on the negative. 2. We have learned how to asses the negative, but learning a new way of thinking and judging performance is a difficult task to accomplish	1. Workers feel devalued and inadequate 2. There is low morale in the agency which leads to job dissatisfaction and eventually turnover	1. There would be "warm fuzzies" given as positive feedback 2. There is naturally positive interactions that occur between supervisors and workers. 3. Supervisors provide workers with daily positive feedback that is visible. 4. Positive work environment where people are smiling, there is good team work, supportive coworkers and mutual acknowledgement of workloads. 5. There is acknowledgement from coworkers and supervisors

Solutions in place at one time or another

1. There used to be a news letter "Treading Water" that would detail caseworker accomplishments, unit accomplishments, caseworker anniversaries, and birthdays.

2. Acknowledgement of work anniversaries

3. Once a month there is a coffee and donuts meeting where commissioner comes to speak with and encourage caseworkers

4. There are great emotional supports from coworkers

5. We have flex time which makes us feel appreciated

6. There have been certificates of appreciation given out to units in the past

7. Letters of recognition have gone in files in the past.

New Solutions Needed

1. A positive feedback box outside of each unit supervisor's office where workers from that unit can write tell sup about positive things coworkers have done. (Secretaries can type up in a newsletter and hand out monthly)

2. Supervisors give stickers for positive accomplishments. The worker with the most stickers at the end of the month wins a much needed office supply ie (corkboard, stapler, white out pen, etc). It is delivered at the monthly staff meeting or can be posted in an email sent to everyone (including commissioner) each month

3. When a worker has gone above the call of duty, such as putting in extra hours a letter of recognition is placed in the employees file, with a copy to the employee and the commissioner.

4. There is a monthly coffee and donut Friday where the first 20 minutes of the day is spent increasing unit morale. Caseworkers/units take turns bringing in food.

5. New and goods start off unit meetings. Each case worker says something new or good about their life for that day.

6. Employee of the quarter. Every three months one worker is nominated by their coworkers as the employee of the quarter for managing a tough case or being extra helpful. This person receives a $20 gift certificate to a local restaurant and is acknowledged at an end of the year caseworker reception thrown by the Agency

7. Have a rotating sticker fairy who puts stickies containing "warm fuzzies" on other's computers.

8. Supervisors put little sticky notes on work saying good court report/UCR, etc

9. Personally model positive feedback

10. Have an occasional luncheon or reception for the entire staff to show appreciation and give positive feedback

and systems change mechanisms: Mechanisms for improving and changing jobs and the system "as it is;" and developing an ideal system.

In the final analysis, *partnership mechanisms* now can be added to this list. After all, university-state agency-county partnerships like SWEC's generate useful knowledge about workforce optimization and stabilization. More directly, they impact retention planning and workforce optimization through social work education programs, responsive research programs, and innovative interventions for both professional and organizational development such as the ones described in this analysis. In all such cases, partnerships are interventions, and they produce both process innovations and product innovations — demonstrable public goods.

This analysis of a complex partnership serves to indicate that the time has arrived to stop viewing public child welfare systems as stand-alone, independent entities. The new, relational view of public child welfare advanced herewith makes these systems, their workforces, their operations, and their outcomes shared responsibilities. In the same vein, innovation, learning, knowledge development, and continuous improvement are shared activities, involving these systems and the social work education programs and faculty linked to them. Such a comprehensive, coherent framework that prizes interdependent relationships among the participating organizations derives from the theoretical logic for effective, successful university partnerships, and this same logic is guiding the development of SWEC's complex partnership for workforce optimization and stabilization.

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