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*This article looks at the next steps for an integrated approach to youth development and academic success.*

# 9

## Future systemic transformations

*Gil G. Noam, Tina Malti*

NOW THAT WE HAVE SHOWCASED the RALLY approach in this *New Directions for Youth Development* volume, we look into the future. In the process, we will draw out some general questions for the field, or better fields, that support the success and development of young people. In addition, we describe our own next steps and ways others can join us in developing a strategy to help youth succeed and thrive.

We begin with the best argument against an integrated approach to youth development and academic success. It was made by no less prominent a child psychologist than Anna Freud and continues to be embraced by many without invoking her name and theory. Anna Freud recommended in a little known article in the *Harvard Education Review* published in the 1960s that the classroom should not have a socio-emotional or therapeutic focus.<sup>1</sup> The goal of school-age development is for students to learn to leave their drives, impulses, and emotional entanglement at the school door and to concentrate and focus in school. Students need to take in information, process knowledge, and produce results. Anna Freud predicted that if teachers became too enmeshed in the outside life of a child or created a classroom that resembles a family in emotional climate and tone, all the complexities of family life, such as sibling rivalry, separation anxieties, and negotiation of limits and boundaries, would

be imported into the very setting where safety for intellectual pursuits should be paramount, leaving the child vulnerable to school failure and negative self-image.

We are elaborating on Anna Freud's argument, but in essence it is what she advised teachers, parents, and therapists. She wanted children and adolescents who needed extra support to be seen by a therapist outside the classroom in a separate setting. This argument has reemerged in the education field as the pressures on teachers and administrators have increased to produce tangible results. Even empathic and warm teachers are not necessarily successful; they can be bad teachers and abandon their students' academic work. Focused on academic outcomes, some principals do not want to become managers of a child-centered community environment and wrap around services. While not using Anna Freud's reasoning, the argument ends up in the same place: keep schools and classrooms focused on the learning, set the bar high, and provide the educational support so young people can reach up.

But there is a growing shift away from this position in policy circles at state and local levels. Many models have been introduced, and we have mentioned a number of them in this book. They range from the Comer community schools, to the Children's Aid Society, and other full-service schools, to a whole range of different community education initiatives. They also include extended-day learning models, school-based after-school and summer programs, and a variety of charter school experiments that blend in school and after-school work. Finally, there are now a number of mental health and health initiatives that reach into schools through clinics and school-linked services. The zeitgeist is on the side of this movement; it has grown steadily and has convinced many decision makers that this change is necessary.

What are some of the reasons for these changes in attitudes and practices? The first one is simple: the work schedule of parents does not match the schedule of children and youth. Leaving the students to their own devices is not acceptable to many parents and communities across the country. Thus, the movement toward increased after-school programming has arisen. This development connects

directly to the achievement gap that continues to plague the United States and many other industrialized countries around the globe (see the first article). The hope is that more time on task will lead to better outcomes for students who do not get adequate support for learning at home or during the school day. In addition, the health and mental health risks are nationwide, especially in stressed environments. We described these staggering numbers and the hidden mental health crisis in the first article. These numbers do not make it possible to focus on only the few students who need help in an otherwise healthy classroom situation. Pull-out arrangements cannot stem the tide; there are not enough mental health and other health professionals to take care of the students, and the stigma is often too high for families to access existing services. All that undetected and unsupported trauma, pain, and aggression does not create students who can leave their problems at the school door and concentrate. They need extra support in order for the educational mission to proceed according to plan: decrease in failure and dropout rates, increase in school attachment and academic success.

Despite the growing agreement that high expectations require high levels of support, what is the evidence that the integration of schooling, mental health supports, and after-school youth development actually works? And what outcomes do we accept as a sign of “working”? A good deal of evidence, which we have referred to in this volume, shows that adjunct services connected to schools lead to higher utilization, earlier detection, and reduced barriers. They also show that family involvement grows and that after-school services can have positive impacts on students’ resilience, social development, and academic outcomes. But we have to honestly admit as a field that these outcomes, though important, do not suffice. The goals of this integrated approach are rather that the various services will bring greater equity to disadvantaged student populations and that the school will benefit by becoming a stronger learning center, with better results. We are sure we will be criticized for this statement, but our view is that the results for this social experiment are still outstanding. Reducing the barriers to

academic learning at some point have to demonstrate unequivocally that the high-intensity model of student support will bring about significant change and far better learning outcomes.

Good progress is being made, individual schools are showing results, and it is mostly in those schools where the emphasis is also on good teaching, excellent content, and didactic knowledge of teachers and individualized learning plans embedded in positive relationships. Success is also found in schools that have clear and consistent rules and where expectations are clearly spelled out. This means that any effort at changing the educational success rates, which are, after all, the primary goal of schools, in contrast to mental health centers and after-school programs, requires a combined effort: changing the school culture, training teachers to teach at their best levels, and creating a rational and productive model of student and family support and wraparound services.

We have become convinced that this support structure has to reach into the daily lives of students and teachers in classrooms. Wraparound is the wrong metaphor, as the services have to penetrate every aspect of teaching and learning. In this regard, we have created a very different model from the one that Anna Freud suggested fifty years ago. The times have changed for many young people, families, and communities and a stronger safety net has to be created to make the “education project” for all possible. To achieve these goals, we now have to:

- Develop detailed models of integrated student support and school climate
- Help teachers be able to concentrate on teaching by providing them the necessary supports
- Bring state-of-the-art teaching methods into schools while doing the same for the support structures of mental health, special education, and youth development
- Demonstrate that this combination yields results

Obviously RALLY is not the only response to these huge societal challenges that require new academic skills, innovative mental

health support, and after-school and summer programs where youth want to spend time. But as members of this growing movement create safe, supportive, and academically rich schools, we have developed a specific orientation. We started with incubating one program and then multiple programs in middle schools, what many consider the wasteland of American education. We saw the magic of support brought to students in nonstigmatizing ways, so they did not have to declare themselves as patients. We also saw the power of pulling in services rather than pulling out students and the changes in wraparound services once the classroom became the center of focus.

Principals and teachers were open to these changes once they understood that the goal was to help school personnel meet the goals they set for themselves and their students. Mental health could rise to the top once the goal was to help students be successful, because mental health, learning potential, and youth development are intricately linked (see the first article).

All of this learning on the ground, coupled with research and scanning the development of the field, has led beyond a project. The time has come to create systems and establish an approach that can be taught and implemented with existing positions in districts and schools that make the work sustainable. This transition from projects to systems requires giving schools and afterschools a great deal of flexibility so they can decide how they want to restructure their own environment. A research-based project cannot be very flexible, but an approach can.

This raises the question of whether the RALLY approach requires RALLY practitioners—extra people who support students and teachers. We have struggled with this question for a long time, having witnessed how successful these young adults who come to school only two times per week really are (see the third article). But we now believe that students can feel known and can receive adult mentorship by training and reorganizing existing resources through after-school and tutoring programs and by allowing all adults in the school to interact with students in informal, attentive, and nonstressful ways. Increasing numbers of schools are introducing advisories, or

weekly electives, when teachers can teach students their hobbies and their passions. These are developments in the direction of bringing youth development principles of voice and choice, or relationship building and engaged learning, into the school day. In addition, we have seen that schools do not always need new services, but they desperately need existing services to be tied together and integrated in ways that lead to results. They also need to detect problems earlier and not wait until a full-blown crisis has developed. Schools that make these transitions need training and consultation, and they also typically need a reorganized student support team.

We have developed a training and consultation system that helps schools restructure their system by training the leadership team to create a new student support system tied to student learning. Through the work at the level of individual schools and in programs in afterschool, we have seen that it is important to build capacity at district levels. We have determined three main interconnected strategies how this can be done:

Creating a new language to talk across the domains. This is important because defragmenting of a system cannot occur only on a systemic level; it has to be possible in the daily discourse and decision making of people working on behalf of children and youth under their care. At present, the professionals and nonprofessionals in schools, including parents and students, all speak very different languages when they focus on specific issues. RALLY has developed and will refine a language that is asset based and nonstigmatizing, yet in line with health and mental health reimbursement procedures. This language has a starting point in the different developmental worlds of youth that require different strategies in teaching, parenting, mentoring, tutoring, and after-school programming.

The integrated support systems that the RALLY approach strives for will survive only if we tackle the change of funding streams or connect the existing funding for education, medical services, special education, and afterschool in more creative ways. Much money is wasted in duplication efforts or is often left unused; RALLY is a uni-

fyng agenda. This has to be tied to policy issues, because sustainability will come only if there is public will, and cumulative knowledge and evidence, and funding streams to support the work.

We have begun a train-the-trainer certificate program that works with districts and youth-serving organizations to train others to implement programs in their schools and afterschool.

We have introduced our approach in an effort to strengthen the fields of education, youth development, and child mental health through integration and system building. We put the young person and his or her relationships, developmental growth, and academic success at the center of the work. Understanding youth, making them part of the solution, and providing programming so they can achieve their aspirations and dreams are central commitments of RALLY. The research field is currently making significant progress in deepening our understanding of adolescent development—from the brain to the environmental systems that affect development. This new knowledge sustains our work as we create a wider range of applications and let reality change our theories and research. To now be at a point where schools and after-school programs, policy makers and social services, and health and mental health providers are open to a new form of collaboration and eager to learn about what works and about new findings creates an enormous opportunity for us all. It is the frontier that needs to be tackled to promote social responsibility and to spread healthy communities where students can learn and thrive.

We end this book with a piece from a nationally recognized school leader, principal of the Edward Devotion School, Pre K–8 School in Brookline, Massachusetts, Gerardo J. Martinez. His experience from the beginnings of our Harvard and McLean based program as teacher and administrator can bridge the past, present, and future of RALLY.

MARTINEZ [SCHOOL PRINCIPAL]: I started as an ELA teacher at the Taft Middle School in Boston in the 1990s. While strong

classroom management is something I valued and worked to achieve, I also had exceedingly high academic standards and a nonsense attitude towards laziness and lack of effort and follow through. My class was like a mini college seminar with lots of opportunities for students to read, write, reflect, think, and discuss at high levels. As a product of the inner city with an extremely strong work ethic and commitment to succeeding, I felt that pure effort and “*ganas*” (“desire” in Spanish) was all that kids needed to overcome the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (*Hamlet*). I soon discovered that there were many students, despite my passion and commitment to their learning, whom I could not reach. Some were special education students, others had emotional trauma, and still others had “I don’t know what.”

When the principal at the time introduced the RALLY concept and partnership, I was happy to go along with her request for a teacher team to give the work a chance. I felt overly protective of my students, feeling that no one could understand them as well as I—someone who had walked the same path as many of them. In fact, I was quite skeptical that an additional person in the classroom two days a week would be particularly effective and was worried about the possible distractions for the students. But it wasn’t long that I began to see a change in the demeanor of students who participated in the so-called “lunch bunches” groups or check-ins, and I liked the fact that all youth were benefiting, not only the ones deemed most at risk (“high fives”). At first it seemed that students were losing more academic time, but what I saw was that students began to want to do better, take steps to do some work, participate in class, etc. I was also amazed by the power of the relationships that were established and how that made a difference not only in school attachment and performance, but also in the bridging to after-school and other spheres of life.

INTERVIEWER: When you became a principal, why did you take RALLY to the C. Middle School with you, and what was it like from the administrator’s perspective?



MARTINEZ: With the impending shutdown of the Taft Middle School and my assignment as principal of the Curley School, the largest of over 20 middle schools in Boston—I believe during my first year the Curley School had over 900 students—it only made sense to transport a program that had success in reaching students and increasing their engagement in learning. I decided to start in grade 7, a grade that I always felt introduced so many adolescent challenges: body changes, entering the teen years, peer pressure to explore with themes related to sexuality, looking ahead to the 8th grade year and then high school. I recall the suspension rate in grade 7 being out of control—the average was more than one a day. I also thought that the teachers needed lots of support since the grade coordinator was always pulled to do other administrative tasks and could not be a consistent presence and support for the team.

When Rally was up and running we had far fewer suspensions since part of the discipline process involved the practitioner intervening and supporting students. We worked to clarify that although the program was designed to address social and emotional challenges to improve students' readiness to learn I wanted a strong academic component. The program helped the school by joining the student support team which met weekly to discuss students being referred for special education and other services. RALLY created the "Consortium" and through it a larger community of services joined us to support students and families.

I recall working to loop with the grade 7 students into grade 8 to get deeper into student supports. Of course having new practitioners every year was a challenge, but we made it work well. The students adapted to that change amazingly well, as long as they continued to have a practitioner assigned to their classroom.

INTERVIEWER: Have you replicated RALLY elements in your new school?

MAARTINEZ: When I left the Curley School to become a principal in a middle school in Brookline, Massachusetts, I offered the RALLY coordinator a position and took her with me. She was

one of the best RALLY staff I worked with over the years. While we do not have a RALLY program per se, our approach to supporting students builds on the principles and practices of RALLY—developing strong and positive relationships with students, monitoring individual student success, linking students to support structures, etc. I believe this is a very important future direction for RALLY: to institutionalize the practices that so clearly work by supporting schools to reorganize so they can best reduce the barriers to learning and increase resilience and student success.

### **Note**

1. Freud, A. (1966). Authority in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(3), 385–410.

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