

**BRAIDED SERVICES AND FUNDING:
A STRATEGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

Research and Practice Issue Brief

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The School of the 21st Century (21C) program at Yale University publishes Research and Practice Issue Briefs to summarize and disseminate current research on topics of special interest to educators and policymakers, as well as to provide information to facilitate the application of research to practice. The goal is to provide concise, objective, and constructive information and explore the implications for the 21C program and other school reform efforts.

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Braided Services and Funding: A Strategy for the 21st Century

Economic conditions rise and fall, while funding and revenue sources change over time, factors that impact everyone, including those in education. Schools of the 21st Century (21C), many of which have sustained their programs for two decades and continue to grow, address these cycles by diversifying their funding streams and using a strategy known as braided services and funding. Lessons learned in the process are provided below, using 21C in Independence, MO, as an example.

What is 21C?

The School of the 21st Century (21C) is a school reform model that includes school-based child care, family services, and other components, such as health and nutrition that together make up a comprehensive and continuous system of learning support, from the birth of the child through elementary school and beyond. 21C was conceptualized in 1987 by Edward Zigler at Yale University and developed as a national model by Matia Finn-Stevenson, also at Yale. The first 21C school was established in 1988; since then, the model has grown and is now in more than 1300 schools around the country.

Braiding Basics

The Independence School District (ISD) in Independence, MO, uses the strategy of braiding to address an increased need for long-term sustainable child care and other support services that are part of 21C. Here, braiding refers to weaving together services and funding to create a system of comprehensive support services in an educational setting. This braiding technique allows an organization or school district to:

- Capitalize on existing funding and services to meet the needs of children and families;
- Maintain accountability and integrity of funding streams;
- Prevent duplication of services; and
- Facilitate the development of innovative programming that can adapt to evolving change.

The braiding strategy was used in part during the establishment of 21C in Independence, the first school district to implement the School of the 21st Century program. The approach was expanded in 1998 when, spurred by demographic changes in several neighborhoods in the district, the need for more services became evident, ISD's challenge was to establish school-based delivery of services that met the unique needs of each neighborhood and expand the district's commitment to education beyond the walls of the classroom.

Today this model includes a braided funding strategy that maximizes available funding and services to provide high quality early education, before- and/or after-

school programming, and family services in each neighborhood school. Programmatic vision, commitment to intentional leadership, and consideration of long-term sustainability are essential components to the long-term success of the 21C model and the strategy of braiding.

Programmatic Vision

A resolute programmatic vision is critical when braiding services and funding. This core vision must center on a commitment to identify the current needs of students, while keeping in mind the realities facing today's families, which may include children raised by single parents and in families in which both parents work. Additionally, stressful conditions and other issues, such as obesity, illiteracy, abuse, hunger, and homelessness, characterize many families.

Any programmatic vision should identify and articulate the needs of its students, services offered to meet those needs, and why such services are the best solutions. Once the students' needs are clearly defined, an organization should then review its historically offered services to determine their effectiveness. Reviewing services with current demographics in mind is important when ascertaining their continued relevance to the needs of today's constituents. The same approach should be used to consider the effectiveness of existing services and to review any duplication that may exist. In a braided strategy, openly and honestly identifying repetition, overlap, duplication, and relevance of services, thus streamlining resources and funding to meet the needs of students and families efficiently and cost effectively, is critical.

The Independence School District (ISD) used this strategy when shifting child care paradigms. Staff determined the need to provide school-based delivery of early education and Head Start, ultimately creating a pre-kindergarten grade level in each elementary school. As ISD began the braiding process, the question of early education leadership arose. Like many child care programs around the country, they had historically hired a child care director who provided leadership at each location. ISD asked the question, "Does a school-based early education model need a separate director or should the elementary principal provide that leadership?" Ultimately ISD determined it was in the best interest of students and families that the principal should indeed provide leadership of the early education program. After all, it was ISD's ultimate goal to align pre-kindergarten as a grade level. The elimination of the child care director model in a public school setting resulted in a \$400,000 savings. ISD was then able to invest those dollars in their front line teachers. ISD ultimately braided child care, Head Start, and Parents As Teachers, thus creating a core that resulted in a comprehensive school-based early education delivery system.

Working through this process and clearly defining the various needs is essential to creating a purposeful braided strategy. Individual services, or strands of the braid, should be able to stand alone for funding or evaluation purposes, yet, when braided together, will interweave into a seamless system of delivery. Essential to developing

a programmatic vision, however, is continually considering the needs of the population who will ultimately gain from the services. Especially in today's public and private funding communities, ensuring that schools, organizations, communities, students, and their families are an integral part of creating a vision is imperative.

Leadership

Effective leadership is vital to any organization hoping to realize its vision. In school districts, a commitment to the services at all levels of leadership is important for success. All organizational leaders and their services must share the vision, mission, and values the school district established. ISD takes this a step further by continually assessing 21C components (i.e. early education, before- and after-school services, and family support) to ensure they are aligned to the district's goals as well. It is a reality that funding streams with specific requirements have the potential of splintering the original intended goals. IDS found that to be true 15 years into their evolution of services. The time had come to revisit their original intent and refocus 21C back to the basic philosophy of comprehensive services within the neighborhoods in which their families reside. Remember to keep an eye on the big picture, pay attention to the details, anticipate future changes, and be willing to change.

The leadership – at the superintendent, program director, or school building level – must consider the future when making decisions. Once an organization has a clear vision, its leaders must create a desire for change. By drawing on relevant data and past experiences and assessing the realities facing students and families, the leader can motivate the team and help it realize the need for change. ISD is a national demonstration site for 21C and has provided guidance to school districts across the country. Repeatedly they hear from others that leadership or lack of support is a major block for organizational growth.

In the earlier braided example for early education, ISD met its ultimate goal of a comprehensive school-based delivery system. To do so, leadership played a critical role by determining common elements of all services and eliminating duplication of systems and personnel. Prior to braiding, ISD had developed a system that each child care location serving preschool and school-age children employed an accounts receivable clerk to handle parent fees (in addition to the child care director previously described). When the district braided services together, it was cost effective and efficient for families to create a district-wide accounts receivable system. In addition, braiding addressed the fact that elementary school buildings were not equipped or intended to handle an exchange of weekly cash and checks. Today, ISD employs several district-wide clerks to process parent fees at one central location, opposed to incurring the expense of multiple personnel at each elementary school.

An intentional leader addresses obstacles, such as funding and resource limitations, to serve the needs of students and their families. Appropriate professional development and attention to leadership at multiple levels will promote successful implementation of services and ultimate execution of one's vision. Early education is not traditionally part of a principal's academic course work, for example, yet we know that early education is significant to the development and success of students later in life. As such, to implement an early education system within their neighborhood schools successfully, building leaders would need to participate in relevant professional development that includes a focus on early education.

Again, it was through the shared vision, global school district mission, and leadership that braided services and funding for an early education system in a school district can result in a seamless system for students, families, and the district as a whole. Providing singular building leadership and district-wide systemization resulted in a continuity of curriculum, professional development, fiscal management, procurement, facility maintenance, transportation, nutrition services, and human resources. All ultimately braided into district-level systems, reducing program cost while embedding the service as a part of the educational culture.

Sustainability

After identifying services and braiding them with resources, organizations must explore sustainability so that programs can continue to operate over time. Strategic financing will inevitably combine outside and internal funding streams, which will require addressing sustainability as part of reporting. Any time spent on early sustainability planning will reap ultimate rewards later and strengthen the core of braided services. ISD, for example, combines resources associated with early childhood special education, Early Head Start, Parents as Teachers, Title I, and 21st Century Community Learning Center funds with various state and private grants into a comprehensive braid to support early education, before- and/or after-school programs, and family services. Although each of these funding streams is attached to specific services, braiding resources safeguards against duplicating personnel and systems while streamlining costs to maximize service delivery.

As an essential part of their funding strategy, school districts and organizations must seek outside funding, establish organizational guidelines and policies regarding management of funding, and hire management personnel with fund raising skills. The reality of outside funding is that it will eventually end and new resources will have to be acquired. The ability to bring together a range of different financial resources is one critical aspect of sustainability (see box on the following page), and sets apart programs that are able to thrive from those that remain vulnerable when faced with budget cuts.

Summary

The School of the 21st Century, a multifaceted model that includes several distinct components that together make up a comprehensive learning support system, lends itself to a braided funding approach. Implementers of 21C who possess vision and

an open approach to creative and innovative thinking will integrate this strategy into their programs with positive results. By thoroughly assessing district and community services, staff can identify funding streams, as well as any needs that are currently not being met. Once the assessment is complete, braiding of funding sources is identified, and funding secured, services can begin. To ensure success, the community must back the initiative and support the principal and other building leaders. Quality Schools of the 21st Century must incorporate authentic partnerships, accountability to each service and funding strand, dedication to pursue additional funding and services, and an ultimate commitment to identifying and satisfying the needs of children and their families. Dedication to services beyond the classroom walls will, without a doubt, significantly impact student school success. More importantly, this commitment will positively impact the well-being of families and will therefore have an impact on neighborhoods and our society as a whole.

The Finance Project's Eight Critical Elements of Success¹

1. **Vision:** Develop a clear picture of what needs to be sustained, starting by clearly articulating what the organization wants to achieve through its work and then clearly identifying the strategies and activities that will get it there.
2. **Results Orientation:** Define "success" for the initiative, measure progress over time, and adjust the work based on what is learned.
3. **Strategic Financing Orientation:** Estimate the needed resources and develop financing and funding to provide a stable base of resources over time.
4. **Broad-Based Community Support:** Consider whose support is needed and develop appropriate efforts and vehicles for community involvement.
5. **Key Champions:** Rally leaders from businesses, faith-based organizations, government agencies, and other parts of the community and persuade them to use their power and influence to generate support for the initiative.
6. **Adaptability to Changing Conditions:** Be proactive in the policy environment and adjust to changing social, economic, and political trends in the community.
7. **Strong Internal Systems:** Build strong systems and structures, such as fiscal management, information, personnel, and governance.
8. **Sustainability Plan:** Create a written plan the organization can use to manage and market its work.

¹Cheryl D. Hayes, Sustaining Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Key Elements for Success (Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project, April 2002). The Finance Project (www.financeproject.org) was founded in 1994 with support from a consortium of national foundations interested in ensuring the viability and sustainability of promising initiatives that contribute to better futures for children, families, and communities. Today it supports decision-making that produces and sustains good results for children, families, and communities. The Finance Project develops and disseminates research, information, tools, and technical assistance for improved polices, programs, and financing strategies.