

Connecting Families, Schools and Community Resources

Policy Brief No. 2

Schools have the opportunity to serve the broader needs of families and communities by connecting families with needed resources, supports, and services. This brief reviews the use of schools as a year-round hub for human service agencies offering a range of supports and opportunities for families as well as what it would take to make school-linked services more available in a greater number of communities.

School-Linked Services – Strengthening Families by Connecting Families, Schools and Community Resources

In many communities, schools are often the only public resource that can serve as a public space for convening community members. Situated in the heart of communities, schools have the opportunity to serve the broader needs of families and communities by connecting families with needed resources, supports, and services.

As part of its Making Connections initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004, Initiatives and Projects / Reading Room section) recognizes the reciprocal relationship between families, communities and schools:

- When families are stronger, they are better able to support their children's success in school.

- Schools are stronger when families are stronger.
- Schools have a distinct opportunity to work in partnership with families in ways that strengthen them.

Communities benefit and are perceived to be strong when they have strong schools.

The *school-linked services* approach is characterized by the following:

- A **holistic, ecological view** that recognizes a child's success is closely tied to his or her emotional well-being, family self sufficiency, and family stability.
- **Coordinated service delivery** that involves creating partnerships between the school, social service agencies and community based institutions and co-locating social services at or near the school, or instituting a school based referral process to services located elsewhere.

- A **focus on child outcomes** that goes beyond academic achievement and takes into consideration child and family well being.

The school-linked services approach is an inclusive concept that encompasses a number of diverse initiatives, including community schools, extended service schools, community education, wraparound services for students in schools, school based health clinics, staff of public and nonprofit agencies placed in schools, school-linked services, and school/community partnerships.

School-linked services are emerging as a promising approach to reduce a sense of disconnection from vital services and supports as well as the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities.

Although school-linked services are an increasingly common practice, they are still a long way from a mainstream approach to addressing educational and family support needs. This brief examines what it would take to make school-linked services more available to a greater number of communities. Practices in school-linked services are highlighted and evidence-based outcomes are examined. The emerging practice of connecting families, communities and schools exemplifies the family strengthening approach by working to:

1. *Promote family economic success*
2. *Strengthen family support systems*
3. *Support thriving and nurturing communities*

Relevance of School-linked Services to the Human Services Field

The Family Strengthening Policy Center has chosen to address school-linked services in this brief

because it is an approach that has relevance to the social service and human development field. Schools can be an effective vehicle through which services are accessed. By linking schools with services and creating community partnerships, schools can serve as a safe and welcoming place for young people, families and community members to access the necessary services and support that health, youth development, and human service organizations offer.

Using schools as a hub, many partners are brought together to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities — before, during and after school, and throughout the summer. Such partnerships facilitate multiple outcomes such as physically, emotionally and socially healthy youth; healthier and stronger families; parents who are supportive and engaged in their children’s learning; greater connections between schools and their communities; safer neighborhoods; children prepared to learn and achieve at high standards; greater community pride; and students poised to be productive adults and active citizens in their community.

School-Linked Services: Challenges and Solutions

The practice of building stronger connections between families, communities, and schools must address several barriers embedded in the prevailing service system that impede academic success, family strengthening and neighborhood transformation. The school-linked services approach aims to address the following challenges:

CHALLENGE: *The current education system is focused on academic proficiency instead of fostering*

child assets and competencies needed for optimal development. While both the education and social service sectors are organized around a shared vision – the success of children and families – the language and goals of these sectors differ. In the education sector, success is measured in terms of achievement and proficiency, while in the social services sector, the focus is on positive outcomes and competencies. The increasing pressure being placed on educators and community service professionals to secure and demonstrate results within a given domain such as achievement and proficiency in standardized tests is real and growing. However, from a child development standpoint, it is important to recognize the broadest possible set of assets and competencies that children and families need to succeed.

SOLUTION: *The school-linked services approach embraces a focus on assets and competencies as essential for the overall development of children and youth.* Assets and competencies highlight a full range of outcomes essential to well being and healthy development rather than being limited exclusively to academic achievement. A number of organizations and institutions, such as the Search Institute, America's Promise and the Forum for Youth Investment, are defining youth development assets and competencies. These organizations have collectively identified essential characteristics, behaviors and qualities in five areas that promote positive growth and development in children: health, personal/social skills, knowledge, citizenship and vocational awareness.

CHALLENGE: *Barriers exist that interfere with parents and guardians engaging in school and community life.* Research shows that students whose families are involved in their education perform better in school, stay in school longer, and are more likely to pursue further education. Parents and guardians also stand to gain from greater involvement in school life by

gaining new skills and greater confidence as well as having more opportunities to become active and play a leadership role in school and community life. Although there is strong evidence that parent involvement in a child's education has many positive outcomes, educators and administrators struggle with how to engage parents in a meaningful way that goes beyond attendance at PTA meetings or school assemblies. While a majority of parents indicate a desire to become more involved, the demands of work combined with transportation and child care limitations hamper efforts for substantial involvement. Other challenges include language and cultural barriers, which may limit their ability to access information. As a result, parents may defer to the expertise of the child's teacher. Many educators do not possess the skills needed to work with families and promote parental involvement, a topic which is addressed in greater detail in Brief No. 3, Parental Involvement.

As federal mandates for family involvement are imposed, it is imperative that educators receive related, culturally appropriate training. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns, honor their contributions, and share their power, they succeed in sustaining connections that can improve student achievement.

SOLUTION: *Create a welcoming setting and provide opportunities for parents to be involved both at school and at home.* The school-linked services approach generally aims to make schools a welcoming environment for parents. Some of them have "Family Rooms" with sofas, televisions and refreshments to offer parents a warm and inviting setting to meet with their children and other family members to learn how to support their child's education and become involved in community issues. Schools may also provide resources and opportunities for increased family involvement in

school and community life. Examples may include voter registration, clinical services, job skills development, affordable housing assistance and child care. Support groups, parenting workshops, newsletters, and family recreational activities made available by the school are additional activities that may engage families.

Parental involvement at home may include help with reading skills, checking homework, supervising and monitoring how the children spend their time out of school. Some schools may train parents on how to work effectively with their children at home. It is worth noting that parents' home activities were related to the widest range of gains on math and reading tests, compared with the other forms of parent involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

CHALLENGE: *Many families have poor access to health and human services* which can have a dramatic impact on children's educational outcomes and social development. Families in low-income, marginalized communities often face serious barriers accessing needed services for a number of reasons, including lack of time, lack of awareness of existing services, transportation barriers, language and cultural barriers and a general sense of anxiety or distrust about getting help through formal service systems. These barriers exist, in part, due to the fragmented and parallel systems of education and social services.

SOLUTION: *Make services accessible by centering them in the school.* By co-locating social services in the school, families and students are surrounded with an array of comprehensive academic and community supports that address the holistic needs of children and families. By fostering strong

school/community partnerships and collaborating with public agencies and community groups, school-linked services have the potential to improve the quality and nature of services as well as making them more convenient. In order for children to succeed, schools must empower parents by providing them with resources and supports to meet the needs of their family. They can, in turn; more effectively support and care for their children.

Nature of the Practice: What does the School-Linked Services Approach look like?

The Coalition for Community Schools' vision of a community school (Coalition for Community Schools, 2004) offers a detailed description of what a community school looks like and what it hopes to achieve. This vision can be applied to other initiatives, including models housed in public, private and parochial schools, that fall into the school-linked services approach:

Community School – Up Close:

A community school, operating in a public school building, is open to students, families and the community before, during and after school, seven days a week, all year long. It is operated jointly through a partnership between the school system and one or more community agencies. Families, youth, principals, teachers and neighborhood residents help design and implement activities that promote high educational achievement and use the community as a resource for learning.

The school is oriented toward the community, encouraging student learning through community service and service learning. A before- and after-school learning component allows students to build on their classroom experiences, expand their horizons, contribute to their communities and have fun. A family support center helps families with child rearing, employment, housing and other services. Medical, dental and mental health services are readily accessible.

Artists, lawyers, psychologists, college faculty and students, businesspeople, neighbors, and family members come to support and bolster what schools are working hard to accomplish - ensuring young people's academic, interpersonal and career success. Their presence turns schools into places that crackle with the excitement of doing, experiencing and discovering unknown talents and strengths. Community schools open up new channels for learning and self expression. Students come early and stay late - because they want to.

Ideally, a full-time community school coordinator oversees the delivery of an array of supports provided by local agency partners and participates on the management team for the school. To achieve their desired results, most community schools consciously link activities in the following areas: quality education; positive youth development; family support; family and community engagement in decision-making; and community development.

How School-Linked Services Fit into the Family Strengthening Framework

School-linked services can play an important role in strengthening families and communities. In the

Strengthening Families / Strengthening Schools Toolkit (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004) the Annie E. Casey Foundation outlines specific ways that family-school-community partnerships strengthen families:

Promoting Family Economic Success

- Provide adult education and opportunities to develop employment skills for family members
- Provide quality after school programs while parents work or pursue continuing education
- Make economic supports such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Care Tax Credit available through the school
- Establish workforce development opportunities for families by partnering with community organizations and employers that can provide job readiness and workforce supports
- Offer ESL, GED and computer classes that prepare parents and adults in the community for employment.

Developing Social Networks

- Provide space within the school that can be used for educational, social and community purposes
- Encourage and create opportunities for parent-to-parent interaction and support
- Support parent leadership within the school as a means to provide effective outreach and connections to other parents, particularly those that are most difficult to engage in school life

Providing Services and Supports

- To *reduce non-academic barriers to learning*, such as primary and preventative health care, dental care, access to food, clothing, and housing, and parent training
- To *support academic improvement*, such as tutoring and homework assistance
- To *improve student behavior and classroom instruction*, such as counseling, behavior management, conflict resolution and anger management
- To *reduce students' stress and anxiety*, such as support groups, counseling and mental health services
- To make crisis prevention and intervention services available for children and families

Emerging Practices

The following school-linked services models are examples that connect families, schools and community resources:

Communities In Schools (CIS), headquartered in Alexandria, VA, is a national network of 194 programs in 28 states and almost 3,000 educational sites. CIS programs build community collaborations that address student and family needs in a number of different ways – ranging from highly individualized, case managed services to brokered community resources made available to entire school sites.

Beacons are school-based community centers located in New York City and now in several other

communities which offer students, their families and neighbors educational enrichment, vocational development, recreational and social services.

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a focused partnership, often between a family service agency (under the national umbrella of the Milwaukee-based Alliance for Children and Families) and a multifamily group to engage families and schools to build protective factors for children (4 to 12 years old) and empower parents to be the primary prevention agents for their own children. FAST is a time-limited (8 week) parent-child-school process rather than an ongoing education/social service delivery program. FAST also has a National Training and Evaluation Center in Madison, WI, dedicated to the dissemination and evaluation of the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program on the national and international level.

Bridges to Success (BTS) based in Indianapolis, IN, is a school-linked services approach founded by a partnership between Indianapolis Public Schools and the United Way of Central Indiana. In Indianapolis, 43 schools have already adopted the BTS approach, which has now been replicated in other cities throughout the country. The BTS approach is focused on shared decision making and strong collaboration to address nonacademic barriers to success like mental health, recreation, dental and vision, by providing valuable resources to family members and residents, and operating on extended school hours.

Boston Public Schools created an Office of Family and Community Engagement which is headed by a Deputy Superintendent who oversees a staff of 40 individuals committed to the mission of promoting family engagement.

Children's Aid Society of New York has partnered with the New York City Public Schools for some twenty-five years to provide a comprehensive array of educational and community supports to students in one geographic school district. The educational and community resource aspects of these schools are closely linked.

Kentucky Family Resource and Youth Services Program is intended to help families and children address nonacademic barriers to learning. Child care, home visits, parent education, health services, and referral to other child and family supports are among the array of services.

21st Century Community Learning Centers is a federal initiative that engages both schools and community resource providers, provides funding for after school programs and academic enrichment opportunities for children in low performing schools. The program offers tutorial services and academic enrichment activities designed to help students meet local and state academic standards in subjects such as reading, math, youth development activities, drug and violence prevention,, technology education, art, music, counseling and character education. About 6,800 rural and inner-city public schools in 1,420 communities participate as 21st CCLCs. The FY2005 president's budget request for the program is \$999 million.

The school-linked services approach is gaining national visibility as a result of the introduction of H.R. 4585, the Full-Service Community Schools Act of 2004 by Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD) on June 16, 2004. This landmark piece of legislation authorizes funding for full service community schools, which are public elementary or secondary schools that coordinate multiple federal, state and local educational and social service programs in partnerships with school districts and community

based organizations. The Act would provide \$200 million for FY 2005 through 2009 to cover the cost of local and state grants, technical assistance and evaluation. The legislation also creates an Advisory Committee composed of representatives from the Departments of Justice, Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Labor, to consult with the Secretary of Education on the development and implementation of full-service community schools.

What the Research Shows: A Review of Evidence-Based Outcomes

The Coalition for Community Schools, a common meeting ground of representatives from all levels in the education, social service, and related sectors, provides an overview of program evaluations of 20 community school approaches across the country in its publication, *Making the Difference: Research & Practice in Community Schools* (Blank et al, 2003). Although the primary emphasis of the evaluations was youth outcomes, 11 of the 20 studies also measured family outcomes.

The report details the following evaluation findings:

Impact on Children

- A Fordham University Study of a Children's Aid Society (CAS) program found that in a New York elementary school, the percentage of children reading at grade level increased from 28 percent in grade four to 42 percent by grade six. In the same cohort, math scores moved from 43 percent at grade level in grade four up to 50 percent by grade six. In addition, a positive correlation was found between attendance at extended day programs and reading scores. In a New York middle school, the percentage of students performing at grade level in reading increased from 39 percent in grade six to 45 percent in

grade eight. For math, the levels increased from 49 percent to 52 percent.

- A Boston CAS program site found that the percentage of students who were considered below average declined from 49 percent to 30 percent, while the students receiving above average grades increased from 15 percent to 30 percent¹
- Preliminary findings from an evaluation of the Beacons approach in New York City found that more than three-fourths of the youth described the Beacons program as helpful in preventing drug use and encouraging schoolwork and leadership.
- A 1995-1996 evaluation conducted on the Indianapolis Bridges to Success (BTS) program showed that of the 202 students receiving case management services (over fifty percent due to behavioral problems), 85 percent showed improvement following the intervention. The evaluation was designed to measure student access to school-based health and mental health services.
- A longitudinal study of the Communities in Schools (CIS) approach conducted by the Urban Institute tracked 659 students for over three years and found 80 percent were still in school or had graduated. The cumulative dropout rate was 21 percent over three years or seven percent annually, significantly lower than for comparable students in other schools. Approximately 70 percent of the students with high absenteeism prior to participation in CIS improved their attendance.

A recent CIS report that presents outcome results for 192 of the 194 CIS programs in the country

during the 2002-2003 school year found 86 percent of the CIS-tracked students were promoted to the next grade level, 87 percent of CIS eligible seniors graduated from high school, and of the CIS programs that track students after their high school graduation, two-thirds of their students went on to some form of post-secondary education.

Impact on Families

Evaluations conducted by Yale University of the Schools of the 21st Century in Connecticut and Kentucky found that participating parents were able to improve their parenting skills, showed less stress as measured by the Parent Stress Index, spent less money on child care, and missed fewer days of work.

Longitudinal studies of the FAST program have shown that the approach has resulted in increased family cohesiveness and parent involvement in school and community.

Impact on Schools

Principals in schools implementing the Schools of the 21st Century approach in Connecticut and Kentucky reported less vandalism, increased parent involvement, better teaching practices, and improved public relations with the community.

Policy Recommendations: Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream

While the school-linked services approach is becoming increasingly common, it is not yet a mainstream practice. There are a number of steps that communities, agencies and legislators can take to move this effective approach for strengthening families and improving academic achievement of children from the margins to the mainstream.

¹ One caveat that should be noted, however, is that this study did not include a control group, therefore it is difficult to isolate the extent to which the community school approach impacted changes.

Local Level

- *Establish a public-private family strengthening commission or coalition dedicated to pursuing long term outcomes and goals for children, youth, families and their community.* Coalition should include a diverse array of stakeholders, including representatives from local government and relevant education, human services, philanthropic and business institutions. Commissions such as these already exist in communities throughout the country. The most effective are those that are informal community driven local groups. Instead of organizing a coalition around a particular issue or problem, a family strengthening coalition would focus on bridging diverse services and sectors in order to bolster support for and to strengthen families.

Such a coalition could provide the guidance and leadership for assessing and determining which school-linked services approach would be most appropriate for the community by engaging existing and potential providers.

- *Invest in administrative infrastructure within existing school systems to promote family and community engagement.* Such an investment can range from establishing a community school coordinator position to serve as the catalyst for the development of family-community-school partnerships to establishing a superintendent or school-district level department committed to family and community engagement.
- *Strengthen professional development through targeted training and skills building.* Teachers and school administrators should be equipped with practical tools and skills that they can deploy to

effectively engage families and community residents in school life.

- *Provide schools with small seed grants to give them the resources to engage families through targeted initiatives.* Schools should have some resources to make parent and community engagement an attainable goal instead of simply a good idea.

State Level²

- *Governors should initiate an interdepartmental task force that engages diverse stakeholders to consider how to better coordinate resources and transform schools into institutions that strengthen families.* A key objective of such a task force could be to coordinate and connect **existing** advisory groups around the theme of parent-community-school connections in order to reduce fragmentation among agencies and programs. The task force should engage diverse stakeholders from different sectors and disciplines, including parents, youth, families, community residents, service delivery agencies, community based organizations, employers, and nonprofit agencies.
- *Develop and promote a vision for improving student learning by adopting and integrating outcomes based on recognized assets and competencies that support young people's learning*

² For a detailed discussion of state-level recommendations on providing leadership for the development of community schools, please refer to "A Handbook for State Policy Leaders – Community Schools: Improving Student Learning/Strengthening Schools, Families and Communities." Accessible at: <http://www.communityschools.org/handbook.pdf> An example of this is the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth, which was successful in part due to its clarity of purpose and expert staffing.

and development, while strengthening families and communities. This process should be initiated on a state level and could involve the education system from the state department of education to local school districts along with other departments and systems that play a role in child and family development, notably the department of health and human services. Interagency coordination on a state level should take this vision and the desired outcomes into account when developing and managing state-level programs and initiatives.

- *Develop performance measures and evaluation tools to measure the multiple components of the school-linked services approach.* State departments of education and other state departments and systems engaged in child and family development initiatives should invest in training and capacity building for department and agency administrators and staff (including teachers and front line service workers) to be able to participate in the data collection and analysis of evidence based outcomes.

Federal Level

- *Establish a presidential interdepartmental task force³ with representation from national youth advisory boards, families, community schools, the philanthropic community, and Congressional members.* Such a task force would seek the following:
 - Establish national outcomes, for children and their families

- Examine current federal programs to see how they can be refined or adapted to incorporate family centered practices
- Determine how existing bridging mechanisms such as interdepartmental initiatives or the 21st Century Community Learning Center program and/or new mechanisms to reduce fragmentation and overlapping services in order to produce better results at the local level.

Resources

Annie E. Casey Strengthening Families / Strengthening Schools Toolkit

<http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/sf/index.htm>

The toolkit includes information and resources to help schools work in partnership with families and communities—to strengthen families, strengthen schools, and help children do better. School staff and people who work for community organizations worked with the Foundation to put this tool kit together. You will find examples of schools that work in partnership with families, practical ideas for work in schools, and ideas for families about working with schools.

Coalition for Community Schools

<http://www.communityschools.org/>

The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy as well as national, state and local community school networks. The Coalition advocates for community schools as the vehicle for strengthening schools, families and communities so that together they can improve student learning.

³ An example of this is the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth, which was successful in part due to its clarity of purpose and expert staffing.

Communities in Schools (CIS)

www.cisnet.org

For over 25 years, CIS has championed the connection of needed community resources with schools. CIS partners with families, schools and community leaders to create a support system for students. CIS is a community-builder delivering resources for kids by working in partnership with public schools—principals, superintendents, teachers and administrators, local business and community organizations.

Harvard Family Research Project

<http://gseweb.harvard.edu/hfrp/>

Founded at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) strives to increase the effectiveness of public and private organizations and communities as they promote child development, student achievement, healthy family functioning, and community development. In its relationships with national, state, and local partners, HFRP fosters a sustainable learning process—one that relies on the collection, analysis, synthesis, and application of information to guide problem-solving and decision-making.

Institute for Educational Leadership

<http://www.iel.org/programs.html>

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)—a non-profit, nonpartisan organization based in Washington, D.C.—envisions a society that uses its resources effectively to achieve better futures for all children and youth. For almost forty years, IEL's mission continues to be to build the capacity of individuals and organizations in education and related fields to work together—across policies, programs and sectors.

Institute for Responsive Education

<http://www.responsiveeducation.org/home.html>

The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) is a research, policy, and advocacy organization that encourages and supports school, family, and community partnership to enable high quality educational opportunities for all children. The website features publications, newsletters and descriptions of the Institute's various projects.

Johns Hopkins University Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm>

The mission of this Center is to conduct and disseminate research, development, and policy analyses that produce new and useful knowledge and practices that help families, educators, and members of communities work together to improve schools, strengthen families, and enhance student learning and development. Current projects include the development of and research on the Center's National Network of Partnership Schools. This Network guides school, district, and state leaders, and teams of educators, parents, and others to improve school, family, and community partnerships.

National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/>

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools bridges research and practice to remove barriers to student achievement. The Center links people with research-based information and resources that they can use to effectively connect schools, families, and communities. The Center reviews emerging findings and research to develop an online database, annual conferences and annual reports to help advance procedural knowledge and provides training and networking to link research findings to practice.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)

<http://www.ncpie.org>

The Coalition's mission is to advocate the involvement of parents and families in their children's education, and to foster relationships between home, school, and community to enhance the education of all our nation's young people. The Coalition web site features a wide array of information for parents, educators and administrators.

National Community Education Association

<http://www.ncea.com/>

NCEA's mission is to provide leadership to those who build learning communities in response to individual and community needs. It does this by providing its members with national and regional training conferences and workshops; specialized periodicals, publications, and products; opportunities for peer support and networking; and information and referral services. In addition it acts as an advocate for community education by working with related organizations and promoting at the national, state, and local levels: parent and community involvement in public education; the formation of community partnerships to address community needs; and the expansion of lifelong learning opportunities for all community residents.

Search Institute

<http://www.search-institute.org>

Search Institute is an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities. At the heart of the institute's work is the framework of 40 Developmental Assets, which are positive experiences and personal qualities that young people need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

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References

This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of “family strengthening” in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children and their families.

The Family Strengthening Policy Center is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is an initiative of the National Human Services Assembly, an association of the nation’s leading national nonprofits in the fields of health, human and community development, and human services.

This brief reflects the findings and views of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, which is solely responsible for its content. Additional policy briefs are available at www.nassembly.org/fspc.

This policy brief was produced with significant support and contributions from:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

www.aecf.org

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National Human Services Assembly**

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For more information about the Family Strengthening Task Force and its membership, please see the Family Strengthening Policy Center website at: www.nassembly.org/fspc/aboutus.html.

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