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TEAM WORK FOR THE WAYWARD CHILD

PARKER L. NORTON¹

During the development of this nation it has gradually been realized that for its own selfish interests every social group must consciously educate its youth for their approaching rights and duties as adult citizens. In practically every community of our land, large or small, there now exists some form of public school, an educational institution supported by public funds.

Through this system there passes, sooner or later, a larger proportion of our children than comes into contact with any other social agency, and through the meshes of this scholastic sieve there are constantly dropping those many individuals who, for any one of a thousand reasons, do not happen at a given moment to fit closely enough into the requirements of our educational mill. While home conditions during plastic infancy are largely responsible for these misfits, the school system is slowly acknowledging its own partial responsibility due to the setting up of disciplinary and achievement standards quite beyond the possible reach of many children.

Lacking thus the sense of security possessed by their more fortunate playmates, these exceptional individuals often express their thwarted desires through unconventional or even anti-social activities which bring them to unfavorable notice with far greater emphasis than their comparatively small numbers seem to warrant. With the increasing congestion in our urban centers these problems of delinquency have been forced more and more sharply into the focus of public attention, and one of the most promising attempts at solution has been the development of the juvenile court.

It thus happens that in hundreds of our communities there now exist side by side two publicly supported child caring agencies. One, the public school, looks after the educational needs of the so-called good child; while the other, the juvenile court, administers the occasional discipline thought to be needed by the so-called bad child. But, because a breach of social convention is so much more dramatic than its normal daily observance, society is often vastly more conscious of the one black sheep in the court pound than of the nine white ones safe within the school fold.

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If these two agencies develop mutual jealousies and work at cross purposes it is the tax payer who foots the extra bills and the entire community that suffers through the neglect of childhood's needs. When the two work in harmony, with a wholesome knowledge of and a mutual respect for each other's powers and limitations, it is again the entire community that profits, both financially and through the better social adjustment of the growing generation.

It is sometimes asked if the juvenile court is, or should be, a social case working organization. But, can it be anything less and justify its existence? Can it afford to ape the policies of the average adult court and pose as an authoritarian source of exact and impartial justice? Can the juvenile court play around in the vacuum of its own judicial righteousness and ignore the rest of the community, or must it, in sheer self-defense, cooperate unreservedly with the other social agencies in working out a suitable program for each individual child?

By way of offering partial and tentative answers to some few of these stated and implied questions, there is here presented a brief summary of the school-court relationships in one city during a period when both agencies found themselves able and willing to work together for the best interests of the chief community asset, youth.

According to the 1930 census there were then in the city of Bridgeport, Connecticut, 146,716 people. Of these, 34,732 were children between the ages of 4 and 16 in September, 1929. There were 33 elementary schools, four junior high schools, three senior high schools, and one City Normal Training School, with about 900 principals, supervisors and instructors acting in their various capacities throughout the system.

School disciplinary problems were handled in much the customary way. The 19 teachers of the "special" classes were so swamped with their daily routine as to leave little time or energy for visits to the homes of difficult pupils. The several assistant principals (sometimes called counselor, dean of girls, dean of boys or office assistant) dealt with such matters of minor discipline as could be managed on the spot or during office hours. The school nurses looked after items of physical health but were neither expected nor trained to touch threatened breakdowns in the mental or emotional field. On the school principals fell the bulk of serious correctional duties, but their crowded daily schedules allowed little opportunity for becoming intimately acquainted with the basic home and neighborhood conditions largely responsible for the child's attitude toward school regulations and his defiance of them. One school psychologist looked

after the testing needs of the entire system, and in addition somehow managed to gather a surprising amount of valuable information about the needs of her numberless charges, though even she could hardly be expected to accomplish miracles.

Truants were handled by four police officers with the rank of sergeant. These officers were selected from the regular police force, reported each morning and night at the central police station, were on the police payroll and drew the regulation salary, took their orders from the chief of police and acted as detectives during the summer months.

Each school principal was his or her own judge as to what constituted a sufficiently serious degree of truancy to justify calling on the police officer in charge of attendance at that school. These truants were brought before the juvenile court and dealt with as were other delinquents, a procedure which helped to swell court figures but did little to remove in either school or child the environmental or personality causes giving rise to dislike for school routine. There were no visiting teachers, and in the community as a whole there existed too little awareness of their necessity to demand action from the school board and superintendent.

At the focus of this scholastically and socially dubious, but not unusual, situation stood the assistant superintendent, very much aware of the civic lacks and needs in child welfare methods and equipment but unable single-handed to remedy conditions. He always took an active personal interest in such school disciplinary matters as came to his attention, doing all possible to fit the school to the needs of the child rather than regarding truancy and similar lapses as matters of crime and punishment to be passed on to the juvenile court.

Turning to a brief discussion of the latter agency, it had existed since 1921 as a branch of the City Court, had the same judges and was housed in an unused loft of the central police station. The successive judges were biennially elected by the General Assembly, this being the only instance in the entire nation where a juvenile court judge is still chosen through action of a state legislature.

In 1929 the Bridgeport Juvenile Court was by legislative act partially separated from the City Court and given its own judge. The group of professional social workers in the city seized this opportunity to bring about a partial reorganization of the juvenile court staff, and the new chief probation officer found himself the worried heir to a tradition of very limited cooperation between the court and other community agencies. For various political, professional and

personality reasons there had developed a tendency toward judicial aloofness with regard to court cases, resulting in an attempt by the court to handle problems which might advantageously have been referred to agencies more adequately and specifically equipped to deal with such matters than the court, under existing conditions, could pretend to be.

During the first few weeks of the new regime there were literally dozens of phone calls from school principals relating tales of truancy and other school problems and demanding immediate court action, which in many cases had previously meant probation or commitment to the state reform school. After several preliminary conferences between the assistant superintendent and the new court official it was very evident that they shared a realization of the need for agency cooperation in order to provide adequate and specialized services for the unadjusted child. Late in October, 1929, the assistant superintendent, with the consent of the superintendent, sent to every school principal the following announcement, which carries its own comments as to timeliness and suitability.

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Bridgeport, Connecticut

Relationship and Procedure of the

Child Welfare Department and Outside Agencies

The *basis* of this relationship is the assumption that the responsibility for solution of all problems occurring within the jurisdiction of the school belongs to the school itself and that so far as it has resources for study and for developing and applying remedial measures, these resources should be exhausted before referring cases to outside agencies.

The Department of Child Welfare hereby organized in the office of the assistant superintendent will serve as a *means or agency* for working out these problems. In time there will be visiting teachers who will be assigned to the field work. At present the facilities are very limited but we plan, nevertheless, with the cooperation of teachers and principals to demonstrate the value of the service of this department in definite terms of children's welfare.

The *procedure* tentatively is as follows:

First. The school through teachers and principal should make all reasonable attempts to solve the problem. Conferences of all interested persons should be held and, if possible, a solution should be found by the teacher and her principal. This department will be ready always to offer assistance upon call from any school. No one need hesitate to request help, since finding a successful solution for problem cases of wide variety is one of the most difficult responsibilities of the school.

Second. When the school can find no solution for the problem the case should be referred to this department together with detailed information covering the problem. In doing this, teachers and principals should be frank and honest. It is in no sense a reflection upon the ability of either teachers or principals to say, "We don't know what to do in this case. We need help." We cannot afford to make mistakes with children. All information will be held as strictly confidential.

Third. All cases in which agencies outside the school system are involved should be turned over to this department. A very definite plan of cooperation between the department and the juvenile court has been worked out. All school cases much reach the court through this department. The court will work with the schools through the same avenue.

Fourth. There are those cases in which the offense occurred outside the jurisdiction of the school. If the offenders are still attending school then the school may be called upon by the juvenile court to cooperate in setting up and carrying out a program for the correction of the child. The court recognizes the school as one of the most vital factors in the life of the juvenile, therefore the court plans to consult the teacher in formulating a constructive program for the youth who makes an unfortunate mistake.

Procedure in Cases of *Truancy*.

First. Check up on the first unexcused absence. Follow the case into the home if necessary. Use the truant officers as has always been done but try so far as possible to remove the cause of the trouble. Truancy in its first stages needs corrective rather than punitive measures. Every teacher and principal should give careful attention to absences, for it is in these early beginnings that truancy takes root.

Second. When the school cannot correct the problem or where assistance is needed the case should come to my office with such information as is pertinent. The situation will be studied from all angles and an attempt will be made to settle the case *without court action* in a manner so far as possible satisfactory to the school and to all parties concerned.

Third. When it becomes necessary to refer cases of truancy or any other problem to the juvenile court such action must always take place through this office. The court in turn when it wishes to reach the school will do so in the same way.

JOHN A. YOUNG,
Assistant Superintendent of Schools.

The effects of this document, amounting to an executive order, were immediately apparent in both of the cooperating agencies, and some few of these effects can be partially stated in statistical terms. In the highly complex field of human relationships almost any mathematical statements must be accepted with some degree of caution, but in the annual reports of "Juvenile Court Statistics" assembled by the Children's Bureau are to be found our most accurate sources of statistical information concerning juvenile delinquency. The year 1929 was a period of transition in the Bridgeport court and the

figures for this year are the results of several successive policies. In 1928, however, the previously existing policies were still in control; while in 1930 the new cooperative relationships between school and court were well under way. By comparing figures of 1928 with those of 1930 some idea of the effects of concerted effort can be secured, while using the figures for the intervening year, 1929, as reported for the country as a whole will give a standard of comparison with other courts. The 1929 totals are based on reports from 96 courts handling 46,312 delinquency cases and 18,805 dependency and neglect cases, but it should be emphasized that varying procedures in these courts and wide differences in community backgrounds prevent too exact or too detailed comparisons.

Within a short time after the above announcement various changes were noticeable throughout the entire school system, sometimes slight in the case of a given individual but definitely cumulative in total effect. While the assistant superintendent had previously managed to keep busy during office hours, he now became the foremost living example of the strenuous life. In the first rush of events he comprised the entire Child Welfare Department, but gradually succeeded in delegating through wider and wider circles many of his initial activities. The psychologist managed to spend even longer hours than before in testing troublesome children, suggesting replacements in groups better suited to their abilities, recommending institutional training for mental defectives and visiting homes when possible to learn something of parental handicaps. Principals looked more thoroughly through their educational machinery to discover possible changes, rather than expecting the bewildered child to make all of the required adjustments. Frantic teachers consented to give "that awful boy" just "one more chance" and developed something of a more tolerant attitude in view of recently learned home conditions. Teachers of special classes could take an honest pride in the progress of a "duller than usual" pupil when they could measure his achievement against the newly discovered background of parental example. Both principals and teachers took renewed personal and professional interest in contacting homes and neighborhoods and using discoveries thus made as a means of "keeping the child out of court." School nurses enlisted in the campaign of prevention and simultaneously extracted both splinters and valuable bits of information from the temporarily communicative child. The mere fact that it was considered worth while for a group of teachers to spend time in formal conferences, rather than in hallway gossip, over the liabilities of a small

boy, often served to identify this child as an interesting and challenging personality in his own right rather than as merely "just another pupil." In brief, the publicly announced conception of the school as a social agency, rather than a mechanical pedagogue, did much throughout the entire system to develop professional pride in both the technique of social prevention and its ultimate product, the well-adjusted child.

While the effect on the school was marked, the effect on the juvenile court was even more so. This announcement at one stroke greatly relieved the pressure on the court to handle on a basis of delinquency a child whose chief handicap was a lack of interest in the academic world. The problem was solved, not by disregarding it, not by useless and even harmful legal compulsion, but by requesting a diagnosis and attempted solution from the agency most vitally concerned at that point, the public school. During 1928 over 9 per cent of the Bridgeport delinquency cases were referred for reasons of truancy; during 1930, under the new policy, only about 3 per cent were referred for this reason, while the average for the 96 courts reporting throughout the nation in 1929 was 9 per cent.

Thus relieved in part of this group of cases, the court was able to give greater attention to other cases which originated in the school, were passed upon by the Child Welfare Department, and from there were referred to the court for appropriate action beyond the legal authority of the school. In 1928 the cases referred by the school amounted to 1.6 per cent, while in 1930 this figure was 3.4 per cent. All of these cases had first been routed through the Child Welfare Department, and the court was able to accept them because of the marked reduction in truancy cases which in previous years had overcrowded the court calendar. The average of school referrals for all courts in 1929 was 11 per cent.

Indirectly, because the school was handling many of its own problems, the court was able to give more time and energy to finding ways and means for avoiding institutional commitments, both for truancy and for other types of delinquency. In 1928 the institutional commitments amounted to 13 per cent of the official cases; while in 1930 these commitments were only 5.3 per cent, with one case (a boy) for truancy. In all courts for 1929 the institutional commitments amounted to 16 per cent of the total cases.

It should be noted that 79 per cent of the juvenile court cases originated with the police in 1928; in 1930 this figure had dropped to 72 per cent because of the comparatively larger intake from other

sources, though this figure is still above the average for 1929 of 55 per cent police referrals in all courts reporting.

As this policy of school-court cooperation was seen to offer many advantages to both agencies, it was gradually adopted to a large extent by other agencies. In 1928 less than 1 per cent of the cases came to the court from social agencies; while 2.1 per cent was the figure for 1930. On the basis of nation-wide figures 2 per cent of the cases in 1929 were referred from social agencies.

Perhaps the outstanding advantage to the court in this cooperative relationship with the school and other community agencies appears in the possibility of avoiding formal court contacts for the child. In spite of all our theories to the contrary, the average community still interprets any encounter with the juvenile court as something of a reflection on the child, and for the present it seems good social policy to "keep the child out of court" whenever possible. In 1928 about 2 per cent of the Bridgeport delinquency cases were referred by the court to some social agency for appropriate action. With the increased cooperation of the court with other agencies it was possible in 1930 to refer 14.5 per cent of all the cases (17 per cent of the official cases) to some agency better equipped than was the court to meet the needs of these particular children. The courts reporting on this item in 1929 give a total of 5 per cent of the cases disposed of in this manner.

All the figures thus far quoted are for delinquent children, but the results for the dependent and neglected group show similar tendencies. Sixty-seven per cent of this Bridgeport group in 1928 were referred to the court by social agencies; but the new relationships raised this to 92 per cent in 1930. The reports from all courts in 1929 showed 41 per cent referred from social agencies. Commitments to institutions formed 55.3 per cent of the dependent and neglected group in 1928; but in 1930 this figure was reduced to 43 per cent, largely because of the increased cooperation of the school and other agencies in aiding the court to avoid institutionalization whenever possible. Even this figure is much above the average of 24 per cent of commitments reported by all courts in 1929.

Through the numerous possibilities offered by this unofficial alliance of the court with the school and other agencies there were placed within reach of the court many resources which would have remained unavailable if the court had insisted on playing a lone hand. The courts reporting on this item in 1929 gave a total of 31 per cent of their delinquency cases handled on an unofficial basis. In Bridgeport 26 per cent were thus dealt with in 1928; while in 1930 this unofficial

group formed 78 per cent, this being made possible through the high degree of cooperation with the school and other agencies. In its effect on the individual child this meant that for nearly 8 out of every 10 children brought to the attention of the juvenile court there was no petition drawn and no formal court hearing. Some of these cases involved school offenses and were referred to the school; other children, or their families, were already known to the family welfare society or a similar agency and the problem of the child was best solved by dealing with the family as a unit; still others were informally contacted by the probation officers from time to time in order to anticipate possible trouble.

In 1929 all reporting courts combined gave an average of 40 per cent of their delinquents placed on probation. In 1928 Bridgeport figures show 47 per cent thus handled, and in 1930 there were 41 per cent on probation, all these percentages being for official cases. It should be noted, however, that due to the large proportion of unofficial cases for 1930 this 41 per cent of official cases meant that only 9.6 per cent of the delinquent intake reached the stage of probation.

If this summary permitted details there would be many illustrations of the growth of the cooperative spirit in a field where it had before played comparatively little part. For lack of space only a few instances can be given.

An active, irrepressible boy of 14 was out of luck for two reasons; first, in the temperamental attitude of his Irish mother toward her neighbors and, second, in the presence of an elderly couple just across the hedge who were unable to make suitable allowances for the noisy play of the neighborhood youth. These two peace loving citizens lost no opportunity in trying to repress the activities of a group in which the boy took a leading part, and the impatient group retaliated to the best of its ability in making life as unbearable as possible for the chiding couple. A court complaint was finally made and a preliminary investigation disclosed the highly explosive beginnings of a potential neighborhood feud. After consulting with the newly formed Child Welfare Department, the probation officer contacted the boy's school principal who quietly pointed out to the boy and his group the inevitable results of their present mode of behavior. No formal action was taken by the court and several months later the gratified couple reported that they had had no further trouble with the children.

A small boy of 12 from a badly warped home had for most of his life been passed along from one relative to another, and during his school career had given endless trouble in the succession of schools

which had tolerated his activities. Constant runaways from home, habitual truancy from school, remaining on the street all night, petty thefts of anything portable, frequent fighting, "making fun of the teacher," extreme restlessness in the classroom—these were a few of the items presented by the perplexed principal in his complaint. The boy had previously been before the court several times for minor offenses, and it seemed highly probable that any reappearance would result in his being sent to the state reform school. In order to avoid this the Child Welfare Department and the probation officer cooperated with other social agencies to which the boy and his family had been known for many years. Preliminary investigation showed a possibility of encephalitis; this was confirmed after a more thorough examination and the patient was finally sent to an institution to receive treatment, rather than being sent to the reform school.

A well grown boy of about 15 had for several years lived with his very nervous foster mother, whose supervision he increasingly resented in proportion as he grew older, largely because of her insistence that he regularly attend school. He vented on the school situation the wrath he hardly dared display at home and played truant as often as possible, a lapse which was finally called to the attention of the truant officer. In the normal course of events this boy would have been brought into the juvenile court and either been placed on probation or sent to a state institution as a confirmed truant. Investigation showed that for several years he had been under the supervision of a local welfare agency, and a conference was held between this agency, the Child Welfare Department and the probation officer. As a result of this conference it was arranged that a representative of the agency should first consult with the boy and his foster mother with a view to having him voluntarily and regularly attend school, and thus perhaps avoid a court hearing. Through this triple partnership between school, court and agency the foster mother was partially convinced of the harm done by her constant nagging of the boy, the latter was led to see the value of regular school attendance and the entire situation was cleared up without the necessity of any formal action by the court.

A complaint came from the railroad police that a car of coal had been tampered with and much of the contents scattered over the railroad yard. Investigation showed that five small boys ranging from 9 to 12 had spotted this tempting prize on a Saturday afternoon when they were prowling around the yards in search of something to do. The fun had begun with throwing small pieces of the coal at each other, following which three of them climbed onto the car and

laid down a barrage against the invading army made up of the other two. Several hundreds pounds of the coal were thus wasted, the boys not realizing its value nor stopping to think of the possible harm they were doing. The family of one of these boys had been known to six different agencies over a period of the last ten years and was at this time receiving financial aid. The family of a second boy had also been given help, but not one of the five boys had ever before been in any serious trouble. The matter was taken up with the Child Welfare Department and tentative plans laid to avoid court action if possible. After consulting with the authorities of the several schools attended by the boys, the railroad officials, and the various social agencies concerned, the probation officer settled the entire affair by collecting a small amount from each boy (a large amount to the boy when taken from each scanty family hoard) and reimbursing the railroad for the scattered coal. Through this procedure it was unnecessary either to file a petition or to hold a formal court hearing for any one of the five boys.

The parents of a rather dull boy of about 15 believed that they needed his wages more than he needed additional schooling, an attitude which fitted in very nicely with the boy's dislike of a disciplinary minded teacher. It thus happened that the boy was habitually truant over a long period and it finally became necessary to exert pressure through the court officer as well as through the school. As a result of a conference between the two agencies an older married brother living apart from the family was finally induced to take the boy into his own home and thus partially relieve the financial situation of the parents, a step which also provided more adequate supervision for the boy himself. He was promised working papers and a job during the coming summer on condition that he continue regularly in school during the rest of that school year, a compromise which made it unnecessary to bring the boy into court where he might have been committed to the reform school as a confirmed truant.

There are still no visiting teachers in Bridgeport, but community sentiment is slowly recognizing the pressing need for this type of service and the teachers will doubtless materialize in time. The assistant superintendent is still the major portion of the Child Welfare Department, and to him more than to any other one person is due what progress has already been made. It is difficult to measure the march of civilization, especially in the field of child welfare; but it seems obvious that close cooperation between the two publicly supported and publicly controlled agencies of school and court will do much to make that march a venture more worth while.