CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY CONSORTIUM

Collaboration Across Minnesota Child Welfare and Education Systems

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THE STORY

Child welfare and education: It's not a new story. Children involved in the child welfare system often fall through the cracks in school and experience seemingly insurmountable barriers to achieving academic success. Children who face crises in school do not always get the resources and support they need from the child welfare system. These two complexly inter-related, but traditionally isolated systems of education and child welfare, have often struggled to functionally meet the needs of children and families. These systems, constructed to provide services and education to the children and families who need them most, often seemingly create more roadblocks than bridges to success. Dedicated professionals in both systems are confronted daily with the challenges of trying to collaborate within and across these two systems in ways that best serves children and families. Due to challenges in information sharing, confidentiality, communication, knowledge of the complexities of the different systems, and excessive strain on already limited time and capacity, professionals are often unable to provide the best services to their clients. But these barriers aren't the only side of the story.

For all of the barriers to collaboration that exist, there are equally influential factors that facilitate successful collaboration between these disparate systems. In a brief survey of Minnesota child welfare and education professionals conducted in March of 2014, we explored not only the barriers to, but also the factors necessary for collaboration across education and child welfare systems. In addition to identifying barriers, this survey also sought out creative strategies from professionals about overcoming those barriers to provide the best services possible to Minnesota children and families.

THE PEOPLE

In March of 2014, University of Minnesota Extension Children Youth & Family Consortium (CYFC) in partnership with the Minnesota chapter of the Child Welfare and Education Learning Community (CWELC) developed a brief online survey to explore barriers to, and factors for collaboration across education and child welfare systems. The survey was completed by professionals who worked with children in the child welfare system in either education settings (e.g. school social worker, teacher, counselor, dean, administrator) or in county services (e.g. social services, child protection, case worker).

Three-hundred and forty-three county and school professionals responded to and completed part of the survey, and of those, 318 completed the entire survey. Over 50 percent of respondents have worked in their profession for 16 years or more (see *Figure 1*). Of total respondents, 70 percent provided services in a county setting, and 30 percent in a school setting. The majority of respondents worked in the metropolitan area (67 percent), followed by rural areas (20 percent) and then

Figure 1: Years worked in profession

Micropolitan areas (13 percent) as defined by the Minnesota Department of Health. Of school respondents 95 percent were from public schools. Most respondents have been in their current position between 6-15 years. The majority of respondents indicated that they primarily serve 5-17 year old youth, but many, especially those working in county services, indicated they also served parents (see *Figure 2*).
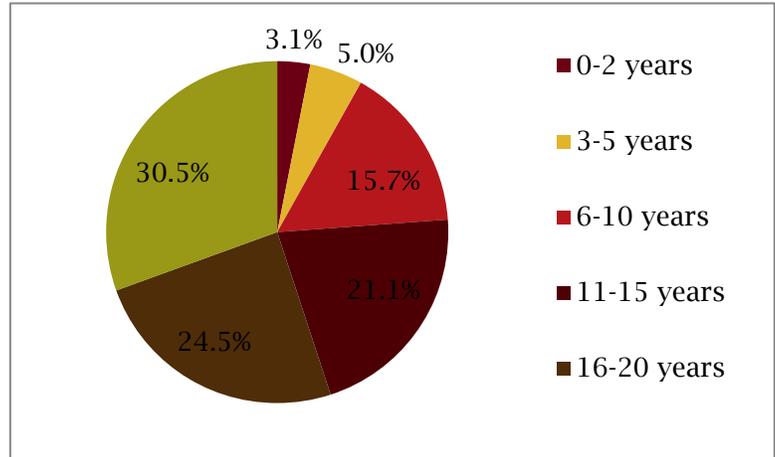
THE QUESTIONS

What are the barriers that you experience when working with professionals in the other system?

When asked the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statement "I experience barriers in collaborating with professionals from the other system" (i.e. for school professionals we asked about collaborating with county services
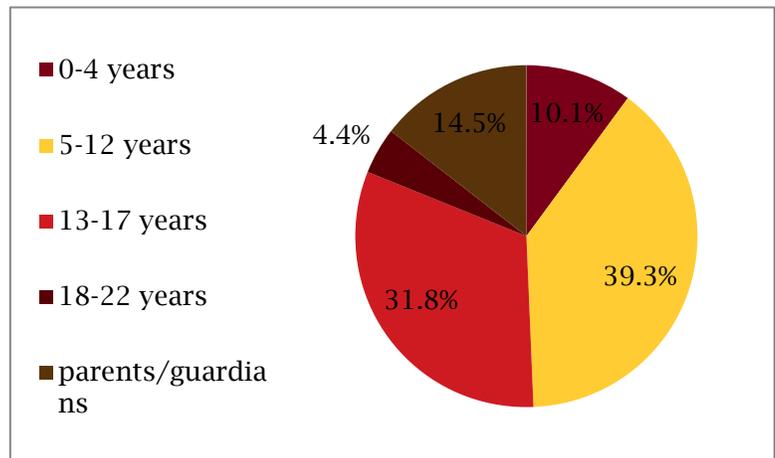

Figure 2: Age of client populations served

professionals and vice versa), school professionals showed a higher level of agreement than county professionals (see *Figure 3*). Fifty-eight percent of school respondents indicated that they either "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement about experiencing barriers to collaboration, compared to 43 percent of county professionals. County professionals also indicated that they "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statement about experiencing barriers to collaboration at a higher rate than their school counterparts (39 percent vs. 22 percent respectively). These results indicate that, in general, proportionally more school professionals report experiencing barriers to collaboration than their county colleagues.

Furthermore, when asked to indicate which barriers they experienced from a list of 13 items (see *Table 1*), school professionals indicated they experienced a greater number of barriers on average than their county professional counterparts (see *Figure 4*). Thus, not only did school professionals indicate agreement with experiencing barriers at a higher rate than county professionals, they also identified a higher number of specific barriers that they experience in their work.
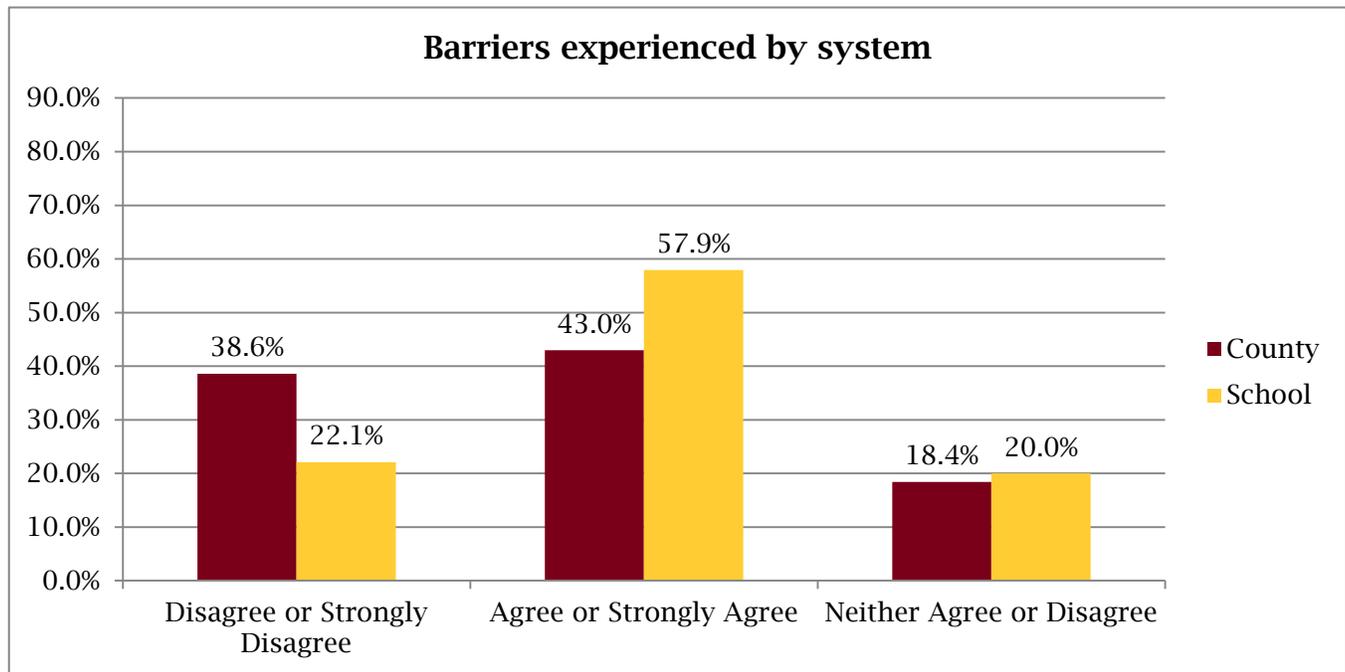
Barriers experienced by system

Figure 3: School professionals indicated experiencing "some or many" barriers at a higher rate than County professionals (χ^2= 8.548, $_2$, p=.014)

Table 1: Barriers to and factors important for collaboration as seen in the survey

Barriers to collaboration	Factors important for collaboration
Time	Regular meetings between staff
Responsiveness of other systems' professionals	Regular meetings with clients
Rules	Responsiveness of other systems professionals' to communications
System structure	Guardian ad litems
YOUR own lack of understanding of the OTHER system	Sharing of resources
The OTHER systems professionals' lack of understanding of YOUR system	Supportive system structures
Legal barriers	YOUR knowledge of the OTHER system
Confidentiality	The OTHER systems professionals' knowledge of YOUR system
Data sharing	Other
Fear of retaliation from families/children	
Resources	
Student mobility	
Other	

We also expected that these different barriers might be more or less important to professionals. Thus, we asked survey respondents to rank the barriers that they indicated they experienced from "greatest to smallest impact on your ability to collaborate with professionals from the other system." We then examined which barriers were most frequently ranked first – as having the greatest impact on collaboration – and again found differences between the systems. Overall, school professionals ranked "time" as the barrier that has the greatest impact on collaboration.

Mean number of barriers by system

Figure 4: School professionals experience significantly more barriers on average overall than county professionals (F=8.325, $_1$, p = .001; School = 4.54 barriers endorsed, County = 3.76 barriers endorsed).

However, county professionals ranked "school professionals knowledge of the county system" as their greatest barrier for collaboration (see *Figure 5*). Interestingly, some school professionals ranked their "own lack of understanding of the county system" as the barrier with the greatest impact on collaboration. These findings suggest that both county and school professionals often think that school professionals have a lack of understanding of the county systems and structures, which can be problematic for effective collaboration. Not surprisingly, student mobility was ranked as the barrier with the most impact on collaboration more often among school
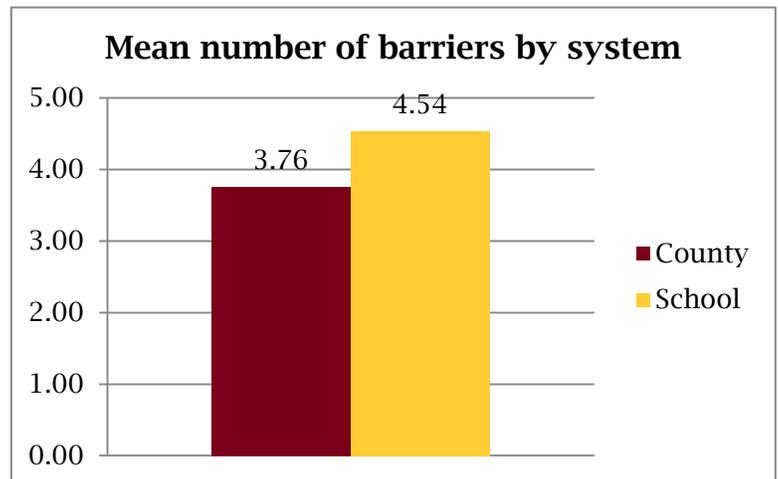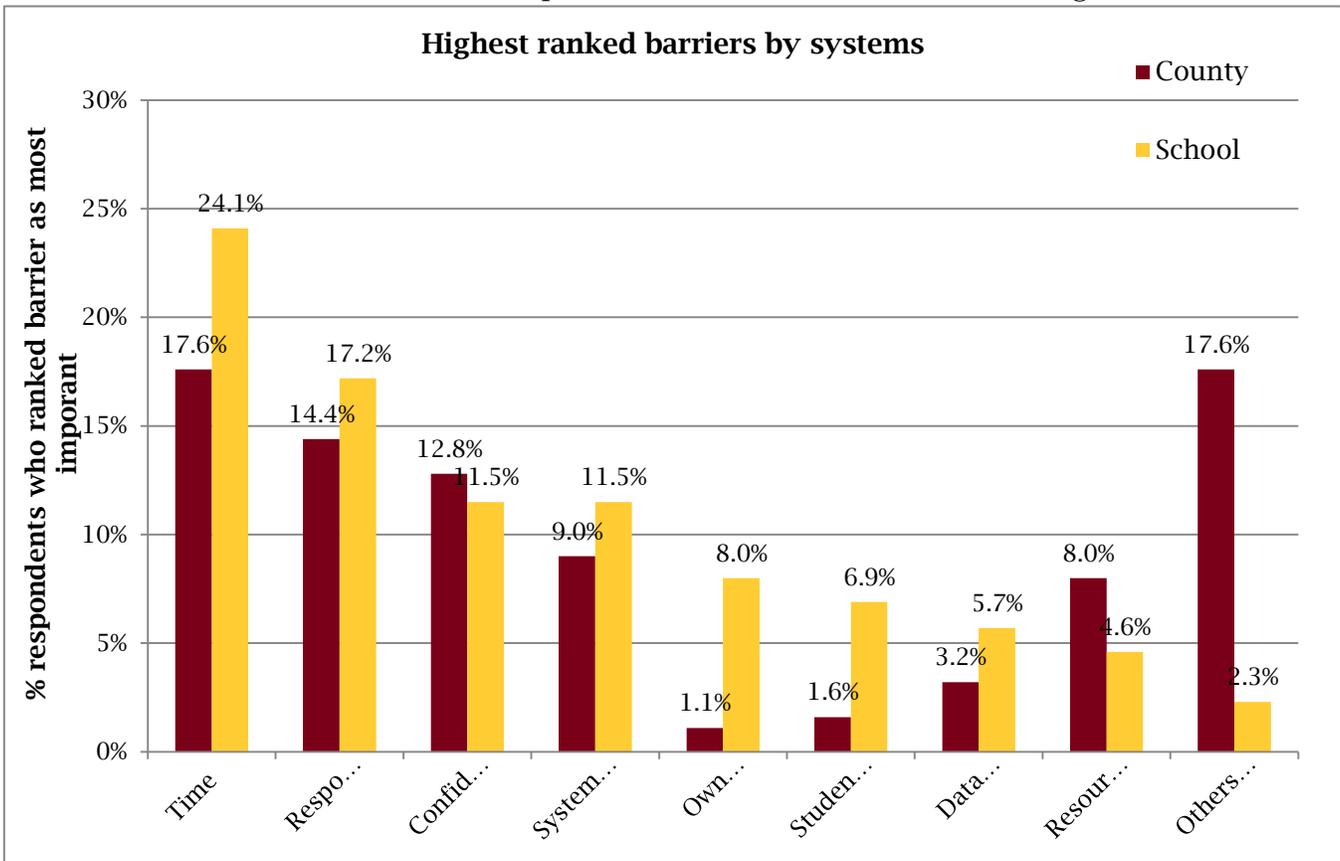
Highest ranked barriers by systems

Figure 5: Barriers ranked as having the greatest impact on ability to collaborate by system (χ^2= 35.354, $_{12}$, p=.000).

professionals than county professionals. "Responsiveness of professionals from the other system" and "confidentiality" were ranked highly by both county and school professionals.

In addition to examining difference across county and school systems, we were also interested in whether the geography of services was a significant factor in barriers to collaboration. The presumption was that service collaboration may be more or less difficult depending upon the size of communities or the structure of services and staffing due to variations in local tax base.
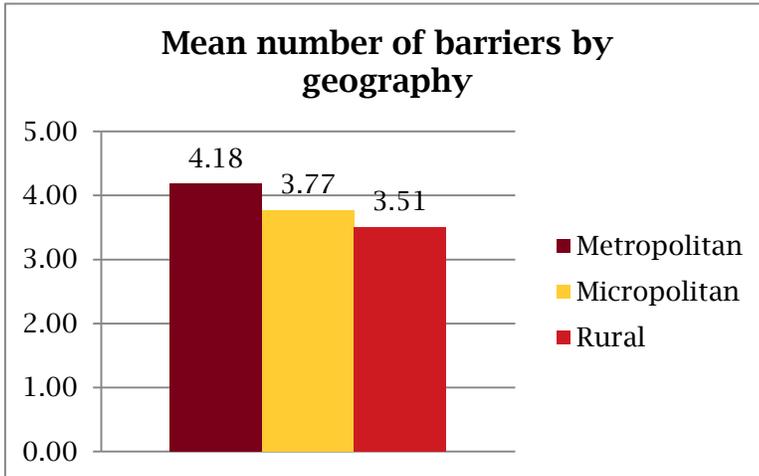
Mean number of barriers by geography

Figure 6: On average, professionals providing services in metropolitan areas experience a greater number of barriers than their mircropolitan or rural colleagues (F=3.058, $_1$, p=.048; Metro = 4.18 barriers, Micro = 3.77 barriers, Rural = 3.51 barriers).

Interestingly, there was a difference in the average number of barriers experienced by respondent location. Respondents who indicated they worked in a metropolitan county experienced more barriers than either their micropolitan or rural counterparts, with rural professionals experiencing the fewest number of barriers on average (see *Figure 6*). This result is especially interesting as it suggests that though metropolitan areas may be comparatively more resourced, the size and complexity of those systems may pose challenges to effective collaboration. However, in more rural areas of the state, where there are small numbers of people working in county or education services, the collaboration barriers are fewer. We would like to explore further whether successful collaboration practices are transferrable to other geographies.

What are the factors that are important for successful collaboration across systems?

When asked about the degree to which they were able to successfully collaborate with professionals from the other system, most county and school professionals indicated that they either "agree" or "strongly agree" that they were able to successfully collaborate (see *Figure 7*). However, school professionals indicated that they felt less able to collaborate than their county professional colleagues. These findings fit with the degree to which school professionals reported experiencing barriers to collaborate (see section above).

When asked to rank the factors that had the greatest impact on successful collaboration (see *Table 1* for list of items), school professionals indicated that the responsiveness of county professionals to communications had the greatest impact (see *Figure 8*). County professionals conversely, ranked having regular meetings with their clients as the factor with the greatest impact on successful collaboration. Both county and school professionals ranked having a supportive system, regular staff meetings, and the sharing of resources as important for successful collaboration as well.

Ability to collaborate, by system of employment
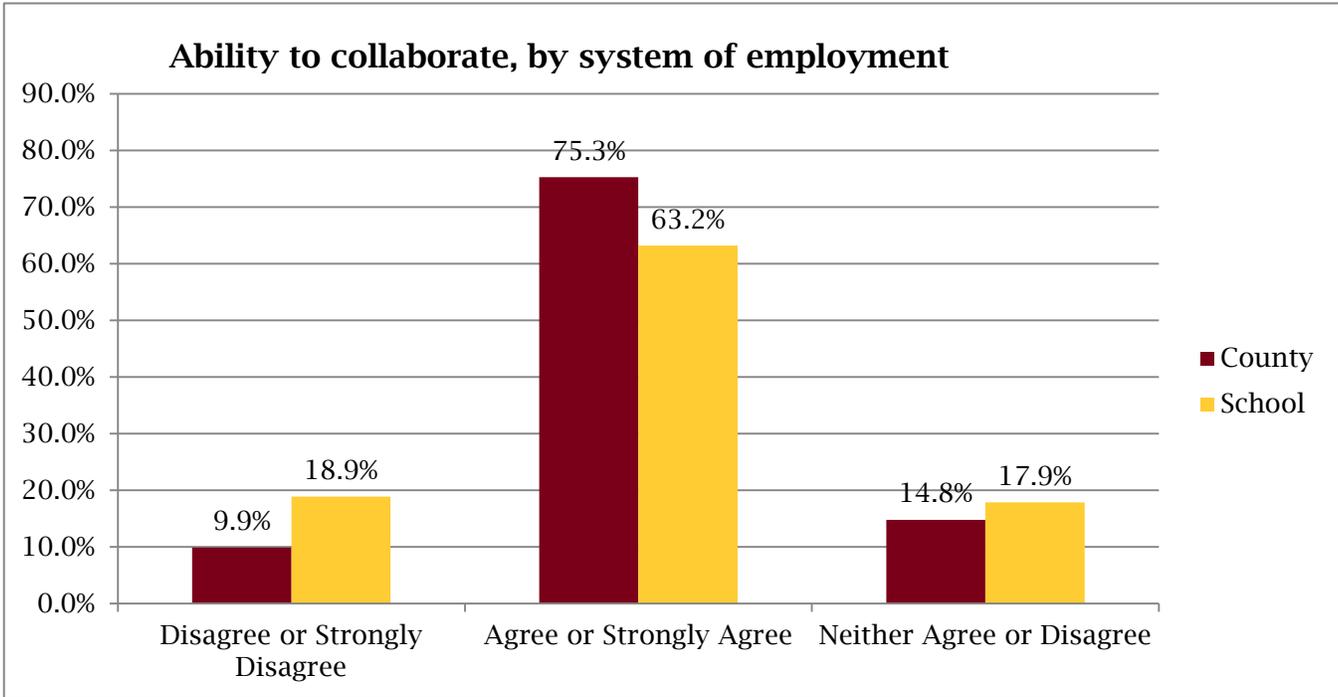
Figure 7: School professionals indicated feeling less able to collaborate across systems than county professionals (χ2= 6.153, $_2$, p=.046).

Highest ranked factors for collaboration by systems
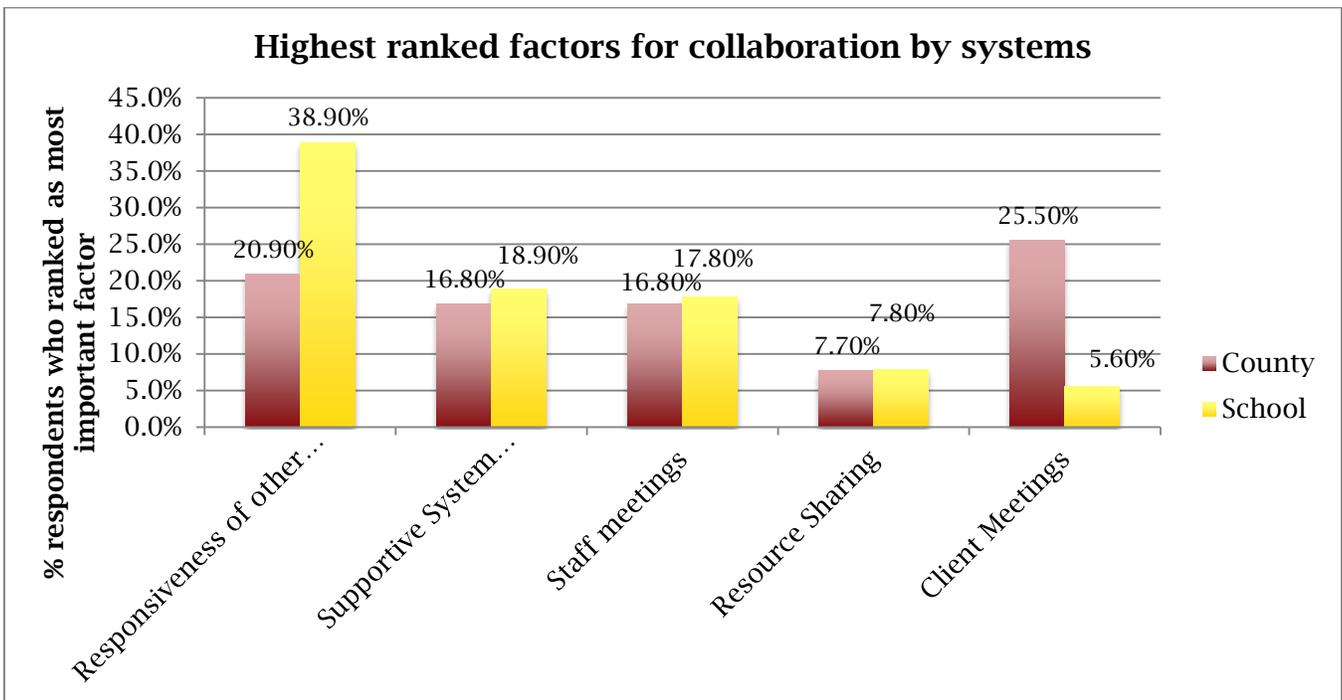
Figure 8: Collaboration factors ranked most important for county and school professionals (χ^2 = 24.052, $_8$, p = .002).

What are the creative strategies you use to have successful collaboration despite barriers?

We provided survey respondents an opportunity to share their unique ideas about how to best facilitate successful collaboration by asking: "What are the creative strategies you use to most

effectively collaborate with professionals from the other system to provide quality services for children and families?" Interestingly, 60 percent of county professionals and 63 percent of school professionals replied to this optional, open-ended question. The image in *Figure 9* visually presents the frequency of words used in response to this question, with the larger words appearing more frequently in the responses than the smaller words. In addition to the expected frequently mentioned words: "school", "county", and "professionals", it is interesting to note the words "meetings" "relationships" and "communication" all appear very frequently in survey responses.

Figure 9: Wordle indicating most frequently used words in question: "What are the creative strategies you use to most effectively collaborate with professionals from the other system?"

Furthermore, we conducted a thematic analysis of these qualitative responses. Figure 10 highlights the primary and secondary themes that emerged. The primary themes included: Communication, Geography, and Structure.

COMMUNICATION

Respondents repeatedly addressed successful communication as key for positive collaboration across systems. Some of the primary suggestions include:

- **Regular "team" meetings:** Whether it is meetings between school and county professionals, or meeting that include everyone who is working with the child or family, the importance of regular meetings between staff was repeatedly mentioned as essential for effective collaboration. *"We have a child protection team that meets twice monthly and we are able to bring forward concerns within a confidential setting. This really helps to increase understanding of concerns and systems from both sides."*

> "Communication is the key to successful collaboration."

- **Flexibility:** Professionals acknowledge that their colleagues may have different preferences for methods or timing of communication (email vs phone; daytime vs evening) and that being flexible to those needs is important. *"I ask the [professional] how best they like me to communicate and how often they wish to meet."*

- **Consistency:** Being consistent in reaching out and responding to other professionals is especially important to collaboration. Furthermore, in some cases, the more professionals are in proximity with one another through meetings, emails, phone calls, conferences, or

professional development trainings, the stronger the relationships between professionals may become. *"The more they see me the more they know me and trust me."*

- **Understanding and Respect:** Though frustrations often arise when working across systems, professionals indicated they find collaboration works best when there is understanding and mutual respect for the complexity and challenges of these systems. *"[I] try to acknowledge that our systems have problems/limitations, [and] how can we cooperate and work around those roadblocks."*

> "I strive to respect that the focus and roles of educational staff is often different from a county worker, but we all have similar goals...to support families and children."

- **Creativity:** Many professionals valued the importance of creativity in determining the best way to meet children and families' needs. *"Consideration of alternatives or workarounds when it comes to meeting the needs of the family by looking at how flexible and pliable the team can be while understanding the system and structure."*

- **Creating and leveraging relationships:** Many professionals highlighted the importance of working to develop relationships with professionals from the other system. "Building professional working relationships with key players can expedite communication and planning." Professionals also emphasized the importance of developing relationships with administrative staff. *"Make friends with the clerical staff at the front desk. It is amazing how smoothly things can run after this occurs."*
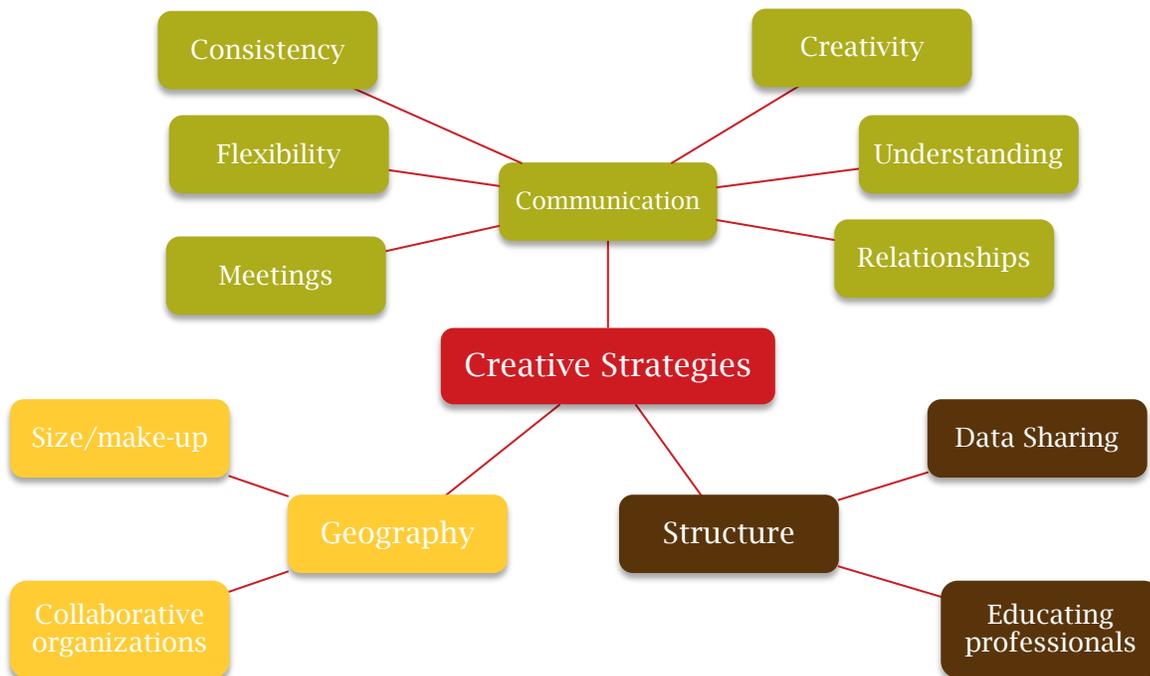

Figure 10: Thematic map of primary and secondary themes on creative strategies for promoting effective collaboration as expressed by survey respondents.

GEOGRAPHY

In many cases, professionals emphasize that differences in creative strategies stemmed from geography. In other words, professionals from different parts of the state have access to different resources and thus use different strategies based on those geographical strengths and weaknesses.

- **Collaborative organizations:** Many professionals indicated that they had access to collaborative organizations in their counties whose role was to convene meetings and provide support to the collaborative process. *"Our [county collaborative] organizes monthly community meetings at each school district…Meetings are intended to identify resources, share updates, address barriers, and consult on student/family concerns. The meetings are appreciated by many."*

- **"Do it all" approach:** Professionals from rural areas of the state emphasized that often in counties with a smaller population and fewer resources that professionals are called on to provide a multitude of services that might be outside the purview of a metropolitan service provider. While this requires skill diversity, it also reduces the challenges of and need for cross-system communication. *"In smaller agencies, we do it all."*

- **Number of counties/districts served:** Some respondents indicated they faced unique challenges due to the sheer number of counties or school districts they have to work with on a regular basis due to the structure of county lines and school districts. *"Where I work [I actually have] to work with 4 different counties which has been a challenge at times!"*

STRUCTURE

Survey respondents discussed the ways in which they dealt with the policies and procedures of the two systems that interfere with collaboration.

- *Data sharing agreements:* Many professionals indicated one of the necessary features of effective collaboration was obtaining a signed consent form from the parent that allows professionals to share information about the student openly.

- *Role as trainer:* Many professionals from both county and school services expressed that they often were put in the role of educating the other service provider about their own system and their role in the case at hand. *"Trying to educate education professionals about the realities of the legal issues involved and the limitations of the county system to intervene in certain situations."* Other professionals talked about the value of workshops and trainings to expand their understanding of their own and the other system.

- *Native American community:* The collaboration between Native American reservation human services and county services can be strained due to the manner in which the scope and authority of these systems were established. These barriers to collaboration have led to concerns about cultural insensitivity with respect to family needs, and more communication is needed to effectively address the wellbeing of children and families in the Native American community. *"This is the most vital time to interconnect services for the betterment of people seeking help."*

NEXT STEPS

These results merely scratch the surface of the complex interplay of systems and perspectives involved in successful collaboration. We are interested in further exploration of creative ideas for facilitating successful collaboration between professionals in these two systems. Thus, throughout the late summer/early fall of 2014, we are holding a series of focus groups across the state of Minnesota to gather professionals' insights and expertise on this topic.

If you are a professional working with children in the child welfare systems in either an education or county services setting in Minnesota and would like to add your voice to this conversation about building successful collaborations, **sign up for a chance to be a part of these PAID focus groups**. Recruitment will close August 31ˢᵗ, 2014, so sign up soon!

THE LESSON

Research, practice, and policy have consistently demonstrated that the education and child welfare systems must work together effectively to ensure all children receive appropriate, high-quality education and social services. The findings from this survey underscore this need, as well as provide a unique look at the day-to-day experiences of professionals in county and school systems in Minnesota. School professionals tend to experience more barriers than county professionals. Interestingly, county professionals cite the lack of knowledge of school professionals (about county systems) as a major barrier, whereas school professionals indicate time is their biggest challenge. Furthermore, both county and school professionals cited responsiveness and regular meetings as crucial for successful collaboration. In addition, professionals provided some insights into *how* effective collaboration between two systems may be instituted, fostered, and cultivated through their responses about creative strategies. On the whole, consistent, flexible and respectful communication, coupled with an appreciation for the geographic and structural complexities of systems were the most important factors for professionals in their work across systems.

The complex challenges facing child welfare and education systems are not a new story, to be sure. But everyday, professionals are making efforts to bridge gaps and overcome barriers to effectively collaborate with one another for the betterment of children and families. Our hope is that you find the valuable voices of these professionals useful in your own work to change the story of child welfare and education.

> "When children and families know that the county worker and I are on the same team and we're all out for the best interest of the child, it seems to have a positive impact on outcomes."

Learn more about the Child Welfare and Education Learning Community on the CYFC CWELC page.

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