



Findings from a Qualitative Study of Family Group Conferences Facilitated by Legal Rights Center in Partnership with Saint Paul Public Schools

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It was early May, as 15-year old Jon sat in a Family Group Conference at his new high school, surrounded by 10 adults, holding his mom's hand as she cried. After moving to St. Paul the previous summer and enduring three bouts of homelessness, Jon's stressors were overwhelming. A series of behavioral issues culminated in his involvement with a group trying to buy drugs with counterfeit money on school grounds. His school requested a transfer and Jon was now three weeks into placement at a new high school. Jon's mom had just shared that the only phone calls she was used to getting from Jon's previous school were when she needed to come pick him up because he was kicked out for the day, or she needed to come in for the reentry meeting after suspension. To be sitting in a room full of school staff, from all different types of departments, talking about Jon's strengths and the goals they had for him, was a new and different experience. Jon's mom said,

"I just didn't know how much you valued him. You hadn't even known him this long and you've taken this upon yourself to get to know him, and that just moves me to see that he has all these supports here."

During a two-hour conference, the group came up with a list of 29 strengths or achievements of Jon. They then discussed concerns related to academics, finding positive peer relationships, being on time and minimizing distractions. Mid-way through the conference, the usually shy young man was able to admit that his phone had also been distracting him at school. He said,

"Okay, well how about as part of the plan I turn my phone in every morning to [staff member], because I trust him, and I get it at the end of the day so that I'm not distracting myself?"

The group then finalized additional elements of a plan to which everyone agreed, that included Jon owning up to his responsibilities, and a clear set of strategies and resources for Jon to use when stress or anxiety was becoming unmanageable. Jon's mom and school staff committed to additional actions, such as ensuring Jon would get to school even while the family struggled with homelessness and be registered for summer school.

At a follow-up conference a month later, school staff shared that Jon was really good in seeking out his adults supports for the plan and being vulnerable with staff about what was happening. He was also doing better in history and English class, and he was registered for summer school. A few months later, Jon's mom reflected on the conference:

"I'm grateful that [the facilitator] came because it helped me to understand. She asked questions that I didn't think to ask. She broke down things that was more helpful to me so that I can help teach my son to have a better understanding for representing or, I don't know if representing is the right word, advocate for my family."

A school staff felt the role of the third party facilitator was very much key to transforming the relationship between the family and school staff because

"[the conference] was very organized but it was very much focused on [Jon] and [Jon's mom] and what they needed versus, 'this is what we are going to do for you.' And that's something that should happen all the time... I think it put him at ease how they set it up, like this is about you and helping you be successful. Typically, this about you getting school done. So it was like a pause and let's take a breath because this is a human being before he is a student... we always talk about those parents aren't involved in that they don't care. So it put on a face and it put the emotion behind, guess what, his mom does care. And if she can sit and cry in front of strangers to let us know how much she loves her son and we're all struggling, but I need to know he's being taken care of in spite of all his stuff. And she's answered every phone call [since]."

Background

Jon's story is typical of a Family Group Conference (FGC) as conducted by the Legal Rights Center's Youth: Education, Advocacy and Restorative Services program. The purpose of the FGCs are to support a smooth, uninterrupted academic transition for students who have been suspended from their home school and placed in an alternate school environment. The program aims to provide an opportunity for the student, family, school, and other supporters to develop a strengths-based plan to address concerns and identify resources that the student may need or want as a means of supporting long term, sustainable change so that the student can make amends and move forward.

Methods

In the summer of 2017, evaluators from the University of Minnesota's Healthy Youth Development • Prevention Research Center (PRC) along with staff from the Legal Rights Center (LRC) determined a need for systematic inquiry that could elicit lessons learned at the early stage of collaboration between the LRC and Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS). We employed a developmental evaluation design that purposefully aimed to elicit timely and actionable data to inform program improvements within complex systems and contexts. PRC staff conducted two case studies that included 30-45 minute interviews with the LRC facilitator, SPPS staff, parent and youth involved in two different FGC cases, as well as a qualitative analysis of LRC facilitator reflections on 11 additional cases. All cases came from families referred to the LRC program from SPPS sites in the spring of 2017. All procedures were approved by the UMN's Institutional Review Board and the SPPS Department of Research, Evaluation and Assessment.

Findings

Four key findings emerged from qualitative analyses and are shared here.

#1

All case study participants recommended that the LRC FGC program be expanded and offered to more students/families:

- Unanimous agreement that the FGC experience is better compared to what SPPS staff, parents, and students perceive as usual/alternative responses to serious behavioral incidents.
- All participants named a deep feeling of support from LRC.
- Participants felt the FGC is valuable above and beyond interventions already available to students (e.g., C3) because of its focus on relational support and the success in resetting the family-school relationship.

#2

At each stage of the conference process, there were barriers and catalysts that, when present, make the program less or more efficient, responsive and likely impact effectiveness.

Figure 1 includes an overview of the conference process and these barriers and catalysts. Barriers emerged that reduced the efficiency and responsiveness of the process. Stakeholders can work to overcome some of these barriers; others are beyond their control.

Barriers to be addressed include:

- Missing information in the referral process, resulting in delay:
 - LRC is not able to contact families until SPPS has received explicit permission from families

to share contact information with the LRC. It appears as though experience helps; of 13 referrals, only four were initially complete and each came directly from school staff members familiar with the process.


- District-school communication in the pre-conference process caused delays in getting to the conference stage (e.g., referral from district does not include school contact information for LRC staff).
- Waiting too long to refer:
 - Five cases closed prior to the initial conference and each had reached a breaking point in the school-family relationship. While two of these families left the district due to a convergence of family and school issues, three families had situations in which there may have been a higher likelihood of transition into the conference stage had referral happened earlier.
 - Several referrals were made late in the school year, which sometimes resulted in not enough time to have follow-up conferences. These cases stayed open with plans to reconvene in the new school year (labeled as “continuing next school year” in Figure 1).
- Potential misunderstandings upon hearing “Legal Rights Center”:
 - In three cases, people had an initial reaction of wondering whether involvement of the “Legal Rights Center” meant the case was moving toward juvenile justice. Although it did not prevent positive engagement in any of the cases, LRC may want to ensure they address this potential misconception in all initial communications.
- System barriers that affect students, with subsequent decisions made by people not participating in conferences:
 - In one case, a student was suspended during their plan period due to a fight. The 10-day suspension lasting until the end of the school year was imposed by an administrator who did not take part in the FGC and who made a decision despite the student’s version of events that included attempting to access the supports defined in their FGC plan but finding them all out of the building.
 - In two other instances, students whose families moved during the course of their FGC plan were asked by district offices to change schools. In both cases, advocacy by LRC and school personnel helped the students to remain in the schools that included the supports named in their FGC plan.

Despite barriers, eight cases resulted in an initial conference (labeled as “completed initial conference” in Figure 1), and all resulted in productive school-family-student interactions. Multiple factors, described below, accounted for why and how the conference was successful and potentially impactful.

Catalysts at each conference stage include:

- When referral and pre-conference goes smoothly, participants come prepared and ready to engage. Specific themes were:
 - The efficiency with which LRC contacted participants and set up the initial conference upon receiving the completed referral.
 - Initial positive interactions began with individual phone calls to each participant.
 - Asking who should be present during pre-conference work was frequently successful in ensuring that key people participated, and limited participants to those who the student could see as an ally or support.

- The conference process is, itself, likely the key catalyst, as positive family-school-student engagement consistently emerged from the process. All cases that proceeded to conference resulted in concrete accountability for past actions, systems of support for improved relationships and behavior in the future and a clear plan of action. Specific themes were:
 - Surprise at conferences being well-organized, efficient and successful in achieving honest and helpful engagement from all parties and a clear action plan.
 - Grounding the conference in *student strengths* is part of what makes this unique from alternative responses and begins to re-set the engagement narrative. Participants frequently moved from skeptical to engaged during this initial step. In all cases, school personnel knew the student well, so they could authentically engage in naming strengths.



“She actually still has [the list of strengths]. I said, ‘Let’s put it on your wall,’ and it’s still on her wall.”

-Parent
 - Allowing all parties to *share concerns* broadens conversation beyond any specific incident or series of incidents and allows all to discuss what may be influencing behavior and hear how that behavior is perceived by others:
 - Students and families frequently discussed concerns about school communication or disciplinary responses.
 - Students and families relied heavily on LRC facilitation to help them voice concerns, fully understand educational lingo and ensure their rights were emphasized.
 - Some students expressed feeling like it was the first time they have voiced concerns and had adults affirm and commit to responding to concerns.
 - In all cases except one, youth acknowledged responsibility and the need to change their behavior. All students articulated what they needed to do and supports they needed to change future behavior.
 - Discussing concerns and their context also frequently resulted in further understanding of family issues (e.g., homelessness, need for mental health resources) and sharing of resources related to the issue.
 - Previous steps in the conference created buy-in for *developing a plan*. Once all parties have felt heard and expressed their concerns, they are ready to commit to action steps:
 - Key processes include: asking the group to come up with a way to overcome each concern; nothing goes into the plan unless everybody agrees to it; everyone present will have some type of commitment.
 - Plans nearly always include behavioral and academic goals, and sometimes attendance and outside support goals. Whenever possible, also include a specific plan for youth to pursue passions.
 - Plans include specific strategies and supports youth can access as needed. These aid the follow-up process as there are specific tasks and progress points to check in about.
- Follow-up with each individual about two weeks post conference serves as a check-in and as an opportunity to hold everyone accountable for their commitments:
 - Participants felt supported and encouraged, not shamed, even when steps had not been completed.
 - Students are contacted last, allowing LRC staff to express positive feedback shared by others and affirm the youth’s effort.
 - If an updated or revised plan is needed, a follow-up conference takes place.

Figure 1
Overview of FGC process with related Catalysts and Barriers

REFERRAL

Total Referrals
13

Complete referral form
 SPPS request permission from families to share contact info with LRC

BARRIERS

Staff do not complete all referral steps and form

CATALYSTS

Referral includes family contact info and consent

PRE-CONFERENCE

Completed Pre-Conference
13

Phone call with each participant, ask for their perspective, strengths, concerns, willingness to participate, opinion of who should be present, goals for process

Staff wait too long to make referral

Participant afraid of time commitment

BARRIERS

Busy schedules or other logistical barriers for conference participants

Too frustrated to consider meeting

District (transfer committee) referrals do not name key school personnel

CATALYSTS

Taking time to hear concerns, explain process and emphasize that it will include discussion of strengths and problem solving

Timeliness

Family expects the call

CONFERENCE

Completed Initial Conference
8

Intros, roles, goals, confidentiality
 Discussion of strengths sets a positive, collaborative atmosphere that reduces barriers to engagement
 Discussion of issues, including cause of referral that provokes restorative conversations; story behind and beyond referral voiced
 Creation of Plan based on identified concerns and group commitment to overcome concerns

BARRIERS

If pre-conference barriers, then people didn't always know what to expect and more time clarifying process was needed

CATALYSTS

People who know youth well
 Prepared and on-time Process

FOLLOW UP

Successfully closed
4

Continuing next school year
4

LRC calls each participant to check-in on commitments, progress and see what additional steps are necessary

Second conference occurs when needed

Cases are closed or remain open based on unanimous opinions of participants

BARRIERS

Subsequent decisions made by people not participating in conferences

CATALYSTS

Participants respond to calls

#3

The role of the LRC as a neutral third party facilitator emerged as a key success factor.

Specific themes include:

- During the sharing concerns step, the LRC facilitator makes sure families feel heard and their rights are respected (e.g., this is frequently an issue where IEPs are involved). This helps to shift perceptions of unequal power dynamics participants noted were present in other meetings with school staff.
- At the same time, the LRC facilitator works hard to ensure everyone feels respected.
- School staff were impressed by productive use of short amount of time and valued ending with a concrete plan.
- LRC shares responsibility, as facilitators often help family connect to resources outside of school system, which school staff say they sometimes are unable to do.

#4

A key ingredient leading to program satisfaction and potential impact is the unique combination of support and accountability that the FGC program provides to students, families and school personnel. Key shifts occurred within each actor that resulted in re-engaged relationships and shared perspectives.

In seven of eight conferences, LRC was able to contact the family at follow-up and discuss progress, concerns and whether additional conferences were necessary. In all cases where follow-up contact was made, multiple parties were able to articulate students' progress, indicating a high level of effectiveness. In the table below are examples of support and accountability themes noted by participants. Quotes illustrate how a participant's mindset shifted as a result.

	Support	Accountability
School Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Take part in more positive and collaborative ways to interact with students/families around behavior, academic and attendance concerns ■ Recognize the value of positive support to families: <i>"...this is one of those things that people are afraid of because it does take time. Which is fine...These are people's lives."</i> – SPPS staff ■ Increased willingness to differentiate student accountability for progress in behavior, similar to how academic progress is treated, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Allow youth time, space, resources to seek out adult when needed ◆ Witness new ability of youth to own mistakes, recognize and repair harm when necessary ◆ Start afresh when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hear parents/students name ways they perceive school has caused them harm (e.g., 45 day transfers, removing from gifted classes, excessive disciplinary responses that fail to account for context) ■ Acknowledge that family-school relationship is broken when primary interactions have been communication about challenging behavior ■ Experience a rebalance of power between family and schools through skillful facilitation of LRC ■ Held accountable in the plan to provide appropriate support for students ■ Recognize that school and district policies still can get in the way of support (excessive punishments for additional behavioral incidents; asking students to move schools based on housing)

(Table, continued)

	Support	Accountability
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice new ways of problem solving with students and school staff Express surprise by amount of support offered to their family from school and other sources Establish a restored relationship to school – several parents went from wanting nothing to do with the school to expressing new respect and appreciation for received support Experience the opportunity to communicate that they and their child are whole humans, often struggling with major issues like homelessness, family break-up, abuse, trauma, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Witness another side of youth and consider how home affects school behavior: “[I realized] it affected them a whole lot. And then not being able to process the information or the situation in a healthy way.” – Mother Move from feeling like an adversary of the school who must advocate for child to an empowered partner of the school, who together hold responsibility for supporting student to be successful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Now more willing to be responsive to school-initiated communication
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hearing multiple adults naming their strengths helps youth accept that others see them as more than their past behavior; youth begin to see themselves that way, too Takes part in discussion of full context surrounding incidents, including barriers that affect behavior Begins to express vulnerability: “<i>Being able to connect the vulnerability that he clearly experiences with mom while at school allowed him to more fully be himself in school.</i>” – LRC facilitator Becomes aware of new resources for support at school. Helps define how those supports can be accessed to fulfill plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept responsibility for behavior Continue to experience disciplinary consequences, but these are aligned with different re-entry and support process Witness and experience parents and school staff on same page about expectations and supports Interact in a positive way with multiple school staff to acknowledge, discuss and problem solve to prevent recurring behavior issues

Discussion

Based on findings from case studies, we recommend additional expansion of the FGC program that is aligned with efforts to improve program efficiency. SPPS school-level and district staff should work closely with LRC to reduce barriers reported here, especially those related to referrals and pre-conferencing. In addition, LRC might consider collaborating with SPPS to find ways to implement systems (such as flagging student records involved in the LRC FGC program) and policies (such as requiring involvement of conference participants in subsequent decisions affecting participating students) that would allow students and families to participate in the full extent and intent of the FGC program.

While every case that reached the conference stage resulted in improved family-school-student trust and perceived support, this finding is not meant to imply that some students did not continue to struggle with challenging behavior. Even in cases where students struggled, however, families, students, school personnel and the LRC facilitator talked about important progress that students had made and expressed hopefulness about continued transformation related to their behavior and school engagement in the future. These consistent findings regarding positive program impact in the short term warrant additional evaluation efforts. Such efforts should include continued assessment of staff, family, and student outcomes if the program is expanded and especially follow-up of outcomes that occur over the course of the year(s) following program involvement.