

It's all about results

His simple, jargon-free approaches have already helped individual councils, and now the US performance management expert is being asked to galvanise the reshaping of children's services. David Brindle meets him

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The connection between fixing a leaking roof and implementing the Every Child Matters (ECM) programme may not be immediately obvious. But US performance management expert Mark Friedman will today tell children's services' leaders that the two challenges are essentially the same. Not that society's ills will be put right by a few tiles or rolls of duct tape, but the problem-solving techniques are fundamentally identical.

Friedman's approach - simple, common sense, jargon-free - may be exactly what is needed to kickstart the ECM agenda where take-up is still sluggish. A crisis of confidence in the programme in Downing Street may have been headed off, but too many schools have yet to buy the idea that working collaboratively with other agencies to improve children's wellbeing can improve their academic attainment. Indeed, say enthusiasts, such collaboration is essential to it.

Addressing the national children's and adult services conference in Brighton a fortnight ago, education secretary Alan Johnson said ECM was as important for schools as had been the seminal 1944 Butler Act. Yet research published at the same event painted a gloomy picture of schools' engagement with the programme, suggesting that as few as one in 10 was "actively" involved with children and young people's strategic partnerships, children and young people's plans or children's trusts.

The research, part of the annual survey of trends in education by the National Foundation for Educational Research, was carried out for the Local Government Association and based on survey returns this summer by 370 primary and 1,155 secondary schools in England. Although there was a further rise in the number of schools offering "extended" services such as breakfast clubs and community activities - though no change in the small numbers offering health, social care or public library services - few respondents were enthusiastic. Asked to gauge the main advantages of extended schools, the most popular answer was "very little or none".

Friedman is unsurprised: across the globe, he says, professionals cling to their silos, fragmenting services and trying to force users of services to fit into artificial categories. And teachers are worse than most. "We are fighting decades,

centuries of narrow thinking about this," he says. "People are scared: it's a frightening thing to step out of your traditional role and say: 'I'm going to pitch in here.' We're used to protecting our turf, working these narrow channels, but the ironic thing is that if you get a community working together, the school's performance will improve."

Schools that turn their back on collaborative working, that cut themselves off from the community, will end up harming themselves, says Friedman, who was briefly a maths teacher. But he understands their reluctance. "The history of this work is that social agencies would come and ask the schools to do their job for them, basically, and the schools would say: 'Woah, my job is to teach kids and I don't have the extra capacity. Get out of here.' The way this is happening now is different: it's agencies coming to the schools and saying: 'The kids in your school who are failing are the kids in juvenile hall [court] who are failing and the kids in the health system who are failing. If we work together, these kids are going to do better in your school.'"

Shuffling boxes

The ECM agenda is a singular opportunity to reshape children's services, he thinks. "If that process of reshaping is simply shuffling boxes and reorganising and changing how people check for compliance, there won't be very much benefit from it. But if it really means that agencies and people work together differently across systems, then there is a chance for some significant gain."

Friedman, who is based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but works in seven countries outside the US, is in Britain at the invitation of the local government Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the CfBT Education Trust and a number of local authorities. In addition to today's national seminar in London, he is giving eight regional presentations this week and next and expects, through them, to reach about half all English children's services departments. Some 40 local authorities are already using his ideas across a range of services, he believes.

Anyone expecting a full-on, close-that-deal motivational speaker will be disappointed, or more likely relieved. Friedman is thoughtful and self-effacing, a career public servant who fell into his current line of work through frustration with management fads. ("I was in government for almost 20 years and the victim of every stupid idea that anyone came up with ... in my experience they were almost all a waste of time.") His ideas are free to public and not-for-profit agencies via his websites, which handily also offer a selection of his musical compositions, computer art, a diet plan and various recipes involving green chilli.

In essence, his approach is based on a set of tools termed a "results accountability" framework and on "getting from talk to action quickly", something that no doubt has resonance at the DfES, under pressure as it is to demonstrate

hard evidence of ECM's efficacy. The framework starts from the desired end result - stopping the roof leaking or, say, reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy - and works backwards to a range of options for action.

This stress on outcomes first is a crucial principle for British professionals to grasp, says Friedman. "There is a tendency here to jump direct to the service system, to assume that the system is going to solve the problem: if only we could beat the bureaucrats harder and get them to deliver faster and better services, then teen pregnancy, juvenile crime, all of these things will go away. That simply isn't the history. You can get the service system spinning like a top, but outcomes for children and families get worse."

Skipping ahead to focus on services is a natural habit of politicians, he thinks. Which is why he is especially pleased that the US state of Connecticut has incorporated his framework in the budget planning process for a big environmental scheme. On the whole, he is suspicious of governments that pour money into programmes upfront: the sensible course, he says, is to adopt a strategy and then identify and plug funding gaps as you go along. "If you put money too soon on the table, you have a food fight."

So has the British government blundered by putting billions on the table for ECM? "I don't really know, I don't know enough about it to say if that is true," says Friedman. He is equally non-committal, or maybe diplomatic, on the split of local authority social services between children's and adults' departments. In the US, he observes, the interests of children and families are considered indivisible. On the whole, however, he despises structural reorganisations: "When I was in government we had a reorganisation every year for 19 years - none of them accomplished a damn thing as far as I was concerned and they all cost a lot of money."

Simplicity and accessibility

He has worked in the UK, on and off, for some seven years and his advocates applaud the simplicity and accessibility of his approach. His book, *Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough*, includes an account of how results accountability helped North Lincolnshire council turn round its failing housing service. He has also worked long-term at Portsmouth and Rob Hutchinson, the city's former social services director and now an IDeA associate, has been instrumental in organising the current visit.

Friedman is anxious to stress that he does not come armed with any solutions, least of all magic ones. "My view is that budgeting is about choices," he says. "If you use results accountability methods, you will have better choices. It doesn't actually mean you will make better choices - you may still make the stupid choices you have always made - but you will have better choices and that's pretty much all you can ask from a planning system."

- Curriculum vitae

Age 57.

Status Second marriage, three children.

Lives Santa Fe, New Mexico, US.

Education Marple-Newtown senior high school, Pennsylvania; Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, BA in maths.

Career 1996: founder and director, Fiscal Policy Studies Institute, Santa Fe, New Mexico; 1991-95: senior associate, Centre for the Study of Social Policy, Washington DC; 1972-91: chief financial officer, Maryland Department of Human Resources, Maryland; 1970-71: high school maths teacher, Centennial School District, Warminster, Pennsylvania.

Publications Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough (2005).

Interests Classical music, hiking, cooking.

- More information at www.resultsaccountability.com
- Details of Friedman's regional tour at www.idea.gov.uk
- Any comments on this article? Write to society@guardian.co.uk