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## The Bill Factory: Lots of paper, few results

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Thick as we are in throes of another state budget crisis, it can be difficult to see any upside. But if necessity is the mother of invention, surely it's the mother of efficiency too.

While there's much focus on how much the state can and cannot spend, it's equally important to focus on how we can maximize the public good done with each dollar. A big part of the solution should be efficiency, and state leaders can learn from efficiencies created at the local level.

Yet efficiency is often perceived as the ugly stepsister of innovation. It's human nature to be more excited about the next new thing and its potential impact than about getting people in the same room, on the same page, and changing how they do business.

But as the recession has driven home, the best results can come from reexamining and reinventing the bird in hand – also a species of innovation.

This was the approach we began in Oakland a decade ago because too many children were dropping out of school and under some form of incarceration, probation or suspension – cut off from learning and other support systems.

We needed a fundamental shift in how social services serve young people, so the Safe Passages/Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority was born. Our principles are simple: Bring together those who make decisions about public spending for youth programs (elected officials, local school

district leaders, city and county health agencies, corrections, Head Start, etc.) to coordinate efforts and leverage everyone's capacities.

Treat children as integrated wholes, accounting for their intellectual and emotional health, time in school, but also their lives within families and neighborhoods.

Measure the results of services and adjust strategies for maximum impact.

Joint Powers Authorities (JPA) aren't new. They're frequently applied to transportation and infrastructure projects that involve multiple agencies, like building bridges or highways.

What's rare is applying them to social services, and Oakland is one of the first and few cities to have adopted this approach to serve youth.

The collaboration embodied by this model produces services that wrap around youth and their families in a familiar setting: their school. Students and families are at the center as a wide variety of social services are seamlessly delivered.

Positive results soon followed. When collaborating agencies jointly developed a violence prevention program and social skills curriculum for middle-schoolers, participating schools reported a dramatic 72 percent reduction in suspensions.

Cross-pollinating strategies led to the creation of alternatives to traditional suspension policies. These alternatives keep children engaged and under the watchful eye of school officials instead of banish-

ing them off campus, where they're more likely to get into trouble.

We're also finding significant results among families with young children. Sixty-three percent of parents who took part in a program aimed at reducing violence in the lives of infants and toddlers said they were spending an hour or more with their children on education activities, compared to 27 percent before the parenting counseling and workshops.

There have also been fiscal improvements. The model has enabled Oakland and Alameda County to leverage public and private dollars, at a time when both are painfully scarce. In 2008-09, the JPA pooled \$475,000 in agency funding and turned these partner contributions into a direct services budget of \$16.8 million.

The JPA model offers a platform that's attractive to a broad range of public and private funders because it guarantees collaboration across the major jurisdictions that serve youth. For example, The Atlantic Philanthropies invested \$15 million to implement the Oakland middle school Elev8 Initiative in 2008.

We're committed to sharing our model and hope that other regions consider adopting similar approaches, which can be applied to a range of public funding for youth services. Doing so would ensure that, in times of scarcity, we have as large an impact as possible with the resources available.

Otherwise, we risk saving money and losing a generation.