

Leave No Child Behind

Creation of prevention chains in North Rhine-Westphalia's towns and cities





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With 18 million residents, North Rhine-Westphalia is Germany's most populous state. In 2012, the State Government decided to focus its preventive welfare policy on the safe upbringing of children.

We are talking about three specific objectives:

- ◆ Every child must have equal opportunities for their future, irrespective of social background.
- ◆ Investing in children's future has the dual effect of providing long-term relief on public funds and satisfying the demand for skilled labour.
- ◆ Healthy upbringing, community participation and the best possible education are crucial to promoting and strengthening our society in the spirit of solidarity and democracy.

Background

Local councils utilise government funds to organise a complex system of support and services for children and families. This includes education, health care, welfare and urban development. Often, however, the system is hampered by jurisdictional constraints. Sometimes there is a lack of cooperation between the various sectors, not enough knowledge of other schemes and also a poor communication culture.

Preventive policy needs to manage to overcome systemic limitations and jurisdictional boundaries and provide non-stop support to children. North Rhine-Westphalia responds to this challenge by the establishment of council-run prevention chains. Following a four-year pilot project, the scheme is due to be rolled out across the state in 2017.



What are prevention chains?

Council-run prevention chains cover the period from pregnancy to the transition into working life. They combine support services across sectoral lines and along life-course trajectories, and are operated by public institutions and community organisations. For this to work, all players need to be supportive of the shared cooperative approach.

Within the prevention chains, the services offered by the players are synchronised and coordinated with a view to sustained assistance and support. An extra focus is on transitional periods such as the changeover from crèche to school.

Which are the conditions essential to successful prevention?

1. Backing from the senior ranks of local government

Cooperation among the various council services within a local government area will only happen if desired by council leaders. It is vital to closely involve the workforce in the process to flesh out the strategy. A combined top-down and bottom-up approach is needed here.

The result must be a concept that is backed throughout the council workforce, plus management and politicians, and including the numerous organisations and individuals ready to provide – often voluntary – help to children and families. They, too, must be brought along during the process.

2. Showing proof of effectiveness

Strategic guidance is provided by neighbourhood data to advise on where the needs are and where resources need to be focussed. Systems can be put in place to monitor the effectiveness of measures over an extended period. At the same time, it is important to take singular aspects (such as migration) and the feedback from skilled personnel into consideration.

3. Concentrating services on where parents and children are

Support services need to be found at the places where all parents or children will have to go sooner or later – obstetric centres or midwives, daycare facilities, schools and government offices. This is necessary to ensure non-discriminatory access and prevent families from being tagged with epithets like 'vulnerable', 'uneducated' or 'disadvantaged'. Where it is not possible to go the other way, services must come to the parents. Nearly anywhere in North Rhine-Westphalia, young parents will receive a 'welcoming visit' from council officials who bring valuable information for parents and their child.

4. Participation

To provide parents, children and teenagers with support and assistance, it is important to know their needs. This works only where there is proper participation. For prevention to work, the services on offer must dovetail with individual requirements and life situations. Low-threshold service provision at an early stage and tailored to individual situations are the key characteristics of good and useful programmes.

5. Pulling together

State and local governments in North Rhine-Westphalia pull together to give children better opportunities for the future. A key role is also set aside for the civil society as well as those national and international programmes that benefit the local level. Cases in point include the European Social Fund and Germany's National Prevention Act (PrävG).

6. Dealing with different things differently

Support services must be introduced where they are most urgently needed. To reduce the impact of poverty, such as educational shortcomings or poor health, neighbourhood-based statistics need to be gathered as the basis for local fine-tuning.

The State Government has to steer most of the funding towards those areas where many disadvantaged families live. Crèches in deprived neighbourhoods, for instance, receive quite generous grants.

The EU and national governments, too, are called upon to centre more of their resources on the effort to fight poverty and its effects. This is not only a question of social fairness but makes economic sense as well.

Facts and Figures

How does the State Government support local authorities?

The State Government of North Rhine-Westphalia has asked a research institute, Münster-based ISA, to work with councils to develop prevention chains.

For each council area, bespoke approaches have to be developed which depend on size, infrastructure and other circumstances. To this end, ISA has developed a quality circle to identify and describe prevention standards.

There is no 'one size fits all' solution. Simply transposing one council's model to another area is not a regular option.



Evaluation

Leave No Child Behind is an initiative of the State Government of North Rhine-Westphalia and the Bertelsmann Foundation, the latter being responsible for evaluating the programme. Various studies have been carried out to identify the right management structures, explore fiscal and budgetary effects, conduct family surveys, analyse microdata and collect neighbourhood-based monitoring statistics.

Funding

This funding of Leave No Child Behind comprises 50 per cent contribution from the European Social Fund and 50 per cent contribution from the State Government, the Bertelsmann Foundation and local authorities.

The road ahead

Evaluation findings and feedback from participating councils have led to the programme being extended to all parts of North Rhine-Westphalia. Leave No Child Behind has also been adopted by the Austrian State of Vorarlberg.

The initiative has bipartisan support and is widely renowned amongst experts. Numerous examples from towns and cities show that it is well on the way to becoming a success story.

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