

Chapter 9

EFFECTS ON NEIGHBOURHOODS AND SCHOOLS

Better Beginnings sites worked towards improving the milieu in which their children and families lived that included the local neighbourhood. In the older cohort communities, initiatives and program activities in the schools were also part of their mandate. In this chapter, as in others, first the measures or questions are described, then the results (both overall and site-specific, when applicable).

NEIGHBOURHOOD RATINGS

Improving the quality of the local neighbourhoods in which children and their families live and increasing parents' feelings of involvement in and cohesion with their communities are important Better Beginnings goals. Parents were asked a series of questions about their use of community resources, sense of community cohesion, and perceptions of their neighbourhood. In addition, statistics from local police and local Children's Aid Societies were gathered to compare the Better Beginnings communities with the surrounding areas.

Parent Ratings of the Neighbourhood

To examine their use of community resources, parents were asked at every data collection point except when their child was 3 months old, "Have you or your child participated in any of the following activities in the past 12 months: toy-lending library; library; playground or recreation program; sports, crafts or clubs; parent/child drop-in centre; or a parent resource centre?"

Parents were also asked a series of questions about the degree of involvement shown by people in their neighbourhoods. These seven items were drawn from a larger measure devised by Buckner (1986). Examples include their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, their willingness to get involved to improve the neighbourhood, feelings of pride in being a community member, and feelings that different races and cultures were accepted in their neighbourhood. Each item is rated 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). These questions about community cohesion were asked at every data collection point except for one, at 18 months in the younger cohort sites.

Third, parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with: their own housing; the number of parks and playgrounds in their neighbourhood; and safety walking on the street at night. Also included was a general neighbourhood satisfaction scale consisting of five questions (e.g., "How would you describe the other people who live around here as neighbours? How about safety from crime in your home or building?") The fifth question rated on a scale from 0 to 10 is, "All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with this neighbourhood as a place to live?" These questions were drawn from the Quality of Urban Life surveys conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University (1977, 1979 & 1981).

A final set of questions consisted of parents' perceptions of the prevalence of alcohol and drug use, violence, and theft in the neighbourhood. Parents were asked these five questions when their children were 3 and 48 months old in the younger cohort sites and when children were in SK and Grade 2 in the older cohort sites.

Results of Parent Ratings of the Neighbourhood

Younger Cohort. No significant consistent pattern of change was found in the younger cohort sites for parents' use of community resources, community cohesion, or perceived deviance in the neighbourhood. However, there was a significant improvement in ratings of the safety of walking in the neighbourhood in the baseline-focal comparison ($p < .01$, $es = .40$).¹ Results from the longitudinal analysis were consistent in direction. One negative finding, decreased contact with friends, resulted from very large increases reported by a few parents in Peterborough.

Older Cohort. For use of community resources, parents reported greater use of playground or recreation programs in both the baseline-focal and longitudinal comparisons ($p < .05$ for each design, $es = .28$ for the baseline-focal, 1.29 for the longitudinal design). On the community cohesion items, there were no significant findings. Parents' ratings of their satisfaction with their dwelling showed significant increases for both baseline-focal ($p < .05$, $es = .25$) and longitudinal comparisons ($p < .01$, $es = .43$). Also, ratings on the general neighbourhood satisfaction scale rose longitudinally ($p < .05$, $es = .33$), with baseline-focal results consistent in direction. There were no overall consistent changes in parents' perceptions of deviance in the neighbourhood.

Site-Specific Findings for Parent Ratings of the Neighbourhood

Parent reports for Guelph, Kingston and Toronto showed broad patterns of change, running across perceptions of deviance (alcohol and drug use, violence and theft) in the neighbourhood, community cohesion, and other conditions (the condition of homes, safety walking on the street at night, and the general quality of the neighbourhood).

Guelph. At Guelph, parent reports showed a pattern of improvement, running across this broad set of ratings. Of the 30 statistical tests, 24 were positive, 5 negative, and one showed no difference in the first two decimal places. Four tests were individually significant, all positive.

Kingston. At Kingston a similar broad pattern of improvement appeared, with 25 of 30 statistical tests positive, against 5 negative. Eight tests were individually significant, 7 of them positive.

Toronto. At Toronto, a broad pattern appeared, but showing unfavourable changes. Of the 30 statistical tests, 26 were negative, and 4 positive. Four tests were individually significant, all of them negative. Explanations for the negative pattern at Toronto are not apparent from its programming. This site has the greatest multicultural diversity, and the highest percentage of single-parent families, and the lowest mean incomes of the urban Better Beginnings sites. Combined with major revisions to welfare support, these factors may have overwhelmed any ability of Better Beginnings to improve residents' perceptions of their neighbourhood.

Police Statistics

For another view of the neighbourhood, police statistics were obtained on vandalism (more technically, on wilful damage) and on breaking and entering. Of course, apparent changes in levels of crime can take place because of changes in the frequency with which events are reported to the police and recorded in their database, so it is wise to approach such statistics with care. Still, they provide the only readily available source of information on crime levels, and both vandalism and breaking and entering are

¹ For an explanation of how effect sizes were calculated, see page 6-21.

common enough to avoid concerns about small numbers producing great instability in the figures from year to year. For most of the Better Beginnings sites, data from the Better Beginnings area were compared to data for of the surrounding area for the years 1990 to 1998.

Results for Police Statistics

For each urban site, vandalism (wilful damage) and break-and-enter figures were obtained over the course of the study, and as far back as computerized records were available. Results for a demonstration site were compared with those for the rest of the jurisdiction within which they were located. The numbers involved, over several years, ranged from a minimum of just over 4,300 for breaking-and-entering at Guelph to a maximum of over 235,000 at Highfield and Toronto for vandalism. With numbers so large, statistical significance could be achieved with very modest effects.

In the case of vandalism, two sites (Highfield and Toronto) where the numbers were at a maximum, showed favourable differences significant at .01. The other sites showed favourable differences, but even with the numbers involved these were not significant. Although, overall, these results appear favourable, they are not of great magnitude. The largest effect, at Highfield, was .02.

For breaking-and-entering, Highfield again showed a significant favourable difference, but Kingston and Sudbury showed significant unfavourable differences. Since there are inconsistent results for breaking-and-entering, no clear Better Beginnings effect can be defined.

Involvement with the Local Children s Aid Society (CAS)

One of the interests in Better Beginnings, Better Futures is the extent to which it can lessen participants reliance on help from formal service providers. The literature suggests that several of the prevention program models present at various Better Beginnings, Better Futures demonstration sites have the potential to reduce reliance on formal child welfare services - for example, home health visitors (Olds, 1997), in-home supports (Cameron & Vanderwoerd, 1997), child care (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Weikart & Schweinhart, 1997) and mutual aid/community support networks (Cameron, Hayward, & Mamatis, 1992). There is also considerable evidence that providing high levels of multiple supports to families often reduces the need for more intrusive and expensive child welfare interventions (Cameron & Vanderwoerd, 1997). Many of these programs have focused on families where the risk of breakdown and child abuse or neglect was considered to be high (Cameron, O Reilly, Laurendeau, & Chamberland, 1999a; Nelson, Laurendeau, Chamberland, & Peirson, 1999). The evidence is less clear as to whether programs involving general populations attract participants for whom the risk of entry to the formal child welfare system is imminent.

This discussion examines: 1) the number of open child protection/family service cases in a year from the demonstration community; and 2) the number of children-in-care. A child protection/family service case is opened when, after an initial review, an ongoing case is given to a family service/child protection worker in a Children s Aid Society. This does not indicate the level of service received, but is a measure of whether entry to formal child welfare is increasing or decreasing. The number of children-in-care in a given year does not measure the amount of time in care, nor the type of placement setting. Child placements are of interest because they indicate family breakdowns requiring more intrusive intervention and are very expensive. In our analysis, the open child protection/family service case measure is generally more useful because the larger sample in each community allows clearer definition of trends.

In some communities, the catchment area for the project is quite large in relation to project resources. Cornwall has been excluded from our discussion since this demonstration project is open to families of

francophone primary school students from across the city. In Kingston, child protection/family service cases from the demonstration community represent about 38% to 48% of all the child welfare cases from Frontenac County, the society's catchment area. We wonder if a modest demonstration project should be expected to influence neighbourhood indicators for this large a geographic area and population.

When impacts from prevention programs have been found on child welfare service use, they have generally been linked with level and duration of program participation. Data available to us include all families involved with the child welfare system, inevitably including many who have had minimal or no involvement with Better Beginnings, Better Futures.

Since we cannot control for level and quality of program involvement, it is not possible to conclusively attribute any observed changes to Better Beginnings, Better Futures rather than other explanations.

Figures 9.1 and 9.2 show how the proportion of total open child protection/family service cases and children-in-care placements in the demonstration communities changed over time. They indicate whether use of child welfare services changed in these communities after the creation of Better Beginnings, Better Futures in comparison with other areas served by the same child welfare agencies. If Better Beginnings, Better Futures lessened reliance on formal child welfare services, then a smaller proportion of total agency cases and placements would be from the demonstration communities.

Results for Involvement With Local CAS

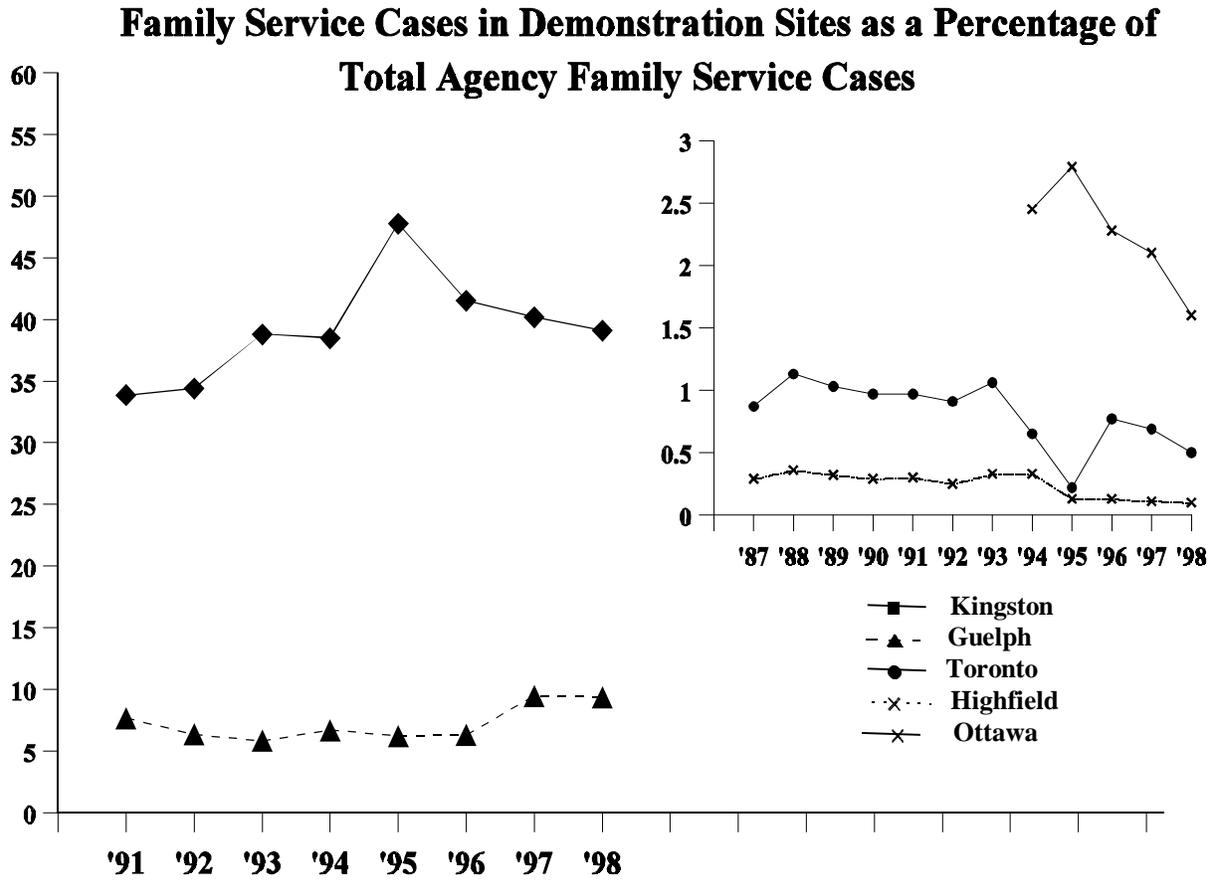
As shown in Figure 9.1, for family services case openings, the Highfield and Toronto Better Beginnings sites show declines in relation to the rest of Toronto. The drop at Highfield between 1994 and 1995 is sharp at $p < .01$, but the effect size is modest at .05. For Toronto, after a relatively stable period prior to Better Beginnings, there is a drop after 1993, so that all later years fall below the earlier plateau ($p < .01$). At Ottawa, after a one-year rise, there is a steady decline ($p < .01$). For Guelph and Kingston, logistic regression models show upward significant trends because of the large numbers involved, but the graph shows relatively modest increases.

In the case of children-in-care, shown in Figure 9.2, for Toronto the graph shows no clear trend. For Guelph and Kingston, after a one-year rise, there is a downward trend, but with the small number of children-in-care, the trend at Guelph is not statistically significant. For Kingston, however, the decline is significant at $p < .01$. At Highfield, the numbers in care are small enough that the graph moves about a good bit from year to year. If we calculate a trend line for 1987 to 1993, and another for 1993 to 1998, the two differ significantly at $p < .01$, suggesting that Better Beginnings may have moderated what had been a rising number of children-in-care, but the effect size is modest at .06.

SCHOOL RATINGS

It is at school that Better Beginnings older cohort children spend considerable time during the day. It was deemed important to gain parent and teacher assessments of aspects of school life, involvement and communication in order to describe them and detect changes that might be linked to Better Beginnings initiatives. Three sources of information were analyzed concerning the schools in the older cohort Better Beginnings sites and comparison sites: parent ratings, teacher ratings, and the Principals' September Reports concerning special education instruction.

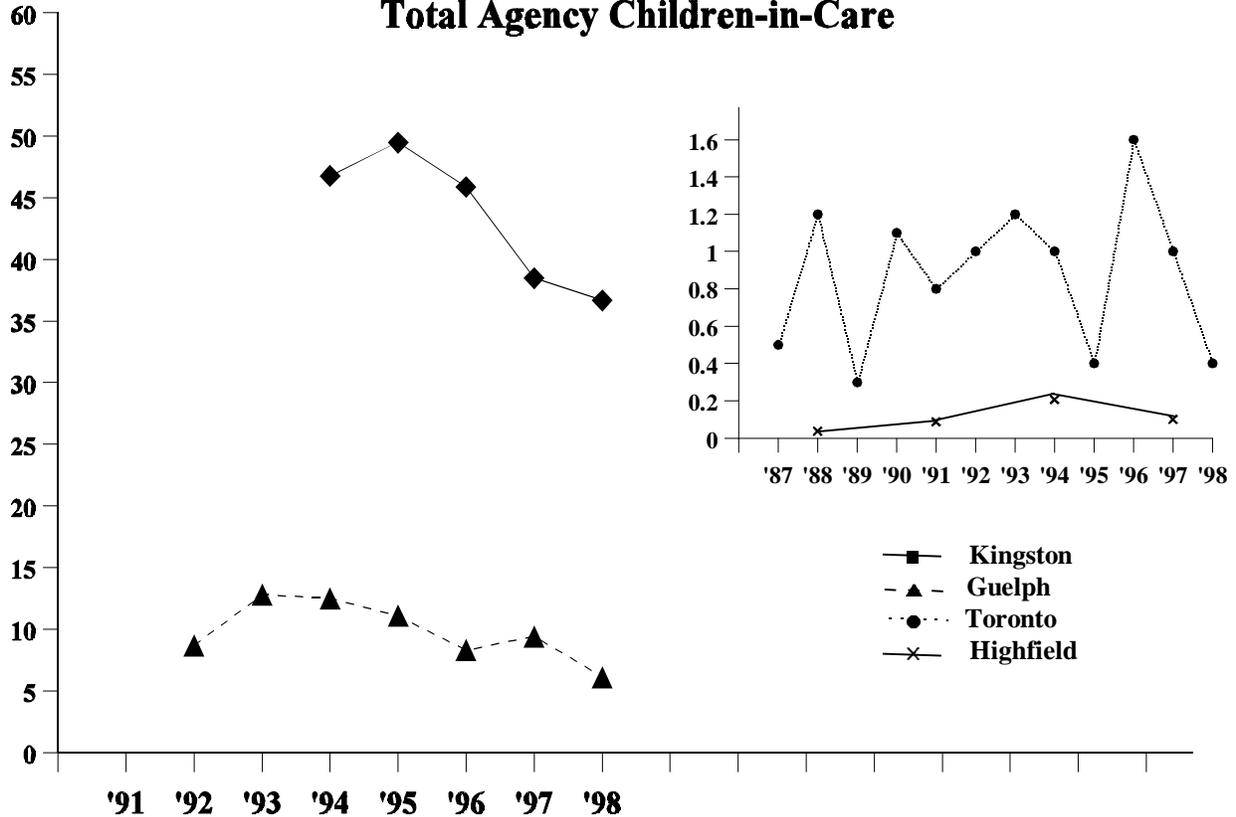
Figure 9.1



The percentage of family service cases in Better Beginnings sites declined in Highfield, Ottawa, and Toronto. The percentage of family service cases moderately increased for Guelph and Kingston. All of these trends were statistically significant.

Figure 9.2

Children-in-Care in Demonstration Sites as a Percentage of Total Agency Children-in-Care



The percentage of children-in-care placements in Better Beginnings sites gradually declined in Guelph from 1993 to 1998 and significantly declined in Kingston from 1995 to 1998 ($p < .01$). The percentage of children-in-care in the Better Beginnings Toronto site showed no consistent trend over time. Due to the small number of cases in Highfield, a moving three year average was plotted. Despite the small numbers, there was a significant reversal of an upward trend ($p < .05$).

Parents Perceptions

When their children were in Grades 2 and 3, parents were asked a series of questions about their children's school, their relationship with their children's teachers and their involvement with the school. These questions were based on similar questions asked of teachers in the NLSCY. The four school ratings include *Most children in this school enjoy being there* and *School spirit is very high*; parents rate these items on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 is strongly agree and 4 is strongly disagree. Examples of the 11 parents' ratings of their relationship with their child's teacher and involvement in the school include *You enjoy talking with your child's teacher*, *You feel your child's teacher pays attention to your suggestions*, and *You volunteer at your child's school*. Parents can rate these 11 items from 0 (not at all) to 4 (a great deal).

Results for Parents' Ratings of Child's School and Relationship with Teacher

There were no overall consistent improvements in parents' ratings of their children's school or teachers either in the baseline-focal or longitudinal comparisons.

Site-Specific Findings for Parents' Ratings of Child's School and Relationship with Teacher

Highfield. Parents in the Highfield Better Beginnings site showed significant improvements in ratings of the relationship with their children's teacher and involvement in the school. This result was particularly strong when ratings of the teacher made by parents of Grade 2 children in 1993 were compared to those from 1997/8 ($p < .01$, $es = .56$), but also ratings improved more from Grades 2 to 3 in the Highfield Better Beginnings site than in its comparison site, Etobicoke ($p < .05$, $es = .47$). Similar but smaller effects were present in ratings of the child's school ($p < .05$, $es = .37$ for the baseline-focal comparison).

Principals' Reports of Special Education Instruction

The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training collects information from the principal of every school in Ontario concerning registration numbers, types of special education programs and number of students receiving instruction for various types of special education needs. This information is provided for the school as a whole and does not distinguish one grade level from another. Thus, although the older cohort projects of Better Beginnings emphasize programs for children registered in JK through Grade 3, the Principal's Report data cover all grades in a school, usually JK to Grade 6 or Grade 8. Despite this limitation, this information may be a way to monitor general trends and changes in certain school characteristics.

For this current report, information on special education services from the Principal's Reports from 1992 to 1997 was analyzed for the schools in each of the older cohort sites of the Better Beginnings Project, as well as for schools in the comparison sites: Cornwall and Ottawa-Vanier (French), Highfield and other Etobicoke schools, Sudbury and Ottawa-Vanier. These different analyses were done on data pertaining to children in all grades who were receiving special education instruction: 1) the percentage of all children identified with exceptionalities, regardless of the type of exceptionality classification; 2) the percentage of children with behavioural problems; and 3) the percentage of children with learning disabilities (the latter two types are subsets of the first).

Results for Principals' Reports of Special Education Instruction

The picture that emerges from analysis of the Principals' Reports is that schools in the Better Beginnings sites showed decreases in the percentage of special education students and those in schools in the two

comparison site schools sets showed increases over the period from 1992 to 1997 (Figure 9.3). The largest relative decreases occurred in the Cornwall and Highfield schools ($p < .01$ for each site). Cornwall was the only site which showed a consistent pattern of significant decreases for all three categories (students requiring special education instruction overall, students with behavioural problems, and students with learning disabilities).

School Climate

A School Climate Questionnaire was administered to the teachers of SK to Grade 3 in each of the three older cohort demonstration sites (10 schools in the first year) and the two comparison sites (13 schools in the first year) beginning in 1994/5 when the focal cohort group of children was in SK through to 1997/8 when the children were in Grade 3. The survey was designed to provide a description of the school environments in schools attended by the Better Beginnings older cohort children compared to schools in the comparison sites. The comparisons do not allow for an evaluation of how school climate has changed from before Better Beginnings programs were in place to after programs were in place, because the first data collection point was the spring of 1995 which was approximately one and a half years after Better Beginnings programs had commenced in the demonstration sites.

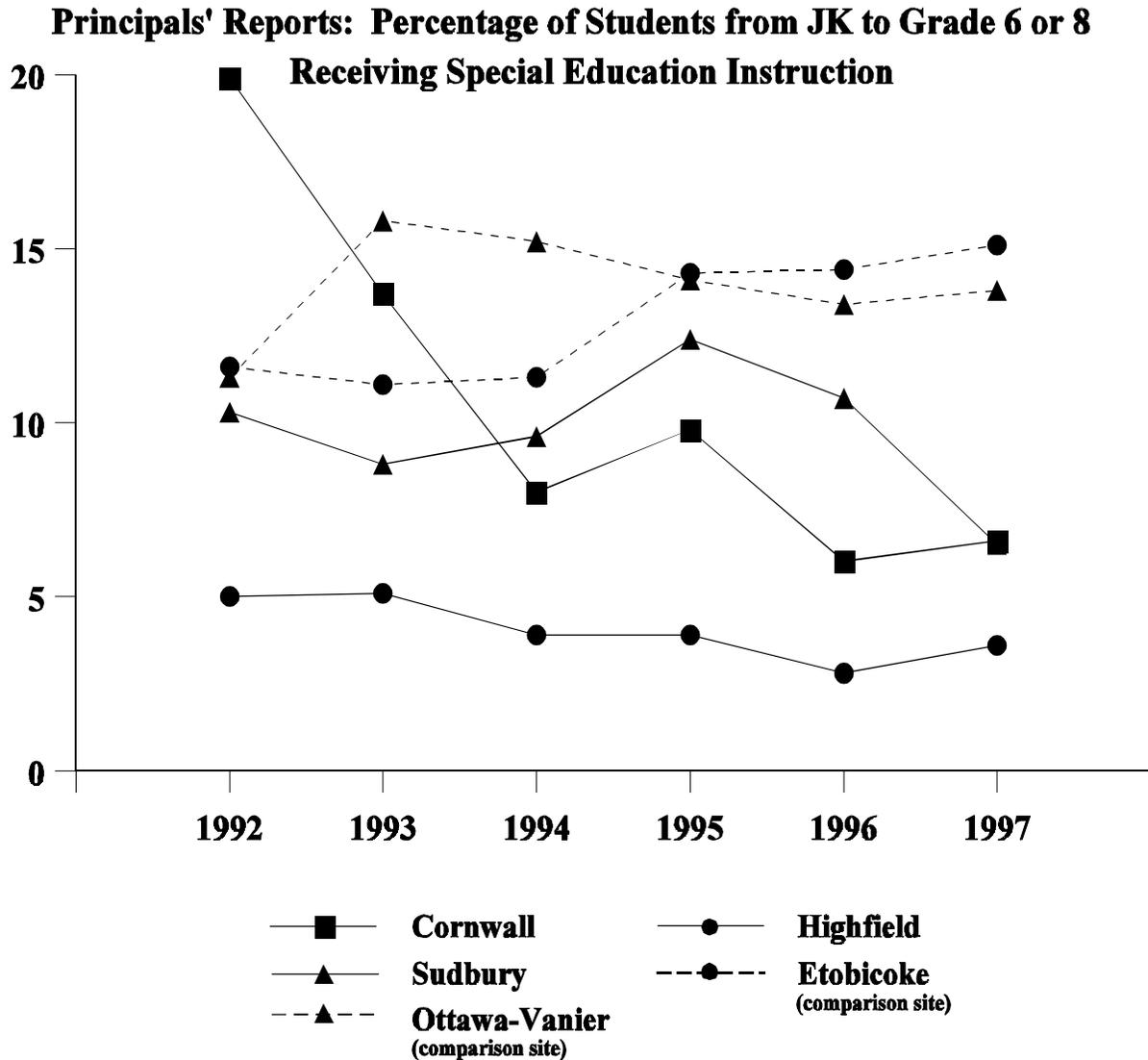
The questionnaire covered topics such as the teacher's background, school climate, children's social behaviours, parent involvement, and working conditions. A few questionnaire items were derived from the NLSCY (1994) and from *Teachers in Canada: Their Work and Quality of Life* (King & Peart, 1992), but most of the questions were developed by RCU Core Team members with input from the community research committees.

The 30 items dealing with school climate, children's social behaviours, parent involvement, working conditions were factor-analyzed, and four scales were identified: Children's Social Behaviour (5 items), Teaching Climate (10 items), Teacher Workload/Support (10 items), and Parent Involvement (5 items). Items that constituted the Children's Social Behaviour scale include behaviour at recess and lunchtime, showing compassion, and showing respect for school property. Examples from the Teaching Climate scale are staff commitment to achieve school goals, work satisfaction, and school as setting for ethnocultural diversities. Items from the Teacher Workload/Support scale include parental support of the school's goals and activities, heavy workload, and unrealistic expectations of teachers. Finally, examples from the Parent Involvement scale include parent involvement in the child's learning, with classroom activities, and with decision-making on school policy.

Results for Teacher Ratings of School Climate

As expected, there were no significant differences in the teachers' ratings of school climate as reflected in the four scales in the Better Beginnings sites in 1994/5 compared to 1997/8. Nor were there any significant differences in teachers' ratings of school climate in the three demonstration sites compared to the two comparison sites on any of the four scales. Nevertheless, the results help to explain the school milieu and climate from the teachers' point of view and provide formative feedback to the schools.

Figure 9.3



Schools in the three Better Beginnings sites showed decreases in the percentage of students receiving special education instruction, while schools in the two comparison sites showed increases. The decreases were statistically significant ($p < .01$) for both the Cornwall and Highfield sites.

SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS AND SCHOOLS

PARENT RATINGS OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

General Findings

In the younger cohort Better Beginnings demonstration sites, parents report:

- ±□ increased ratings of safety walking at night; and
- ±□ decreased get-togethers with friends.

In the older cohort Better Beginnings demonstration sites, parents report:

- ±□ increased satisfaction with their personal dwelling;
- ±□ greater use of playground or recreation programs in both the baseline-focal and longitudinal comparisons; and
- ±□ increased general neighbourhood satisfaction.

Site-Specific Findings

Parents at both Guelph and Kingston reported a broad pattern of improvement in their neighbourhoods: less deviant activity (alcohol and drug use, violence and theft), increased community cohesion, and improvements in other conditions (the condition of their homes, safety walking on the street, and the general quality of their neighbourhood). At Toronto, there was a pattern of unfavourable change on the same variables.

POLICE STATISTICS

There was a decline in vandalism at all sites, with two of them (Highfield and Toronto) statistically significant; but with the very large number of occurrences involved, statistical significance could be obtained for relatively modest trends. There was no consistent pattern for breaking-and-entering. Again, there were statistically significant differences (favourable at Highfield, but unfavourable at Kingston and Sudbury), but these could be obtained relatively easily with the numbers involved.

INVOLVEMENT WITH LOCAL CHILDREN S AID SOCIETY

There were no consistent site-to-site changes in involvement with the Children s Aid Societies, either for opening of family service cases, or for children-in-care. Results for opening of family service cases showed significant declines observed at Highfield, Ottawa and Toronto, and rises at Guelph and Kingston. There was a decline in children-in-care at Highfield and Kingston.

SCHOOL RATINGS

General Findings

- ±□ Analysis of the Principals Reports indicate a decrease in the percentage of special education students in the three older cohort Better Beginnings demonstration sites ($p < .01$). The largest relative decreases occurred in the Cornwall and Highfield sites ($p < .01$ for each site).

Site-Specific Findings

Cornwall: From the analyses of the Principals Reports, results indicate a consistent pattern of significant decreases for students requiring special education (overall), students with behavioural problems, and students with learning disabilities ($p < .01$ for each effect).

Highfield: Parents in the Highfield Better Beginnings site showed significant improvements in ratings of the relationship with their children's teachers, their involvement in the school, and ratings of the school.