

All Together Now, One By One



Building Capacity for Urban Education Reform in Promise Neighborhoods

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IN THE LEAD-UP to the presidential election, then-presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama outlined a comprehensive place-based agenda he would, if elected, pursue to improve the lives of low-income residents in urban neighborhoods across the country. In that speech, delivered in July 2007, Senator Obama proposed to infuse poor neighborhoods with a mix of maternal and early childhood family services, expand employment opportunities, provide incentives for businesses to return to the inner city, and increase affordable housing options for low-income families. The final component in this five-pronged agenda would be an initiative referred to as Promise Neighborhoods, which would be patterned after the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ).

Since Promise Neighborhoods was first proposed, HCZ has witnessed a considerable uptick in interest among national and overseas service providers, which was undoubtedly fueled by the attention it received during the presidential campaign. Recent evaluative results, though preliminary and not without their detractors, also helped to heighten its visibility, as did TV and journalistic accounts of the inroads the initiative has made in helping to improve the health and academic performance of inner-city children and youth. In the coming years, Promise Neighborhoods will attempt to achieve the same kind of community presence as HCZ. However, it is important to keep in mind that the HCZ has only had a preliminary evaluation, and a rigorous assessment of its durable effects has yet to be conducted. Accordingly, what is about to be tested in the Promise Neighborhoods is not the systematic replication of the HCZ itself but an overarching concept about how to successfully intervene in the lives of low-income families. To maximize Promise Neighborhoods' chances for success, we argue, providers can and should build on the concept of community collaboratives and resource sharing that HCZ invokes. It is also critical that providers formulate local adaptation strategies that are specifically geared toward their communities. We expand on this argument by first outlining the HCZ model, as well as the evidence and controversy surrounding its effectiveness. We then briefly consider previous place-based initiatives and argue that the established evidence from decades of these efforts have important, possibly even premonitory implications, for the success of Promise Neighborhoods. Finally, we stress the need to ensure that a sophisticated theory-based evaluation of Promise Neighborhoods is undertaken, one that begins with the start-up phase and follows the implementation of these initiatives. In this way, we can learn from this endeavor and ensure that future programs can build on its successes and not have to reinvent the wheel, as frequently happens.

The Harlem Children's Zone

The HCZ was founded by Geoffrey Canada, who, for nearly 11 years, has been steadily building the human and social capital supports for low-income families in a 97-block area of central Harlem, with the aim of improving outcomes for children and youth. Over the years, Canada put together an impressive array of donors with deep pockets to fund and maintain a panoply of services for children in the area from birth to college, as well as for their families. Initially, Canada's approach was to bolster kids' chances of doing well in the neighborhood public schools by addressing their out-of-school needs. Eventually, however, he opened his own public charter schools, called Promise Academies, which select students by lottery and control the quality of education the pupils receive.

For Canada, primary and secondary education improvement is just one of a host of equality of life chances that HCZ addresses among low-income children and youth in central Harlem. For example, figures released by HCZ indicate that its after-school office helped place more than 700 students who attended traditional public high schools in college, and the program supports

these students until they graduate. Its asthma initiative served 1,000 students, and the program has dramatically reduced their missing days in school. For six straight years, 100 percent of pre-kindergarten students in the Harlem Gems program were school ready. Of the parents who attended the HCZ parenting program (The Baby College), 81 percent reported that they read to their children more often than they did in the past. Parental satisfaction of students in HCZ's public charter schools (Promise Academies, serving children and youth from kindergarten through the eleventh grade), as measured by the city of New York, is also extremely high. Finally, attendance rates among students in the HCZ charters are also significantly higher than those for youth in traditional public schools in New York, including the Promise Academies' lottery losers. These rates are remarkable given that HCZ students spend 50 percent more time in school, including extended daytime instruction and extended school year, compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools.

The most rigorous evidence of the HCZ's impact on academic achievement was reported by Harvard economists Will Dobbie and Roland Fryer in a random assignment lottery design study of the performance of students in the HCZ's charter schools on the New York statewide math and English tests. When the tests were given in 2009, the students from the Promise Academies had scores on the cognitive tests that far exceeded those of children in the traditional public schools of New York, so much so that they closed the Black-White achievement gap in mathematics and reduced it by about half in the English proficiency test (English Language Arts). Among students in the two Promise Academy elementary schools who started in kindergarten, the Black-White achievement gap in both mathematics and English Language Arts was eliminated altogether.

These results are in light of recent longitudinal research by sociologists Robert Sampson and Patrick Sharkey and their colleagues, which reveals that living in poor segregated neighborhoods for extended periods of time has an adverse affect on verbal ability, as measured by reading and vocabulary tests given at three different periods. This research also shows that these effects linger even after children leave these neighborhoods, suggesting the intractable consequences of growing up in chronic economically poor segregated neighborhoods. That Promise Academy could overcome some of these barriers in such a brief period is further testament to its impact on elementary students.

However, when the state of New York made its exams more difficult in 2010, scores dropped in the Promise Academies as they did in the city and state of New York overall—although both schools outperform the city in math (with 60 percent passing in one school and 81 percent in the other). The Promise Academy elementary school, in which 62 percent passed in English, outperformed students in the city as a whole and was among the top 10 percent of charter schools in New York.

However, not all of the studies of the HCZ have been favorable. A recent report by researchers at the Brookings Institution questioned whether HCZ's charter schools were performing any better or even as well as other charter schools in the New

York area that did not have the benefit of wrap-around neighborhood investments. The findings, which compared the test results of middle- and high-school students in the older of the two HCZ's charter schools to those of their counterparts in other public charter schools in Manhattan and the Bronx with similar demographics, indicated that HCZ students were only average performers. Moreover, since they found no difference in the test scores between the Promise Academy students who resided outside the Zone and those inside, the authors questioned the role of community investments in improving academic achievement.

This study was promptly criticized by Geoffrey Canada on several grounds. He faulted the study for not acknowledging the incredible gains made by students who entered the Promise Academy middle school with lower scores on average "than all black children in New York City." Moreover, in reaction to the study's claim about the similarity in test scores between Promise Academy students residing inside and out of the Zone, Canada noted that all of the students, no matter where they live, have complete access to several HCZ services, including free medical, dental and mental health services, healthy meals, counseling and social work, test prep, after-school as well as weekend and summer enrichment classes, recreational opportunities, and college tours among others. Canada also raised concerns about whether the study used accurate figures for the proportion of Academy students who receive free or subsidized lunch as well as the way it drew subsamples, which omitted high-performing third and fourth grade Academy students from the analysis.

The authors of the Brookings Institution study only responded to one of these pointed criticisms by reanalyzing the numbers to include the omitted elementary students. The revised analyses still found that compared with other New York public charter schools with similar demographics, HCZ students only scored in the middle percentile. Based on their analyses the Brookings researchers continue to question the appropriateness of investing in community services as part of Obama's Promise Neighborhoods initiative.

However, it is highly debatable whether any of the existing research has adequately considered the full impact of the community services that Canada makes available to families. The Brookings study certainly does not provide sufficient justification for their negative assessment of the merits of Obama's intention to replicate the HCZ approach in neighborhoods around the county. Extant assessments of the effects of the HCZ have been confined to educational outcomes, which are arguably just one of a number of important goals of the program. There are other outcomes ranging from rates of delinquency and gang involvement to teen pregnancy and mental and physical health that the program seeks to address, which have not been considered by studies to date. Consequently, the overall impact of HCZ may not be evident until youth who grow up in the more stable, resource-rich neighborhood remain in school and go on to college. "We'll see the impact five or six years from now," Canada recently told the *Washington Post*, "when they are working adults and no longer going to prison."

Replicating the Zone

Building on this idea of a continuum of community services integrated with quality schools, President Obama, once elected, got approval from Congress to allocate \$10 million in fiscal year 2010 for competitive grants to support neighborhood nonprofits' planning efforts to establish partnerships with other providers in their respective cities. Last summer, 339 organizations applied for a planning grant, and 21 were recently awarded between \$312,000 and \$500,000. These planning funds are intended to help communities to better position themselves when applying for the full Promise Neighborhoods implementation grants later this year.

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The initial enthusiasm that Promise Neighborhoods generated was seriously diminished by the recent Congressional budget negotiations, which left many wondering if the program would even make it out of the starting gate. The final budget that Congress announced in April contained \$30 million for Promise Neighborhoods in this fiscal year, which in addition to funding site implementation in several locations around the country is also intended to support another round of planning grants to be announced later this year. This allocation is well shy of the amount the administration originally hoped to secure. In advocating for the program prior to the election, Senator Obama cautioned that it "can't be done on the cheap." He emphasized that millions of dollars would be needed from a consortium of funders, including government, philanthropies, and businesses. Compared to the HCZ, which had nearly \$200 million in assets in 2009 and a fiscal year budget of roughly \$84 million (much of which come from corporate funding), it now seems likely that Promise Neighborhoods will operate on a much smaller scale either with far fewer neighborhoods than was originally intended or with sites having to secure a lot more dollars from other sources or both.

Undoubtedly, a much leaner Promise Neighborhoods initiative will struggle to address many of the broader concerns that HCZ is able to tackle. And, despite claims to the contrary, the Brookings' results do not address whether or how intensive community supports might bolster urban education reform in distressed neighborhoods. In many of these neighborhoods, disproportionately high rates of social problems and disorder, including family breakups, teen childbearing, chronic unemployment, and gang activities, are strongly correlated with concentrated poverty. Years of piecemeal approaches to social problems and an unrealistic appreciation of the interconnections of economic distress and social maladies in the inner city gave rise to inadequate social services and the fragmented infrastructure of providers in these neighborhoods. However, even if sites are successful in making up any shortfall in funding from the federal government, the question remains whether Promise Neighborhoods can achieve the goal of network formation among local institutions and residents in order to improve conditions for school-age children.

educational outlets under the HCZ canopy, Canada maintains strict control of how they function. The more contained and centralized management approach of the HCZ, which governs most of the services families and children in the Zone receive, is seen as one of its hallmarks of success. Such autonomy can mean short delays in implementing decisions, reacting to setback, or simply planning day-to-day activities. Neighborhood-based collaborations can be messier undertakings. If the planning grants are anything to go by, few of the eventual Promise Neighborhoods initiatives will be awarded directly to schools. Since educational outcomes are such a primary objective of the initiative, nonprofits will need to ensure that schools in their network do a good job of educating students.

However, it remains to be seen how much nonprofits can insinuate themselves in the educational activities of schools or whether such arrangements can work in the best interests of students. Few details have emerged from the proposals submitted by planning grantees about how they intend to go about this. Indeed, figures released by the Department of Education suggest that many of these relationships have yet to be formed. Yet these collaborations will be pivotal for the success of Promise Neighborhoods. Organizing a neighborhood around educational improvement can generate considerable civic capacity. In practice, however, as Clarence Stone's review of years of communities' capacity building around urban education reform demonstrates, consensus building among school administrators and other community actors is fraught with instability.

After considering the marginal gains such efforts witnessed in several major urban areas in the 1990s, Stone concluded in a 2001 article that "our research taught us quickly that, whatever might be the case with various forms of social capital, civic capacity is not a generic quality, easily transferable from one issue to another. An ability to address educational improvement is not simply an application of a general community capacity to solve problems, but requires its own particular development." Full-service community schools are able to sidestep some of these pitfalls by making available a wide range of services in-house. For those Promise Neighborhoods who hope to achieve comprehensive coverage through consensus-building and resource-sharing, this road less traveled is a bumpy one.

Other important lessons (and cautionary tales) about community partnerships can be gleaned from decades of place-based services and integration strategies, some even initiated by previous administrations. For example, in 1966, the Model Cities program was introduced during the Johnson administration and supported demonstration programs to address ineffective and fragmented services for the poor in the ghetto. The War on Poverty launched a multitude of these "service strategy" approaches, whereby community-action agencies helped create organizational networks that linked clients with multiple providers. Later iterations by the federal government, such as the Services Integration Targets of Opportunity (SITO) launched in 1972 by the Department of Health Education and Welfare, the Comprehensive Human Services Planning and Delivery System (CHSPD)

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Can It Work?

By modeling Promise Neighborhoods on the HCZ, the administration benefits from the popularity of Canada's program and provides a compelling example of how coordinated efforts might improve the educational performance of low-income children and youth. Likewise, HCZ enjoyed increased visibility because of President Obama's endorsement of the program (although Canada was doing a fine job garnering public and media attention on his own). However, both initiatives now find themselves having to defend the other, which is unfortunate, since Promise Neighborhoods should not be relying solely on HCZ as its prototype. In fact, there are important differences between them, which make the comparison less than ideal. By operating the public charter schools, day care centers, after-school programs, and other edu-

projects, and numerous block grants to states, provided flexibility in the funding and delivery of wrap-around services at the local level. States, localities, and foundations—the Ford, Robert Wood Johnson, Heinz, and Casey, among others—also got in on the act and sponsored service integration projects in urban neighborhoods over the years. More recently, a plethora of comprehensive community initiatives worked to strengthen the social fabric of urban neighborhoods. The approach used by many of these initiatives seems to better reflect the strategy advocated by Promise Neighborhoods.

Rigorous evaluation of most of these initiatives is in short supply. However, several perceptive studies by the GAO and Rand, as well as researchers and organizational theorists of community vitality, have documented the challenges faced by building broad-based coalitions in urban neighborhoods. Space constraints prevent a detailed discussion of all the relevant research here, but it is imperative that realistic appraisals of the efforts of Promise Neighborhoods acknowledge and consider the challenges faced by these earlier efforts. In general, past attempts at coalition-building have had only modest success, but we know a lot more now about some of the major stumbling blocks. For instance, case studies indicate that the adaptation, implementation, and diffusion of innovative policies are not for the faint of heart. Lead entities will need to diligently cultivate and maintain a disparate group of network partners. Much of this work is extraordinarily time-consuming as constituents work to build trusting relationships with one another.

Political wrangling and conflict will pervade every level of negotiations with mayors, school boards, agency directors, community gatekeepers, and other stakeholders. These negotiations often become more contentious in the face of limited resources or the prospect of uncertain funding streams. Effective leaders must have the flexibility and autonomy to meet local challenges while maintaining fidelity to the overall mission of Promise Neighborhoods. Clear goals and written agreements will be essential in maintaining cordial relations among partners. However, a central administrative body with binding authority that can make timely decisions for the entire network is essential to minimize conflict, overcome inefficiency, and maintain collaboration among members of the partnership. Each actor in these coalitions can begin this process by addressing some fundamental question right from the start: How are we set up to respond to initial results if they show that targeted schools in the Promise Neighborhood are not significantly improving test scores? Do members of the consortium have a clear understanding of their respective contribution? How will ineffective or nonconforming partners be sanctioned or dropped by the consortium? How will decisions be made about dwindling funds when (not if) the time comes? How will conflict or disagreements be handled in a timely fashion? No one wants to be a killjoy, but these kinds of impediments need to be recognized and addressed early on.

The administration should also be cognizant of the unfortunate fate of some of its predecessors in initiating community programs. President George H.W. Bush's desire to let disparate

community activities flourish like “one thousand points of light” may have been well intentioned, but their impact was so diluted that we now know very little about whether or how they facilitated improvements in people's lives. A scaled-back version of Promise Neighborhoods can provide a spotlight on effective capacity-building in a few, well-funded, and carefully chronicled demonstrations to address public school improvement through community development. In doing so, however, the administration needs to remain mindful of the original five-pronged approach laid out by President Obama in his July 2007 speech. The success of even the best formulated strategy to mobilize neighborhood coalitions to improve public education cannot succeed without putting in place other key elements of this proposal, primary among them being efforts to boost the economy in these distressed neighborhoods. Schools, nonprofits, and other community actors can help to cultivate a culture of learning advocated by Promise Neighborhoods, but ultimately students' learning will be significantly stimulated if they see real, tangible opportunities for themselves and their academic efforts in the neighborhoods where they live.

Finally, comprehensive documentation of the processes and impact of Promise Neighborhoods needs to be prioritized. It is disheartening to know that after multiple attempts to create community coalitions to effect change, we still know little about why some worked and why many more did not. The same should not be said about Promise Neighborhoods. It is still unclear whether Promise Neighborhoods is intended to be a demonstration program to learn how to do this well in advance of going to scale or whether it is just a one-off attempt to create synergy among disparate groups in a few distressed neighborhoods. A recent bill introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) seeks to provide long-term funding for Promise Neighborhoods, which, if approved, would certainly allow time to demonstrate whether or how lessons learned from the program can be exported to other communities. Either way, we have the potential to answer many of the critical questions that the Brookings study and others have not addressed to date. To this end, we need to have in place an evaluation design that is flexible enough to allow researchers to capture important information about how this process unfolds. This design would also feature a systematic theory to explain *how* partners working individually and collectively as part of a larger coalition achieve outcomes, and *why* some coalitions succeed while others do not. If the administration intends for Promise Neighborhoods to be a real strategy in the revitalization of distressed neighborhoods and not just another in a long list of community interventions that faded into obscurity, we need to take seriously the task of chronicling and explaining the process right from the start, warts and all.

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