

November 2009

Realizing the  
Promise of  
Promise  
Neighborhoods

By Don Howard  
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In the next few months, the U.S. Department of Education will issue an RFP for planning grants to create Promise Neighborhoods in 20 of this country's poorest communities. Inspired by the example of the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ),<sup>1</sup> Promise Neighborhoods are poised to become the Obama administration's boldest and riskiest attempt to break the vicious cycle of inter-generational poverty that characterizes so many inner-city communities. If the Promise Neighborhoods succeed, they could provide compelling evidence that a new, integrated, education-centered approach to ending poverty can give poor children a real shot at economic opportunity. If they fail, they could become just one more proof of the cycle's intractability, in addition to leaving yet another generation of America's children in their wake.

Can the promise of the Promise Neighborhoods be realized? We believe the answer is "yes." However, we also believe that doing so will require an unusual degree of discipline and clarity: from policy makers, who will be pressured to base crucial decisions—like choosing the neighborhoods—on political considerations rather than objective criteria; and from community leaders, who will understandably be tempted, given the challenges their neighborhoods face, to spread the available resources too thinly to effect real change. The grounds for both beliefs come from our experience over the past decade working with scores of organizations—including HCZ—that are focused on dramatically improving equity and outcomes for poor children across America. It is still early days for all these efforts, we know. And none of the organizations can yet claim to have "cracked the code" on what matters most in achieving good outcomes for kids. Still, their collective experience is encouraging as well as instructive.

The Promise Neighborhoods initiative is a once-in-a-generation opportunity that challenges all of us to do whatever we can to help realize its potential. In that spirit, what follow are five lessons Bridgespan has learned about the tradeoffs the leaders of the Promise Neighborhoods are destined to confront and the choices that can help to ensure those tradeoffs are made successfully—so that they really do begin to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. These lessons are derived from our experience with nonprofit organizations around the country that are engaged in the hard work of changing lives and changing neighborhoods. As such, we hope that they will prove useful for the policy-makers at the Department of Education who are designing, and will ultimately select, the Promise Neighborhoods and for the nonprofit leaders who will be initiating those neighborhoods in their own communities.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, we are keenly aware of how much more there is to say and consider. We are grateful for the feedback we received from sector leaders (many with viewpoints sharply different from our own) who responded to earlier versions of this paper. As the Promise Neighborhoods continue to be designed, developed, and launched, we hope there will be many more conversations to which everyone can contribute and from which everyone can learn. We invite you to add your thoughts and papers to those that have already been posted on <http://www.bridgespan.org/promise-neighborhoods.aspx> and to share your comments with us at [Don.Howard@bridgespan.org](mailto:Don.Howard@bridgespan.org) and [Nan.Stone@bridgespan.org](mailto:Nan.Stone@bridgespan.org).

1 Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) is a 97 square block area of Harlem, where approximately 8,000 children and their families are accessing cutting-edge, high-quality educational opportunities, social services, and community-building supports—all geared toward helping each child in the Zone achieve the same educational success as any child growing up in a middle class neighborhood.

2 The Obama Administration has already taken the first step towards making the Promise Neighborhoods a reality, as the 2010 budget proposal includes \$10M for "1-year planning grants to non-profit, community-based organizations to support the development of plans for comprehensive neighborhood programs."

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## Many Neighborhoods, One Common Set of Goals

Harlem Children's Zone began its process of transformation in 2001, when it committed the entire organization to a singular goal:

*“Over the next decade, Harlem Children's Zone's (HCZ) primary focus will be on children aged 0 -18 living in the HCZ making a successful transition to an independent, healthy adulthood, reflected in demographic and achievement profiles consistent with those in an average middle-class community.”*

This goal is focused, specific, compelling, and measurable. It is the starting point from which HCZ's program strategy and organization—similarly focused, clear and outcomes-based—emanated. Although the statement does not explicitly mention education, the centerpiece of HCZ's program has become a “conveyor belt” of educational opportunities for children and youth in the Zone. Harlem Children's Zone has compelling evidence that its educational model, coupled with its full suite of other supportive services, is making a difference in closing the achievement gap—an essential step in ultimately opening up opportunities for college and future financial success.<sup>3</sup> This is the evidence that so excited the President and other leaders and, presumably, is why the Administration has chosen to locate the leadership and funding for the Promise Neighborhoods within the Department of Education.

We believe the Promise Neighborhoods need an equally powerful, *shared* goal or goals explicitly framed around educational outcomes that prepare young people for post-secondary studies and living-wage work. Education is the single most effective way to end the cycle of inter-generational poverty. Being prepared for college and career is the key to earning a living wage and entering (and staying in) the middle class. Data show that a college graduate can earn 75 percent more than a high school graduate and over twice as much as someone who fails to make it even that far.<sup>4</sup> And, as the current tough times demonstrate, in a recession those with less than a high school degree lose jobs at dramatically higher rates (2x) than those with a high school degree and (10x) those with a college degree.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to focusing all the chosen neighborhoods on this critically important lever, a common goal statement will allow for learning, measurement, and communication among the initiative's leaders. It is also the only way truly to

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<sup>3</sup> Promise Academy students are chosen by lottery. Dobbie and Fryer, two Harvard economists, found that the 2005 and 2006 cohorts of students significantly outscored those who did not win the lottery to attend the academy. By comparing lottery winners to lottery losers, the study was able to correct for biases that can plague studies of charter school performance. Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr., “Are High-Quality Schools Enough to Close the Achievement Gap? Evidence from a Bold Social Experiment in Harlem,” April 2009

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Cheeseman Day and Eric C. Newburger found that average adult earnings in 1997-1999 ranged from \$18,900 for high school dropouts to \$25,900 for high school graduates, and \$45,400 for college graduates. “The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings,” US Census Bureau: 2002

<sup>5</sup> Presentation by Paul E. Harrington, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, to the New York City Dropout Summit, March 6, 2009

know if the Promise Neighborhoods approach is working across all the sites. That is why it will be crucial for the Department of Education to specify the core goals for the Promise Neighborhoods as part of the initiative's design.

### The challenges and tradeoffs

Since no two communities are alike, policy makers may rightly be wary of setting uniform goals: Every community has its own unique history and constellation of assets and deficits. Education may not be the single most dramatic presenting issue. Violence, unemployment, sickness, and family-crisis are among the critical barriers that can make it hard for a child in a poor neighborhood to show up at school, much less learn.

For example, when the leaders of the Los Angeles Urban League (LAUL) were designing a strategy (now called Neighborhoods@Work) to dramatically improve conditions in the Crenshaw area of South Los Angeles, safety was an overriding problem. Violent crime in the neighborhood was 250 percent of the city's average, and guns and gangs were taking a rising toll on the students at Crenshaw High School. Fearful for their lives, children couldn't engage in learning and teachers couldn't teach. By contrast, when the City of San

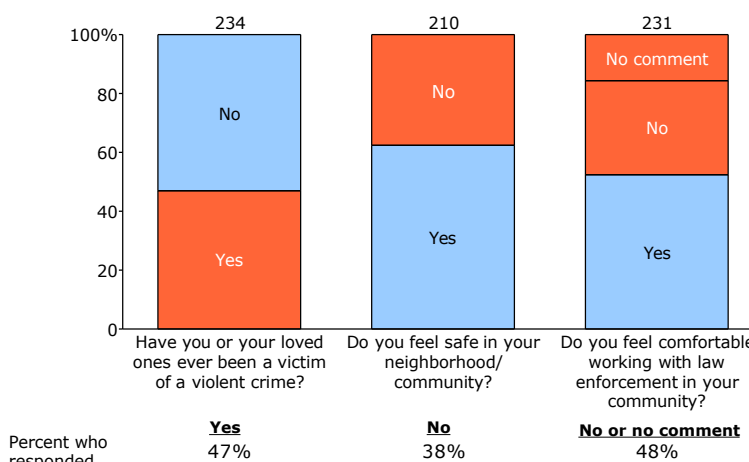
Francisco and its philanthropic partners set out to improve conditions in the Bayview and Visitacion Valley neighborhoods; they found that 25 percent of the families were in a state of crisis, as evidenced by their involvement in multiple safety-net systems. A primary reason why children in those communities couldn't succeed in school was that their parents were struggling to stay afloat.

So one can imagine that, at the least, there will be a natural temptation for policy makers to allow each Promise Neighborhood to add its own unique set of goals—focused, perhaps, on crime statistics or employment—to the common educational goals shared across the network.

Doing so will make it extremely difficult to assess the impact the national program is having, however, because it won't be possible to employ common metrics to measure progress and demonstrate success. It will also be

### Results from a survey of residents in LAUL's target neighborhood

Percent of respondents



Note: The area was bounded by Crenshaw Blvd., Western Ave., Martin LutherKing Jr. Blvd., and Vernon Ave. 240 of households successfully surveyed; 515 doors knocked on; no responses excluded  
 Source: African American Summit of Violence Prevention, Summer Survey, 2005.

extremely difficult for individual Promise Neighborhoods to learn from one another's efforts, as they will necessarily have to do. Last but not least, it risks increasing the pressure on community leaders to spread their efforts and resources across too many programs and activities, thereby diluting their potential for making a difference.

Requiring the neighborhoods to adopt a common set of goals does not mean ignoring other urgent, non-educational issues. In order to create the conditions that will allow young people to learn, a given Promise Neighborhood may have to tackle issues related to safety, jobs, health, and/or family stability from the outset. But these barriers should be addressed in the overall strategy as precursors or means-to-the-ends of helping young people achieve educational success rather than as ends in themselves. To cite two examples: the Los Angeles Urban League made it a priority to establish neighborhood safety through partnerships with the Los Angeles Police Department, the California Highway Patrol, and a private security firm with community ties, so that students could attend school without fear of violence. One of Harlem Children's Zone's best-respected programs is its Baby College, which provides information and tools to expectant parents before a child is born to ensure that the infant's life gets off to a safe and healthy start.

By considering extra-educational goals as part of the means (rather than the ends), the initiative's leadership can stay as focused as possible on the overarching and shared goal of achieving educational outcomes that will ready its community's young people for life-long success.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Lesson one:**

The Promise Neighborhoods will need to have common success measures, focused on educational outcomes for young people. The other challenges a neighborhood faces can be addressed selectively, as a means-to-the-end of educational success.

## **Disciplined Execution Will Be Tough Enough**

In selecting their initial programs, the leaders of the Promise Neighborhoods will be setting their path forward. The path will be long, with success taking a full generation—or more—to realize. And implementation will be challenging, with many unexpected twists and turns along the way. Yet maximizing the odds of achieving near-term successes will be crucial, not least because with so much new funding at stake, the fiscal and political pressure on the Promise Neighborhoods to show positive change in very short order will be enormous. Absent such evidence, they could well become a political football in the run-up to the next presidential election.

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<sup>6</sup> We believe that educational success should be defined as students graduating from high school ready for college and career.

Given these competing realities, minimizing the amount of unnecessary experimentation in the neighborhoods' initial design is both prudent and important. Requiring each neighborhood to follow a consistent approach, which adheres to the underlying principles of the HCZ model—comprehensive supports, anchored in a conveyor belt of educational opportunities, delivered in high doses, within a manageable-size neighborhood—is one way to do this.

Implementing evidence-based programs and practices is another. As the Promise Neighborhoods get underway, they are likely to include a mix of new and existing programs, some (maybe all) of which may require some degree of adaptation to meet local needs. But, all the programs in the Promise Neighborhoods need to be able to deliver results—new and existing programs should be based on principles that have been rigorously assessed and shown to work. There are many ways to demonstrate that capacity in addition to participation in a randomized controlled trial, which is an implausible and/or unaffordable option for many good programs. But wherever possible, some sort of rigorous assessment by an objective third party should be the standard. The Promise Neighborhoods should also be expected—and resourced—to monitor the results of their programs in real time, so that they can quickly understand what's working and adapt programs or practices that aren't.

Lastly, the neighborhoods should begin with a common set of entry points in the educational pipeline. We recommend focusing on ones where progress has already been shown to be possible and where success can be documented in a relatively short period of time. Early childhood health and education, middle school, and high school offer three illustrative examples.

The research into the value of early childhood education is clear and compelling. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, has demonstrated that “early childhood interventions of high quality have lasting effects on learning and motivation.”<sup>7</sup> The social and emotional skills very young children develop out of early experiences affect their future growth and potential—for good or ill. That is why so much attention is being paid to HCZ's Baby College,<sup>8</sup> which sets participants' children on the right path from day one (or earlier!), and to Nurse-Family Partnership, a rigorously tested pre- and neo-natal program, which helps children of low-income first-time moms get a healthy start, so they can be ready to learn in preschool.<sup>9</sup>

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7 James Heckman, “Invest in the Very Young,” Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies, 2000

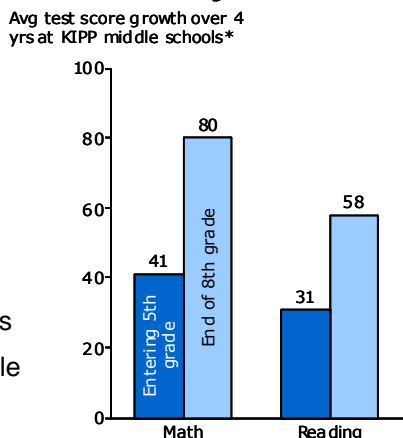
8 HCZ's Baby College is a nine-week parenting workshop for expectant parents and those with children up to 3 years old. Classes are held on Saturday mornings at a local public school, and all services are free. Participants receive breakfast, lunch, incentives, and child care during the nine week course, which covers a broad range of subjects including brain development, discipline, immunization, safety, asthma, lead poisoning, parental stress, and parent-child bonding. The program, which began in 2000, now has several full cycles per year, each with more than 50 graduates.

9 Longitudinal studies and research trials have shown that the Nurse-Family Partnership program improves children's health and development and increases their level of school readiness (including a 50% reduction in language delays of child age 21 months and 67% reduction in behavioral/intellectual problems at age 6). For more information, see [http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/resources/files/PDF/Fact\\_Sheets/NFP\\_Research\\_Outcomes.pdf](http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/resources/files/PDF/Fact_Sheets/NFP_Research_Outcomes.pdf)

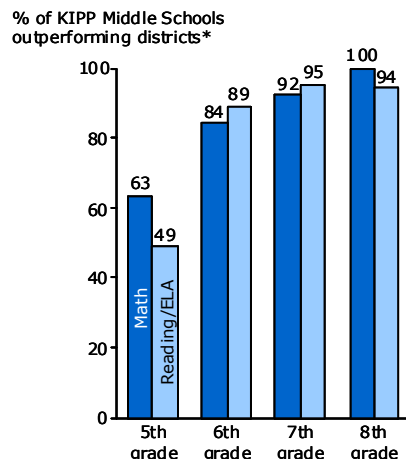
Research also supports the value of focusing on middle-school students. Middle school is where students develop the foundational skills they will need to succeed in college-ready high school curricula. And adolescence, as we know, is complicated, emotionally and physically. So making sure the children in the Promise Neighborhoods' middle schools succeed will pay dividends in two ways: by setting these young people up for success when they enter high school and by providing compelling

## 2008 aggregate test scores at KIPP schools

**KIPP students make substantial progress in both reading and math between 5th and 8th grade**



**KIPP students closed the gap with the average district student by 8th grade**



evidence of change. There are a number of middle-school models that have been shown to increase student achievement during these critical years including charter schools like KIPP and school improvement programs like AVID.<sup>10</sup>

The transition to high school is the point of highest risk for students dropping out.<sup>11</sup> The Portland Public Schools developed a data-driven early warning system, which includes indicators such as failure to meet 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency standards, failing more than two core courses and/or missing more than 20 days of school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. These indicators allow teachers and counselors to focus their efforts and provide special support to young people most at risk of leaving school.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Communities in Schools has shown that it's possible to reduce the number of young people who drop out of high school by identifying them early, providing them with targeted support and connecting them with a committed and caring counselor.<sup>13</sup>

10 In a review of seven major studies on the effectiveness of KIPP, Jeffrey R. Henig found that KIPP students who enter and stay at KIPP schools outperform their counterparts at traditional schools. ("What do we know about the outcomes of KIPP schools?" The Greater Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice, Nov 2008) Mehan et al. , in a study of AVID outcomes in San Diego, found evidence that AVID students attended college in greater rates than district averages. 48% of overall AVID students attended a 4-year college, vs. 37% in the San Diego Unified School District. The gains are even greater for Hispanic students (43% vs. 25%) and black students (55% vs. 38%). (Mehan, H., Villanueva, I., Hubbard, L., and Lintz, A. (1996). Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low-achieving Students. New York: Cambridge University Press.)

11 Ruth Curran Neild, Scott Stoner-Eby and Frank Furstenberg have found that when an extensive set of controls (e.g. for family, aspirations, etc.) are placed on a group of students, their 9th grade outcomes still contribute substantially to the researchers' ability to predict eventual dropout. Neil et al. conclude, "Reducing the enormous dropout rates in large cities will require attention to the transition to high school." (Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg, "Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout," Education and Urban Society, July 2008; 40: 543 – 569)

12 Early indicators of success included a 7% decrease in the number of 9th graders who failed more than two courses, and a 5% decrease in 9th graders with 20 or more absences, when compared to the previous year's cohort. By the end of the 2007-2008 school year, the school drop-out rates fell to the lowest levels in over a decade. ("Oregon high school drops to lowest level in a decade," The Oregonian)

13 Initial findings of the Communities in Schools National Evaluation found that dropout rates decreased by 3.6% and on-time graduation rates increased by 4.8% in schools with high fidelity to the CIS model. "Communities in Schools National Evaluation: Mid-Level Findings," Communities in Schools National Office, April 2008

It's important to note that while HCZ decided to develop its own charter schools, most neighborhoods will need to implement these changes in existing district schools. This will require a high level of collaboration with the school district, principals, and teachers. The Los Angeles Urban League spent the first year of its neighborhood initiative building relationships and developing an agreement with the Mayor and the Los Angeles Unified School District that gave it a unique role as a partner in reforming Crenshaw High School, the anchor of its entire neighborhood initiative.

In sum, we recommend that the Promise Neighborhoods be required to employ evidenced-based programs and approaches, perhaps drawn from a menu of vetted options developed by experts and commissioned by the Department of Education, targeted at common intervention points in the educational continuum where rapid gains, which can build political support and neighborhood momentum, are realistically attainable.

### The challenges and tradeoffs

Harlem Children's Zone conveyor belt of educational opportunities literally start before birth (Baby College), include early childhood education (Harlem Gems), and continue on through elementary, middle, and high school (through HCZ-run charter schools and after-school enrichment programs). The most exciting data to date come from the success of the third and fourth graders in the charter school, many of whom participated in HCZ programs from Pre-K or earlier.<sup>14</sup> The organization's goal is to have as many of the Zone's children and youth enrolled in this high-quality pipeline as possible.

The prospect of creating a similar educational continuum in each of the Promise Neighborhoods from the outset is compelling. Unfortunately, it is also unrealistic. It has taken HCZ a decade to get to where they are today, and they are still able to enroll fewer than 1,200 of the Zone's students in their charter schools.<sup>15</sup> The community-based organizations leading the Promise Neighborhoods are unlikely to have the requisite people, money, or skills to engage immediately on all fronts. And even were that possible, the risk of overstretching these organizations would almost certainly be too great to run.

This harsh reality will pose a set of difficult and painful choices. Selecting evidence-based programs and approaches and requiring each Promise Neighborhood to focus initially on a few "high-leverage" points of intervention will require leadership and political will. There will be innovative local programs already in place that seem promising but have no evidence of success. There will be champions for these programs, some of whom

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<sup>14</sup> In 2009 100% of PA I and PA II third graders were at or above grade level in math. 93% of fourth graders at PA I and 97% of those at PA II were at or above grade level in math. In English and Language Arts, the 3rd and 4th graders tested above the New York City average, with scores of 94% and 86% for the third graders, and 77% and 83% for the fourth graders at PA I and PA II, respectively. (HCZ website and 2008-2009 biannual report)

<sup>15</sup> Harlem Children's Zone



stand to lose power (or face) if programs from outside the community are adopted. And many will argue that requiring the use of evidence-based programs will also disenfranchise local leadership and voice, discourage diversity, and stifle innovation. There is no getting round the fact that in some cases these arguments may prove true. But, with each program that isn't evidence-based, the overall risk of failure will increase.

The pressure to address ancillary challenges is also likely to be intense and ongoing. As noted earlier, each Promise Neighborhood will have a set of non-educational barriers that will have to be torn down in order for its young people to succeed in school. When individual community leaders select partners with programs that focus on these critical issues, they should apply the same evidence-based standards wherever possible. For example, the Boston Gun Project, the Promotores health education model, and mixed-income housing approaches have all been shown to make a real and predictable difference on the problems they target.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, there will be powerful voices advocating for spreading the wealth evenly—"fairly"—across the community and across age groups (rather than picking a small number of intervention points). For many reasons, including the visible and urgent needs within these communities, these arguments will be very hard for local leaders to resist. History has shown, however, that when focus is lacking, resources are likely to be spread too thin to have effect.<sup>17</sup> And, rapid implementation across multiple programs and age groups cannot be done well. Rather than risk failure by attempting to be comprehensive from the start, therefore, it would be better to build program by program and success by success, moving steadily along the path towards greater and more sustainable results.

### **Lesson two:**

Because the pressure to show results in the near-term will be enormous, evidence-based programs and approaches are critical building blocks for the Promise Neighborhoods, Initially this will mean focusing on points in the educational pipeline where there is greatest opportunity for impact.

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<sup>16</sup> Research from the National Institute of Justice found that the Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire was "was associated with a 63-percent decrease in youth homicides per month, a 32-percent decrease in shots-fired calls for service per month, a 25-percent decrease in gun assaults per month, and a 44-percent decrease in the number of youth gun assaults per month in the highest risk district (Roxbury)." (National Institute of Justice, "Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire", 2001).

In a review of the scientific literature regarding Community Health Workers, Swider showed positive findings in the areas of increased access to health care, improved health status, and promotion of behavioral change (Swider S.M., "Community health workers: Integral members of the health care work force", Public Health Nursing, 2002).

And Urban Institute research found that the HOPE VI Program has succeeded in "bringing about positive changes for public housing developments, residents, and neighborhoods." (Urban Institute, "A Decade of HOPE VI: Research Findings and Policy Challenges", 2004)

<sup>17</sup> The Aspen Institutes' "Voices from the Field II: Reflections on Comprehensive Community Change" (The Aspen Institute: 2002) discusses lessons learned from Comprehensive Community Initiatives, based on interviews with 63 practitioners. One of these "lessons learned" speaks to this issue of focus. The report advises, "Being comprehensive means viewing problems and solutions through a comprehensive lens and approaching the work strategically. It does not mean doing everything at once. Many seasoned observers and funders of CCIs have moved away from the "comprehensive-at-the-outset" model...They now think that such initiatives dissipate energy and resources by trying to do too much or become paralyzed by the task." The Chapin Hall evaluation of the Ford Neighborhood and Family Initiative agrees with this advice. "Rather than begin with a broad and unqualified comprehensive focus, action should be guided by an articulated (if evolving) theory of change that identifies critical points of intervention and specifies assumptions about causal links between one action and another. "Comprehensiveness" should thus be understood to develop incrementally over time, with program components building strategically on one another." (Robert J. Chaskin, "Lessons learned from the implementation of the Neighborhood and Family Initiative: A Summary of Findings," December 2000)

## Start Small to Ensure Impact

Each Promise Neighborhood will have limited resources. Yet those resources must fundamentally change the conditions for the children and families who reside there. As HCZ learned, this means the “dosage” of supports must be concentrated enough, and the neighborhood small enough, to get the job done.<sup>18</sup>

What is *enough*? Underlying the concept of the Promise Neighborhoods are (at least) two hypotheses. The first is that young people, growing up in impoverished neighborhoods, need a great many supports in order to succeed. The second is that if you can reach enough children and families with enough supports, over time the fundamental dynamic of the neighborhood will shift, breaking the cycle that keeps families in poverty.<sup>19</sup> Together, these hypotheses create a compelling argument for defining the boundaries of the Promise Neighborhoods carefully and tightly, so that there is a balance between the resources at hand—people, money, skills—and the number of residents those resources will need to reach in order to change their life prospects and affect the broader community.

In our work, we’ve come to understand how important and challenging it is to match the scale of resources to the scale of the problem being tackled. In the case of wholesale neighborhood change, this problem is made all the more acute by the financial cost and operational complexity of employing strategies that are both comprehensive (tackling multiple causes) and deep (seeking to reach a large number of residents).

Harlem Children’s Zone began its work by focusing on a 24 square block area. As it has tested its programs and strengthened its organization, it has progressively expanded to 64 and now 97 square blocks. Other efforts that have modeled themselves after HCZ have tried hard (and sometimes succeeded!) in keeping their initial efforts tightly confined (see the table below), with aspirations to expand when they have gained traction.

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<sup>18</sup> Other leading organizations working to improve outcomes for low income children and families have come to the same conclusion that focus improves outcomes. For example, the America’s Promise Alliance, which operates in all 50 states, is partnering with 10-12 communities to create Promise Zones with deeper, more concentrated resources. Enterprise has selected eight Enterprise Impact Markets to focus on, while Annie E. Casey chose to focus on ten cities for its Making Connections initiative, in order to avoid spreading resources too thinly.

<sup>19</sup> Another version of this hypothesis, as articulated by the LA Urban, defines the outer limit on the neighborhood’s size as being the point at which proof can be made that these systems changes are working and can/should therefore be extended to new neighborhoods.

Initiative	Blocks	Young people	Residents	Approximate Annual Budget
HCZ phase I	24	2,600	13,000	\$15 million <sup>20</sup>
HCZ phase II	64	8,500	32,000	\$30 million <sup>21</sup>
HCZ phase III <sup>22</sup>	97	11,300	46,400	\$70 million <sup>23</sup>
LA Urban League	70	3,000	10,200	\$5 million <sup>24</sup>
Parramore Kidz Zone	1.4 sq. miles	2,100	7,300	Unavailable <sup>25</sup>
Communities of Opportunity	Blocks around 4 public housing developments	5,800	15,000	\$2 million <sup>26</sup>

In determining the right size for an initial Promise Neighborhood, key questions to consider include:

1. How many children and families can we afford to serve?
2. What's the minimum scale at which we will be able to achieve our goals?
3. How many children and families can our organization successfully serve?

The answer to the first question depends on how much funding can reasonably and realistically be assumed to be available. As an example, HCZ, which has been very successful at fundraising and leveraging public dollars for education, spends about \$5,000 annually per young person enrolled in its programming.<sup>27</sup> At that cost, every \$1 million of funding will allow you to serve 200 children (and their families).

The second question is more challenging. There are many sorts of physical boundaries—retail shopping areas, highways, rivers—that can give a neighborhood a sense of integrity. But for the purposes of defining a Promise Neighborhood, strategic considerations are likely to be as, if not more, important. Among these, the configuration of the neighborhood's educational resources is one of the most significant. The catchment area of the neighborhood school system (namely, its high school and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it) may provide the most relevant anchor for the work and, hence, the initial boundaries of a Promise Neighborhood. In determining whether that is indeed the case, two issues are particularly relevant: one is whether district and school-level leadership are demonstrably committed to reform and prepared to deploy public dollars

20 Actual FY 2002 operating budget, "Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. Growth Plan FY 2001-2009," updated Fall 2003

21 Estimated FY 2006 operating budget, "Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. Growth Plan FY 2001-2009," updated Fall 2003

22 The figures for the Harlem Children's Zone are cumulative

23 Mike Spector, "Bear Market for Charities," *The Wall Street Journal*: January 24, 2009,

24 \$25 million over 5 years, *Los Angeles City Beat* interview with Blair Taylor, 12/27/2007, <http://www.lacitybeat.com/cms/story/detail/?id=6515&IssueNum=233>

25 The Parramore Kidz Zone is funded "mostly by \$3.9 million in grants and private contributions," administered by the Legacy Trust for Orlando Children. Mark Schluab, "Orlando Touts Parramore's Slow Rebirth," *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 10, 2009

26 The COO Annual budget for planning, outreach and administration. COO plays primarily a coordinating role, and provides on-ramp programs to connect residents to city services, which are not represented in this budget figure. "Management audit of Communities of Opportunity," prepared by the San Francisco Budget Analyst, Oct 2008

27 Robin Shulman, "Harlem Singled Out as a Model," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2009 (calculated by dividing the total budget by the total number of children served)

to support it; the other is the degree of mobility within the neighborhood. High levels of mobility are common in disadvantaged neighborhoods; and yet the educational goals that are at the core of the initiative will be very difficult to achieve without a relatively stable cohort of children. To deal with this conundrum, neighborhoods where there is a great deal of residential turnover will probably have to adjust their programming and measurements to account for that fact.

The Los Angeles Urban League’s Neighborhood@Work encompasses a 70-block area surrounding Crenshaw High School (right). Among the factors that made the area the right target were its proximity to LAUL facilities and programs, its high proportion of minority residents, and the fact that its needs are significant but addressable.



- 1 Crenshaw Senior High School
- 2 LAUL Headquarters
- 3 Milken Family Literacy Center
- 4 LAUL West Adams Worksource

The third question is the most subjective because the answer will depend on the capacity of the lead organization to implement programs successfully. Strong organizations, with work that is already in process, will probably be able to take on more right from the outset. But it’s likely that most of the organizations chosen to lead Promise Neighborhoods will need to expand their teams as well as implement new programs. In our experience, the ramp up time to fully build out the team necessary to take on a neighborhood effort akin to the Promise Neighborhoods can be 18 months to two years.

The Promise Neighborhoods initiative is not a one-time, short-term infusion of services. It is a long-term commitment designed to transform some of the country’s most disadvantaged communities. This, together with the practical realities that have to be factored in to answer the three questions above, leads us to recommend strongly that the Promised Neighborhoods start small and expand with experience, as their programs demonstrate success and each neighborhood meets its commitments.

### The challenges and tradeoffs

Community leaders will confront tough and, in some cases, existential tradeoffs as they draw the boundaries of their Promise Neighborhoods. A neighborhood isn’t something that a planner can concoct; it has its own systems, assets, history, and integrity. Some community-based organizations will probably have service areas that are

broader than they can effectively address with the kind of high-dosage programming that the HCZ model entails. Changing the footprint of a community-based organization's work will go against history, and it will necessarily mean leaving some current assets and relationships unutilized.

This was the case for the LAUL when they shifted their strategy to focus on the neighborhood around Crenshaw High. Because the organization had long operated programs dispersed across south and east Los Angeles, embarking on the neighborhood-change initiative entailed letting go of valued programs in long-served communities. The board wrestled with the human consequences of this change, as well as with the fear that a neighborhood-focused strategy would jeopardize the organization's relevance in city-wide politics. In the end, however, Neighborhood@Work has enabled the LAUL to return to its historic mission, by focusing its work on one of the city's last remaining neighborhoods with a majority of black residents. It has also provided the connective tissue that was lacking when its programs were dispersed across the vast stretches of its former service area.

Make no mistake, limiting the size of the neighborhood will mean excluding some children and families. That will be hard emotionally and politically.

### **Lesson three:**

Carefully selecting and defining the boundaries of each Promise Neighborhood is crucial to delivering on the goal of fundamentally breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Each neighborhood must be small enough to allow the available resources to reach enough children and families with enough supports to do that successfully.

## **There's Strength in Numbers**

Much more is unknown than known about what it will take to deliver success in the Promise Neighborhoods. Inevitably, there will be incorrect assumptions in the overarching approach and missteps in implementation at the local level. To increase the odds of success, the Promise Neighborhoods must be designed to be able to diagnose what is going wrong and adapt rapidly.

This is why it is so important to capitalize on the basic premise of the Promise Neighborhoods—multiple sites following a similar path—by viewing the participants as a community, brought together to share experiences and learn directly from one another. They will need common and easy-to-use tools (such as neighborhood assessment analyses), programmatic approaches (such as a common high school drop out detection and prevention program), and systems (such as data tracking/analysis and case management systems) that can save time and increase their ability to compare results and benefit from one another's successes and failures.

Analysis and planning can take you only so far. Much more is learned when the hard work of implementation begins. In our work in neighborhood revitalization, we have come to appreciate the value of pilot testing and rapid prototyping. For example, Communities of Opportunity (COO) went through a nine-month planning process, resulting in an elegant and compelling strategy and plan. Yet, unrecognized political and operational challenges surfaced almost as soon as the work on the ground began. After about 18 months of implementation, the strategy and plan needed to be modified to incorporate all that had been learned. In retrospect, it probably would have been better to move more quickly to pilot testing, learning, and adaptation, and to spend less time on the initial planning.

Community of Opportunity's experience is hardly idiosyncratic.<sup>28</sup> That is why the Promise Neighborhoods will need to reserve time for learning and adaptation. With multiple sites implementing a common approach, the initiative can be a perfect laboratory for learning. Rather than be seen as a sign of failure, ongoing adaptation should be recognized from the very start as the most efficient way to achieve the target outcomes.

### The challenges and tradeoffs

Enabling rapid learning across the network will require testing a common strategic framework—common goals, evidence-based programs, and shared educational intervention points—across all the sites. This will mean less latitude for customization. This is a tough tradeoff, and one that is likely to meet with stiff resistance.

Within that framework, each Promise Neighborhood will pursue its own path to get results. The community-based organization leading each effort will have to build a partnership with the residents to customize the strategy and develop an implementation plan. It will have to add programs to address the unique barriers to educational success for the young people in its community. And it will have to develop partnerships with policy makers and other organizations—particularly the local school district—to do the hard work of changing systems and supporting kids and families. As a result, each one of these sites will be testing the shared strategy in distinctive ways and have the potential to provide valuable data that can help the others improve their work.

But this kind of shared learning can't go forward in the absence of a common strategic framework. So, the likelihood that a prospective neighborhood will be able to implement the common approach may have to be one of the key selection criteria. This, in turn, may mean that some of the neediest neighborhoods won't be chosen in this initial round.

Bringing the network together for learning will almost certainly require taking time away from the challenging work of implementation. Reflection, individual and collective, will inevitably divert time and resources from hands-on

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<sup>28</sup> For example, the East Lake Foundation in Atlanta revised its vision and strategy through constant and persistent interactions with community leaders.

work with children and their families in the neighborhoods and schools. Time together might easily be cast as a boondoggle and waste.

But *not* to benefit from the collective experience of the neighborhoods chosen to receive the initial funding would be truly wasteful. In launching this initiative, the Obama Administration is creating a community of obligation, not a community of privilege. Harlem Children's Zone has shown us what can be done in one community with this approach. The organizations that lead the Promise Neighborhoods have an unprecedented opportunity to show us what can happen when multiple communities follow this path. Learning what works—and what doesn't—among themselves and then sharing those lessons with others across the country need to be integral parts of the initiative's overall design.

#### **Lesson four:**

Bringing the Promise Neighborhoods together into a learning community can yield benefits that reach far beyond the initial participants. Creating such a community will require both a common underlying strategic framework that can be tested and refined across the sites, and additional resources to allow the participants the breathing space to reflect on what's being learned and to adopt new approaches as they are identified.

## **It's a "Who" Thing**

None of the above will matter if the community-based organizations leading the work in the Promise Neighborhoods aren't strong enough to deliver results. Our experience with HCZ-like efforts and with our more than 200 nonprofit clients suggests that the four most important characteristics of the organizations chosen to lead these efforts will be: strong leadership; deep relationships within the community and beyond; capacity to execute; and ability to raise significant amounts of additional funding.

As these neighborhoods are planned and implemented, there will be too many needs and too few resources. Tough decisions will be inescapable, and someone will need to be responsible for making them and accountable for the results. This is why we recommend that a single community-based organization take the lead in each Promise Neighborhood. When we benchmarked earlier neighborhood revitalization initiatives, decision making and accountability were the dimensions on which coalitions and collaborations consistently came up short.

That said, the challenges in these neighborhoods are clearly too great, and the problems too complex, for any organization to address them single-handedly. Succeeding as a Promise Neighborhood will mean changing public and community systems such as the public schools and gangs. Demonstrated ability to forge and nurture strong public-private partnerships must be a critical factor in choosing the lead organizations, because they will have to persuade many others—school districts, state and local policy makers, county health departments, other

community based organizations—to make changes in their own policies, systems, and programs and to align their efforts toward the common goal.

This sort of deep systems change cannot go forward unless its advocates are truly rooted in their community. Access, credibility, the ability to carry the day—all depend on having deep and trusted relationships across the community and the respect of residents, other community leaders, local government officials, and the business community. This kind of access and respect must be a core criterion for selecting the organizations that ultimately receive funding.

In addition to strong leadership and broad relationships, the Promise Neighborhoods will need teams of people who can organize themselves, their partners, residents, and others community leaders to implement their strategies. In sum, they will need good management. Managerial capacity cannot be seen as an afterthought or a nice to have. The organizations chosen to implement Promise Neighborhoods will need to have, or quickly be able to develop, teams of capable managers. And the design specifications of the Promise Neighborhoods must make it possible for them to do so. Strong leadership is a critical piece of the puzzle. But the neighborhoods will need strong organizations, as well, and the approach will need to be designed, resourced, and supported accordingly.

Last but not least, these organizations will need to be capable of raising funds locally. The Department of Education will provide the seed money for the neighborhoods, and it appears that other agencies, most notably the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, are actively looking to align other place-based initiatives (such as the Choice Neighborhoods) with the Promise Neighborhoods. But whatever the ultimate sum, these public dollars will have to be the catalyst for bringing in significant additional funding from individuals, corporations, foundations, and local government. Two-thirds of HCZ's annual operating budget of \$68 million is raised from non-government sources, for example, and the organization has also raised more than \$90 million from private sources for an endowment to ensure its ongoing operation.<sup>29</sup> Although some will argue that HCZ's model isn't replicable, because it depends so much on the special characteristics of its charismatic leader and New York City location, other organizations have found their own ways to raise the requisite funding to sustain successful work.<sup>30</sup>

Assessing organizational capacity is difficult and imprecise, but it needs to be hard-wired into the application process nonetheless. On this front, we have found the analyses and measures noted below quite helpful.

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29 Mike Spector, "Bear Market for Charities," *The Wall Street Journal*: January 24, 2009,

30 Hayling Price, "Promise Neighborhoods: A Planning How-To Guide," *The Alliance for Children and Families and the United Neighborhood Centers of America*, September 30, 2009.



Analysis	Metrics	Potential Data Sources
Ability to deliver effective programs	Outcome metrics will vary by program type	Baseline outcomes data on current programs should be available through internal tracking Ideally, programs will have at least some outcomes evidence based on external research or evaluation
Capacity to implement and scale	Leadership and management effectiveness	Gathering data will require organizational surveys and/or diagnostics. Sources of potential tools include:
	Strategic clarity	McKinsey & Company/Venture Philanthropy Partners, “Capacity Building in Nonprofit Organizations” and related assessment tool Other toolkits and due diligence tools developed by grant makers and consulting firms
	Strength of relationships with partners and residents	Ideally, initiatives will be able to provide evidence of successful collaboration with, and support from, key partners (e.g. school districts, other public agencies, other CBOs, resident groups)
	Funding sustainability	Historical data should be available through individual organization financials and financial projections Initiatives should be able to demonstrate a willingness and ability to bring funders to the table during the planning stage

### The challenges and tradeoffs

A Promise Neighborhood will not succeed without a lead organization, empowered and accountable, that is deeply rooted in the community. History shows that outside-in revitalization efforts, however well-intended, almost always fail. Our experience working with community-based organizations reaffirms this truth: leadership must be local and truly trusted by neighborhood residents.

At the same time, identifying community-based organizations with the requisite management capacity and access to wider networks will be challenging. The men and women who lead community-based organizations are often among the most impressive individuals imaginable. But typically they are also stretched extremely thin and lack the resources to build strong and experienced teams. Chronically starved of operating funds, they do not have the management experience and systems to scale up and take on new programs successfully. Nor do most have access to, or credibility with the funding networks—foundations, high-net worth individuals and business—that could be tapped to sustain their work at the level the Promise Neighborhoods will need. And sadly, while these problems exist across the board, the weakest organizations are often in the poorest communities.

So, the most wrenching challenge for the Promise Neighborhoods selection process will be to identify those neighborhoods where the level of poverty *and* the strength of the sponsoring organization justify the investment. At least for this initial slate, there simply won't be time to build weak organizations up to succeed. Tapping the

neediest neighborhoods—but failing to deliver because those neighborhoods lack adequate infrastructure in the form of organizations that can take on the work—would be devastating on all counts. Choosing these communities as initial Promise Neighborhoods might well be worse than “doing no harm,” because it would jeopardize the entire program.

There will be a great push to distribute this opportunity evenly. There will be tremendous social and political pressure—as well as personal, emotional pressure—to include the neighborhoods most in need. There will also be pressure to expand rapidly to include those communities that don’t make the first cut. But the key, in this initial foray, will be demonstrating that the model works. Only then can the program expand successfully and live up to its aspirations.

#### **Lesson five:**

In selecting the Promise Neighborhoods, the capacity of the community-based organization proposing to lead each site—its leadership, relationships, implementation skills, and fundraising ability—is likely to be the make-or-break factor.

## **So What?**

We have seen the Promise Neighborhoods concept close-up and believe it holds great promise. We are excited that the Administration will be testing the potential of this approach, and hope that the lessons we have learned from our work in this arena can improve the odds of success, as the Department of Education and local community leaders plan and implement their Promise Neighborhoods.

In summary, our recommendations are:

1. Set common outcome goals for all the Promise Neighborhoods, focusing on educational success. Address other barriers with local customization, as necessary, because they are a means to helping young people succeed educationally. Make the links explicit.
2. Build the Promise Neighborhoods on data-driven programs that have evidence they work. Work toward a conveyor belt of programs, but start with a few, shared intervention points that can rapidly show results.
3. Select each neighborhood carefully and rigorously. Make the boundaries tight enough to reach enough children and families to fundamentally change the dynamics of the neighborhood.
4. Require the use of a common foundational strategy across the Promise Neighborhoods to allow for measurement, learning, and adaptation. Invest in the network of sites as a learning laboratory.
5. Fund Promise Neighborhoods that are being led by organizations with strong management as well as strong leadership, relationships that can lead to systems change, and the ability to raise the funding essential for long-term success.

## Related Bridgespan Clients

<b>Neighborhood Initiatives</b>	<b>Links</b>
The Community Builders	<a href="http://www.tcbinc.org">www.tcbinc.org</a>
Communities of Opportunity	<a href="http://www.coosf.org">www.coosf.org</a>
Harlem Children's Zone	<a href="http://www.hcz.org">www.hcz.org</a>
Los Angeles Urban League Neighborhoods@Work	<a href="http://www.laul.org">www.laul.org</a>

<b>Related nonprofits and funders</b>	<b>Links</b>
Aspire Public Schools	<a href="http://www.aspirepublicschools.org">www.aspirepublicschools.org</a>
BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life)	<a href="http://www.bellnational.org">www.bellnational.org</a>
The California Endowment	<a href="http://www.calendow.org">www.calendow.org</a>
The Children's Aid Society	<a href="http://www.stopteenpregnancy.com">www.stopteenpregnancy.com</a>
Communities in Schools	<a href="http://www.cisnet.org">www.cisnet.org</a>
Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses	<a href="http://www.fdnh.org">www.fdnh.org</a>
Good Shepherd Services	<a href="http://www.goodshepherds.org">www.goodshepherds.org</a>
Living Cities	<a href="http://www.livingcities.org">www.livingcities.org</a>
KIPP Charter Schools	<a href="http://www.kipp.org">www.kipp.org</a>
Manchester Bidwell Corporation	<a href="http://www.manchesterbidwell.org">www.manchesterbidwell.org</a>
National Academy Foundation	<a href="http://www.naf.org">www.naf.org</a>
National Council of La Raza	<a href="http://www.nclr.org">www.nclr.org</a>
Nurse-Family Partnership	<a href="http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org">www.nursefamilypartnership.org</a>
Talent Development High Schools	<a href="http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/tdhs/index.html">web.jhu.edu/CSOS/tdhs/index.html</a>
YES Prep Public Schools	<a href="http://www.yesprep.org">www.yesprep.org</a>
Youth Villages	<a href="http://www.youthvillages.org">www.youthvillages.org</a>

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