

The Harlem Children's Zone: Revitalizing Our Nation Through Education

By Geoffrey Canada and Angela Glover Blackwell, Esq.

The unprecedented scale and success of the Harlem Children's Zone® Project in closing the achievement gap has elicited curiosity around the world. People want to know: what is the “secret ingredient” that is producing results where decades of social programs have failed. With President Barack Obama calling for 20 Promise Neighborhoods based on the HCZ® Project model, people in the field have become more eager than ever to uncover the secret.



“The objective is to create a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighborhood just can’t slip through.”

—*The New York Times Magazine*

The “secret,” though, has been in plain sight for years, operating in more-affluent communities: support every child from the womb through college, and do whatever it takes to overcome any barrier to a child’s successful development.

The Children’s Zone® was born out of the realization that Harlem’s children and families were facing many dire problems and that the only way for them to succeed was to address as many of these issues as possible. Even the greatest classroom program is doomed if a student is missing it due to asthma, or is preoccupied with the threat of violence on his way to that classroom, or is worried about losing the home he goes to at the end of the school day.

Though the basic concept of the Harlem Children Zone is simple, its implementation is difficult in chronically poor neighborhoods. While children need ongoing support, the broken families and devastated communities around them also need strengthening, so they can reinforce the direct work done with children. However, if we build on the lessons learned in Harlem, success is absolutely replicable in other communities around the nation.

The HCZ Project makes real the old saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In the village of Central Harlem, where 39 percent of the children are born into poverty, the village itself has been in no shape to help anyone for decades. Like many poor neighborhoods across the country, the things that middle-class children take for granted—working schools, useable playgrounds, decent housing, safe streets—have been all but nonexistent in Harlem.

Like the 13 million children living in poverty in the United States today, the children in

Central Harlem had been far less likely than other children to get a good education or adequate health care and are more likely to enter prison. A black boy born in America in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison during his lifetime.

The HCZ Model

HCZ has become a national standard-bearer for a simple but far-reaching idea: it is difficult—often impossible—to raise healthy children in a disintegrated community. The goal of the HCZ Model is to rally the community around the well-being of its children.

The HCZ model is comprehensive, focusing on the educational, social service and health needs of children in the zone. The model begins with the Baby College®, a nine-week workshop for parents of children up to three years old, where outreach workers literally go door-to-door to recruit parents. The outreach workers even aim to get parents with little or no interest in a workshop by highlighting the program’s free meals, child care and occasional raffle. The pipeline then continues with high-quality programs aimed at each stage of children’s development through college. HCZ’s health initiatives address the prevalent existence of asthma and childhood obesity. The Community Pride program works to revitalize and stabilize the neighborhood.

By partnering with parents, residents, teachers and other key community leaders, and working in collaboration with churches, parks, local businesses and schools, HCZ has developed a safe, nurturing environment to help children from ages 0-23. A few HCZ facts illustrate its effectiveness:

- 100 percent of students in the HCZ

Harlem Gems pre-K program were found “school-ready” for the sixth year in a row.

- 81 percent of Baby College parents improved the frequency of reading to their children.
- 97 percent of HCZ Promise Academy 1 Charter School eighth graders were at or above grade level on the 2008 statewide math exam.
- 100 percent of HCZ Promise Academy II third-graders scored at or above grade level in the statewide math tests.

Facing Down Poverty

Poverty now costs the United States about four percent of its gross domestic product annually in lost production, decreased economic output and increased social expenditures. For example, children who drop out of school are more likely to end up in prison, which can cost \$50,000 or more annually.

HCZ’s success highlights the need for any federal effort aimed at eradicating child poverty to be multifaceted. It requires aiming for one common goal—creating communities with conditions where children’s success is the norm, not the exception.

Principles for Achieving Success

Five principles, applied in a strategic, coordinated way are necessary to maximize opportunities for children to achieve such success:

1. **Serve an entire neighborhood comprehensively and at scale.**

The HCZ Project’s goal is to achieve a tipping point of children and families

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served so that a middle-schooler in Central Harlem sees his peers engaged in enriching activities – whether it is chess or video-making or karate – and heading inevitably toward college. Given accessible, engaging alternatives to socializing, that child will gravitate toward those activities rather than drift toward anti-social behavior.

2. Create a comprehensive pipeline of support.

As any parent knows, there is no time during a child’s life that you can simply walk away for a year and be assured that they will stay on track. Each year of a child’s life presents unique challenges, so there needs to be a safety net of supportive adults every step of the way. While the Project’s original goal was to get students into college, staffers found that even a minor setback could cause a student to drop out of school. For that reason, HCZ created the College Success Office to help students navigate the unfamiliar challenges of college.

3. Build community among residents, institutions and stakeholders, who help to create the environment necessary for children’s healthy development.

When the HCZ Project began, staff soon found that residents were often so isolated behind heavily locked doors that they did not even know their neighbors. HCZ organized building meetings and block parties so residents could form alliances. This began the process of reweaving the social fabric of the neighborhood.

4. Evaluate program outcomes and create a feedback loop that cycles data back to management for use in improving and refining program offerings.

In creating The Baby College, HCZ knew it was critical for parents to read more to their babies. To make sure that message was getting across, a questionnaire is given to parents, asking about reading practices and other parenting topics at the beginning and end of each series of workshops. By comparing the results, The Baby College can determine if the program is meeting its goals.

5. Cultivate a culture of success rooted in passion, accountability, leadership and teamwork.

HCZ tries to hire people from the community, which means they often

have a personal stake in the work, and they get extensive training. Further, it is made clear that good intentions are not enough—workers must produce results. They cannot blame the children, or make excuses for failure. With a good leadership team in place, staff are held accountable, but know there is a larger group around them to help solve tough problems.

Expanding the Model

The Obama administration is proposing to develop Promise Neighborhoods, inspired by the HCZ Project, in 20 cities. While Promise Neighborhoods should be grounded in HCZ core principles, development of specific programs should be guided by community needs and resources. The Promise Neighborhoods do not need to replicate every component of the HCZ Project. They need to show a commitment to developing a pipeline of comprehensive programs appropriate for their children and their community.

In many places, policy makers are already examining the HCZ children’s anti-poverty model. Some states, for example, have taken legislative steps to create programs inspired by HCZ, while others are just beginning. HCZ is eager to support such efforts and has established a Practitioners Institute to aid others in adapting the model. There are operational considerations about the structure and design of Promise Neighborhoods that are important. The federal program structure should include:

- *A federal governance structure* that allows for a multifaceted approach;
- *Use of a technical assistance provider(s)* to support training, program development, implementation and cross-site learning;
- *Federal funding* that is structured in a way that allows for local flexibility and innovation;
- *Program design and structure* with selection criteria to assess readiness, experience and leadership; and

- *Continuous improvement and evaluation* systems that meet the needs of local sites and of the overall program.

Strength in Numbers

The Harlem Children’s Zone model holds promise for a nation struggling to move people out of poverty. In its comprehensiveness, HCZ draws on and expands the best available knowledge and practices to ensure that children living in poverty have opportunities for education, health, physical activity and social services so that they become successful adults.

The Children’s Zone proves that given the right opportunities, poor children can achieve success on a large scale. The interest of the Obama administration in establishing Promise Neighborhoods is a sign of more than support for an idea. It is also a commitment to pursue a new path and avoid the consequences of maintaining the status quo: incarceration, substance abuse and unemployment.

In the months to come, the support and the commitment of the Federal government and local communities may collectively be the “secret ingredient” to break the cycle of generational poverty for America. 🌐

Geoff Canada is the author of “Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America” and was the recipient of the first Heinz Award in 1994 for his work as President/CEO of Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City. Since 1990, Mr. Canada has been the President and Chief Executive Officer for the Harlem Children’s Zone. In a June 2004 cover story in the New York Times Magazine, the agency’s Zone Project was called “one of the most ambitious social experiments of our time.” The Project offers an interlocking network of social service, education and community-building programs to thousands of children and families in a 60-block area of Central Harlem.

Angela Glover Blackwell is founder and chief executive officer of PolicyLink, a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity. Blackwell is a nationally recognized poverty expert, co-authoring or contributing to Ending Poverty in America: How to Restore the American Dream (The New Press, 2007); The Covenant with Black America and its follow-up, Covenant in Action; and Searching for the Uncommon Common Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America (W.W. Norton, 2002) She is also a frequent media guest, having been featured on Nightline, NOW with Bill Moyers, and PRI’s Marketplace and on the opinion pages of the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. Blackwell earned a bachelor’s degree from Howard University and a law degree from the University of California at Berkeley.

