

“The Promise of Promise Neighborhoods: Beyond Good Intentions”

Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to the Harlem Children’s Zone Conference,
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It’s a pleasure and honor to be addressing this conference of the Harlem Children’s Zone. HCZ, and its founder and extraordinary leader, Geoff Canada, have produced one of the most remarkable anti-poverty community programs in the nation’s history. Thanks to the efforts of the Harlem Children’s Zone, children born today in Harlem have a continuum of support that middle-class children take for granted but is shamefully rare for disadvantaged students--and it is changing the odds for all children in the community. From birth to career to parenthood, HCZ has built a seamless pipeline of high-quality parenting programs, early childhood education, preschool, K-8 schools, and after-school services.

As you know, President Obama was so impressed by HCZ that he made it the template of his Promise Neighborhoods proposal during the campaign. So today I want to pose a basic but essential question: How can government, non-profits, and community organizations successfully apply the core concepts of the Harlem Children’s Zone? And as we move forward with solutions to the problems of poverty and educational inequality, what lessons do HCZ’s history and the history of other place-based programs have to teach us?

For starters, it’s clear that programs like the Harlem Children’s Zone show us what everyone in this room intuitively knows—you cannot just divorce where children live from where they learn. In a famous commencement address that Lyndon Johnson gave at Howard University in 1965, he said “it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity—all our must citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.” Ability, as President Johnson pointed out, is not “the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neighborhood you live in—by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unseen forces playing upon the little infant, the child, and finally the man.”

Now, President Johnson recognized that freedom is not enough. He saw that rectifying injustices that stem from birth and race was the next and more profound stage of the civil rights struggle.

I don’t believe that any president since Johnson understands this truth more deeply than President Obama. He is the community organizer who began his career knocking on doors in Chicago’s public housing projects, holding meetings in churches and schools, and organizing laid-off factory workers. As the president put it during the campaign, “The philosophy behind [the Harlem Children’s Zone] is simple: If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools, and broken homes, then we can’t just treat those symptoms in isolation.” President Obama wants Promise Neighborhoods to build that seamless continuum of support and services for low-income children, from cradle to career. And he wants to break the cradle-to-prison pipeline that plagues so many poverty-stricken neighborhoods today.

Both the President and I have a powerful, personal, and permanent commitment to community-based organizations that work to reduce the achievement gap by providing high-quality early childhood education, after-school support, and college-readiness programs. Yet the history of the Harlem Children’s Zone and other place-based programs also teach us that out-of-school programs, inevitably backed by the best of intentions, is simply not enough.

To succeed as HCZ has, place-based programs funded thru Promise Neighborhoods will have to become much more rigorous about managing for outcomes, sustainability, and regional scalability. As President Obama has said, we are looking to expand programs that work--and get rid of programs that do not. And even as communities and non-profits aspire to develop a seamless opportunity structure of out-of-school support, place-based programs can never lose sight of the fact that great neighborhood schools, are still, hands-down, the most critical anti-poverty tool of all for closing the achievement and opportunity gap.

Now, it's no secret that I am a big believer in high-quality out-of-school programs, including full-service community schools. When I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, the city became the national leader in whole-district adoption of community schools. By the time I left, Chicago had more than 150 community schools--the most in the nation. Many of those schools—35—have full-service health clinics.

It never made sense to me that poor children should be expected to learn just as readily as other students when they couldn't see the blackboard, or their mouths ached from untreated cavities and gum disease. So we dramatically expanded our free vision and dental check-up programs in the schools. During the 2005-06 school year, about 12,500 students in the Chicago public schools received free vision services--and roughly 10,000 students got prescription eyeglasses. Three years later, the number of students receiving free vision services had more than doubled to 27,750 students, and about 22,000 students got eye glasses. The dental care program grew even more dramatically during the same years, going from treating 1,250 students to more than 55,000 students.

When I was in Chicago, people used to warn me that we could never fix the schools until we ended poverty. As I say, I am a huge fan of out-of-school anti-poverty programs. But I reject this idea that demography is destiny. Despite challenges at home, despite neighborhood violence, and despite poverty, I know that every child can learn and thrive. It's the responsibility of schools to teach *all* children-- and have high expectations for every student, rich and poor.

Historian Diane Ravitch got it right more than a decade ago when she wrote that educators must "relentlessly seek to replicate schools that demonstrate the ability to educate children from impoverished backgrounds, instead of perpetuating and rewarding those that use the pupil's circumstances as a rationale for failure." The fact is that if we don't dramatically improve our inner-city schools, we'll never win the war on poverty. And that is why we want excellent schools to be at the heart of every successful Promise Neighborhood.

Now there are two great traditions of social programs that Promise Neighborhoods will draw from that also have been woven through my own life. The first tradition is the century-old community school movement, which really has its roots in Chicago. Jane Addams' Hull House—the famous settlement house Addams established in 1899--provided recreation, college extension classes, kindergarten, book talks, visiting nurses, art exhibits, and legal services to poor immigrants. Addams believed that the problems of poverty were interconnected, requiring a holistic response.

Her settlement house model soon spread to other cities. But Addams and her friend, the famed educator John Dewey, quickly recognized that only a limited number of immigrants could be helped in homes. Many more could be reached through the schools. It was John Dewey who pioneered the idea of schools as social centers. And in many respects, Dewey, and community school advocate Charles Stewart Mott, are indirectly responsible for the auditoriums, gyms, showers, school libraries, and nurses' stations that are now standard features of most elementary schools.

In 1896, Dewey founded the Dewey Laboratory School in Chicago, which soon became the University of Chicago Laboratory School. My sister, my brother, and I were all lucky enough to attend that school. And when I went to work for the Chicago Public Schools, it never seemed right to me that city after-school programs had to provide sports, drama, chess club, yearbook, debate team, and French for students--because all of those opportunities were part of the normal curriculum at the Lab School.

The second great tradition of social programs that informs Promise Neighborhoods is the community development programs of the last half-century. Starting with the Gray Areas initiative of the Ford Foundation in 1959, running up through LBJ's Community Action Program in the 1960s, the Community Development Corporation movement of the 1970s and 1980s, Jimmy Carter's Atlanta Project in 1992, the first President Bush's empowerment zones in 1993, and all the way up through the HOPE VI public housing revitalization reforms of recent years, community development projects have had both triumphs and failures. As these place-based programs multiplied, so did wraparound services for students, including early childhood education and preschool, ESL classes, after-school programs, GED programs, college readiness initiatives, and adult education. More and more, these services were co-located at schools, turning more schools into one-stop shopping centers for students and parents alike.

My sister, my brother, and I all grew up in one of those new community-based programs. In 1961, several years before I was born, a neighborhood pastor asked my mother to teach summer Bible study to a group of 9-year old girls. The group only had one Bible, and my mother figured everyone could read a few sentences and then pass the Bible to the next student. But my mother was horrified to discover that not one of her students could read.

She decided to do something about that--and opened up a free, after-school tutoring program in June of 1961. Now you have to realize that in 1961, after-school tutoring programs were not the norm in Chicago. My mother couldn't get any school to let her set up shop because all Chicago schools shut down at 2:30. So she opened her after-school program in a church basement on the South Side of Chicago. And we stayed in one church basement or another for the next 40 years.

From the time we were born, my brother, my sister, and I all went to my mother's after-school program every day. When we were little, the older students tutored the younger kids, and as we grew up, we tutored the younger students. After we were done our studies and chores, we played basketball together. Everyone knew our program was a safe haven where kids were nurtured, respected, and taught right from wrong.

From the corner of 46th and Greenwood, some remarkable success stories emerged. The teenager who tutored my group when we were growing up, Kerrie Holley, today is an IBM engineer who was named one of the 50 most important black research scientists in the nation. Corky Lyons became a surgeon. Ron Raglin went on to help me manage the Chicago Public Schools and bring the AVID program to Chicago. And Michael Clarke Duncan pursued his dreams in Hollywood, where he starred in *The Green Mile*.

Running an after-school program in the 1960s wasn't always easy. The Blackstone Rangers fire-bombed our first location—one of my earliest memories is carrying boxes of books down the street to another church to start over again.

Fortunately, my mother and her team didn't know the meaning of the word "quit." The work was too important, the need too urgent, and the children's potential too vast to back away because of threats and intimidation. Forty-eight years later, she is still going strong.

But it was in those church basements decades ago that I first learned a high-quality tutoring program can be a good thing but a high-quality tutoring program run by caring adults is a great thing.

When I became CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, I tried to take a lifetime of lessons to scale. Ernest Boyer, the former head of the Carnegie Foundation, had it right when he said that it is "impossible to have an island of educational excellence in a sea of community indifference." I believe, and President Obama believes, that it is time to begin reimagining our basic concept of school. We need to move beyond the agrarian-era calendar of a 9:00 to 3:00 school day, five days a week, nine months a year. Schools don't belong to you or I, the principal, or the unions—they belong to the community. And it is a tremendous waste of resources that schools aren't doing more to serve as one-stop community centers.

I'd like to see schools open 12, 13, 14 hours a day, year-round, offering not just mentoring and tutoring programs but art, chess, family literacy nights, debate teams, and GED and ESL programs for parents. It doesn't have to be that expensive to keep school opens longer. In every school you have classrooms, computer labs, libraries, gyms--and many have pools. Rent the school out for free from 3:00 to 9:00 PM to great non-profit partners like the YMCA's, the Boys and Girls Club, college-readiness programs, and other enrichment programs. When schools have these tremendous physical resources, the YMCAs and Boys and Girls Club should get out of the business of brick-and-mortar start-ups. Just run their programs in the schools—and put all their scarce resources into children, not buildings. We must open our doors to the community.

Today, the preliminary evidence suggests that students in Chicago's community schools are outperforming other students in Chicago. But it is important to emphasize that even the best out-of-school services provided by community schools are no substitute for a strong academic program that sets high expectations.

A new report by the Center for American Progress on community schools found that "no matter how comprehensive the nonacademic services are in a school, each initiative must put a strong academic program at the center of its community school strategy." To my mind, the more than 10,000 after-school programs that the government funds through the 21 Century Community Learning Centers grants have not done a good enough job yet of linking their programs to improved academic outcomes.

The unfortunate truth is that out-of-school time initiatives still tend to rely on a patchwork of independent city agencies and non-profits. Not enough of the initiatives are high-quality programs--or have the data to demonstrate that they work. A recent study by Public/Private Ventures and the Finance Project of six cities' out-of-school programs found the initiatives "often have no established guidelines for quality and rarely have the information they need to identify areas for system-level improvement." The same study found that sustainability received the smallest share of program funds citywide, just 5 percent overall.

Now, community development programs have a similarly checkered history—too often, they have lacked the data to demonstrate whether they work and aren't sustainable. And many community development programs have done a poor job of working with local schools--or opted to work around them altogether.

By contrast, the best community development programs have transformed poor neighborhoods, usually working hand-in-hand with local schools. Remember when President Carter stood on a burned-out expanse of the South Bronx in 1977? Thanks to the efforts of CDCs and generous funding from New York City, the South Bronx has been rebuilt. Today, it bears no resemblance to that infamous symbol of urban decay. Yet many community development programs, despite the best of intentions, come and go without having much impact.

Now, I recognize that government has also been part of the problem in building sustainable, place-based programs. I'm not going to kid you. When I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, I did not always welcome a call from the nice man or woman at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington. And that's because the federal government has traditionally been a compliance monitoring machine, not an engine of innovation.

That wariness also reflected the fact that each agency of government has traditionally supported place-based programs in separate silos, causing redundancy and disconnection at the local level. Every HOPE VI public housing revitalization project had, in effect, a captive elementary school that should have been an integral part of redeveloping the community. But HUD and my department did not do enough to work hand-in-hand in the past to make school improvement an important part of community development--and neither did many local non-profits, who tended to see public housing as federal property, governed by federal rules.

In HUD's new Choice Neighborhoods proposal, which is replacing HOPE VI, I think you're going to see a lot more cooperation between HUD and our department. We have already met to discuss the alignment of selection criteria and measurements of effectiveness for Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods. And I have been enormously encouraged by the willing hand of partnership and cooperation that Shaun Donovan, the Secretary of HUD, and Kathleen Sebelius, the Secretary of HHS, have extended to our department. These are leaders without egos who simply want to get the job done. But I am counting on you to help keep us accountable to work together and break out of those historical silos that stifle reform.

How else can non-profits and community groups support Promise Neighborhoods? In so many respects, the Harlem Children's Zone provides a roadmap of how to do it right—in addition to highlighting some of the speed bumps that are likely to be encountered along the way.

I don't need to tell you, but the Harlem Children's Zone was not built in a day. The organization began in 1970 as Rheedlen, New York City's first truancy-prevention program. After the crack epidemic tore through Harlem in the late 1980s, the agency started offering after-hours community services at a public school. In the late 1990s, HCZ ran a pilot project to bring a range of support services—to a single block.

In 1997, HCZ finally began a network of wraparound programs for a 24-block area, one-quarter the size of the current zone. But even then, Geoff Canada was learning and expanding as he went. In 2000, he added the Baby College workshops; in 2001, the Harlem Gems, a first-rate preschool program, was added.

As valuable as those wraparound services in the community were, they weren't enough. The problem was the schools. HCZ's supplemental services inside Harlem's schools--the tutors, the computer labs, and the after-school reading programs--weren't boosting student achievement. So Geoff Canada

decided he had to create an outstanding school on his own if he was going to really close the opportunity gap. And then--as Paul Tough recounts in *Whatever It Takes*—Geoff Canada rode herd at his new school, Promise Academy.

Geoff Canada did not see data as a burden but as a blessing. He used data relentlessly to manage and track outcomes and improve instruction in the classroom. ... As a result, HCZ can now prove it works with scientific evidence—and Promise Academy is one of a growing number of genuine, gap-closing schools for disadvantaged students in the United States.

It's true that a lot of what HCZ does is not new. Wraparound services, co-location, and preschool education have all been around for several decades. What is new is the powerful way that HCZ puts all these components together. It is this focus on high-quality program coherence, from cradle to career--with strong schools at its core--that has made HCZ a national leader in the field.

Other successful place-based programs are discovering some of the same lessons and crafting similar solutions to the problems of concentrated poverty. In Atlanta, philanthropist Tom Cousins, and his East Lake Foundation have totally transformed a rough neighborhood and violent public-housing project formerly known as the “Little Vietnam” of Atlanta. About 60 percent of the residents of East Lake Meadows public housing project were on welfare when the project was torn down to make way for a mixed-income development. In 1995, just 5 percent of fifth graders at the local elementary school met state standards in math.

Like HCZ, the East Lake Foundation created a first-rate early childhood program, preschool, and college-readiness programs. And like HCZ, it also opened a school to serve students, the Charles Drew Charter School, Atlanta's first charter school. It has an extended school day and uses community assets, like a nearby golf course owned by the Cousins Family Foundation--where students receive free golf instruction, earn money for jobs, and work toward college scholarships sponsored by the golf course. Today, Charles Drew students outperform the average student in Atlanta's public schools, and they exceed state averages in Reading and English Language Arts. From 1993 to 2007, the number of violent crimes in the neighborhood fell 96%.

Let me cite one final example of a national program that works, which I came to know well in Chicago. Communities in Schools, known as CIS, runs the nation's largest dropout prevention program, each year providing about two million students an array of integrated support services. In Chicago, CIS provides services to 64,000 students at 152 public schools, and it tripled in size in Chicago over the last decade. A third of the students in Chicago, 22,000 in all, went through conflict management, anger management, gang prevention, and bullying prevention programs last year.

Like East Lake and HCZ, CIS has sponsored rigorous, independent evaluations of its program. As a result, CIS can now show that it boosts math achievement, reduces dropout rates, and is one of the only dropout-prevention programs in the country that increases the proportion of students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma. CIS also discovered that school sites which fully implement the CIS service model have a bigger impact on student learning and graduation rates than schools that only partially implement the model.

It is programs like CIS, East Lake, and the Harlem Children's Zone that are showing us the promise of Promise Neighborhoods. A relentless focus on improving outcomes, on regional scalability, and sustainability are the core elements for a successful assault on poverty and educational inequality. And

the spoke of the wheel that makes that conveyor belt of seamless services turn is a great school. To succeed, place-based programs can no longer treat good schools as optional, or secondary to efforts to build high-quality preschool and after-school programs. Communities will take different approaches to achieving these goals, but the principles will be the same.

As you know, nonprofits and community-based organizations will be the applicants for Promises Neighborhood grants. We expect to fund one-year planning grants for developing Promise Neighborhood applications next year, and will begin funding implementation grants in 2011.

We intend to do this right. No doubt, we will have missteps. Just like the Harlem Children's Zone, we will have to adapt and change. As President Obama said during the campaign, "changing the odds in our cities will require humility in what we can accomplish and patience with our progress." And the president, just like Geoffrey Canada, anticipates that we will learn as we go along. The president promised that "Every step these cities take will be evaluated--and if certain plans or programs aren't working, we will stop them and try something else." In the end, this is all about what works--for children and communities.

I began on a personal note, and let me close with one last story from Chicago. In 1966, Martin Luther King went to the West side. His visit, and the protests he launched, helped to push the government to channel billions of dollars into communities for everything from job training, to housing, to drug rehab and health care.

But when I became CEO of the Chicago Public Schools 35 years later, 95% of children in North Lawndale schools lived below the poverty line.

Why was that? Because the one thing that didn't change is the most important anti-poverty measure of all--and that is the quality of education that our children receive. Martin Luther King is my hero--and no one did more to advance the cause of social justice. But as we continue King's battle to realize equal opportunity, let us add to that legacy by living up to our national creed. Let us finally make education the great equalizer in America.

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