

Replicating the Harlem Children's Zone in Maryland

The Harlem Children's Zone

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) Project is an innovative strategy to improve outcomes for poor children. The HCZ transforms neighborhoods plagued by poverty, violence and low-expectations into supportive, enriching environments where children can thrive. The HCZ aims to create a tipping point so that school success and college—rather than dropping out and jail—become the neighborhood norm.

The Harlem Children's Zone works with families in 100-square blocks in East Harlem, New York City, providing direct services to children and parents. Unlike many social service programs, which are reactive, piecemeal and disjointed, the HCZ is a cohesive pipeline of preventative services from birth through college. (See box at right for examples.) The HCZ aggressively reaches out to all neighborhood children and families, offering incentives to increase participation. All services are free to families.

The New York Times calls the Harlem Children's Zone's innovative approach "one of the most ambitious social-service experiments of our time". President-elect Barack Obama included replication of the Harlem Children's Zone as part of his plan to combat urban poverty.

Key Elements

- All neighborhood families are included, starting with families with young children ages 0 to 5.
- Services include basic supports that help all families succeed, preventing the need for more intensive interventions.
- Services continue and evolve as children get older.
- There is strong, charismatic leadership.
- Parents and community members are involved in early phases of project development. Parents are viewed as part of the solution, not the problem.
- Trusted members of the community keep in regular contact with families, who are therefore more likely to take advantage of the services offered.
- Collaborative service provision from HCZ, community organizations and government.

Sample of Harlem Children's Zone Programs

- The Baby College is a 9-week parenting workshop series addressing topics like ages and stages of development, discipline, bonding, safety, health, and nutrition.
- Harlem Gems is a pre-kindergarten program that prepares four-year-old children for entry into kindergarten, with extended day care to support working parents.
- The three Promise Academy Charter Schools offer an extended school day and year for elementary and middle school students.
- Single Stop offers access to a wide variety of services - from counseling to financial advice to legal consultations - at several locations each week.
- The Harlem Children's Health Project offers free on-site medical, dental and mental-health services to families.
- Harlem Peacemakers are college-aged interns who offer in-classroom support, supervise transitional periods during the school day, provide after-school programming, and coordinate outreach to parents.

Replication and Recommendations

Several groups in Maryland have begun efforts to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone. As these efforts proceed, it will be critical that the projects build on the fundamental principles of the HCZ: help children at as young an age as possible and surround children with a critical mass of adults who are committed to helping them succeed. Successful replication efforts depend on a dynamic leader like Harlem Children's Zone founder Geoffrey Canada. Replications must also develop sustainability plans to ensure children will be supported through college.

President-elect Barack Obama's plan to create 20 Promise Neighborhoods should jumpstart replication efforts in Maryland. The Governor can also provide leadership by designating a high-level point person to support community-based planning and implementation efforts.

For additional information on the Harlem Children's Zone, please visit: www.acy.org.

