



Seeing Education in a New Light

Geoffrey Canada,
Harlem Children's Zone

At a very early age, I knew what I wanted to do with my life: save children who grew up like me—in poor communities, the odds stacked high against them. But I wanted to do more than just help the successful exceptions to the rule of failure in poor neighborhoods: I wanted to change the odds for all the children.

Now that I'm 58, I've seen over and over how a lousy education can destroy a child's chances for a comfortable life. I've seen how failing generation after generation of children can destroy a community.

Though I have concentrated my efforts at helping poor children who have fallen behind, I have also seen that the crisis in education today goes beyond the inner city. America has fallen behind other industrialized countries in educating all of our children. We need to improve our devastated communities, but we also need to improve our entire public education system.

Put simply, we need to place the needs of our children first and we need to look at our education system with new eyes and rethink how schools operate.



Photo courtesy Marty Lipp and the Harlem's Children's Zone

We are working to create a tipping point for the neighborhood. We want kids to look around and see peers and older siblings readying themselves for college and the workplace.

Students participate in class at the Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy 1. More than 8,000 students are part of the Harlem Children's Zone Project.

Strengthen the Community

Education, which is the key to breaking the cycle of generational poverty, has to begin before kindergarten and go beyond the walls of the classroom. As every good parent knows, a child can suddenly stumble off track at any stage of their development, so there is no age when adults can stop being vigilant.

We need to tackle all the various problems that our children are facing. If a child is in a great tutoring program but misses it regularly because of asthma or has to leave it because his or her family is evicted, the program is really of limited value.

From our experience working with families at the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), we saw that for children to do well, their families had to do well. From our experience working in a devastated neighborhood, we also knew we had to strengthen the community to support the families.

We have an overall goal of getting children successfully through college so they can enter today's high-skills job market. Toward that end, we try to organize the

broadest possible cross-section of community members around these children. To make sure our efforts are on track, we rigorously evaluate how each program is working every step of the way.

Today, the HCZ Project covers 97 blocks and serves more than 8,000 children from birth through college. We are working to create a tipping point for the neighborhood. We want kids to look around and see peers and older siblings readying themselves for college and the workplace. We want college and success to be in the air, a given as it is in middle-class communities.

Programs for Each Stage of Development

The HCZ Promise Academy Charter Schools were created to directly impact the centerpiece of a child's educational life. Since their creation in 2004 and 2005, the Promise Academy schools have done well enough to lead Harvard economist Roland Fryer to conclude that the many of the students had actually closed the black-white achievement gap.¹

The schools have a longer school day and year, and feature wide-ranging, enriching after-school programs.





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

➤ *The New York Times*



Children receive community support and a high quality education from birth through college.



In 2010, the students at our Promise Academy II had the highest overall scores in the district.

But any teacher in America can tell you a story about a child whose potential was lost because of a problem outside the classroom. That is why we work to remove any barrier to a child’s education. The Promise Academy has a great school-based health center that gives the kids free medical, dental and mental-health services, and it has a social work team.

But we also work to support the children at nine public schools in the Zone. We have young men and women from AmeriCorps who we call Peacemakers who work as teaching assistants during the day and then run enriching after-school programs when the school day ends. We make the same promise to these children as we do to our charter school students: we will work with you to get you successfully through college.

We also take a holistic approach at our Beacon Centers, which turn public schools into community centers. In the middle of a block where drug-dealing was once rampant, at the Countee Cullen Beacon Center,

children are now working on computer-based literacy programs after school, earning points for prizes. Where youths once carried, and regularly used, guns and knives, they now prep for the SAT exams, volunteer to help in hospitals and run food drives at our Teen Center. Countee Cullen serves more than 2,200 people annually, from kindergartners to seniors, with a full range of academic, social, recreational and support services.

For years, we informally supported young people once they enrolled in college because we found that many struggled in the new environment. In 2004, we formalized those efforts by establishing the College Success Office. The goal is to give students the resources they need in order to become successful college graduates and active members of their communities. The program now serves more than 640 college students and

The cost of keeping children on track is a fraction of the cost of what happens when young people drop out.



Photo courtesy Mary Lipp and the Harlem’s Children’s Zone

Students are collaborating on a problem in English class at Promise Academy I.

provides year-round academic, administrative, financial and emotional support.

Scaling Up

HCZ has been changing the odds for an unprecedented number of children. Communities from across the country who have heard about our work are coming to see what we are doing. We tell them that they don’t need to exactly replicate each of our programs, but that they should adhere to the basic principles that keep us on track.

Investing in Children Pays Off

Providing free high-quality services and programs to more than 10,000 children and nearly as many adults in 2010 cost \$77 million with an average cost of \$3,500 per HCZ participant. Eighty percent of our budget goes to direct program costs.

The cost of keeping children on track is a fraction of the cost of what happens when young people drop out. One recent study found that the median annual earnings of college graduates are \$31,400 more than high school dropouts.² High school dropouts soon discover how hard it is to make a comfortable living. Many young people who cannot find a job drift into anti-social behavior, which has tremendous costs financially

Geoffrey Canada is the president and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone (www.hcz.org). He was named as one of the most influential people in the world in Time Magazine’s 2011 Time 100 list. HCZ’s work has been profiled by The New York Times Magazine, 60 Minutes, The Wall Street Journal, The Oprah Winfrey Show and the documentary Waiting for Superman. President Barack Obama is seeking to replicate the HCZ Project in 20 cities in his Promise Neighborhoods initiative.



Scaling Up

- ① Work at scale within a specific geographic area where you can meet the needs of a significant number of children and families.
- ② Create a pipeline of best-practice programs for children in every age group. Begin working with children as early as possible and stay with them until they graduate from college.
- ③ Build community among residents, institutions and stakeholders.
- ④ Evaluate programs rigorously and make sure that the information cycles back to management to help improve programs.
- ⑤ Cultivate a culture of passion, accountability, leadership, and teamwork within the organization.

and otherwise. The cost of locking up one young person in the juvenile justice system for a year in New York State can be between \$140,000 and \$200,000.³ Prison routinely costs \$30,000 or more a year—many times higher than the costs of education or support services—yet incarceration produces almost no benefits.⁴

Despite the big, tough challenges for our public education system, I am convinced that we are at the verge of a transformation. This is still America—we have unparalleled resources, and “change” is in our DNA. We know the way to fix this, and Americans are awakening to the challenge and finding the will to tackle it.

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