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Helping Students in Under-Performing Public Schools

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*This brief belongs to a series, **Building the Pipeline: Effective Practice Briefs**, aimed at helping the Promise Neighborhoods network transform communities so that children finish high school, transition to and complete college, and move into careers. Many thanks to the staff of the Harlem Children's Zone who dedicated substantial time to the development of this piece.*



Helping Students in Under-Performing Public Schools

Building the Pipeline: Effective Practice Briefs

For children growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods, a college degree is still the best ticket to a middle-class adulthood. Workers who have a bachelor's degree earn about \$20,000 more per year, on average, than workers with only a high school diploma.^a Therefore, a major goal of the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods initiative^b and other similar initiatives in low-income communities is to help more children get into and graduate from college so they can break the cycle of poverty.

This brief is based on the notion that college is possible not only for students who attend excellent primary and secondary schools but also those who struggle in under-performing public schools. Using the Harlem Children's Zone[®] (HCZ[®]) as a case study, it explores the theory and practice behind this approach; summarizes results, challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations for other communities interested in this approach; and offers examples of three students whose lives changed because of HCZ's student support strategy.

THE THEORY

The Harlem Children's Zone, and similarly the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, is rooted in the belief that all students can succeed in school and graduate from college if given the necessary support. HCZ focuses on three tasks simultaneously: helping struggling traditional schools improve; running its own charter schools as innovation centers; and ensuring that all students in the community are prepared for college, regardless of which school they attend. In 2008, only 13 percent of Central Harlem students—most of whom were stuck in struggling schools— completed high school, enrolled in college, and graduated by the time they were 25, compared with 23 percent of students in New York City^c and 27 percent nationally.^d

Similarly, the Promise Neighborhoods model asks lead organizations to focus on all students in a particular neighborhood, whether or not they are fortunate enough to attend a good school. A complete Promise Neighborhoods continuum of programs begins working with children and families when a mother is pregnant so that children arrive at school ready for kindergarten. Unfortunately, there are rarely enough high-performing schools to serve all of the students in low-income neighborhoods. Rather than write off whole cohorts of students who find themselves in failing schools, the Promise Neighborhoods program encourages a two-pronged approach: a) help struggling schools improve; and b) provide intensive, supplemental services and supports to all children in the neighborhood—in school, during out-of-school time, and year round—to improve the odds that more students will make it through high school and college regardless of the school they attend.

Again, the focus on supporting students does not preclude a focus on improving schools. On the contrary, Promise Neighborhoods should keep working with local schools to improve their performance so that eventually they offer the high-quality education that all kids deserve. But widespread school improvement

may not happen fast enough to help the current generation of students, and we can't risk losing them in the meantime. Communities need to partner with schools in strategic ways, as HCZ has, to help all students finish high school and earn a college degree.

THE PRACTICE

The Harlem Children's Zone has developed an effective, scalable way to help more students who attend traditional public schools graduate from college. Because there are no traditional public high schools in the Zone, HCZ had to be creative in reaching the young people living there, ultimately choosing a strategy that relies on three elements: (1) partnerships with traditional public elementary schools in the Zone to support teachers, students, and staff while providing supplemental services to students throughout the school day and out-of-school time; (2) high-quality after-school programs where middle and high school students develop skills through exploration of media arts, fitness, and technology while building relationships with Student Advocates who ensure they receive individualized academic and non-academic support; and (3) programs that help youth through college and into careers.

1. Partnerships with elementary schools in the Zone. HCZ hires and supervises AmeriCorps interns at seven traditional public elementary schools located in the Zone to help with classroom instruction, teach conflict resolution, and run after-school and summer academic and enrichment programs. HCZ began its work with the first of these schools in the mid-1990s and only opened its own charter schools in 2005 and 2006. Agency-wide, only 19 percent of HCZ's children attend its charter schools.

2. Relationships with middle and high school students. As there are no high schools in the Zone and HCZ encourages its young people to apply to the best schools throughout New York City, adolescents attend upwards of 275 middle and high schools located across the vast city. HCZ's approach is for after-school staff to forge relationships with individual teachers or school counselors around specific students when needed.

HCZ uses an "Academic Case Management" approach to help middle and high school students become college-ready. Students come back to the neighborhood after school to participate in one of HCZ's 11 out-of-school time programs. They come for the engaging, skill-building activities offered, and then they are also given academic supports geared specifically for college preparation. Student Advocates assess each student's needs and create individual action plans that prescribe supports and services to help the student develop specific competencies required for college success. Tutors, teaching artists, and other program staff then work together to deliver the identified supports.

One key to the Harlem Children's Zone success lies in the relationships forged between these middle and high school students and their Student Advocates. HCZ employs almost 100 Student Advocates—generally college students or young people in their twenties working part or full time—who serve as personal counselors, advisors, and advocates for a total of 2,000 middle and high school students at 11 different locations in Harlem. Each Student Advocate works with about 25 students. These programs offer three critical supports to students:

A. Student Advocates provide individualized Academic Case Management to help students master critical competencies needed for college success and apply to and enroll in college

At the beginning of each school year, the Advocates assess each student's academic and developmental competencies and create an individual action plan to furnish whatever help is needed. Most plans include tutoring to strengthen academic skills as well as support to catch up with assignments and target subjects

where students are struggling. Advocates monitor student grades, help with course selection, and, through one-on-one sessions with students, stay abreast of situations in the student’s personal life that could derail his/her progress. Student Advocates also interact with family members, teachers, and other adults to coordinate college-preparation efforts.

“We do whatever it takes to get these kids on a college-bound trajectory. Sometimes we have to go see that a student gets on the bus to college, just to make sure; or we have to sit with them to make sure they submit their college applications on time. When we see them back home during college breaks, all that hand-holding seems well worth every minute.”

—Student Advocate

Advocates also enroll students in activities such as advisory sessions on college selection and a 12-week SAT test preparation class. They collaborate across high school sites to design college and career readiness intensives called Project EOS (Educational Opportunities for Success) which focus on writing skills and career exposures at each grade level and take place on a college campus. They also organize group visits to colleges on the East Coast, beginning when students are in middle school, and help high school seniors enroll in summer bridge programs that offer credit-bearing classes on a college campus.

B. After-school staff provide access to high-quality enrichment activities within the framework of Academic Case Management

With the holistic Academic Case Management approach, the program staff at each site works with the Student Advocates and tutors to advance students’ academic skills, knowledge, and behaviors. Each HCZ after-school program offers engaging activities to attract students to after-school programs, such as gymnastics, robotics, photography, African dance, media arts, mural making, production of a cable television program, fashion design, and magazine publication. These activities encourage teens to strive for excellence and challenge their acceptance of popular culture by developing critical thinking skills and individual forms of expression.

“Getting time to talk with [my Advocate] was what kept me coming to [the after-school program]. She was cool. She always cared about me getting through high school and into college. And she always had my back if I messed up. I wouldn’t be here today if not for her.”

—High School Student

C. Programs offer financial incentives for students to participate fully in the program, work hard, and contribute to community service

Knowing that students must give up part-time jobs to participate in its programs, HCZ offers stipends^e to highly involved teens. This incentive encourages students to show up regularly and teaches them to adhere to standard workplace expectations while also receiving academic support. It also recognizes that families often depend on these young people to bring in some income through after-school jobs and this helps to assuage and reward that sacrifice.

“We’re just doing for Harlem kids what middle-class parents do for their kids. We show them we care about them, believe in them, expect great things of them, and help guide them along the way. You’d be amazed how effective this relationship can be.”

—Student Advocate

3. Support for youth in college. HCZ also hires and trains about 25 College Advisors to work individually with about 900 students who are enrolled in college in SY2012-13 and those who have work to do before they are accepted. These counselors help students deal with administrative and financial aid issues, connect them to on-campus resources such as mental health services or work-study jobs, and provide academic tutoring (for those who are enrolled in New York City schools). They also provide job search assistance and internship placements during and after college.

The College Advisors are college graduates, some of whom have master’s degrees and work full-time for HCZ. During the one to three years that College Advisors typically hold this job, each works with 30 students—staying in touch with their advisees by phone, text message, and e-mail; reviewing their grade reports; and occasionally traveling to the college to meet in person with the student and/or professor or advisor.

Results OF HCZ’s Student services and Supports

HCZ reports that almost all of the students attending its after-school programs graduate from high school, apply to, and enroll in college.¹ Of all 265 high school seniors who regularly participated in HCZ’s after-school programs in school year 2010-2011, all but three applied to college and 251, or 95 percent, were admitted to one or more colleges.² HCZ is waiting for data to show how many of these 251 accepted students actually enrolled in college, but its anecdotal evidence from staff suggests that almost all of them did.

This high rate of high school seniors accepted to college places HCZ far above the national average. Only 60 percent of African American and Hispanic students nationally from low- and middle-income families enrolled in college in 2009 during the fall immediately following high school graduation.³ This suggests that HCZ’s intensive individual support makes a difference.

HCZ helped students procure \$9.2 million in scholarships and grants for its 251 college-bound students last year. This does not include loans.

¹ This does not include HCZ charter school students. Fall 2013 is the first year that charter students will be entering college.

² This includes only 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities, not vocational or technical schools.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, *Condition of Education 2011*, published May 2011, Figures 21-1 and 21-2, page 69.

Most importantly, the Harlem Children’s Zone hopes that of its students who graduate from college, many will themselves come back to live and/or work in the neighborhood in various capacities so that they help “tip” the neighborhood to a more productive culture. Once 200-300 college graduates come back to live or work in the neighborhood, HCZ believes they will be powerful and influential role models. Younger children will be able to identify with their success and will be more likely to see going to college as the norm, not the exception.

CHALLENGES

Getting kids from failing public schools into and through college is no easy task. HCZ notes a number of obstacles that pose particular challenges, including the following:

- **Difficulty establishing relationships with 275 schools.** Because students who live in the Zone attend middle and high schools spread throughout the city, the extent to which HCZ partners with schools outside of the zone varies a great deal. HCZ does not have the capacity to develop a partnership with 275 schools so when there is not a strong relationship with a particular school, HCZ staff members try to reach out to individual teachers or guidance counselors. These school staff members have many competing priorities, however, and do not always reach back. Without frequent, two-way communication, it becomes more difficult for HCZ staff to help students with their academic needs.
- **Transitions among Student Advocates.** Ideally, the same advocate would stay with a student for three to five years while he or she moves through a segment of the pipeline such as middle school or 10th-12th grade. However, Student Advocate positions are filled primarily by recent college graduates who count this as their first job, and for most it is only part time. Since most want to move up to full-time positions, they typically move on after a year or two, creating a challenge for the program. To manage this predictable transition, HCZ's team approach helps ensure that students know a group of adults at the program beyond a single Student Advocate. In addition, by placing case notes in their database, HCZ ensures that important historical information can be reviewed by a new advocate, fostering continuity.
- **Staff training and quality control.** During the last decade, HCZ's staff has increased as its programs have helped more students get into college. But with this success and growth has come the challenge of maintaining high-quality staff performance. Across multiple after-school programs, HCZ leaders supervise almost 150 staff, making sure for example that each Student Advocate knows how to assess his/her students' academic and non-academic needs and determine which resources are most appropriate to meet those needs. This requires considerable communication, training, and oversight.
- **Academic remediation needs.** Some students come to HCZ late in their school careers and are far behind academically. HCZ does not turn away children who are in this situation, but for those who arrive during their junior or senior years with serious gaps in knowledge and skills and without having taken the courses required for college admission, this is a difficult task. HCZ makes every attempt to get these students into good community colleges if no other options are available and discusses longer-term plans for a BA degree as well. For young people who begin with HCZ prior to their junior year, the chances of success are higher, because there is time to provide remedial academic support.
- **Keeping students who go to two-year colleges in school and on track for an Associate's Degree.** Students who attend some community colleges have a high dropout rate, compared with students who go to four-year institutions. One reason is that students tend to get stuck in no-credit remedial courses and do not receive the supports they need to advance from and within those institutions. HCZ is working to create new solutions to address this problem.
- **Getting students to believe they can succeed.** Many children who grow up in impoverished neighborhoods have been exposed to limited options for the future and do not imagine themselves attending college. This is often compounded by guidance counselors and others who may tell them they are not college material. Student Advocates work hard to create strategies for students to build

their confidence, college knowledge, and sense of purpose that will empower students to believe they are fully capable of doing well in school, earning a college degree, and enjoying a satisfying and well-paying career.

“Some people have lower expectations for disadvantaged kids so they give them the message that they are not college material. For instance, they might fail to offer calculus in their high school. This gives kids the wrong message. Nobody has the right to take away from a child the chance to go to college. We tell all our kids there is no question they are capable of going to college and earning a degree.”

— **Geoffrey Canada, HCZ President and CEO**

- **Gaining parental support.** Not all parents believe their child should go to college, especially if it means leaving home or borrowing money to go. For example, one young woman who worked very hard and received a full scholarship to a renowned private college in upstate New York was pressured to drop out and return home to look for a part-time job that would contribute to the family income. HCZ helped her re-enroll in a City University of New York campus and she graduated with a four- year degree, but the opportunity to live independently outside of New York City was lost, along with a full scholarship.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

[THE NAMES OF STUDENTS HAVE BEEN ALTERED TO PROTECT THEIR IDENTITY]

Yunia is a senior in one of New York City's worst public high schools, a place where few students learn in the classroom and many drop out. Yunia began attending an HCZ after-school program in 7th grade. She worked with a tutor to bring her grades up and wrote stories for a magazine. When she was in high school, she received career planning help from HCZ and earned annual stipends that her mother used to help meet the family's expenses. Even though she began working with HCZ's after-school programs in middle school, she was still struggling academically in ninth grade. With much hard work, by senior year Yunia had raised her GPA from 1.7 to 3.0 and set her sights on college.

Yunia visited several colleges on trips paid for by HCZ. She participated in HCZ's Project EOS, the six-week summer program co-sponsored by and held at Columbia University where she received intensive help writing her college application essay, editing five drafts before finalizing it. During the summer before 12th grade, Yunia also earned six college credits through a program at Carleton College in Minnesota. Now she is applying to several small liberal arts colleges, including Carleton, Colgate, and Spelman, and she eventually wants to go to law school. Yunia says that without HCZ's steady help, she would probably have never made it to college.

David grew up in the Harlem Children's Zone, began attending an HCZ after-school program in fifth grade, and recently graduated with an AA degree from SUNY Hudson Valley Community College near Albany. David has a significant learning disability; he says he always expected to attend college but he needed lots of help throughout his school career to stay on course. Because David's mother often lived in a shelter and his dad was a temporary worker, David's Student Advocates through his middle and high school career functioned much as a parent—showing confidence in David's abilities, orchestrating tutors after school, meeting with his teachers when needed, and helping him explore and apply to appropriate colleges.

David's struggles continued when he got to college. His HCZ College Advisor had to call him frequently to get him out of bed in the morning, and at one visit spent an entire day helping him straighten up his room, which was such a mess he couldn't get any work done. The counselor arranged the education accommodations that David needed and helped him switch from an 8 a.m. biology class to one in the afternoon, when he was more likely to get to class. It took David four years to get an AA degree, but with much hard work he graduated. After graduation, David worked as a Teaching Assistant at HCZ's Harlem Gems and is now applying for work upstate so he can return to live in the college town he grew to love.

Alisha, a freshman at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, attended a large public high school in New York City with only one counselor for every 250 students. Her Student Advocate says Alisha has always been a good student but is quiet and shy and might have fallen through the cracks in such a large high school without a deliberate push to get her to college. Alisha started in HCZ's high school after-school program, earning a stipend each year for her consistent participation and hard work. HCZ helped place her in an internship at a local bank during the summer before her junior year. When it was time to apply to college, Alisha's Advocate helped her get financial aid, because her family could not afford to contribute and she did not want to graduate with large debt. Once in college, Alisha's HCZ College Advisor helped her get a work-study job that helps pay her tuition. The Advisor also monitors what classes Alisha takes that are required for graduation in her major to ensure she has the proper credits to graduate on time.

LESSONS

After a decade of effort, HCZ leaders and staff have distilled these lessons about how to help more youth graduate from college and earn a living that lifts them out of poverty:

- 1. *Seek partnerships with schools and parents, but forge ahead if relationships don't materialize.*** It is preferable to get parents, principals, and teachers on board with efforts to improve children's academic experience and prepare them for college, but not at the risk of sacrificing students' opportunities. When high schools fail to submit students' transcripts to selected colleges as requested, HCZ has stepped in to send copies so the students' applications would be complete. And, because parents frequently fail to fill out financial aid forms, HCZ offers its free tax preparation services as an added incentive for parents who agree to come in and sign their child's college aid form.
- 2. *Align services with the needs and interests of potential partners.*** HCZ recognizes the constraints under which public schools and parents operate and tries to offer services that address those interests while also helping students. Consequently, parents of HCZ children tend to support their participation in the after-school program because the student can earn a little money, which eases the family's financial burden. Similarly, schools in the Children's Zone have partnered with HCZ after realizing they could receive something they needed in return, such as additional classroom aides or a health fair held at their school.
- 3. *Integrate academic work with enrichment through project-based learning so that students get practice mastering core academic standards in a fun way.*** Providing students with opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills through arts-based learning during their discretionary time has been shown to help students make connections among ideas, be more open-minded and intellectually courageous, and find meaning in their academic pursuits.^f Creating a magazine, for instance, helps students learn the writing competencies that they need to get into college and succeed once there.
- 4. *Staff members need to discuss individual students frequently so they can align and coordinate their efforts.*** Academic Case Management provides a structure and process for all of the student's stakeholders to collaborate in formal case management meetings, project-based work, and community engagement. This youth-centered collaborative approach allots extra time to focus on students with the greatest needs. Because there are several instructors and counselors working with students, each with his/her own specialty, it is essential for staff to communicate about the students they share in common. At HCZ, these discussions occur both within programs (e.g., academic tutors talk to art teachers at an after-school program) and across programs (e.g., College Advisors talk to Student Advocates).
- 5. *Pay rigorous attention to staff performance, and enforce quality standards.*** Because the relationship between Student Advocate and child is so critical to the program's success, it is vital that each staff person be held accountable for engaging and keeping students on the right path. Because HCZ believes students should play significant leadership roles, students sometimes take part in program assessment and weigh in on hiring decisions after talking and interacting with job candidates. Moreover, HCZ's practice is to "hire slowly and fire quickly": supervisors quickly transfer to another position or terminate any staff person who does not meet expectations despite adequate training and supervision rather than continuing to try to retrain him or her to the detriment of the young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although every community will have to adapt the approach described here, Promise Neighborhoods can benefit from considering these elements of HCZ's approach:

- ✓ Seek partnerships between schools and community agencies, but don't let the absence of partnership prevent efforts to work directly with students in schools.
- ✓ Don't try to fix the entire school system before taking on the urgent task of helping individual students prepare for college. The job is harder in struggling schools, but it isn't impossible. **Do both simultaneously.**
- ✓ Make sure that support programs include intensive individual attention. Expect staff to spend considerable time addressing the many details involved in getting public school students ready for college, and keep counselor caseloads limited to 30 or less.
- ✓ Look for young staff who are passionate about working with teenagers, and let some of the students weigh in on hiring decisions.
- ✓ Reach out to contacts throughout the larger community to help students obtain internships to build their resumes and job preparation skills. Allow students to experience different work environments in different neighborhoods.

It is undeniably difficult to get low-income students attending under-performing schools into and through college, but HCZ has shown that it can be done—with a tremendous amount of consistent, persistent attention and individualized support. The lessons and examples in this brief offer a starting point for more communities to take on this urgent but rewarding challenge.

^a United States Bureau of the Census, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2007*, Jan 2009.

^b The Promise Neighborhoods Initiative was inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone and is a place-based effort to wrap children in integrated, coordinated, high-quality academic, social, and health programs and supports from the cradle to college to career.

^c NYC Administration for Children's Services. *Community Snapshot 2008 – CD 10 Central Harlem*.

^d United States Bureau of the Census, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2007*. Jan 2009.

^e Exact amounts vary with the age of the child; as the child progresses to the next grade, he/she is eligible for slightly higher stipends.

^f Burton, J. and Horowitz, R. and Abeles, H. "Learning in and through the Arts: The Question of Transfer." In *Studies in Art Education. A Journal of Issues and Research*. 41 (3), 2000. Also, Greene, M. *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts and Social Change*. CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.