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## BEYOND LESSONS IN THE FIELD

### Community Engagement in Promise Neighborhoods

#### Active Community Participation for Neighborhood Transformation

Central to the Promise Neighborhoods approach is the idea that community improvement requires participation by the people and institutions who have the greatest stake in the outcomes: the people who live or work in the neighborhood. This includes youth, parents, grandparents, immigrants, business owners, religious leaders, health care organizations—everyone who cares about kids and families in the neighborhood. Community engagement means actively involving these people in planning, monitoring, implementing, and governing the Promise Neighborhoods initiative.

Neighborhoods with a high level of community engagement feel different from those without it. Adults look out for kids walking home from school so they are safe; a mom can call one of several neighbors to check on her child if she can't get home in time after school; residents participate in meetings to figure out how to bring a health clinic into the neighborhood. Engaged communities see residents graduating from leadership training programs, leading tenant associations or block clubs, sitting on boards, providing support to one another, and spurring lasting change that benefits everyone in the neighborhood. Some community members need support and/or training in order to achieve this; others are ready to go.

Sites can facilitate community participation in Promise Neighborhoods work in several ways. At the most basic level, sites can help parents get more involved with their child's education and create networks of parents who can call on one another when needs arise.

On another level, community members can participate in specific Promise Neighborhood activities. In the early phase, residents can work on the community needs assessment. Community members can also participate in the initiative's governance and decision making. Joining an advisory or governing board gives residents opportunities to provide critical input, monitor progress, and recommend refinements. Any way they participate, community members can be forceful advocates for their neighborhood.

#### Department of Education Requirements

The Department of Education requires sites to engage community members in planning and implementing Promise Neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> The governance structure of every Promise Neighborhood must be representative of the area served — this means having a governing or advisory board that includes residents — and residents must “have an active role in the organization's decision making.”<sup>2</sup>

#### *Eight key questions and answers from the field*

## 1. Why is community engagement important for Promise Neighborhoods?

First and foremost, community members can and should be active participants in community change, rather than having outside will imposed upon them. From a more pragmatic perspective, there is a much greater likelihood of achieving and sustaining results if community members participate at every step.

Countless local initiatives imposed by outsiders have come and gone without making meaningful gains in impoverished neighborhoods, often because they overlooked factors important to the people who live and work there. Engaging community members is critical because they:

- have a unique perspective on what’s needed; they often have a bird’s eye view of the neighborhood that is not restricted to a small slice but covers education, health, safety, city services, the physical environment, and more;
- lend legitimacy and credibility to the initiative, because their primary motivation is to improve conditions in their neighborhood;
- have staying power and will help sustain an initiative; and
- contribute important skills and strengths to neighborhood improvement.

## 2. How can sites reach out to and engage community members?

Sites that have successfully engaged community members in neighborhood change initiatives generally spend a good deal of time up front knocking on doors, delivering flyers, sending out mailings and emails, and attending neighborhood meetings. The staff gets to know residents and wins their trust. Often, staff of the lead and partner organizations engage residents themselves to do much of this outreach.

At this early stage, it is important to give community members multiple choices, both formal and informal, for their involvement. Residents should be able to choose the ways that feel most comfortable and that suit their schedules. One expert calls for a “honeycomb” of options that offers something for everyone.

Many communities place an emphasis on supporting and strengthening the social networks that already exist in the neighborhood to bring people together. They hold block parties with a local DJ, movie nights with discussion and dessert afterward, meet and greets so residents get to know the president of their block association, game nights, talent shows, field trips across town to local museums, and more. They figure out how to use social networks to increase informal supports that families rely on daily and to connect people in the neighborhoods to range of opportunities—job training and placement, financial coaching, better quality childcare, and many others. The purpose is to create a committed group of neighbors who trust and support one another and can work together to better their community.

### Example: Louisville, Kentucky

A local partnership in Kentucky created the Louisville Network: Thousands of residents from several Louisville neighborhoods carry membership cards and help plan and participate in a range of activities that range from monthly “Network Nights,” where members come together for food, fun, fellowship and sharing of resources to leadership develop and advocacy trainings, events at schools, and weekly gatherings at the local farmer’s market. This created a strong social fabric, which provides a platform for residents to address issues related to children and families such as child care, school success, and better jobs.

Engaging immigrant and refugee families can pose special challenges. Many of these residents do not typically participate in community activities, especially if they are undocumented. Effective outreach for these groups often takes place in their homes, churches, community centers, housing projects, and cultural centers rather than expect people to come to a new program. It is important to use interpreters whenever possible and to publish materials in multiple languages. Asking community residents who speak a particular language to talk with their neighbors is particularly powerful. The staff should refrain from asking for personal information at large meetings since some immigrants may be reluctant to publicly discuss matters they consider private. Save these questions for one-on-one meetings.

#### **Example: The Harlem Children's Zone**

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) spends considerable time reaching out to families and other residents. For example, HCZ started by working with the Building Organizing Network, which addressed eviction issues. HCZ staff asked network members to visualize what they wanted their neighborhood to look like. Meetings offered child care, translation services, and food; the staff even encouraged participants to take food home to their families. When network members could not make a meeting, HCZ staff went to their homes instead.

Over time, residents came to trust the HCZ staff, and identified health, education, and safety as chief concerns. HCZ staff members recognized they needed community input to keep them focused on the most important issues. And residents recognized they were building a sense of community.

Additionally, it has become common for former participants to be hired as HCZ staff. For example, a critical community outreach member of The Baby College is a West African immigrant who attended The Baby College herself. Her language abilities and cultural knowledge open many doors that might otherwise have been hard to reach.

### **3. Should youth be involved in Promise Neighborhoods planning and monitoring?**

Youth should be full participants in every Promise Neighborhood. Teenagers and young adults can add fresh perspectives to planning the initiative. They bring contemporary real-world (and real-school) experiences that can add texture to the discussions, generating new ways of describing problems and solutions that break the mold.

If sites involve youth in the development of survey instruments and data collection during the needs assessment, the results are likely to be more authentic and speak directly to needed changes. Down the road, as the initiative develops, young people can be highly effective advocates who provide compelling first-hand testimony before school boards, legislatures, funders, and other powerful bodies. Further, youth engagement helps train the leaders of tomorrow—building the capacity of the very people needed to sustain the initiative's momentum and success.

### **4. How can Promise Neighborhoods sites encourage parents to support their own children's education and development?**

Family and community engagement achieves many benefits for students:

- children get higher grades and score better on standardized tests, spend more time on homework, and have better school attendance regardless of the parents' ethnic background, education level, or socioeconomic status;

- children exhibit more positive attitudes, and risk behaviors such as alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behaviors decrease; and
- students have higher graduation rates and greater enrollment rates in postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup>

Family engagement also leads to stronger families and healthier communities.

Parents can take an active role in improving the odds that their children will succeed academically. They can seek positive resources in libraries, museums, and parks, even if these are outside the immediate neighborhood. Parents can help their babies and toddlers by talking to them about the world around them, telling stories around picture books, describing colors, textures, and feelings. They can help school-age kids with homework by explaining content, creating a healthy study environment, asking about schoolwork, playing word games, and celebrating student achievement at home. Sites can help parents align home activities with school-based learning.

In all cases, it is important to ask parents how they want to be involved in their children's schooling. Using surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations, staff should ask parents what they'd like to see for their child's school success and how they'd like to be involved. Some parents want to engage primarily from home while others may want to help in the classroom or participate in school council meetings.

Making school a welcoming place is key to parent participation. Many parents have had bad experiences in their own school careers and do not like to come to their child's school. To overcome this, the school needs to look inviting; signs should be in multiple languages, and friendly faces rather than a uniformed security guard should greet parents. Inviting parents to a school-wide celebration at the beginning of the year often sets the right tone. Having parents reach out to other parents is another good way to get more families engaged in their child's education.

Parents can also help their children grow into healthy adults in non-academic ways as well. For example, they can keep up to date on their children's physical and mental health needs, planning regular doctor and dentist appointments, arranging for immunizations during early childhood, staying aware of any mental and emotional struggles the child may be facing throughout adolescence, and seeking help when necessary.

### **Example: Community Schools in New York City**

The Children’s Aid Society works with the New York City public schools to operate several Community Schools, which engage families and community organizations in a concerted effort to improve student learning in high-poverty neighborhoods. A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships among the school, parents, and other local resources to provide supplementary services such as health, mental health, and social support to students and their families.

Community schools are built on the premise that students need more than a strong academic program to learn. They also need essential supports as well as educational and cultural enrichment outside school. Community schools marshal parents and other family members, community members, and allied organizations in a collaborative effort to help kids thrive.

As a result of strong parent and community involvement in these community schools, data show that compared to control schools, there has been:

- improved academic performance;
- higher attendance rates for both students and teachers
- improved school safety and climate; and
- improved student-teacher relationships.

### **5. How can Promise Neighborhoods engage community members in planning tasks?**

Involving community members in the neighborhood needs assessment is an ideal start. In the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections initiative, lead agencies worked with residents of low-income communities to design survey instruments and other tools to gather resident feedback. Residents refined draft surveys, noting when questions were inappropriate or worded incorrectly or might not elicit the information that program organizers wanted to know. Residents also added questions of their own.

Residents were hired to conduct the surveys and collect data. Later, the staff worked with community members to analyze the results and understand what the data said about the neighborhood.

The process took a lot of time and labor, but it brought credibility. Residents who initially were skeptical because they had been surveyed to death in the past were willing to participate given the involvement of their neighbors.

### **6. How can sites help community members participate in the governance of Promise Neighborhoods?**

Since Promise Neighborhoods need to have residents engaged in decision making on either an advisory or a governing board, it is useful to look at how other organizations have done this. For example, Harlem Children’s Zone created a community advisory board, made up of residents and other community members, to guide the work.

Once community members identified their top priorities—health, safety, and education—HCZ staff shared information with advisory board members about best practices in each area. The staff brought in national experts as well. Board members then applied what they had learned to make recommendations to HCZ. To this day, community members advise staff on how programs are working, what new features

should be added, and what should be changed. HCZ staff members report that residents are “an immense value to us.”

The relationship between staff and community members is based on trust and respect. Staff members say they always respond to residents’ advice in a timely way, and while they do not act on every suggestion, they tell residents what they are doing and why. Reporting back to residents signals that staff members value their time, ideas, and commitment.

Staff members meet quarterly with the community advisory board, focusing on one age group at each meeting. HCZ also holds an annual retreat for advisory board members and senior managers from HCZ. Here the staff reports to the advisors in the same way it reports to the board of directors. The staff presents achievements and challenges of the past year and the broad mandates from the board of directors for the coming year. The community board then advises on how to make the broad direction operational.

### **7. How can sites develop community members’ leadership capacity so they become effective advocates for their neighborhood?**

Resident leadership training helps lay people develop the skills to take on more sophisticated leadership roles in their neighborhood. This includes developing youth leaders who can represent the voice of teenagers and young adults in the neighborhood change initiative. NeighborWorks America,<sup>4</sup> a national non-profit based in Washington D.C., helps residents learn how to:

- make meetings work,
- recruit and retain volunteers
- work with elected officials
- develop an advocacy campaign on topics such as getting needed housing repairs done
- do grant writing, and
- obtain in kind donations from local businesses.

Promoting civic engagement is a key goal for many neighborhood change initiatives. Teaching residents how to develop petitions for a specific policy change, prepare fact sheets, and speak up at official meetings or public hearings are important facets of leadership development that can have a big payoff in sustained neighborhood improvement.

A lead agency can also help resident-led groups build the capacity to stand on their own. An example comes from the Harlem Children’s Zone Community Pride Program, which helped the St. Nicholas Residents Association become an incorporated nonprofit under Section 501c3 of the IRS code. HCZ staff trained resident leaders and connected them to an attorney and an accountant who worked on their incorporation. The Association now runs many of its own programs. It has also helped secure resources such as a grant from Councilmember Inez Dickens, which provided the New York City Housing Authority with funds to install security cameras in the community.

Ideally, communities can link these types of activities. Residents who have graduated from leadership training programs might get involved in civic engagement and organize other residents. Some of these people might then work in resident-led organizations so the neighborhood has even greater capacity to drive change.

### **8. How can sites tell if they are doing community engagement right?**

They would see the following signs:

- **More seats at the table:** More organizations in the neighborhood would invite community members to join their deliberations. Residents would find more concrete opportunities to have input into decisions that affect their lives.
- **Greater connections:** One would see inspiring instances of residents working together and with neighborhood service providers.
- **New skills:** Residents would be able to identify specific new skills and capacities they had developed from attending trainings and other community activities.
- **Greater choice:** There would be more opportunities for residents to contribute to their neighborhood improvement, with multiple options for engagement at different levels.

This document summarizes guidance on community engagement from:

Nilofer Ahsan, Center for the Study of Social Policy  
Marlene Fox, Harlem Children's Zone  
Kaaryn Nailor, Harlem Children's Zone  
Sarah Jonas, Children's Aid Society National Center for Community Schools

These presenters participated in a series of three webinars hosted by the Promise Neighborhoods Institute in January and February 2011. These webinars can be found at [PromiseNeighborhoodsInstitute.org/Technical-Assistance/Webinars](http://PromiseNeighborhoodsInstitute.org/Technical-Assistance/Webinars).

### **Additional Resources**

1. Nilofer Ahsan, *Sustaining Neighborhood Change: The Power of Resident Leadership, Social Networks, and Community Mobilization*, The Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009.
2. FINE (Family Involvement Network of Educators), Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, [www.finenetwork.org](http://www.finenetwork.org).
3. *Beyond Random Acts: Family School and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform*, Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, December 2010, <http://www.hfrp.org>.
4. *Why Invest in Grassroots Leadership Development?*, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.
5. *Grassroots Leadership: Voices from the Field*, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.
6. Joyce L. Epstein et al. *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Corwin Press, Inc., 2002.
7. Robin L. Jarrett. *Successful Parenting in High-Risk Neighborhoods*. The Future of Children: When School Is Out. Volume 9, No 2, Fall 1999.
8. Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp. *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. <http://www.parentinvolvementmatters.org/articles/bake-sale.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, “Notice Inviting Applications,” Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 86 / Wednesday, May 5, 2010 / Notices, Page 24672.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, “Notice Inviting Applications,” Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 86 / Wednesday, May 5, 2010 / Notices, Page 24675.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Bryk, et al. *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> NeighborWorks America, <http://nw.org/network/training/training.asp>