

The Harlem Children's Zone Project Model

Executive Summary



Harlem Children's
Z O N E

In the United States today, more than 13 million children—nearly one in five—live in poverty. We know that these children face a future in which they are far less likely than other children to get a good education or adequate health care and more likely to enter prison. The odds are that they will not, by a long shot, live up to their full potential. But we must understand this: Their future is the future of America.

Poverty now costs the US about 4% of its gross domestic product annually in lost production, decreased economic output, and increased social expendituresⁱ. As today's poor children enter tomorrow's workplace, under-educated and ill-prepared, the cost to America's future competitiveness in the world marketplace is incalculable.

That such great numbers of American children live in poverty is, of course, a national disgrace and a cause for shame and indignation. But shame and indignation alone will not improve their lot. We need a strategy to combat poverty effectively and broadly, one that addresses not only how to help improve the lives of poor children, but also the great number of children that need that help.

Over the last ten years, the Harlem Children's Zone[®] (HCZ[®]) has developed such a strategy in Central Harlem, a New York City neighborhood with a child poverty rate of 39%, more than double the national average. In most poor neighborhoods, the fabric of the community is in tatters. Things that middle-class communities take for granted—working schools, useable playgrounds, decent housing, support from religious institutions, functioning civic organizations, safe streets—are all but nonexistent. When they do exist, their effectiveness is marginalized by pervasive neighborhood dysfunction.

Under these circumstances, the gravitational pull of negative forces is so strong on already fragile families that only a small fraction of the children in these neighborhoods thrive. These exceptional young people are labeled *resilient* and are justly celebrated for beating the odds. But by definition, most children are not exceptional. Most poor children lack the means to overcome these crushing forces and reach their potential. Instead, they grow up poorly prepared to find good jobs with decent wages as adults, and many fall into substance abuse or end up incarcerated.

Most traditional poverty-fighting approaches are narrowly focused. Hampered by a lack of resources, many are not able to provide high-quality programs, or if they do so, it is only for a few hundred children. Others attend only to a single issue or single age group, approaches that fail to address all the developmental needs of children throughout their childhood. The great majority of approaches neglect the neighborhood environment that surrounds children and affects them profoundly.

The Children's Zone[®] Model

The Harlem Children's Zone has created a new paradigm for fighting poverty, intended to overcome the limits of traditional approaches. Our model focuses primarily and intensively on the social, health, and educational development of children. To help support that development, we also provide wrap-around programs that improve the children's family and neighborhood environments.

The theory of change underlying the HCZ model requires the coordinated application of its five core principles. To create change it is necessary to:

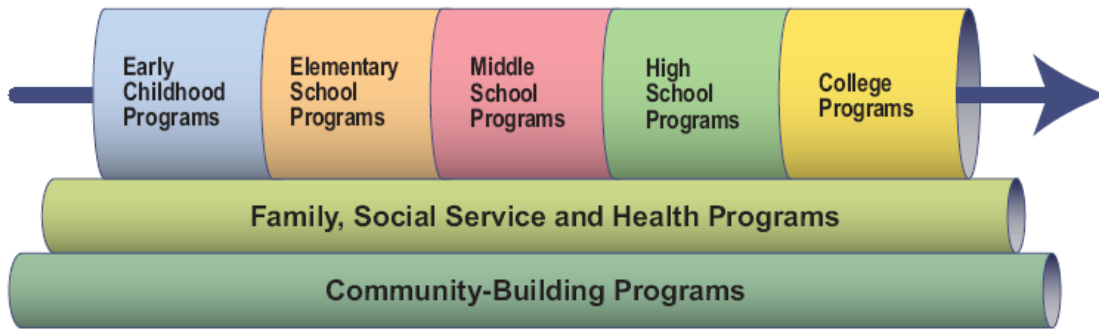
- Serve an entire neighborhood comprehensively and at scale. Engaging an entire neighborhood helps to achieve three goals: It reaches children in numbers significant enough to affect the culture of a community; it transforms the physical and social environments that impact the children's development; and it creates programs at a scale large enough to meet the local need.
- Create a pipeline of support. Develop excellent, accessible programs and schools and link them to one another so that they provide uninterrupted support for children's healthy growth, starting with pre-natal programs for parents and finishing when young people graduate from college. Surround the pipeline with additional programs that support families and the larger community.
- Build community among residents, institutions, and stakeholders, who help to create the environment necessary for children's healthy development.
- Evaluate program outcomes and create a feedback loop that cycles data back to management for use in improving and refining program offerings.
- Cultivate a culture of success rooted in passion, accountability, leadership, and teamwork.

Principle 1: Neighborhood-Based, At-Scale Approach

It is vitally important to establish a pervasive presence in the individual community where you work. Some non-profits offer a limited number of disconnected programs in one neighborhood or many programs scattered throughout several neighborhoods. However, the effects of a few good, or even excellent, programs are easily diluted in otherwise under-served neighborhoods. To bring about widespread change it is necessary to work on a scale large enough to create a tipping point in a community's cultural norms, a threshold beyond which a shift occurs away from destructive patterns and towards constructive goals. To achieve that tipping point, the collective programs offered by a non-profit must reach about 65% of the total children in the area served.

How does a non-profit organization shape the physical and social environment so that it positively affects child development? While no single non-profit organization can meet the needs of the millions of American children living in poverty, one organization working with partners can make a difference for thousands of children in one community. At HCZ, we focus on a finite area where we can concentrate intensive services on a large number of children and families, including those that are hardest to reach. We surround children with role models and programs whose message is success. As an increasing percentage of the community responds to these positive influences, we create a tipping point in community norms. This strategy changes the odds for a whole neighborhood rather than just helping a few kids beat the odds.

Principle 2: The HCZ Pipeline



The HCZ Pipeline, or continuum of services, provides children and families with a seamless series of free, coordinated, best-practice programs. We focus on the needs of children at every developmental age, including specific programs addressing pre-natal care, infants, toddlers, elementary school, middle school, adolescence, and college.

Academic excellence is a principal goal of the HCZ Pipeline, but high-quality schools are only one of the means we use to achieve it. Others include nurturing stable families, supporting youth development, improving health through fitness and nutrition, and cultivating engaged and involved adults and community stakeholders.

Children can enter the HCZ Pipeline at any age and they will be supported with high-quality programs. Through our aggressive outreach efforts and multiple entrance points, we want families to easily access the HCZ Pipeline whenever they are able to do so. Once they have entered, we do not want them to leave. We promise parents that if their children regularly attend our programs, we will prepare them for college. We have made good on that promise, even when children first enter the HCZ Pipeline in their teens. Today, HCZ has over 370 students in college who participated only in our after-school programs, and not in our charter schools or early childhood programs. However, we have found that the earlier a child enters and remains in the HCZ Pipeline, the greater the cumulative impact.

Overall, we seek to (1) maximize educational achievements for poor children; (2) ensure that each of the programs in the pipeline is strong and incorporates best practices; (3) foster strong links across programs to smooth transitions and guarantee that programs are pedagogically continuous; (4) stay community-based and responsive to local community needs; and (5) provide relevant data to program staff so that they can improve services and to policy-makers and decision-makers so that they can get the best results on their investments.

Each of the HCZ programs has been developed using hard evidence of what works for poor children and their parents. All HCZ programs, when looked at individually, are effective. But the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. The cumulative effect of multiple programs working together helps children reach their full potential. HCZ Pipeline programs consistently produce outcomes that meet or exceed national, state, and city averages.

Principle 3: Building Community

Of course, no matter how effective, it takes more than one series of programs working together to support a child's development. It takes an entire community working together to do that. So from the beginning, HCZ has worked collaboratively with local residents, faith-based institutions, cultural organizations, and other leaders on an array of issues affecting children.

Children's development is profoundly affected by their environment. The most important part of that environment is, of course, the family and the home. But it also matters greatly what children face once they step outside their home. Will their role models be drug dealers loitering on the corner or neighbors in work attire walking to the train every morning to go to work? Will children jump rope in safe playgrounds or congregate in vacant lots?

Pride in the neighborhood and strong, thoughtful local leadership must flourish alongside stable families and effective programs. It is residents, stakeholders, and local institutions that will, in the end, sustain the community.

For these reasons, community building is an essential part of the HCZ model. Residents have advised us on local needs and guided our growth at every stage of our development. Through leadership training, community organizing, neighborhood beautification, connections to social services, and a host of other activities, we work every day to build a strong community and mend the fabric of Central Harlem.

Principle 4: Evaluation

Evaluation is a key part of everything we do at HCZ. It drives program improvements, helps to identify needed enhancements, and provides managers with real-time decision-making data. Too often, evaluation is seen as a function externally imposed on community-based organizations, something forced on them by funders or policy-makers. We have brought evaluation deep inside the workings of our organization, using it as a critical tool in a process of continual self-examination and improvement. Treating evaluation as an ally to be enlisted in our success helps us to build intellectual capital and to continually refine and upgrade our performance.

Principle 5: Culture of Success

HCZ's organizational culture emphasizes accountability, leadership, teamwork, and a deep, shared passion to improve the lives of poor children. We hold ourselves to the highest standards, because we know that the way we present ourselves as role models to our young people matters a great deal. This combination of shared values and high standards leads to great morale and staff pride. Staff members consider it a privilege to work for HCZ in the interests of Harlem's children.

Careful hiring practices help to bring individuals with the right values and ethics to work for HCZ. Ongoing staff training and leadership development help to build and upgrade human capital within the organization.

We are ambitious in our goals and determined to meet them. We believe and work wholeheartedly to ensure that all our children will succeed. The only way to do that is with a motivated, dedicated, highly trained staff working together with a common purpose.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Local, state, national, and international leaders have long demonstrated an interest in the HCZ model. In response to that interest, we have crafted a detailed policy framework with suggestions as to how to implement and fund programs based on the HCZ model. Key points in that framework are summarized here.

- 1) Apply the principles of the HCZ model to other communities. A great number of high-quality, promising programs already exist in neighborhoods, cities, and states throughout the US. Communities interested in following the HCZ model do not need to replicate the specific programs we developed for Central Harlem. But they do need to incorporate all the principles outlined above into the programs that work best in their own neighborhoods.
- 2) Expect that it will take at least 10 years to fully implement a pipeline and see major outcomes. Know that in 3-4 years you will begin to see interim outcomes and they will continue to grow during the ten years it takes to build out the full model.
- 3) Make sure that a community-based organization, not government, is the lead entity, with full accountability for the program. Government can have a major role as a partner, but politics typically do not allow politicians to wait ten years for outcomes.
- 4) Obtain secure, sufficient, sustainable funding, at a level of at least \$3,500 per participant in order to build capacity, plan strategically, and execute high-quality programs.
- 5) Begin strategic planning at the outset, and plan for the long term. Proper planning will help transform a vision into a blueprint for success.

The aims of the Harlem Children's Zone are both broadly ambitious and sharply focused. We seek to touch virtually every developmentally important aspect of our children's lives as they grow to adulthood. But we do not take sole responsibility for every economic and social problem faced by every child and family. Instead we attempt to create a community of self-reliant families working together to build a common future through their own best efforts.

For more information about HCZ, please visit our website at www.hcz.org or contact Kate Shoemaker, Policy Director, at kshoemaker@hcz.org.

ⁱ Holzer, H, Schanzenbach, DW, Duncan, GJ, Ludwig, L. The Economic Costs of Poverty: Subsequent Effects of Children Growing Up Poor. (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2007)