

**Testimony of Geoffrey Canada**  
**President/CEO, Harlem Children's Zone &**  
**President, Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academy Charter Schools**  
**before the**  
**Senate Committee on**  
**Health, Education, Labor & Pensions**

**April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010**

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and Members of the Committee:

Good Morning. I am Geoffrey Canada, President/CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone<sup>®</sup>, and President of the Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academy Charter Schools. Thank you for this opportunity to speak broadly in support of comprehensive services for children within the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; and more specifically for President Obama's Promise Neighborhoods program. I believe Promise Neighborhoods will break the cycle of generational poverty for hundreds of thousands of poor children in America.

Like our work at the Harlem Children's Zone<sup>®</sup> (HCZ<sup>®</sup>), Promise Neighborhoods will transform the odds for entire communities by addressing the needs of the whole child. High-achieving schools must be at the core of Promise Neighborhoods, but it is not only about creating a successful school. It is about programs for children from birth through college, supporting families and rebuilding community. By providing the same level of comprehensive supports found in middle class communities, Promise Neighborhoods will change the trajectory of entire communities of poor children.

The challenges facing poor urban and rural communities across America are the same ones we face in Central Harlem, a community in New York City where I have worked for over 25 years. The fabric of the community is in tatters. Things that middle-class communities take for granted—working schools, useable playgrounds, decent housing, supportive religious institutions, functioning civic organizations, safe streets—are all but nonexistent. When they do exist, their effectiveness is marginalized by a toxic culture that overwhelms any small scale efforts.

As today's poor children enter tomorrow's economy, under-educated and ill-prepared, the cost to America's future competitiveness in the world marketplace is incalculable. In fact, 75 percent of young people in the U.S. today can't join the military because they are too poorly educated, are overweight or have a criminal record.<sup>i</sup> In America's inner cities, more than half of all black men do not finish high school.<sup>ii</sup> The impact of this is devastating communities: "By their mid-30's, 6 in 10 black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison."<sup>iii</sup>

Fortunately, there are solutions.

In the mid-1990s it became clear to me that despite heroic efforts at saving poor children, success stories remained the exception. My kids in Harlem faced not just one problem that could be tackled by any one specific program, but encountered obstacles everywhere that they turned.

Our piecemeal approach was of limited value against a perfect storm of problems and challenges. Vast numbers of kids were still failing out of high school leading to unemployment, antisocial behavior, drug abuse and prison.

We need to work with these kids and their families and their communities, enveloping them in healthy and encouraging environments at every stage of life, starting from birth all the way up until they graduate from college. Through this process, we are beginning to see a new generation of successful adults, coming back to Harlem to not only bring economic prosperity back to their neighborhood, but also to be the parents of and role models for the next generation of youth growing up here. So instead of seeing our kids drop out of school and get involved in crime, we will see a whole new Harlem community prepared to thrive in the global economy, competing with children from both the U.S. and the world.

This was our idea ten years ago when we started the Harlem Children's Zone in Central Harlem, an area in which the child poverty rate is more than double the national average. We started with one building on West 119<sup>th</sup> Street and over the last decade have grown in three phases to a neighborhood encompassing 97 blocks. Last year, the HCZ Project served 14,230 clients including 8,163 youth and 6,067 adults. HCZ, Inc. served 21,279 clients including 10,462 youth and 10,817 adults.

Ten years later, the Children's Zone<sup>®</sup> model is working. A few examples of outcomes from our programs:

- **Parents are reading more to their children.** At The Baby College<sup>®</sup>, a program for parents of children aged 0-3, our pre and post surveys of parents showed that 86% of parents who read to their children fewer than 5 times per week at pre-test increased the amount of time they spent reading to the children.<sup>iv</sup>
- **Four year olds are school-ready.** After a year in our early childhood programs, 99.4% of our children attained a "school readiness" classification of average or above compared to 83% at pre-test on the Bracken Basic Concept Scale-Revised. Also, at pre-test, 35.4% of children (57 of 161) had a school readiness classification of advanced or very advanced; at post-test, 73.3% (118 of 161) were in these categories (based on national norms, one would expect 15.9% of students to be advanced or very advanced).<sup>v</sup>
- **Poor minority youth are narrowing and closing the racial achievement gap.** Harvard economist Roland Fryer and his colleague Will Dobbie evaluated the outcomes of Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academy<sup>®</sup> Charter Schools and HCZ programs combined. They found that we increased the achievement of the poorest minority children. They wrote, "Taken at face value, the effects in middle school are enough to close the black-white achievement gap in mathematics and reduce it by nearly half in English Language Arts. The effects in elementary school close the racial achievement gap in both subjects."<sup>vi</sup>

- **Teenagers are graduating from high school and going to college in historic numbers.** Our College Success Office helps young people complete their college degrees, the ultimate outcome we seek as an agency. Currently, we have 490 students in college. Each year, we increase the size of our cohorts. For example, of those 490 college students, 181 just started college in the fall of 2009.<sup>vii</sup>
- **Parents are filing for their Earned Income Tax Credits and spending these resources back in the local economy.** As of April 9, 2010, our free tax filing program had helped families file 4,530 returns worth just under \$8 million. Of the total returns, 1,285 were eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit.<sup>viii</sup>

The theory of change for the Harlem Children's Zone model is embodied in five key principles. When policymakers or other communities ask us how to create similar models, we recommend that they replicate our five principles, and not our specific programs. The five principles are:

- **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 high-quality programs that** starts from birth and continues to serve children until they graduate from college. The continuum should include everything that children need to succeed: parenting education, early childhood programs, strong schools and after-school programs, health initiatives, social services; support before and during college. Programs must be: high quality, accessible and linked 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. The pipeline must be surrounded by additional programs that support families and the larger community such as family counseling, benefits counseling, legal services and assistance filing for taxes, especially the Earned Income Tax Credit.
- **Build community** among residents, institutions, and stakeholders, who help to create the environment necessary for children's healthy development.
- **Evaluate** program outcomes; create a feedback loop that cycles data back to management for use in improving and refining program offerings; and hold staff and partner organizations accountable.
- **Cultivate a culture of success** rooted in passion, accountability, leadership, and teamwork.

One key component of the HCZ pipeline is strong schools. Charter public schools provide the opportunity for innovation, but I do not believe that they alone are the answer. Proven reforms must be incorporated into traditional public schools. And children in communities with poor outcomes need both high-quality, comprehensive supports and strong schools.

HCZ charter schools have longer school days and a longer school year, merit pay and bonuses, data-driven decision making, and school leaders with the ability to hire and fire employees. We believe that these reforms—coupled with our early childhood programs, out-of-school time programs for all ages, medical, dental, and mental health services<sup>i</sup>, and healthy food, nutrition, and fitness opportunities—generated the terrific improvements in our student achievement that Fryer and Dobbie found in their study.

While all of the supports are critical, we cannot expect that only adding supports to schools will transform academic outcomes. This approach must be paired with the type of structural reforms to education that the Obama Administration has proposed in their blueprint for revising the ESEA and encouraged through Race to the Top. For example, we must have effective teachers and leaders alongside high-achieving after-school programs.

The HCZ model is not cheap. We spend on average \$5,000 per child each year to ensure children's success. But compare this to the costs of not spending this money:

- New Yorkers spend roughly \$210,000 per youth on detention annually. A recent report from New York State Governor David Paterson's Task Force on Transforming Juvenile Justice highlighted the fact that three-quarters of those released from detention were arrested again within three years and 45% were reincarcerated.<sup>ix</sup>
- In the 97 square blocks that constitute the HCZ project, the government will spend \$42 million incarcerating some residents of our community.<sup>x</sup>

Poverty now costs the U.S. about 4% of its gross domestic product annually in lost production, decreased economic output, and increased social expenditures.<sup>xi</sup> Yet for far less money than the costs of poverty or what we are already spending on incarceration, we can educate our children, have them graduate from college, and bring them back to our communities ready to be successful, productive citizens. We think the choice is obvious.

HCZ's achievements are not magic. They are a result of hard work and a comprehensive effort. Communities recognize that this is not easy, but they are already getting started. PolicyLink and HCZ recently held a conference focusing on the HCZ model and 1,400 people representing over 100 communities came. HCZ has a Practitioners Institute where other communities can come for several hours or several days to learn about our model. Since we launched our Institute in 2003, HCZ has welcomed over 120 communities from the US and more from around the world.

I applaud the President for taking the war on poverty to the next phase and I urge you to support Promise Neighborhoods and comprehensive supports for children.

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<sup>i</sup> Mission Readiness, Ready Willing, And Unable To Serve. (Washington, DC: Mission Readiness, 2009)

<sup>ii</sup> Eckholm, Eric. *Plight Deepens for Black Men*. New York Times. March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> HCZ Internal data.

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Health Fund, Harlem Hospital and HCZ provide medical, dental and mental health services to our charter schools.

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<sup>v</sup> HCZ Internal data.

<sup>vi</sup> Dobbie, W., & Fryer, R. G., Jr., (2009). *Are high-quality schools enough to close the achievement gap? Evidence from a social experiment in Harlem*. (NBER Working Paper No. 15473). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>vii</sup> HCZ Internal data

<sup>viii</sup> HCZ Internal data

<sup>ix</sup> A Report of Governor David Paterson's Task Force on Transforming Juvenile Justice. *Charting A New Course: A Blueprint for Transforming Juvenile Justice in New York State*. (New York: 2009)

<sup>x</sup> Cadora, E and L Kurgan. Columbia University Spatial Information and Design Lab Geographic Information Systems. (New York: Justice Mapping Center 2007)

<sup>xi</sup> 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)