



Harlem Children's Zone:

Focusing on 100 Blocks and One Child at a Time

Factors: Economic, social, physical, service

The revitalization of Harlem occupies the minds and agendas of many people. While many focus solely on the economic aspects—developing luxury condominiums and commercial real estate—others believe that the most valuable aspect of Harlem's revival is its human capital, particularly its children. Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), has adopted a 100-block area in Central Harlem in New York City and created a multifaceted approach to the healthy development of over 7,400 children—from infancy to adulthood. HCZ's approach focuses on strengthening families, providing opportunities for sustainable social and economic well-being, and creating physical environments that foster learning and growth.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, approximately 152,000 people, predominately African American, live in Central Harlem; 26 percent are children. In 2003, a study of health in the neighborhood found that residents disproportionately suffer from conditions such as heart disease, stroke, and cancer and that rates of infant mortality are higher than in many other sections of New York City. The report found that the asthma rate among children is four times higher than in other parts of the city, childhood obesity rates are rising, and there's a high prevalence of Type 2 diabetes among teenagers. The financial health of the neighborhood mirrors its physical health: 61 percent of children live in poverty, and one in four black men in Central Harlem is unemployed.

To make a positive impact on the neighborhood, the Harlem Children's Zone Project is a multipronged, place-based approach to developing a healthy neighborhood—one child at a time. One of the HCZ Project's programs is the Baby College, which offers a nine-week series of classes on Saturdays to 60–100 parents of children between the ages of zero and three. Topics discussed include childhood nutrition, constructive ways to discipline children, and methods for educating toddlers. Since the program's inception seven years ago, outreach workers have organized monthly gatherings of the Baby College graduates to foster social networks that serve as support systems, providing emotional assistance in times of need. The monthly gatherings also introduce parents to other programs within HCZ. One such program is Harlem Gems, a universal pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds.

To address the community's high asthma rate, HCZ launched its Asthma Initiative—in partnership with Harlem Hospital's Department of Pediatrics, Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, and the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene—to screen all neighborhood children for asthma and to combat the triggers that cause asthma attacks. Workers conduct home visits to survey families and provide services to asthma sufferers. In 2006, the HCZ Asthma Initiative surveyed 5,793 students and found that over 30 percent had asthma. (The national rates are from 5 to 7 percent.⁸) HCZ has enrolled 756 children since the initiative began; outcomes show that participants are doing better since joining the program: the school absentee rate related to asthma dropped from 24 percent to 7 percent, and emergency room visits also dropped considerably. The organizational structure of HCZ contributes to the success of the Asthma Initiative outreach: HCZ has developed trust with parents through its programs such as the Baby College, Harlem Gems, and the Peacemaker program in the local elementary schools, and information on healthy living is distributed through the wide variety of HCZ's educational and social programs.

In January 2005, HCZ opened a six-story facility that houses part of the Promise Academy, a charter school that will ultimately educate up to 600 middle- and high-school students. The school includes a free health clinic, the Harlem Children's Health Project, operated by the Children's Health Fund. It provides medical, dental, and mental health services and screens children for asthma and other health issues such as obesity and diabetes. The HCZ Obesity Initiative works with children to help them obtain or maintain a healthy body mass index. HCZ hired a chef who prepares nutritious

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foods in the cafeteria—a stark contrast to the fast-food spots, convenience stores, and donut shops that populate much of the neighborhood.

Another HCZ program that addresses healthy living is the TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center (TRUCE is an acronym for the Renaissance University for Community Education). Through the center, middle-school students have conducted surveys to analyze the factors that lead to obesity and diabetes in Central Harlem. They found that very few neighborhood grocery stores stocked healthy foods. To address this deficit, they created community gardens and donated the produce to food banks and sold it to local markets. Youth have become gardeners, learned about healthy eating, and developed their entrepreneurial skills.

TRUCE also offers a comprehensive youth development program for high-school students focused on academic growth and career readiness through the use of the arts, media literacy, and multimedia technology. Youth publish a quarterly newspaper and produce an award-winning cable TV program. Both outlets allow HCZ to communicate messages about healthy living, encourage dialogue around community issues, and inform the community about HCZ programs. TRUCE teens have excelled academically.

A healthy community must be economically sound. Through a partnership with a local bank (Carver Bank) and the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED, an organization that seeks to expand economic opportunity), families in the Young Harlem Investors program open savings accounts for their children to encourage the pursuit of higher education. HCZ and CFED match the family's deposits by contributing when families meet certain milestones.

The Investment Camp teaches youth about financial literacy, including investing in the stock market. According to Canada, this program—launched in partnership with Lehman Brothers—has resulted in 75 youth earning \$14,000. “Let’s say you’re 14 and someone says to you, ‘Hey, go and sell this package; if you get caught, you might go to jail or, worse, you might get killed.’ We’re saying, ‘Learn these stock names; you’ll make more money than you’ve ever imagined, much more than standing on that corner,’” says Canada. “Our job is to tell kids that there are lots of opportunities out there that they don’t know about.”

HCZ’s impact extends further than the families it serves. The organization employs a number of vehicles to push for policy change. Canada co-chairs—with Richard Parsons, chairman and CEO of Time Warner—the city’s Commission on Economic Opportunity, established by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The commission is charged with coming up with time-tested, results-driven policy recommendations to reduce poverty. The initiative will focus on children younger than six, young adults ages 16–24, and the working poor—a parallel demographic to those enrolled in HCZ’s comprehensive programs. Based on recommendations, the city will devise a strategic plan, which will be monitored by advisors. Additionally, Canada—with Karen Schimke, president and CEO of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy—co-chairs the Children’s Cabinet Advisory Board, which advises Governor Eliot Spitzer on his Children’s Agenda announced in the spring of 2007.⁹

The Harlem Children’s Zone philosophy and approach embody the proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Through its Practitioners Institute, the senior staff of HCZ plays a role in “lifting up what works” by citing best practices and successful approaches to programs. According to the institute’s director, Rasuli Lewis, participants get a “surround-sound understanding of HCZ’s conveyor belt of services, targeting those from zero to 24 years of age. . . . At the end of the visit, practitioners understand that improving the child’s health must be comprehensive.” He concluded, “You can’t focus solely on one environment because oftentimes a child comes from a distressed home within a distressed neighborhood, so you’ve also got to provide services to the child, family, and community.”

For all its comprehensive services and all the implications for broader policymaking, the zone remains at heart a neighborhood organizing strategy, one that emphasizes the power of adults getting involved and the need for mutual accountability for positive results among all parties, whether they be teachers, doctors, program managers, or parents. As Canada says, “People must realize that if our children don’t make it, neither will our country.”