



Not the Ceiling, but the Floor

Innovative Harlem Early Childhood Education Effort Complicated by Varying Government Regulations

Kristina Costa June 1, 2012

This case study was produced in conjunction with the Center for American Progress's accompanying report on these issues, "Increasing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Existing Public Investments in Early Childhood Education."¹ This report establishes a set of policies and administrative changes on the federal level that will begin to address disparities in requirements for publicly-supported pre-K, Head Start, and subsidized child care programs.

A cool early November sun filters through the windows of Geoffrey Canada's top-floor office. An ambulance siren wails as it rushes by the Harlem Children's Zone² headquarters at the corner of Madison Avenue and 125th Street—Harlem's bustling "Main Street." In contrast to the chaos outside his windows, Canada is the picture of calm. A tall, rangy man with a graying goatee, he is the visionary president and CEO of the Children's Zone, an innovative, holistic, 97-block effort that aims not only to educate thousands of children in Harlem but to also break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. As it says on its website, the Children's Zone is working to "reweave the social fabric of Harlem, which has been torn apart by crime, drugs and decades of poverty."³

In reweaving Harlem's social fabric, the Children's Zone starts at the very beginning with parenting and early childhood programs and then continues by offering an array of services that follow children straight through college. "As every parent knows, you can't just work intensively with your 4-year-old and then do nothing for that child for the rest of their life and expect that kid to be fine," says Canada. "So the fact that some people are still trying to say, 'Just do a high-quality 4-year-old program and kids who then enter into lousy schools should be just fine,'—that just doesn't make any sense at all."

The Children's Zone's successes are presaged on the fact that early childhood intervention is incredibly important—but so, too, is providing supports for parents and for children as they age.

"That's why we say, early childhood education is not the ceiling, it's the floor of what poor children need," continues Canada.

Since the 1990s, Canada, who holds a master's in education from Harvard, has worked tirelessly to prove poor children can achieve, thrive, and succeed. A 2004 *New York Times Magazine* article noted that the Children's Zone, which supports children from cradle to college, "combines educational, social and medical services. ... it meshes those services into an interlocking web, and then it drops that web over an entire neighborhood. ... the objective is to create a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighborhood just can't slip through."⁴

The approach has been successful. One hundred percent of students enrolled in the Children's Zone's pre-kindergarten programs in fiscal year 2011 tested as kindergarten-ready by the end of the program. In 2008, 100 percent of third-graders at one of the Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy charter schools scored at or above grade level on the statewide math test, as did 97 percent of third-graders at the second Promise Academy location.⁵

But in their early childhood education programs—the Harlem Gems—the Harlem Children's Zone grapples with a problem that is familiar to those who seek to educate preschoolers nationwide: the cost and complexity of complying with different sets of requirements and guidelines for programs receiving money from state preschool funds (in New York, these are called Universal Pre-K funds) and those financed with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start dollars.⁶ The two funding streams have different requirements on the federal and state levels for a wide range of basic functions, including student evaluations, program financing, and professional development.

The Children's Zone operates the Gems program in four locations—three of those sites receive public funding from Universal Pre-K and the fourth, which is a Head Start program, receives a blend of public funding from Head Start and Universal Pre-K. All of the Gems sites are augmented by private donations. The Children's Zone's unique public-private financial structure enables them to keep many administrative burdens in the back offices at headquarters and out of their classrooms. But even the flexibility that comes with private and philanthropic dollars isn't always enough to work around some major bureaucratic hurdles.

Take for instance the Children's Zone's effort to concurrently set up a new Head Start program and construct a new building to house their administrative offices and one of their charter schools. In the spring of 2001, they began renting a three-classroom storefront on West 117th Street for the new Head Start program. A few months later they held a groundbreaking ceremony on a recently purchased parcel of land that would eventually be the site of a glistening new \$43 million headquarters and charter school complex.

Over the next three years, six stories of glass and concrete were designed and built in Manhattan, and the doors of the new building opened in December 2004. But just a few blocks south, the new Head Start remained mired in red tape. The Head Start space would not open for another several months until the start of the 2005-06 school year.

“There was wrangling over licensing, over square footage, over architects’ designs,” says Shana Brodnax, senior manager at the Zone, recalling the challenges to opening the Head Start Gems. It took four years for the Head Start to launch. “It was quite an ordeal just to be able to do what the community needed.”

Clearly pleased with the result of all their hard work, Canada nonetheless hints to a bit of frustration. “There’s no difference between a 4-year-old who needs help in Head Start and one who needs help in other systems.” Continuing, he says, “it costs us an awful lot of money to provide two different sets of audit materials” for separate Head Start and Universal Pre-K programs. Canada points out that’s money and time that could be spent educating children.

The back office meets the bureaucracy

The many laurels heaped on the Harlem Children’s Zone can obscure the magnitude of the difficulties they and their students face. Nationwide 80 percent of African American and Hispanic public school students score below grade level on standardized tests of math and English. In Harlem 31 percent of families live on less than \$15,000 per year.⁷ And each year about 18.4 percent of 4-year-olds entering Children’s Zone preschool programs score as “delayed” or “very delayed” on the Bracken Basic Concept Scale, a rigorous, nationally normed learning assessment. That proportion is slightly higher than the 15.9 percent expected based on the tool’s norms; still some of their preschoolers score much lower than one might anticipate.⁸

“Occasionally, some kids don’t even register on the Bracken. That’s the degree of challenge we’re facing,” says Kate Shoemaker, the Children’s Zone’s energetic director of policy and special projects. To address these problems, the Children’s Zone uses every tool in the book. All students at their Promise Academy charter schools, which will eventually enroll children from kindergarten through 12th grade, attend school for more hours of the day and more days of the year than their traditional public school peers. Even the pre-kindergarten Harlem Gems students have a school day that runs from 8 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., Monday to Friday, September through August. For each class of 20 Gems, there are at least five adults working as teachers and teacher assistants.

Shana Brodnax is the Children’s Zone firewall between government bureaucracy and the organization’s early childhood programs. She points out that it is her job to “make sure that the programs don’t feel the pressure and strain” of the various federal and state reporting requirements. “What I refuse to do is see it [bureaucratic red tape] impact the kids. But frankly, I have that luxury.”

Like all of Canada’s deputies, Brodnax is fervent in her commitment. “My job is to save these kids. Not in theory, but in fact. Any time I have to spend arguing about minutiae is in direct violation of what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Yet “arguing about minutiae” occupies a considerable amount of Brodnax’s time as she oversees the Children’s Zone early childhood education programs. To underscore this point, Brodnax uses the example of student evaluations. She says that in New York both Head Start and the state’s Universal Pre-K programs require two completely different student evaluations, which were different, too, from the assessment already being used by the Children’s Zone to determine school readiness in preschool students. Brodnax notes that the Children’s Zone uses the Bracken Basic Concept Scale, which she calls the “gold standard for getting an in-depth assessment” to determine a child’s school readiness.

Fortunately the Children’s Zone was “able to convince New York’s Universal Pre-K officials to accept the Bracken assessment” instead of the preferred Early Screening Inventory-Revised assessment. But according to Brodnax, “we have to wage that battle anew every year.”

As for the federal Head Start program, it “wouldn’t budge,” continues Brodnax. As a result, in addition to administering the Bracken assessment twice a year, both the Gems and the Gems Head Start programs complete the BRIGANCE Early Childhood Assessment. And while the Children’s Zone is constantly asked about whether they’ve completed given screenings, requirements for effectively responding to the results of these evaluations are spotty.

“If you only ask about the screening but don’t ask about the follow-up, you’ve really missed the boat,” adds Shoemaker.

To reach as many kids as possible, the Children’s Zone runs both Universal Pre-K preschool programs and a Head Start program that also receives UPK funding. But the disparate requirements of the two funding streams has, according to Brodnax, led to the creation of “this elaborate shadow structure throughout the agency” charged with keeping the organization in compliance.

In the eight years that Debbie Kim, the director of foundations and government, has worked for the Harlem Children’s Zone, the organization’s budget has nearly quadrupled from \$24 million to \$95 million. The majority of the annual budget comes from private and philanthropic dollars with about a third derived from public funds. Even so, Kim says, “managing the public funds takes more organization than the private dollars.” Illustrating the point, she points out that with the Head Start program, “there are [New York] regulations requiring a separate bank account and a separate audit.” Kim says maintaining a separate bank account for Head Start has been a particularly nettlesome problem.

Brodnax agrees. “We’re a huge agency that has certain procedures in place, and the concept of having a separate bank account for one project is sort of ridiculous.”

Fortunately, because the Children’s Zone meets certain criteria, it was able to press the city administrator for a waiver to allow them to administer the Gems Head Start program from their main accounts. That waiver, however, wasn’t received until April 2011.

Even with the waiver, the Head Start program still has plenty more unique requirements facing the Children’s Zone, including having a board of directors that is separate from the organization’s main board. In addition, Head Start requires separate procedures for monitoring staff and has different qualification requirements for staff. Many smaller agencies struggle to meet these and other requirements.

“Head Start’s program audits have over a thousand different things they’re looking at for 3- and 4-year-olds,” Canada says. “I just think that it makes it a much more paper-driven system than a child-performance system. We should be looking at what kids do and what they can’t do instead of whether or not your sinks are a certain height and distance from the bathrooms and all of the files are color-coded.”

Additionally, the Children’s Zone’s concerted efforts to raise private and philanthropic dollars allow it to work around another critical misalignment between Universal Pre-K and Head Start: professional development. The Children’s Zone exceeds the requirements for teacher training set by both programs, but more could be done, says Brodnax. “There are fantastic trainings that I can only send teachers from one funding stream to.” She says when that occurs, usually only lead teachers—not assistant teachers or aides—can attend the trainings, even though there are five adults in each Harlem Gems classroom, all of whom are expected to have similar knowledge.

In one instance, New York City’s Head Start facilitator held a training session on emotionally responsive teaching practices. “It ended up being extremely valuable,” Brodnax says. “It really helped us with children’s emotional self-regulation and dramatically changed behavior and aggression in the school. But we weren’t allowed to include anyone from the other [Gems] sites because they weren’t Head Start.”

In light of that situation, the Children’s Zone began offering its own emotionally responsive teacher training session using private funds to allow more teachers, teaching assistants, and aides to avail themselves of the training, which in the end benefits the students. Still Brodnax can’t help but wonder, “if the training’s happening anyway, what does it hurt to have a few more people in the room?”

As pioneers in data-driven education, these programmatic differences and thorny bureaucratic challenges are things that Children’s Zone thinks can—and should—be changed. For all of the care that goes into keeping programs in compliance, little has been done in many programs to connect preschool experiences and data with students as they enter kindergarten and elementary school.

“We need to not make early childhood a terminal experience for children,” Canada says. “It’s hugely inefficient that we haven’t taken the steps to connect these programs.”

Shoemaker agrees. “In many cases, teachers and staff aren’t being trained about how to use the data” they collect. As a result they are left wondering if the data they are collecting are going “into a black hole.” At the Children’s Zone, staff meets frequently in teams to review student data with information about student strengths and weaknesses being shared between grades as students progress. Shoemaker says “the integration and coordination of data is a key ingredient” in driving program improvement.

Inside the Harlem Children’s Zone classrooms

A few blocks north of the Children’s Zone’s headquarters is the Lenox Avenue entryway of one of the Universal Pre-K-funded Uptown Gems, a bright and sunny space with low shelves displaying dozens of picture books and carpeting printed with a cartoon alphabet. Stairs off the entryway lead up to the classrooms that are named for universities—Spelman, Morehouse, Yale, and Cornell.

On this day it is midafternoon and it’s naptime for each classroom of about 20 “Uptown Gems.” Some of the preschoolers are zonked out, arms and legs akimbo. Others peek shyly out from under their eyelids, playing possum on their sleeping mats. In the corner of the Spelman-Morehouse classroom, a small girl wearing a sailor blouse steers a computer mouse determinedly as she works away at a Waterford learning activity, a computer-based program used to promote literacy.

The Harlem Children’s Zone strives to make early childhood education as beneficial to parents as it is to the Gems. Adrienne Crudup, the warm and cheerful program director of the Uptown Gems, emphasizes the many activities and events they hold to keep parents involved in their children’s education, including weekly take-home activities, monthly parent meetings, and a lending library.

Crudup acknowledges that Children’s Zone’s rigorous standards and extended school day and year require more of her and her teachers when compared to their counterparts in many other early childhood programs. “Do we go home tired sometimes? Yes,” she admits. But with a smile brightening her face, she quickly adds as she walks down a hall decorated with colorful artwork and vocabulary words of the day in three languages, “I’m doing what I love.”

Meanwhile, just a few blocks away from Uptown Gems on 117th Street, it’s snack time for the preschoolers at the Harlem Gems Head Start. Deborah Carroll, the Gems Head Start program director, who has the kind of even, soothing voice that seems to come naturally to those who work with young children, explains her program is the only income-eligibility-

based program run by the Children’s Zone. Children in foster care, children who are homeless, children who live below the federal poverty threshold, and children with special needs receive prioritized enrollment in the two-year program. Even with the inherent challenges facing many of its students, 100 percent of the most recent class of Harlem Head Start Gems moving from their first year to their second year tested as “school-ready” on the Bracken at the end of just one year—surpassing the national norm of 84 percent.

Carroll acknowledges that there are sometimes difficulties with inspections and compliance when it comes to Head Start, but she notes that the Gems Head Start has been in good compliance in its annual audits since 2005. Still, Carroll isn’t convinced that hitting performance benchmarks conveys the whole of the Gems Head Start story. “Sometimes people are just looking at the performance standard and how it reads, and aren’t looking outside the box, particularly when something supersedes what’s required,” she says. Carroll says she has had “to inform [inspectors] in understanding how we work,” particularly in those areas where the school exceeds Head Start’s standards.

It’s exactly this narrow “tunnel vision” approach—this failure to fully grasp the bigger picture—taken by funding entities that Geoffrey Canada finds frustrating. Just a dozen blocks separate the Uptown Gems and Harlem Gems Head Start—two of the Children’s Zone’s four highly successful early childhood classroom spaces, which offer mirroring educational and social services to basically the same set of preschoolers and their families.

“In early childhood [education] we need to stop having dual systems with different funding requirements, different resources. ... they’re really targeted at the same young people,” says Canada. After a long moment, he adds, “We need to bring some rationality to the system.”

Kristina Costa is a Research Assistant at the Center for American Progress.

Endnotes

- 1 Donna Cooper and Kristina Costa, "Increasing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Existing Public Investments in Early Childhood Education" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012), available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/06/earlychildhood.html>
- 2 "Children's Zone," "Harlem Gems," "Harlem Children's Zone," and "Promise Academy Charter School" are registered trademarks of the Harlem Children's Zone.
- 3 "The HCZ Project," available at <http://www.hcz.org/about-us/the-hcz-project> (last accessed May 15, 2012).
- 4 Paul Tough, "The Harlem Project," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2004, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/20/magazine/the-harlem-project.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
- 5 "Promise Academy Charter Schools," available at <http://www.hcz.org/programs/promise-academy-charter-schools> (last accessed May 15, 2012).
- 6 "Harlem Gems" is a registered trademark of the Harlem Children's Zone.
- 7 Harlem Children's Zone, "2011 Biennial Report" (2011), available at <http://www.hcz.org/books/HCZ%202011%20Biennial/index.html#/1/>.
- 8 Betina Jean-Louis, interview with author, November 4, 2011.