

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

# Case Study: Parramore

Parramore was Orlando's toughest neighborhood when Buddy Dyer became the city's mayor in 2003. Data painted a bleak picture of the 1.4-square-mile neighborhood adjacent to downtown Orlando. Fully 73 percent of Parramore's children were living in poverty and 47 percent of neighborhood adults neither had a high school diploma nor a GED. A disproportionate percentage of city crime occurred in Parramore. Multiple structural issues contributed to the area's decline: the placement there of seven homeless shelters, closure of both the neighborhood's two elementary schools and the paving of a four-lane highway right through the residential sector.

But Parramore's luck began to change when Dyer was elected. As one of his earliest priorities, the mayor committed to its revitalization. The city began allocating significant resources to address the neighborhood's housing, public safety, quality-of-life and business-development problems. This effort culminated in the Parramore Kidz Zone (PKZ), a neighborhood-based education collaborative modeled after the well-known Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ).

Using the HCZ model as a starting point, PKZ began investing in, enhancing and scaling up the neighborhood's existing services and institutions wherever possible. But it made some specific adaptations: Rather than centering services around a particular school, PKZ focused on providing primary prevention services, such as

### Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Parramore neighborhood in Orlando, FL
- **Problem:** 73% of children living in poverty; 47% of adults lacking high school diploma or GED
- **Results:** 21% increase in number of children at or above grade level on standardized math test (FCAT) between 2006 and 2010
- **Differentiating Feature:** Parramore deliberately incorporates proven strategies both inside and outside of the community in its initiatives, beginning with the Harlem Children's Zone model.
- **Leaders/Lead Organization:** Mayor Dyer and Parramore Kidz Zone
- **Philanthropic Support:** Orlando's Mayor Dyer has raised most funds through city money and personal fundraisers.

tutoring and youth development programs, to children at neighborhood-based sites. PKZ lowers barriers for kids to join such programs through grassroots marketing, subsidized fees, streamlined paperwork and transportation to programs. PKZ also has expanded the capacity of participating (mostly neighborhood-based) nonprofits serving Parramore children through funding, free rent, and technical and administrative support.

The result? Parramore's transformation was nothing short of remarkable. Scores for the FCAT, Florida's standardized test, have moved up sharply. For example, 60 percent of elementary students were at and above grade level in reading in 2010 compared with 45 percent in 2007. Similarly, the FCAT math percentages nearly doubled to 48 percent from 27 percent. And while Orlando's overall juvenile crime rate declined by an impressive 67 percent from 2006 to 2010, Parramore showed significantly better results—with an 81 percent reduction.

Housing-improvement projects and an influx of city funding played a critical role in Parramore's progress. But the key to its children's success has been the real collaboration among all its varied sectors—nonprofit, government, faith, civic, education, philanthropy and corporate. As Lisa Early, director of Families, Parks and Recreation says, "We make sure all boats are rowing in the same direction."

Another unique strategy was PKZ's commitment to invest in the neighborhood's nascent social capital. As a result, most partners today are grassroots organizations with offices and programs already inside Parramore. Armed with this experience, PKZ is exploring expansion into an adjacent neighborhood, Holden Heights. While PKZ will continue to invest in Parramore, the replication effort is a testament to the enormous progress PKZ has made over the last five-plus years.

#### **Four key things have made PKZ successful in improving the lives of Parramore's children:**

##### **Building on others' successes:** *deliberate alignment toward what works*

Parramore deliberately incorporated proven strategies both inside and outside of the community in its initiatives. Early recalls she was searching in 2004 for a viable strategy when she first read about Harlem Children's Zone. Within months, a mayor's office team visited Harlem, liked what they saw and began to model a similar PKZ. With Early leading the team, PKZ adopted and customized HCZ's evidence-based and developmentally appropriate approaches across the cradle-to-career continuum. PKZ doubled the neighborhood's Head Start program, established a child-care funding pool and, using research-based tools to measure quality of child-care centers, funded a child-care quality-improvement project. For older youth, PKZ also used the tried and true. It makes investments using the Positive Youth Development (PYD) theoretical framework, which 1) emphasizes

the building of youth assets, skills and competencies, and 2) connects youth with trusted adults as the key mechanism for healthy development.

**Powerful, committed leader:** *effective leadership and governance*

Dyer's commitment has endured. Indeed, he put his reputation on the line from the outset, saying: "The time to act is now. You can measure my success as mayor of Orlando by my ability to rebuild this once proud neighborhood." Dyer allocates significant city monies to Parramore and donates 100 percent of the proceeds from his annual charity fundraiser. Dyer also dedicates 50 percent of the time of his director of Families, Parks and Recreation to the project. Another strong advocate over time has been State Representative Geraldine F. Thompson.

**Investing in data:** *use of data to set the agenda and improve over time*

Data has always shaped PKZ's course. From the start, PKZ engaged the Local Health Council of East Central Florida as an external evaluator to measure its progress against best practices. To establish a baseline, residents participated in a face-to-face survey in 2006, and they will be surveyed again in the first half of 2012. Survey results were used to shape programming. As the PKZ team declares: "We invest in what the neighborhood wants. We found that 80 percent of parents wanted more tutoring for their kids and adapted our services accordingly." To provide ongoing data on service utilization and effectiveness, PKZ tracks each youth's attendance through sign-in sheets.

Yet, PKZ has to work hard to gather its data. Parramore does not have its own zip code, and students attend many outside schools. PKZ and its external evaluator had to work with various government entities to get granular, geography-specific information. Tracked at the neighborhood level today are: teen pregnancy rates, reading and math proficiency scores, readiness for school by kindergarten indicators and juvenile arrest rates. The collaborative is working to start gathering individual indicators for youth on education progress and health issues.

**Rooting programs in community opinions:** *community members as partners and producers of impact*

Parramore residents are instrumental in shaping and marketing PKZ services. PKZ uses community feedback and survey results to design programming. Or as one PKZ staff member put it: "We never would have been successful if we tried to tell the community what services they needed instead of listening to what they wanted." To stay informed, the collaborative constantly holds neighborhood meetings. There, PKZ gathers feedback on its services and marketing strategies, disseminates information, plans activities and generally builds resident ownership of the effort. To boost attendance, PKZ provides free child care, transportation and food. PKZ's resident community ambassador is

Brenda March, the city's children and education manager. Born and raised in the community, March oversees day-to-day PKZ operations. March has led community engagement efforts in Parramore for her entire career and has earned the respect of neighborhood leaders, pastors, business people and residents.

Door-to-door and street outreach and the engagement of community members directly drive impact by spreading the word about PKZ's services. The marketing tactics employed by PKZ are unique and culturally relevant, including "wrapping" PKZ vans in the neighborhood youth's designs; collaborating with youth to organize neighborhood events; and distributing PKZ t-shirts and other giveaways. The project has saturated the neighborhood with information about services and engaged so many grassroots partners that the brand is easily recognized throughout Parramore.

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#### **SOURCES**

- Parramore Kidz Zone Overview. <<http://www.cityoforlando.net/fpr/Html/PDFs/kidzzone.pdf>>. 2006.