



The Promise Neighborhoods Movement: Creating Communities of Opportunity from Cradle to Career

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The Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood illustrates how setting clear goals for collective impact and making sure local efforts get needed support can result in sustainable systemic change in low-income communities.

Seven miles from the Mexican border in the city of Chula Vista, California, seventeen-year-old Andrea¹ was close to her college dream, but reality was getting in the way. She had followed a perfect plan: good
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1 “Andrea” is a pseudonym.

grades, extracurricular activities, and even a part-time job. She had been a model student and good daughter. But even though she had already received two college acceptances, she was having second thoughts. Leaving home would mean leaving her mom and four sisters without her part-time earnings. The family relied on it. Leaving home would mean breaking tradition and breaking up the family.

Feeling like she had to choose between family and future, Andrea turned for support to Chula Vista Promise

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Neighborhood (CVPromise) on her school campus. The CVPromise team understood her struggles. Many of them had gone through similar experiences with their own families. The CVPromise team met with the entire family to create a plan for this college journey, not just for the student but for the family as well. Part of the journey was learning together about the value and benefit of higher education and another was dealing with the reality of economics. The CVPromise team linked mom to additional resources and employment opportunities, bringing new hope to a stressful situation.

CVPromise supports have since become a regular part of Andrea's senior life and an integral part of her siblings' academic experience as well. Andrea's younger siblings have a plan now as well. Not only do they join their sister at various college-related events, but they also now *all* are planning their college journeys – even the youngest child in the third grade.

This story is a common one. Beyond academic scores are the realities families are facing and the responsibilities students carry. Economics and culture play an integral part in our students' lives and in their choice to pursue higher education. It is important for systems, programs, and services to be aligned so that the needs of the family as a whole are taken into account. Neither educators nor community-based organizations can do this on their own. It takes the whole community to build the supports necessary to strengthen all families as key partners who not only understand how to help their children thrive, but also have the resources to do so.

In just a short year and a half, the CVPromise team has seen the impact not only on families, schools, and community – but in academic outcomes as well. As of 2013, English

language arts proficiency among fifth-graders more than doubled in a year, from 15.6 percent to 32.5 percent, and math scores increased dramatically, from 3.1 percent proficient to 33 percent of students at or above grade level. Results like this are being achieved across the board at Castle Park Middle School and at the four other schools in the Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood. And across the country, other communities are also transforming and getting results. Just a year or two into implementation, Promise Neighborhoods from Buffalo to Minneapolis to Los Angeles are changing the lives of young people and their families, including improvements in academic proficiency, attendance, high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and other performance indicators.

The federal Promise Neighborhoods program² brings together community partners to provide children and families with comprehensive, coordinated support to improve results and reverse the cycle of generational poverty. Inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone,³ Promise Neighborhoods create communities of opportunity, centered around strong schools, that allow children to learn, grow, and succeed. Rather than impose yet another program on low-income communities, the Promise Neighborhoods approach aims to amplify and accelerate local efforts in order to achieve *collective impact* at a systems level and at the scale needed to change the odds for a significant number of our nation's 14.7 million children living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor 2014). Inspired by the successful model of the Harlem Children's Zone, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink (PNI) supports Promise Neighborhoods – communities

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2 See www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html.
3 See hcz.org.

of opportunity centered around strong schools – to wrap children in education, health, and social supports from cradle to college to career. By effectively coordinating the efforts of schools, families, social services, health centers, and community-building programs, all children can fulfill their promise. South Bay Community Services (SBCS) is a multi-service agency in San Diego County that coordinates CVPromise. (See sidebar for more on PNI and SBCS.)

The collective impact framework that guides this work goes beyond the traditional idea of collaboration. Using this approach, a cross-sector group of stakeholders sets aside their individual agendas and strongly commits – in action as well as words – to a common agenda to solve a specific social problem. They agree to use common measurements, align their activities, communicate continuously, and create a backbone organization to coordinate and facilitate these processes (Kania & Kramer 2011). The collective impact approach is tough work. It means that every single partner must own the same results and indicators, whether the partner is a funder, business leader, school district, police department, or intermediary organization like PNI. Instead of competing for resources, and continuing to do business as usual, organizations align their work around particular results to achieve transformative systems change.

Promise Neighborhoods aim to bring consistent, intensive focus to children at every step of their lives, from cradle through college to career, by changing the way families and leaders from education, government, social services, philanthropy, business, and faith community work together. The program's hallmarks are cross-sector partnerships, a seamless continuum of solutions, a common set of ten academic and community results that make the biggest difference for

low-income children with fifteen associated indicators,⁴ and shared accountability for results, using real-time data for continuous improvement and rapid response when interventions fall short.

In this article, the authors reflect on the successes and challenges of the Promise Neighborhoods movement as it works toward education equity, and on what it takes to effect large-scale, sustainable change for low-income communities and communities of color.

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4 See Federal Register, [gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-04-20/pdf/2012-09597.pdf](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-04-20/pdf/2012-09597.pdf), p23,679. For more in-depth explanation of the fifteen indicators see: Urban Institute's Guidance document, www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/pndataguidance.pdf.

ABOUT PNI AND CVPROMISE

PNI, an independent nonprofit organization, helps more than sixty communities in the United States and abroad plan and implement Promise Neighborhoods. PNI provides communities with a system of support that aims to:

- Accelerate local leaders' ability to achieve results by providing wide-ranging assistance, including Results-Based Accountability training (Friedman 2005), supporting a community of practice, providing data infrastructure, and leadership development.
- Build evidence of the effectiveness of cradle-to-career strategies through research, data analysis, evaluation, and communication outreach.
- Advocate for policies that support the scaling up and sustainability of Promise Neighborhoods.

promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org

The Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood (CVPromise), in San Diego County, targets a 33-square-block neighborhood of nearly 7,000 residents, mostly Latino, where 67 percent of adults have not graduated from high school, 50 percent

of families are underemployed, and 27 percent of children live in poverty. With \$57.8 million over five years from the federal government and a local match, the initiative involves twenty-eight partners, including K–12 schools, colleges, nonprofit organizations, local government agencies, health centers, and business.

cvpromise.org

South Bay Community Services (SBCS) is one of the largest multi-social service agencies in San Diego County, providing a comprehensive range of services and programs for children, youth, and families in San Diego County's southern region. SBCS coordinates CVPromise, bringing together a collaboration of partners focused on family, education, health, and community to provide children in Castle Park neighborhood with the kind of opportunities they need for success in school, college, career, and life.

southbaycommunityservices.org

Q What is the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, and how does it differ from other federal and local programs to help advance education equity and build strong communities?

A *Michael McAfee:* The federal government has applied lessons learned from past anti-poverty efforts in designing a program that catalyzes communities to organize themselves in new ways to achieve ten desired results, with fifteen associated indicators,⁵ for low-income children and children of color. PNI supports the execution of this vision by grounding sites in a disciplined approach to doing their own, local work.

First, we believe that Promise Neighborhoods need a results framework that will guide their work on the ground. Second and equally important, the voice, wisdom, and experience

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⁵ For a full listing of the indicators and results, see *Comey 2013*.

of community leaders must guide the work. For example, community leaders are clear that federal funding must be flexible and substantial. Promise Neighborhoods must provide the kind of funding that allows communities to capitalize the initial building of a cradle-to-career continuum of solutions. The Promise Neighborhoods initiative gives leaders the opportunity to serve an entire neighborhood comprehensively at scale, creating a pipeline of solutions, engaging community residents in this work, being very clear about how we will evaluate our results, and then creating a strong culture of accountability that allows us to move forward based on those results. These kinds of investments surround and support schools, making equity reachable.

Mauricio Torre: The results-based focus, the systems for accountability, the level of support and training, the flexible funding – I have never before seen these things at this scale. We are pleased to see the federal government trusting that at the local level, we understand our community and have the ability, knowledge, and discipline to design a project that is responsive to the needs of our children and families. Within our community, we're learning a more focused, disciplined way to work in strong partnerships and align resources.

Michael McAfee: Every Promise Neighborhood looks different, depending on the geography, the political landscape, and the nonprofit environment. But some elements are consistent. Leaders like Mauricio are reigniting conversations among people who are responsible for ensuring that children succeed at every developmental stage and leading the community to build a cradle-to-career system of supports that includes the appropriate mix of solutions, involving families, programs, policies, and/or systems.

Promise Neighborhoods is not just about effectively managing the federal program. It's also about using the resources of the federal program to transcend siloed and one-off responses to complex problems. It's about achieving collective impact – or in the Results-Based Accountability language, population-level results. Federal Promise Neighborhoods funding is a catalyzing agent. For example, the Hayward Unified School District is now sharing their data with the Hayward Promise Neighborhood to ensure that each student is connected to the right resources and that a common case management system can hold data about those students.

The Promise Neighborhoods framework suggests a twenty-plus-year journey to improve the educational and developmental results for poor children. The federal funds are seeding the first five years of this journey. Consequently, we don't believe that a Promise Neighborhood should wash over all the good work going on in the community. Rather, it should be an opportunity to scale local leaders' proven contributions to achieving population-level results.

For example, a Promise Neighborhood should not necessarily come in and start its own program just because it has federal money and can do that. It should work with folks who are ready to co-invest in that result. Some Promise Neighborhoods – for instance in Hayward, California; San Antonio, Texas; and Buffalo, New York – use their resources to invest in existing community schools models (Potapchuk 2013). In Los Angeles, the full-service community schools model laid the groundwork for a robust expansion of the work already under way. In San Antonio, parent centers located in schools are a key component of the community engagement strategy under way and of resources provided by the Promise Neighborhood. San Antonio

has also passed a sales tax to fund pre-K in the city and has aligned it with their local Promise early learning network, connecting public financing, quality, and access to the Promise Neighborhoods strategy.⁶

Q What are the main challenges of cross-sector partnerships and collective impact?

A *Mauricio Torre:* We have many complex adaptive systems at play in every community, and we need to align them. In Chula Vista, our partners include health and human service agencies, business, community-based organizations, schools, educators, government, funders, and more. To paraphrase the Theory of Aligned Contributions (Pillsbury, n.d.), population-level change is most likely to occur if key multi-sector, cross-agency leaders not only respond to a call to action, but also take the aligned actions at scope and scale toward a result. Getting people to move from talk to action is difficult; moving into systems alignment is our greatest challenge. When properly done, it is a game-changer, and amazing results follow.

This was evident during the 2014 summer bridge programming. In 2014, Castle Park Elementary (CPE) went through extensive renovation that closed the school during the summer (all schools within CVPromise are year-round). This presented concerns about student mobility and loss of academic gains. CVPromise was aware, based on the neighborhood survey, that there are many families who rely on the year-round schedule to manage a working schedule and would consider moving their children to other schools outside the catchment area. In response to this issue, CPE, Chula Vista Elementary School District, Sweetwater Union High School District, Castle Park

6 See policylink.org/sites/default/files/americas-tomorrow-march132013.pdf.

Middle School, Manpower, and Barrio Logan College Institute came together to create comprehensive summer learning opportunities for our most vulnerable children and parents at Castle Park Elementary. The following are examples of the contributions that were provided by each partner in this venture:

- CPE provided data that helped prioritize need, technological equipment, and technical assistance.
- Chula Vista Elementary School District provided access to transportation resources for field trips.
- Castle Park Middle School provided their campus as the venue to host summer programming for elementary students, on-site support, and technical assistance.
- Sweetwater Union High School District provided access to technological infrastructure to run academic software at Castle Park Middle School for elementary school students.
- Barrio Logan College Institute provided tutors and funding to support summer programming.

The manner in which all partners came together to address this need was truly remarkable. Such a venture highlighted how much impact a partnership can have when there is a call to action and systems align for common results. In this case, partners aligned under a vision of maintaining the number of elementary students within our neighborhood, supporting financial needs for families, and supporting academic proficiency among elementary school students.

The result of this venture was that CPE students remained within the catchment area, students participated in academic enrichment programs, and CPE students had a learning experience at the school where they will transition into middle school. CVPromise is

currently tracking the academic impact for these students. Among the most valuable outcomes was seeing how children enjoyed this learning experience. Students were exposed to academic, recreational, leadership (evident when students decided to write to school administration about their thoughts and needs), and cultural experiences that would otherwise not be available to them due to their economic limitations.

Q How does the Promise Neighborhoods initiative support the capacity building and infrastructure development needed to achieve collective impact?

A *Michael McAfee:* It is one thing to talk about capacity building and the use of infrastructure, and it's another to recognize that we've never really paid for it to be built. This is a huge organizational burden that we put on nonprofit leaders. Most organizations do not have excess resources and capacity to build the infrastructure necessary to serve a community's effort to achieve population-level results. In the intermediary space that we occupy at PNI, we've been able to build infrastructure that helps the Promise Neighborhoods communities do the work.

For example, we invested in a national case management system, a data dashboard for the network, and the seamless integration of these systems. These investments save our network of sixty-one communities more than \$2.5 million a year. Sites did not have to buy systems individually. And they were able to ramp up in six months to take advantage of the system, instead of spending three years building their own system. This eliminates the technical challenge of selecting the right tools and allows communities to focus on the critical and adaptive work of execution. It is a perfect example of how we should behave: with vision, courage, and discipline.

Mauricio Torre: The longitudinal case management system that PNI offered to us allows us to see in real time everyone who is receiving services, and we have been able to do that since we began our Promise Neighborhoods work. We now track attendance, behavior, academics, and any other contact with support services by a student or the family. We track interventions and identify patterns. We keep our eye on the data so we can make immediate changes and adjustments. This is such a powerful tool that we're using it not only for the Promise Neighborhoods work, but also for our organization as a whole. Now several large nonprofit organizations in San Diego County are going to use the system as well. Having such a system in place builds capacity for an entire community. We're only going to get transformative results when we know what's happening with our community.

Q Describe results in Chula Vista and nationally.

A *Mauricio Torre:* We're pretty proud of the progress we've shown. Here are just a few examples.

- Third-grade students:
 - Reading at or above grade level: in one year and six months we moved the baseline from 47 percent to 48 percent
 - Writing at or above grade level: from 3 percent to 22 percent
 - Mathematics: from 6.5 percent proficient to 37 percent
- Fourth-grade students:
 - Mathematics at or above grade level: from 9.8 percent to 15.7 percent
 - Reading at or above grade level: from 20 percent to 28 percent
- Fifth-grade students:
 - Reading at or above grade level: from 19 percent to 40 percent
 - Writing at or above grade level: from 13 percent to 25 percent

- Mathematics at or above grade level: from 3 percent to 33 percent
- Sixth-grade chronic absenteeism declined from 11 percent to 3.4 percent.
- Parents who report that they read to their children (birth to kindergarten) three or more times a week: 53.5 percent at baseline; increased to 67.8 percent.
- Parent involvement in the school community: 19 parents volunteered regularly throughout the planning year of 2012. During our first year of implementation (January 1 – December 31, 2013), CVPromise increased these numbers to 350 regular parent volunteers with a presence at all five school sites, providing over 3,500 total volunteer hours throughout our community.

CVPromise has worked extensively to build accountability with partners to achieve collective impact. Although South Bay Community Services (SBCS) has worked closely with various organizations and has established partnerships that go back many years, it has not been until now that there's been a deeper investment in how we measure our impact. The most prominent example of this has been the data-sharing agreement with the school districts. The journey in achieving these agreements was not easy. As partners, we navigated through technical and political challenges around the disclosure of data.

Even after the data-sharing agreements have been signed, our partnership continues to work through challenges. Building our collective vision of what change looks like has been what has driven this effort forward. The construction of this vision has been perhaps the most significant effort in the way we've changed how we work together. It's taken us into a continuously evolving culture where we see

data as a top priority and has forced our partnership to infuse data conversations in the process of program development. Even further, it has taken conversations to deeper dialogue about what is the true impact we want to achieve. For example, previous programmatic efforts were focused on how many individuals we wanted to serve; whereas now, we are questioning why we want to serve a specific number and if such a goal will truly make population-level change.

Michael McAfee: What happens in Chula Vista is happening around the nation. The Promise Neighborhoods communities across the country are beginning to quantify and qualify the steady march of progress. In Buffalo, the mobility rate is going down, meaning that children are staying in the same school so they can receive the interventions they need.⁷ Minneapolis is reversing what is referred to as the *summer slide* — children are maintaining academic proficiency throughout the summer.⁸ In Los Angeles, Academic Performance Index (API) scores are going up.⁹ A focus on results, coupled with disciplined execution, is resulting in a steady, incremental improvement in academic performance.

Q How can educators and service providers outside Promise Neighborhoods apply best practices in their communities?

A *Michael McAfee:* Infrastructure matters, and all partners must own the same results and indicators. Part of co-investment in common results is connecting to families and making sure they own a contribution

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7 Source for the mobility trend information: Buffalo Public Schools.
 8 See northsideachievement.org/wp-content/uploads/NEWS-RELEASE-NAZ-TFA-U-of-M-Partnership-1.pdf.
 9 See ypiusa.org/dramatic-api-gains-for-ypi-and-los-angeles-promise-neighborhood-schools.

just like everyone else. You don't hold meetings without them. We have to abandon the idea that we have all the answers and truly partner with the men, women, and children we are privileged to serve.

Right off the bat, leaders must answer the following questions:

- What is the toughest work that must be done to get results at a scale commensurate with the problem?
- If you commit to using an evidence-based approach like Results-Based Accountability for moving from talk to action, what early results do you anticipate from leading multi-sector stakeholders through the process of answering questions about population and performance accountability and obtaining their commitment to contribute to solutions?
- What do you envision to be the key components of your cradle-to-career continuum of solutions?
- Who are the key partners at each developmental stage of your continuum?
- What are each partners' results, indicators, targets, and performance measures?
- How will you use data to ensure that your cradle-to-career continuum of solutions includes the appropriate mix of families, programs, systems, and policies?
- How is the capital of multi-sector stakeholders being aligned to sustain your continuum of solutions?
- To sustain achieving population-level results, what type of organization, infrastructure, and systems are being built by the backbone organization?

While you may not have a federal Promise Neighborhoods grant, millions of dollars come into communities every year through federal and state grants

that are passed through directly to cities and counties; there are also private foundations that support this work. Although additional financial support is needed, we can and must commit to use our existing resources in more creative ways to achieve population-level results for our most vulnerable children and families.

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