

# Issue BRIEF

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## Promise Neighborhoods Case Studies

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Promise Neighborhoods seek to offset the effects of growing up in poverty by building a comprehensive continuum of “cradle-to-career” supports that enable children to reach their potential. Since 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has awarded three rounds of Promise Neighborhoods grants totaling nearly \$100 million to nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, and American Indian tribes, including 46 planning grants and 12 implementation grants to 48 lead agencies in 23 states and the District of Columbia. Promise Neighborhoods are in the early implementation stage of a long-term endeavor to improve the educational outcomes of the communities they serve. Findings from case studies conducted of five sites reveal how the grantees designed and implemented their programs, the services they chose to offer, and their early successes and challenges in improving the lives of children in their community.

The Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink (PNI) provides a national system of supports—ranging from technology tools to engagement with peers and advice from experts—to Promise Neighborhoods and other communities interested in implementing similar place-based strategies. To document the complexity of the Promise Neighborhoods and their implementation experiences, PNI contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct in-depth case studies of five selected Promise Neighborhoods. The sites included three from the first cohort of implementation grantees, Berea, Kentucky; Buffalo, New York; and Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and two from the second cohort, Chula Vista, California and Los Angeles, California. For these case studies, Mathematica gathered and analyzed data from documents, telephone interviews, and site visits to each Promise Neighborhood. Three primary questions guided the case studies:

1. How do Promise Neighborhoods build the infrastructure to support and sustain a pipeline of programs for children from birth through college and career?

2. How does the resulting system work on the ground? What are the take-up rates of high quality services and schools?
3. Are Promise Neighborhoods meeting their partnership and service coordination goals? What barriers and facilitators do they face? What is needed to create a positive climate for successful partnerships and achievement of Promise Neighborhoods’ goals?

### BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

To develop the infrastructure necessary for a successful Promise Neighborhood, the five case study sites have taken several simultaneous approaches. The lead agency for each site has expanded its own capacity to manage and provide structure for the complex efforts, by building on their areas of expertise and hiring additional staff to fill new roles. Although lead agencies typically provide some direct services in addition to their coordination functions, they are partnering with schools, community-based organizations, government agencies, and other groups to cover the range of expertise needed to complete a comprehensive

cradle-to-career continuum of solutions. Key structures that sites have developed to support the success of their cradle-to-career strategies include common data systems for continuous improvement and shared accountability and staffing structures that connect pipeline components and facilitate ongoing communication. To finance Promise Neighborhoods activities, now and in the future, sites are identifying and braiding funding from a variety of sources, ranging from small local organizations to larger national foundations and including private entities as well as government agencies.

### CONTINUUM OF SOLUTIONS AND TAKE-UP RATES

To achieve their goals, Promise Neighborhoods sites are implementing a comprehensive cradle-to-career continuum of solutions for children and their communities, including:

- Early childhood offerings, ranging from new preschools to supports for existing center- and home-based caregivers.
- Academic and enrichment activities for K–12 students, provided before, during, and after regular school hours.

#### Key Targets for Promise Neighborhoods' Services



- Targeted programs, primarily for high school students, to support transitions to college and careers.
- Family and community supports from parenting classes and adult education to health programs and housing assistance.

School-based activities reach the largest numbers of participants in the case study sites. Virtually all students who attend partner schools are touched by Promise Neighborhoods' services to some extent—whether through a new curriculum, fine arts programming, or other school-wide reform. Smaller numbers participate in more intensive K–12 activities and in programs for younger children and adults. Differences in take-up rates across sites and activities are driven by a combination of program capacity and participant interest.

### PROGRESS, BARRIERS, AND FACILITATORS

Promise Neighborhoods are working to improve the outcomes reflected in the 10 results and 15 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) indicators specified by ED. Early efforts toward assessing progress have focused on defining measures and establishing baselines and targets. By the end of the 2013–2014 school year, the three case study sites in the first cohort of implementation grantees were able to report baseline data for most of the GPRA indicators; sites in the second cohort reported data for fewer indicators. Across the indicators with data available for more than one year, all sites reported upward trends in some measures and downward trends in others, but across sites and measures, there were more upward than downward trends. The most consistent positive trends reported were in GPRA indicators related to early child development. However, these changes over time cannot be considered definitive indications of the impact of the Promise Neighborhoods efforts, because factors unrelated to their efforts also influence these measures.

Although Promise Neighborhoods have experienced early successes in some areas, sites have also encountered numerous challenges in their early implementation efforts.

- **Lack of experience building a cradle-to-career continuum of solutions.** The organizations involved in the Promise Neighborhoods case studies all have experience serving their communities and working with partners, but efforts of this scale and complexity require new approaches. Building relationships among the many different organizations involved can be a slow process. Developing and achieving full use of the

shared data systems needed to track Promise Neighborhoods results—and learning to use the data effectively—also takes time.

- **Varying levels of commitment and flexibility among stakeholders.** Each partner organization comes to a Promise Neighborhood with its own expertise, mission, policies, and culture. Although all are drawn by Promise Neighborhoods’ goals and commit to working toward the same results, the depth of commitment to the initiative as a whole can vary. The case study sites found that the policies and structures of school districts are often more unyielding than those of other partners.
- **Staff and partner turnover.** As these complex initiatives evolve, changes can occur in partners or in staff within partners. Turnover at either the organizational or the individual level can hamper effective implementation as new relationships are built and staff are oriented to the Promise Neighborhoods initiative. Turnover of organizations, regardless of cause, can also result in gaps in services.
- **Unrealistic expectations.** Some respondents in the case study sites found defining and communicating what the Promise Neighborhood and its staff can and cannot do a challenge. Unrealistic expectations about how quickly the initiative could achieve target impacts are one aspect of this challenge. Funders and other stakeholders sometimes fail to realize that it will take more than two decades for the first children born in a new Promise Neighborhood to make their way through the full pipeline and complete college.

Despite the challenges inherent in such an ambitious undertaking, sites have identified factors that facilitate the development of Promise Neighborhoods.

- **A robust results framework with shared accountability.** All Promise Neighborhoods are working to achieve the same goals that were specified in the federal grant announcement, with locally defined targets and measurement for each indicator. Rigorous use of data to assess progress toward targeted outcomes supports continuous improvement and shared accountability. The case study sites have found that training

in Results-Based Accountability™, which PNI provided as part of the national system of supports, facilitates effective use of data.

- **Strong interpersonal and institutional relationships.** Developing and maintaining a continuum of quality services requires strong relationships among a set of partners with a broad range of expertise. Strategies such as co-location of staff and referral systems can facilitate the on-the-ground linkages necessary to ensure seamless connections between programs and transitions for families. Building relationships with community residents is also critical, and staff at case study sites noted the importance of being open to community input in designing Promise Neighborhoods programs and services.
- **Flexible, patient, and sustainable capital.** It is important that Promise Neighborhoods and their supporters remain flexible to meet changing needs, respond to lessons learned, and address new circumstances as they arise. Funding streams that target a Promise Neighborhoods initiative as a whole support this flexibility by enabling lead agencies to adapt their initiatives and refocus efforts in a more productive direction, rather than tying them to a specific program or partner organization that might not be working as well as expected. Funders that understand that a long-term commitment is needed to achieve population-level results could prove the most reliable for sustaining the continued efforts of Promise Neighborhoods.

Promise Neighborhoods are in the early implementation stage of a long-term endeavor to improve the educational outcomes of the communities they serve. The efforts that the case study sites have put into developing their cradle-to-career continuums of solutions and systematically tracking outcomes over time have laid the groundwork for continued assessment of progress towards their goals. However, the complexity of the Promise Neighborhoods effort makes it challenging to study, and future research will need to take that into account.

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