



“We’re on a Mission to Save Our Kids”: Lessons on Building Place-Based Strategies for Children’s Success

By: Claire Reid and Lynne Sacks
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“After more than two years of virtual events and severe limitations on in-person gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to come together as the cradle-to-career collaborative action field to reconnect, recharge, and explore cutting-edge approaches to educational equity and creating pathways to social and economic mobility for children, youth, and families in communities across the nation.”

– Rob Watson, Director for Partnerships and Community Impact, The EdRedesign Lab

Introduction

Where a child grows up impacts almost all aspects of their life—from which schools they attend to their future economic mobility and predicted lifespan. Place-based, cross-sector approaches to creating more equitable opportunity for children were gaining momentum even before COVID-19, but the pandemic has underscored the critical importance of local strategies. This heightened understanding of the role communities play in children’s outcomes, along with new funding opportunities—both public and private—has created a sense of urgency and opportunity among local leaders and policymakers committed to accelerating this work by sharing the best research and practices in the field.

This summer, [The EdRedesign Lab](#) (EdRedesign) convened a diverse group of community leaders, researchers and a range of experts to both learn from and build local expertise in developing place-based solutions for children through two convenings: the [2022 By All Means Community Retreat](#) and [Transforming Place Through Neighborhood Leadership](#), hosted in partnership with the [William Julius Wilson Institute](#) at the Harlem Children’s Zone. “There was a deeply palpable sensation that we are at a major inflection point as a field and that the convergence of crisis and opportunity across key issues—democracy, public health, education, and community development—has set the stage for us to come together to radically imagine a new paradigm for child and youth development,” said Rob Watson, EdRedesign’s Director for Partnerships and Community Impact.

EdRedesign has been advancing cross-sector cradle-to-career strategies since 2016 by working closely with communities across the country to accelerate the impact of their cross-sector efforts through its *By All Means* (BAM) community of practice. BAM communities create [Children's Cabinets](#) or other collaborative action organizations that coordinate across governmental agencies, nonprofits, and other local entities to improve outcomes for children. The William Julius Wilson Institute (WJWI) at the Harlem Children's Zone is supporting communities nationwide by serving as "a central hub for place-based services and programs, and for backbone organizations to access the supports they need to be successful" in the most vulnerable communities. WJWI works with on-the-ground partners to ensure place-based strategies are serving the most marginalized populations rather than perpetuating inequity.

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– Hayling Price, Senior Managing Director of External Engagement at the Harlem Children's Zone

The 2022 By All Means Community Retreat brought together cross-sector leaders from eight of our BAM communities to share best practices and give each community the opportunity to learn from one another. "We're here to share successes, share challenges, and share our needs. We're here to support one another with expertise. We're building a field; we're building a movement," said EdRedesign Founder and Director Paul Reville. Programming emphasized emerging opportunities for cross-sector work within the field and building connections between communities for future collaboration.

Together, EdRedesign and WJWI hosted the Summer Institute: *Transforming Place through Neighborhood Leadership*. "We're on a mission to save our kids," said Geoffrey Canada, Founder of WJWI and Founder and President of the Harlem Children's Zone. The goal of the Summer Institute was to enhance the skills and capacity of local leaders already involved in place-based work to amplify and sustain their efforts. "Programs and interventions are not enough, and systems are not enough. It's important that we work together to strengthen the connective tissue between the two," said Hayling Price, Senior Managing Director of External Engagement at the Harlem Children's Zone. The week-long leadership event devoted time to critical issues such as

organizational finance, grant writing strategy, adaptive leadership, data management, and systems change, while providing participants with the opportunity to connect with other leaders in the field.

Both events showcased the most promising practices and research in the field and highlighted the power and amplification that comes from sharing ideas. This brief summarizes some of the key takeaways from community leaders, researchers, and organizational leaders during the two events.

Key Takeaways

This moment offers a unique and urgent opportunity to accelerate the movement for place-based interventions.

Keynote speaker Cornell William Brooks, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and former president and CEO of the NAACP, invoked a sense of urgency in his address, saying, “This is a moment in which our most vulnerable citizens, namely our children, find themselves under assault.” The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the systemic issues facing our children outside of school and underscored the importance of place. Food and housing insecurity, unstable family situations, and a lack of reliable internet access were all brought to the forefront of national attention, but these issues are not new.

“There’s more money on the table right now than ever, and more need than ever. The question is: are we going to grab the opportunity and do what needs to be done for children?”

–Geoffrey Canada, *Founder and President of the Harlem Children’s Zone*

What is unprecedented is the amount of federal funding now available to address them. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund and American Rescue Plan allocated billions of dollars to addressing the social issues exacerbated by the pandemic. It is imperative to capitalize on this funding while it is available. As Geoffrey Canada asked, “There’s more money on the table right now than ever, and more need than ever. The question is: are we going to grab the opportunity and do what needs to be done for children?”

Local communities contain a wealth of knowledge and innovation but face enormous challenges.

From the Harlem Children’s Zone to full-service community schools, local Children’s Cabinets to [Promise Neighborhoods](#) and countless other initiatives, communities are working with “strategic relentlessness” to improve the lives of children and families, using multi-pronged strategies to address the interlocking challenges of inequitable opportunity, gun violence, disproportionate academic outcomes, housing and food insecurity, and others.



PICTURED: GEOFFREY CANADA, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT, HARLEM CHILDREN’S ZONE, ATTENDING THE SUMMER INSTITUTE IN 2022.

One area of common focus is expanding digital inclusion. Bridging the digital divide that was highlighted by the pandemic became a priority for many places as schools shifted to remote or hybrid instruction. Through its [EdConnect](#) program, Chattanooga, TN is now providing free internet to all families eligible for the federal free or reduced lunch program—reaching roughly 11,000 households. Similarly, the Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet raised \$150,000 early in the pandemic for the purchase of digital devices and worked with its public library to provide 50 mobile

hotspots around the city to increase internet accessibility. Oakland, CA nearly eradicated the digital divide through its [Oakland Undivided](#) program, boosting internet connectivity from 12% to 97% over the course of the pandemic. Oakland is also pioneering efforts for a [guaranteed income for low-income families](#). A pilot that provides 600 families with monthly payments of \$500 is currently underway, with an impact evaluation to be completed as well.

The pandemic also exacerbated mental health issues among children. The [Chelsea Cares](#) initiative, born out of the Chelsea Children’s Cabinet, sought to address these worsening problems. Chelsea Cares leveraged American Rescue Plan funds to expand mental health services and increase public awareness about existing mental health resources for children. Aaron Jennings, Equity, Diversity, and Excellence Officer of Chelsea Public Schools, credits the accomplishments of Chelsea Cares to its collaborative nature: “If it weren’t for our community partners, we would not have had the success we had this year.” While the Chelsea Children’s Cabinet spearheaded this effort, city officials, school representatives, and community organizations were also involved—further underscoring the power of cross-sector collaboration.

The commitment each community has to their work is inspiring, and no one embodies this commitment better than Amon Couch, Director of Programs at [Partners for Rural Impact](#) in Berea, KY. Couch joined the convening just days after his region of Eastern Kentucky was devastated by massive flooding. In his introductory remarks, Couch lamented, “All of our folks are resilient, but

isn't it sad that they have to be." The team from Partners for Rural Impact continues to work to improve outcomes for children in rural Kentucky, despite the increased challenges they now face.

Data and concrete goals are integral to success.

"Better data leads to better decisions and better decisions lead to better outcomes," says Alan Cohen, CEO of the [Child Poverty Action Lab](#) (CPAL). CPAL is striving to reduce child poverty in Dallas by 50% in the next 20 years. While this may seem like a difficult target to reach, Cohen stresses, "This to me is not an audacious goal; it is a math problem." Robust data analysis has allowed CPAL to make serious progress toward this goal by improving participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children ([WIC](#)) program, instituting [eviction prevention](#) measures, and addressing [violent crime](#) through community revitalization projects. In 2017, 1 in 3 children in Dallas grew up in poverty. Today, CPAL has reduced that number to 1 in 4 children living in poverty in Dallas. CPAL's work highlights the power of effectively leveraging data to get real results.

Regularly measuring progress against identified metrics allows for an iterative problem-solving approach. By using data as a guide, organizations can see which programs are having their intended impact and which may need to be revisited. "If you are not getting the data, you are not able to self-correct," said Geoffrey Canada. Quantifying success with relevant data can also help make a compelling case in grant applications and garner future philanthropic support.

Access to social capital is a key component of upward mobility.

Harvard economist Raj Chetty presented his newly published research about the impact of a child's social network on their future economic prospects at the Summer Institute. Chetty's research



PICTURED: HARVARD ECONOMIST RAJ CHETTY AT THE SUMMER INSTITUTE IN 2022.

shows that areas with high levels of economic connectedness, defined as relationships between high- and low-income individuals, exhibit higher levels of upward mobility. "It's not enough for people to be physically closer together. We need to foster meaningful interactions," said Chetty. Schools and community-based organizations play a vital role in a child's socialization, and Chetty's research highlights the important role these entities can play in intentionally facilitating cross-class friendships. For Chetty, one major implication of his research is the need for place-based investments. Upward mobility varies drastically by geographic area, frequently with substantial differences between places as close as neighboring census tracts. To increase upward mobility in low-opportunity areas, the communities need to be revitalized. Improving the schools, housing, infrastructure, and community programming of a place

can help foster social engagement across socioeconomic lines and build the kind of relationships that positively impact children's lives. Read more about Chetty's research at socialcapital.org.

A sound internal business plan is a prerequisite for external impact.

Speakers Andrea Levere and Tom Bartlett emphasized the need for both a strong business model and enterprise capital for an organization to have a sustainable future. Nonprofits must have the capacity to attract the amount and type of capital necessary to achieve their mission and meet performance goals. Enterprise capital is long-term, flexible capital that targets the balance sheet rather than the income statement and allows organizations to build out enduring infrastructure. One way to design your business model is to think about what differentiates your organization from its competitors. What services are you providing and how are you creating value for your customers? Strong financial analysis is also necessary to gauge the financial health of your organization. Financial analysis boils down to tracking financial resources over time, so it is imperative that there is an organized system in place to retrieve accurate and thorough financial information.

Attracting federal funding requires the right staff, resources, systems, and timing.

A robust grant-seeking infrastructure includes grant managers, program staff, and development staff. Federal grant consultants Teresa Wilke and Cara Pugh shared their keys to a successful grant application during a session on grant competitiveness. These included timing and momentum; networked connectivity across institutions and structures; data capture and reporting infrastructure; policy, power, and purse alignment; mechanisms of accountability and clear governance structure; and demonstrated power of an activated community. The federal funding that is currently available for place-based cross-sector work can change the equation for the next generation of children. As Kwame Owusu-Kesse, CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, said during the Summer Institute's closing panel, "This is not about charity or handouts. This is about unlocking the great potential in the communities we serve." Maximizing use of federal funds will allow your organization to do so to the fullest extent possible.

Know your "why."

Remembering the reason your organization exists, the people it is designed to help, and the goals it seeks to achieve grounds the organization in a tangible purpose. Reminding employees why they come to work every day can help alleviate the burnout they may be experiencing from the long hours and never-ending need to create equal opportunity for all children. Centering the organization's "why" in everyday work can also help to attract passionate, mission-oriented employees. For Parvathi Santhosh-Kumar of StriveTogether, "Economic mobility is our north star. This work is about changing the equation of opportunity." Daniel López of OneGoal is drawn to his work so that every student can have their "mailbox moment," referring to the joyous point in time when a high school senior receives a college acceptance. As a first-generation college student,

López fondly remembers the moment when he received his acceptance letter from Boston University. He hopes to help other students have that same experience through his work at OneGoal, an organization dedicated to boosting college graduation rates among disadvantaged students. Capturing the driving motivation behind your organization’s work is also an essential part of telling a more compelling story in grant applications. A persuasive narrative that showcases the importance of your organization's work makes for a much stronger application.

For a complete list of event speakers and participants, please see the links below.

[BAM Retreat Speakers](#)

[BAM Participants](#)

[Summer Institute Speakers](#)

[Summer Institute Participants](#)

A video highlight from the *By All Means* retreat can be viewed [here](#).

About the EdRedesign Lab

EdRedesign champions a broad, holistic model of developmental and educational opportunity for all children and youth, especially those affected by racism and poverty. We serve as a catalyst, through research, advocacy, and collaborative action, advancing the cradle-to-career field by promoting cross-sector community-based systems of support and opportunity to provide all children clear and accessible pathways to well-being, educational attainment, and upward mobility. We strive for a society characterized by racial, economic, and social justice.

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