

“Hope Lives Here”:

Dayton’s Hope Zone is Embedding Personalized Supports for Children and Families in Their Broader Cross-Sector Strategy

BY JULIE ALLEN, TAUHEEDAH JACKSON, AND LYNNE SACKS

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What if, instead of looking to schools and school reform to close outcome and opportunity gaps for children, communities invited other stakeholders to share collective responsibility for student and family success? Omega Community Development Corporation (Omega CDC) in Northwest Dayton, Ohio is answering this question through an ambitious collaboration among community- and faith-based organizations, local public schools and agencies, national networks and field leaders, and private sector partners.



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about Omega CDC

Omega CDC’s Hope Zone has become a national model of a two-generation cradle-to-career place-based partnership creating pathways to opportunity for children and families. Omega CDC has partnered with Learn to Earn Dayton, the Dayton Public Schools, dozens of local organizations, and national field intermediaries, including The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign) at Harvard Graduate School of Education, StriveTogether, and William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children’s Zone, to empower families to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty through deep engagement with the local community, cross-sector collaboration, personalized supports, and a strong focus on data.

Creating a Collective Impact Strategy to Mitigate Intergenerational Poverty

Omega CDC was founded in 1997 by the Omega Baptist Church to promote youth and family well-being and economic development in Northwest Dayton. Like other communities experiencing concentrated poverty as a result of disinvestment, Dayton grappled with persistent gaps in educational outcomes and economic mobility across racial and socio-economic lines. Rev. Vanessa Ward, then co-pastor of the Omega Baptist Church and now President of Omega CDC, and her husband, co-pastor Rev. Daryl Ward, saw the neglect facing the neighborhood surrounding the church and felt it was the responsibility of the ministry to lift up its community. In Rev. Vanessa Ward's view, being part of the ministry, "also meant we should be a presence in the community, on the block where the church existed, and that there should be a better life for the children and families we served." Over the years, Omega CDC focused on economic development, housing, and direct services to the Northwest Dayton community.

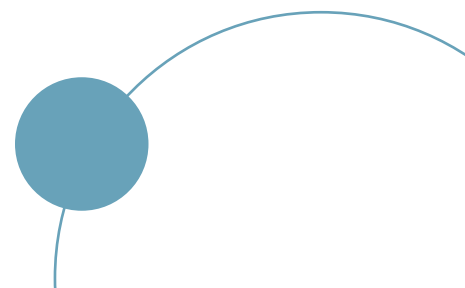
In 2005, leveraging public and private investments in their work, Omega Baptist Church bought 30 acres of land to create new community spaces. The site was the former location of the United Theological Seminary, where Rev. D. Ward had worked, and became the Omega Harvard Campus. Omega CDC has been co-developing the property ever since to serve the community. In addition to building a senior living center there, Omega CDC opened a community center on that parcel in 2021 with co-located services aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty plaguing Northwest Dayton's families and empowering residents to build pathways to success and well-being. The facility, called The Hope Center for Families, includes an early childhood center, a therapeutic intervention classroom, allied health instruction, a full-service pediatric clinic, and additional wraparound supports and services. In 2024, an average of 133 individuals visited the Hope Center each day for access to education, healthcare, and workforce development.



Omega CDC Hope Zone monthly workgroup meeting

"Northwest Dayton is leading a two-generation place-based movement to reshape outcomes for children and families who have long been underserved. We are not merely improving conditions—we are building a thriving community where families choose to move to, rather than away from...setting a new standard for what is possible...Our work is not just about programs and services—it is about empowering people to transform their lives and their communities."

Rev. Vanessa Ward, Omega CDC President,
Portraits of Hope, Omega CDC 2024 Impact Report



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In 2021, Omega CDC, a member of the Montgomery County Place-Based 2Gen collaborative, began implementing a two-generation approach to mitigating intergenerational poverty and historic disinvestment in Northwest Dayton. The strategy focuses on both children and families, providing direct services as well as acting as a coordinating body, or backbone, for the many community-based organizations, businesses, and government partners engaged in the work. Through cross-sector collaboration around common goals, Omega CDC, its partners, and engaged community members identified research-based cross-sector strategies to create an array of supports for families and children. To focus its collaboration with partner organizations, community workgroups, and its Community Advisory Council, Omega CDC articulated its theory of change and identified near-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes in each of its focus areas—education, economic stability, health and wellness, and community engagement.

Leveraging Regional Capacity for a Systems-Level Strategy

Learn to Earn Dayton has brought its deep expertise as a regional systems-level backbone organization to support Omega CDC and the Hope Zone. Learn to Earn Dayton is a member of the national StriveTogether cradle to career network, which focuses on building systems to support local initiatives through data and evaluation capacity, policy advocacy, and leveraging resources. Learn to Earn Dayton uses the StriveTogether outcomes framework and tracks and publishes data on those measures every year. As Learn to Earn Dayton CEO Stacy Schweikhart explains, "We use the data as the centering point and then say, 'What's the shared vision? What would radical success look like, and what would it take to get there?'" The organization uses data showing progress to bring people together and motivate them by helping them see what is possible. Learn to Earn Dayton's mission is to, "ensure all learners in the Dayton Region have the resources and opportunities that foster lifelong success and economic mobility." Its role is to convene cross-sector partners to establish a shared vision, collect data and conduct evaluation, aggregate and leverage resources to fuel innovation and establish proof points, and identify public funding and policy priorities.



Omega CDC Hope Zone youth workgroup leaders and teen ambassadors for Re-Light Nites (Summer Safe Spaces for Teens)

Learn to Earn Dayton and Omega CDC

In August 2021, the philanthropy Blue Meridian Partners (BMP) awarded a collaboration led by Learn to Earn Dayton and including Omega CDC \$8 million over two years to fund their ambitious shared vision. With BMP's support, Learn to Earn Dayton and Omega CDC leaders participated in a site visit to Harlem Children's Zone for community practitioners in 2022. There, they learned about the impact of Harlem Children's Zone's groundbreaking cradle-to-career approach in disrupting intergenerational poverty, which has served as a model for other communities for decades.

Later that year, Learn to Earn Dayton and Omega CDC leaders attended the Summer Institute for Neighborhood Leaders, co-led by EdRedesign and William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone that provides technical assistance and other support for communities across the United States seeking to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone model. At that event, Omega CDC Vice President Rachel Ward, the daughter of Revs. Vanessa and Daryl Ward, first learned about EdRedesign's Success Planning strategy of pairing children and families with caring adult Navigators who develop trusting relationships to co-create individual Success Plans that connect children and youth to personalized supports and opportunities. Through a whole-child approach, Success Planning provides a mechanism to ensure every child is known, seen, and heard, has a positive connection to a caring adult, and has agency over their pathway to success.

Rachel Ward met with Tauheedah Jackson, Deputy Director of EdRedesign and Director of EdRedesign's Institute for Success Planning, and recognized how Success Planning could help Omega CDC scale their collective impact work, calling it "exactly what we were looking for." The Dayton partnership was in the process of developing a proposal for a federal Promise Neighborhoods grant, which could provide catalytic multi-year funding to support their cross-sector place-based initiatives striving to turn neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity. Omega CDC and Learn to Earn Dayton built Success Planning and Navigators into their grant proposal as a strategy to, "really be able to understand how our students are doing, how their families are connected to resources and support, where the gaps are, and how to work through those things," according to Rachel Ward.

The Omega CDC Hope Zone Health Extravaganza is an annual event held in support of Minority Health Month. Pictured here: A family learning from community partners about healthy food choices and portions





Omega CDC Scholars of H.O.P.E., an out-of-school-time program, are pictured here learning yoga at the Omega CDC Hope Zone Health Extravaganza.

HOPE ZONE REACH

Children served

6,700

Families served

3,400

Neighborhoods served

17

Percentage of all children and families in Northwest Dayton served

67%

"Hope Lives Here"— Establishing the Hope Zone

In 2023, Omega CDC was awarded the highly competitive U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods grant of nearly \$30 million in funding over five years, creating the Hope Zone Promise Neighborhood in Northwest Dayton. The funding and the institutional, financial, technological, and relational systems infrastructure that came with the grant "changed the trajectory of our work," according to Vanessa Ward, enabling Omega CDC to accelerate and expand. The Hope Zone Promise Neighborhood serves a defined geographical region covering 6,700 children and 3,400 families living in 17 neighborhoods in Northwest Dayton, covering 67 percent of all children and families served by Omega CDC.

The mission of the Hope Zone is "breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty by catalyzing change in Northwest Dayton through four pathways to self-sufficiency—community engagement, education, economic stability, and health and wellness." The catchphrase for the Hope Zone's two-generation approach, "Hope Lives Here," signals their

aspirations and creates a powerful message to galvanize the community. As Vanessa Ward explained, "We were here to breathe hope."

Dayton Joins the Success Planning Community of Practice

In 2023, the Hope Zone joined the second cohort of communities in EdRedesign's Success Planning Community of Practice to design, implement, and scale the Success Planning and Navigator work that had been embedded in their Promise Neighborhoods grant proposal. Success Planning provides a framework for leveraging caring relationships to identify the goals and needs of individual children and families and connect them with services, resources, and opportunities as part of a personalized comprehensive plan for action. The data collected through those comprehensive plans can help community leaders and decision-makers identify community-level gaps and needs, see where practices, policies, and systems can be improved, and decide where resources can best be allocated.

The Success Planning Community of Practice is comprised of teams of cross-sector leaders from urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the country. The Community of Practice supports districts, schools, community- and faith-based organizations, and other key partners in creating and implementing a personalized, relationship-based approach and/or scaling an initiative already underway. As a member of the Community of Practice, Dayton received in-person and virtual technical assistance, coaching, and data and implementation support from EdRedesign leadership, staff, and consultants, Harvard faculty, and national thought leaders, and peer mentorship from other communities in the Community of Practice as they continued to design, refine, and implement their ideas. EdRedesign provided additional technical assistance to Dayton, beyond the Community of Practice, to support on their Success Planning strategy and broader place-based efforts under their Promise Neighborhoods grant.

Dayton designed its Success Planning initiative to pair students with caring adult Navigators who meet with their students regularly, identify their needs and interests, develop action plans (what they call Student Success Plans), and provide targeted opportunities and supports to students and their families. In addition to personalized supports for children and youth, the Hope Zone also has a family coaching strategy to support adults with goal setting and achievement. Goals are geared towards education and job security, having a healthy birth and baby, and achieving economic stability, among others. Coaches conduct assessments and partner with residents on accountability and updating goals every 30 days at a minimum.

12 Core Components



Student Success Planning



Prenatal Education



Early Learning



K-12 Education



Expanded Out of School Learning & Support



Post-Secondary Education Support



Social, Health, Nutrition, & Mental Health Services & Supports



School-Community Partnerships



Family & Community Engagement



Planning & Capacity Building



Community Development



Community Safety



Omega CDC Hope Zone
Workgroup Meeting

2024-25 SCHOOL YEAR

Number of Navigators

16

Number of children

420

Number of families

136

Number of meetings
with children

2,195

Number of meetings and
home visits with families

234

Dayton's Student Success Planning effort, led by Omega CDC's Managing Director of Educational Programs Jasper Person, began in its first year in the Success Planning Community of Practice (the 2023-2024 school year). At the completion of its second year in the Community of Practice (the 2024-2025 academic year), 16 Navigators are working to meet weekly with 420 children and youth in pre-K through high school as well as 136 families. Between the start of the school year and March 28, 2025, Navigators held 2,195 meetings with children and youth and 234 meetings and home visits with families. Omega CDC's Success Planning goal is to reach 3,350 students by 2027, linking them to a caring adult and individualized relationship-based supports.

Dayton has been thoughtful about who they hire as Hope Zone Student Success Navigators, according to Person, "to be able to connect the dots of students' interests." Navigators are full-time employees of Omega CDC and stay with students as they move through different school levels. Omega CDC has focused on hiring Navigators with a range of backgrounds and representing a variety of sectors, including those who have worked as educators, social workers, and in the justice system. After learning from their first year of implementation, Dayton has strengthened their Navigator structure by creating teams of four, with one Navigator designated as the leader of each group. While Navigators continue to have their individual caseloads, the new design enables the teams, which meet weekly, to "multiply their impact" according to Person by jointly strategizing and leveraging relationships at the schools to better serve the students.

The impact of the Navigators can be transformational for the young people they serve. In one example, according to Person, a recent high school graduate was facing tough times, struggling to meet his urgent basic needs. "We've been working with community partners to create stability around housing and get him all types of resources like food stamps and health care services. He's been making really great gains. The other day when I connected with him, he was in tears communicating the importance of having somebody to connect with and help guide him through the process," Person said.

Centering Data to Accelerate Change in the Hope Zone

Omega CDC provides infrastructure, data support, fundraising, and coordination as the local backbone organization in Northwest Dayton, and Learn to Earn Dayton provides data and other support through their regional expertise.

Early in the Hope Zone implementation, Omega CDC realized that there was a gap in supporting the academic needs of students in afterschool programs because of a lack of access to real-time data. To address this challenge, Omega CDC reached data-sharing agreements with the local school district and partner organizations that enable Navigators and after school program staff, with parental permission, to have access to individualized data using a collaborative data platform called Learning Circle. This platform allows Omega CDC to collaborate with the school district on attendance, behavior, and core academic performance data. The data-sharing agreements also enable Navigators to see students' data in order to optimize service provision and follow-up. Person said the data sharing also enables Hope Zone partners to understand, "the numbers of where we are, where we've been, and our proficiency in reading and mathematics across elementary, middle school and high school, our ACT and SAT scores, as well as all our entry level to college data."

Omega CDC Scholars of H.O.P.E.
arriving at the Health Extravaganza

The Hope Zone set many ambitious goals, embracing Results-Based Accountability and the Turn-the-Curve framework. Among many other academic outcomes, the Hope Zone decided to make a strategic push focusing on third-grade reading, a critical predictor of academic success in later years. This was an area of deep need—just 8.9 percent of Hope Zone third graders were reading at or above grade level in the 2022-2023 academic year, having dropped from 18 percent in 2021-2022 and well below the state-wide mark of 62.3 percent. They set a North Star goal of 45 percent of third-grade students in the Hope Zone reading at grade level by 2027 – a goal that would represent a sharp increase in just four years, while recognizing that they would still have significant room to improve.

"We believe that access to data is essential in order to influence improvement and alignment in the systems that serve youth and families."

Stacy Schweikhart, CEO,
Learn to Earn Dayton



Building With the Community and Community Partners

The Hope Zone is community-centered, engaging long-time residents of the neighborhood and prioritizing authentic partnership with community members. All residents of the Hope Zone can take part in the initiative by joining one of Omega CDC's workgroups or the Community Advisory Council. The workgroups include resident leaders in key roles. The workgroups and the Community Advisory Council are responsible for ensuring that the community is centered in initiatives and prioritizing strategies to meet their needs. Community engagement and leadership have been strong, with an average of nearly 45 attendees per workgroup meeting and over 6,000 participants attending community events in 2024. Seventy-one percent of workgroup attendees reside in the Hope Zone and 32 percent of workgroup attendees are under the age of 18. Fostering opportunities to capture the lived experiences of residents, including youth, and amplify their voices is central to the Hope Zone's work.

The Hope Zone has leveraged its strong community engagement and partnership as residents and organizations collaborate to improve literacy rates in the neighborhood through various efforts, including literacy campaigns and reading buddies. For example, the Director of the local YMCA has supported the Hope Zone literacy goal by ensuring there are bookshelves in



Omega CDC Hope Zone Future Self Day—Omega CDC Staff Sharing Resources with Teens

its childcare center. Young Ladies Aspiring Greatness, a young women's organization, organized a "Reading Is..." campaign that included investing in billboards to bring awareness to the literacy goal and bringing this work into the local high school. Additionally, the Omega Baptist Church recruited 50 parishioners to serve as Reading Buddies in the Scholars of H.O.P.E. afterschool program, through which 50 students meet with a Reading Buddy once or twice per week to build confidence in reading proficiency; this has led to more community churches looking to get involved by supporting with additional volunteers. The Hope Zone initiative truly embodies the "it takes a village" mantra.

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Third-grade reading proficiency at Fairview Elementary, the only public elementary school in the Hope Zone, rose dramatically from 8.9% in 2023 to 29.6% in 2024

Accomplishments and Challenges

The Hope Zone's multi-pronged strategy to improve third-grade reading, combined with individualized support provided by Navigators, has led to significant improvements in a short time. Third-grade reading proficiency at Fairview Elementary, the only public elementary school in the Hope Zone, rose dramatically from 8.9 percent in 2023 to 29.6 percent in 2024. In addition, chronic absenteeism for sixth graders at Fairview Elementary decreased from 75 percent in 2023 to 43.4 percent.

Learn to Earn Dayton also engages in policy advocacy. Learn to Earn Dayton is a member of the Ohio Regional Partnership Coalition, which

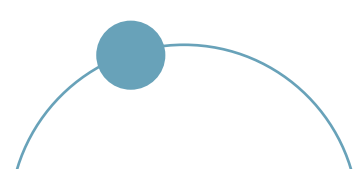
advances policies that promote better outcomes for children and families. Learn to Earn Dayton and other Coalition members supported the development and passage of an Ohio bill, introduced in the state legislature by state representatives from Dayton, to support place-based partnerships. In January 2025, Governor Mike DeWine signed the legislation, which provides for eight regional place-based partnerships across Ohio to support prenatal through postsecondary strategies, making Ohio one of just a handful of states to enact such legislation.

While the Hope Zone has had success in procuring federal resources and other funding to implement their initiative, Omega CDC recognizes the need to secure funding beyond 2027 to sustain their work. A full 81 percent of their 2024 revenue was from federal, state, and local grants; and they are now looking beyond term-based grants to develop a long-term funding strategy. To address their sustainable funding needs, they have created a Development Department and are focusing on leveraging additional revenue streams, including private investments and community contributions.

An additional challenge has been focusing on building and maintaining the trust necessary to ensure the work's effectiveness. Omega CDC recognizes that the key to building trust with students and families requires consistent action and collaborative decision-making. It requires sustaining the community's agency in creating their own upward trajectory.



Omega CDC President Vanessa Ward greeting community members at the Gem City Market (co-op) during the State of The Hope Zone convening-where a tour of their assets was taken to start the event



Key Takeaways

Faith-Based Initiatives Can Serve as an Entry Point for Place-Based Partnerships

Omega CDC was born out of the Omega Baptist Church and led by one of the church's pastors. What began as a community development corporation focused on economic development in the 1990s has grown into a national two-generation model of a place-based partnership lifting up its community and improving outcomes for its residents. In many communities, faith-based institutions already serve as anchor institutions and trusted community partners.

Build With and From the Community

Omega CDC and Learn to Earn Dayton are led by committed local leaders who come from the community they serve. Their deep understanding of the opportunities and challenges in the Hope Zone neighborhoods, along with the relationships built over decades, is the foundation for trust. Their workgroups have resident leaders in key roles and bring students and families together to shape initiatives.

Use Data to Motivate Action, Identify Strategies, and Evaluate Progress

Even before the Hope Zone had the funding to hire a full-time data lead, Rachel Ward and Stacy Schweikhart made data central to their work. With funding from StriveTogether, Learn to Earn Dayton recently launched its [Statewide Data Dashboard](#), which allows all stakeholders in Ohio, including community members, to see data on their school district's academic outcomes and post-secondary attainment and compare it to data from districts and counties across the state.

Embed Personalized, Relationship-Based Supports Into the Model From the Outset

Designing the Hope Zone initiative with Success Planning as its throughline created a way to integrate and personalize supports into the broader place-based model while ensuring a focus on children's strengths and interests as well as their needs. Embedding Success Planning in a place-based model helps to accelerate progress and amplify impact by providing communities with real-time data to make data-informed decisions about resource allocation and community-wide priorities and policies.

Focus On Policy Change Along With Local Strategies

Both Omega CDC and Learn to Earn Dayton have made policy a priority, supporting legislation that funds place-based strategies for children and families and creates enabling conditions for their expansion, both in Ohio and nationally.



Omega CDC Hope Zone Meeting—Community and Partner Letter Writing Campaign to state and national leaders sharing why Promise Neighborhoods funding matters.

Conclusion

Dayton's two-generation approach to serving its residents provides a model for other cities to emulate. The Hope Zone has shown what is possible for collective action and community empowerment within a city that faces substantial challenges around economic development and historic disinvestment. Engaging adults and youth in the process increases the buy-in for the whole community and highlights everyone's role in sustainable transformational change. Omega CDC, Learn to Earn Dayton, and their many partners have created a model for community change that centers relationships and partnerships in order to build durable systems and pathways to economic mobility for residents. Because of the work they have done, according to Vanessa Ward, "We have seen a complete turnaround in the philosophy of the people. This is what happens when you dare to let people hope. In a community long defined by disinvestment, we've seen neighbors become leaders, ideas become action, and hope become a strategy for real, lasting change, because it's rooted in the people who live it every day."

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Rev. Vanessa Ward,
Omega CDC President



Omega CDC Hope Zone Future Self Day (event for high school students to explore career and education choices)



“The Hope Zone lives up to its name and is a testament to the power of partnership and Omega CDC’s collaborative efforts to realize more positive outcomes for children, youth, and families in Northwest Dayton. While it is a source of inspiration and hope, it is also a promising example of how embedding personalized relationship-based supports into broader place-based strategies can be so impactful, moving the needle positively on persistent disparities. The invaluable data personalized supports provides fosters opportunities for youth, family, and community engagement and a roadmap for key decision-makers to prioritize and address the unmet needs of children and youth from cradle to career. This leads to better alignment between community-wide efforts, more strategic resource allocation, the scaling of best practices, and policy and advocacy efforts that lead to systems change. When community partners, from faith-based institutions to businesses, coalesce around a shared vision, in a place, historic disinvestment can be just that, history. I’m proud of the role that EdRedesign has played, walking alongside Omega CDC and their partners, to realize the promise of the Hope Zone. I know their story will inspire others to begin their journey and contribute to a movement that fosters meaningful individualized relationship-based supports and broader cross-sector collaboration so that children, youth, and families can thrive.”

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All photos courtesy of Omega Community Development Corporation

About EdRedesign

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, EdRedesign provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based partnership field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility. To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means initiatives. Our mission is to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic development and well-being of all children and youth, especially those affected by racism, poverty, and disinvestment.