

Bernadette Pelissier, County Commissioner

Harlem Children's Zone Visit Reflection

5/15/15

Kwami Owusu-Kesse, Chief Operating Officer, summarized the underlying principles of the Harlem Children's Zone, all of which can clearly be used as general guidelines for the Family Success Alliance to develop in a manner appropriate for Orange County.

The 1st principle is to build and rebuild community. We will build community in the two Zones and transform the community such that all families can be successful. It is not only about targeting specific children, but the entire community. We need to listen to and learn from the community.

2nd principle - create a series of programs of best practices. The Harlem Children's Zone staff has identified several basic general practices from experience which lead to success. Find out what each individual child and family needs and always operate from the assumption that each child can succeed. Pair a child with an advocate who ensures that ALL their needs are met. It is not just about competencies and skills but ensuring that each child knows HOW to apply those competencies.

Best practice does not come only from looking at the success of other programs, but in a large part from looking at what is working within your programs and trying new things when you are not accomplishing what you expected to accomplish.

3rd principle - operate at scale. They started out small, developed a vision of where they wanted to go and stuck by their strategic plan. We need to develop the strategic plan for the FSA. It took many years for the Harlem Children's Zone to get to where it is now and it will for us also.

4th principle - evaluation data - always assess what you are doing. Never be satisfied with your current successes. Look to what else needs to be done. If a child is not succeeding, try something else.

All the principles operating together create an environment where parents and children do not feel judged and are more likely to engage in the programs, where staff are always looking to how things can be better done (no chance to get stale!).

For example, it was originally thought that once a student was accepted in college, the work of the Harlem Children's Zone was complete. Not at all. They discovered that many needed continued support and now that support is being provided.