

Harlem Children's Zone: Defeating Poverty, One Child at a Time

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I too, like Aviva Scully, read the Paul Tough [New York Times](#) cover story about the Harlem Children's zone over ten years. And I've been following HCZ developments ever since: Obama's 2007 campaign promise to replicate the project, the establishment of the federal [Promise Neighborhoods](#) initiative to do just that, the publication of Tough's HCZ book *Whatever it Takes* and the explosive growth of HCZ in terms of the number of kids it serves (up to 10,000 currently) and the phenomenal growth in its budget (Julia Lewis Dreyfus' [father](#) just donated his personal art collection, valued at up to \$50 million, for example).

Tough makes clear in his book and the sentiment was echoed in conversations with HCZ staff on our trip—this isn't just about Harlem, it's about proving to the country more broadly that poverty, especially the stubborn, generational form found in Harlem, can be tackled; it can be dramatically reduced, interrupted, altered with the right approach, the right framework, the right people at the helm. And if one can prove that, it seems as if there are plenty of investors, in the form of Wall Street philanthropists, foundations big and small and government at all levels, lined up and ready to throw in. There's a mantra, a conventional wisdom of sorts, that you can't throw money at big problems like poverty or public schools, which HCZ has proved wrong. In this case, it seems you can throw money at it; the HCZ budget tops \$115 million at this point, and they get fantastic results in return (over 1,000 HCZ kids have graduated from high school and most are in some form of secondary education). That's a huge development in the argument over whether poverty is something that can actually be solved. Score one for those that answer with a resounding yes!

Now the questions turns to—can this model be replicated? Can you have an HCZ in north Minneapolis ([NAZ](#)) or [Washington, D.C.](#) or [Orange County, NC](#), for that matter? That is an open question that may not be answerable for many years; it took HCZ over 20 years to show its jaw-dropping results. But if one is attempting such a feat, as we at the Family Success Alliance are, it certainly is awe-inspiring to actually see HCZ up close. It feels like something of a pilgrimage, a journey to the heart of the American dream, where low-income kids of color learn in three languages in the preschool Harlem Gems, every school-aged kid has a student advocate to keep them on track and high schoolers set record breaking scores on standardized tests that effectively close the achievement gap.

I returned from Harlem knowing that if there is a will in the community for change and there are smart, hardworking people in the community ready to lead that change, that there's no end to what might be accomplished. As the coordinator of the Family Success Alliance, I'm ready and excited to tap into that will and support community leaders ready and willing to do "whatever it takes" to make sure all kids

in Orange County reach their full potential and to further prove to ourselves and to the nation that we can make the American dream real for all of our residents.