



Promise Neighborhoods and Community Schools

Promise Neighborhoods represent a vitally important national strategy for improving the lives of children in our most disinvested communities. The strategy's power lies in its recognition of the interconnected nature of the academic, social, emotional, physical and civic development of our young people in the communities in which they live. This recognition is grounded in solid research. In addition, the Promise Neighborhoods strategy follows several other principles of best practice in education and youth development: starting early, providing consistent and sustained support, and taking a comprehensive, integrated approach.

The manner in which the federal government frames the Promise Neighborhoods strategy will play a crucial role both in how the work rolls out in the short term and how it can be sustained in the long term. This brief addresses two key elements that should be considered in the formulation of that strategy: the general role of anchor institutions and, specifically, the pivotal role of public schools as anchors including the vision of the community school

1. Anchor Institutions

Anchor institutions are public or non-profit entities that are permanently rooted in specific locales – generating jobs, creating local business opportunities, and contributing in significant ways to the development of human, social and cultural capital. Higher education institutions¹, hospitals and health centers, community-based youth development organizations, and schools are some of the most important anchor institutions that may be in, or near, a Promise Neighborhood. Engaging the leadership of these institutions as partners in a Promise Neighborhood and mobilizing their assets will be vital to the success of the effort. By leveraging the resources of anchor institutions, Promise Neighborhoods will be a stronger position to sustain their work over the long term.

Promise Neighborhood applicants should be expected to identify these anchor institutions, demonstrate how they are currently contributing to neighborhood well-being and specify additional commitments of institutional capital to support action toward a broad set of results that the applicant seeks. Applicants should also define mechanisms for sustaining the involvement of top-level leadership of these institutions as partners in the Promise Neighborhood planning and implementation process over an extended period of time. The potential for these institutions to refocus and redirect their own institutional assets towards strategies that improve results for young people in Promise Neighborhoods should be required.

Rural applicants clearly will not have the same locally-based anchor institutions that are present in many urban centers. Therefore, rural applicants should be expected to look beyond their own geographic area to regional or state level institutions with assets to contribute, such as regional medical centers and state institutions of higher education.

¹ Chapter 8: Anchor Institutions As Partners In Building Successful Communities And Local Economies in Retooling HUD For A Catalytic Federal Government: A Report To Secretary Shaun Donovan, PENN Institute for Urban Research, University of Pennsylvania, February 2009.

2. Schools as Key Anchors (Community Schools)

Schools are particularly critical and influential anchor institutions because they reach most, if not all, children in a neighborhood. All schools in Promise Neighborhoods should be community schools – regardless of the type of school (traditional public school, charter public school, magnet school, alternative school); regardless of who operates the school (local school district, community-based organization -CBO, higher education institution, educational management organization); and regardless of size or curricular focus.

Community schools have extended hours and extended services as well as deep and purposeful relationships with community resources. The vision of the community school has the school building open all year, all day and well into the evening, involving an array of community partners working together around a set of shared outcomes to a) develop the academic social, emotional, physical and civic competencies of students; b) strengthen families so they can support their children’s education and contribute to the community; and c) provide various opportunities and support to community residents.²

Community schools typically involve early learning and care opportunities, challenging and engaging real-world curriculum, expanded learning time, comprehensive services and learning supports (such as school-based or school-linked medical and mental health services), strong family and community engagement, adult education and job training and cultural and civic events. The school also serves as a place for community problem-solving.

Effective partnership which are at the heart of the community school strategy, will be vital to the development of Promise Neighborhoods overall. For example, a school’s lead partner – a CBO, higher education institutions or other organization – typically helps to a) mobilize the resources of the community to support the school’s core educational function, and b) engage the community in other student support, family strengthening and community building activities. This partnership model allows educators in the school to focus on their academic mission.

Community schools can and should be an integral part of any Promise Neighborhood. All Promise Neighborhood applicants should delineate how they will facilitate schools, regardless of type, becoming centers of their community, through mobilizing and leveraging community assets. The goals must include not only improving academic achievement, but also promoting the social, emotional, physical and civic development of young people, their families and other community residents.

For More Information:

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² For more information about Community Schools go to www.communityschools.org