

EXTENDING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Unequal Fortunes concludes with a challenge: Either the nation will invest in the next generation when they are young and promising, or we will pay for them when they are older and broken. The United States has the capacity today to reduce the number of children who, like Leo, are lost unnecessarily, and to dramatically increase the proportion who are graduating from high school and attending colleges.

Three organizations exemplify how this can be done and show us new directions for public policy:

I Have a Dream was launched in 1981 and promised to pay college tuition for sixth graders graduating from an East Harlem elementary school if they completed high school. Since then, I Have a Dream Foundation has provided assistance and support to sponsors of nearly 200 programs serving more than 15,000 youngsters. The effort provides extensive supports and services for students to realize the American dream, despite social challenges that serve as barriers to high school graduation. Research shows that “Dreamers” perform better academically, and graduate from high school and attend college at higher rates than their peers.

Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) targets 100 blocks in central Harlem. Through an array of interrelated educational, social-service and community building initiatives and programs, HCZ seeks to maximize educational achievements for poor children, incorporate best practices, and respond to local community needs. The organization hosts two Pre-K-12 schools, called Promise Academy Charter Schools, which offer extended days and year-round instruction, focusing on safety, health, and the arts and media at specific grade levels. In 2008, HCZ served 10,883 youngsters. In 2009, overall the Organization served more than 21,280 individuals.

Say Yes to Education offers a comprehensive array of supports—academic, socio-emotional, health and wellness, and financial—to increase high school and college graduation rates for inner-city youngsters. More than three-quarters of participants (76 percent) have graduated from high school; half of those graduates have attended postsecondary education, and more than one-quarter of those graduates have received baccalaureate or higher degrees. Say Yes is currently launching its most ambitious program, perhaps the largest scale-up effort of this type ever undertaken—a whole city. Say Yes, in collaboration with Syracuse University and the Syracuse Public Schools, will attempt to dramatically increase both high school and college graduation rates for the entire city. All Syracuse City School District students are eligible to participate in the program, and 22 private colleges and universities and 70 State University and City University of New York institutions have made commitments to provide them with free college tuition. Beyond the universities, Say Yes, and the school district, partners include the Syracuse city government, the state of New York, and the local business community.

These programs have been successful, in no small part, because they have helped address the needs of each child and family; provide mentors; offer continuity when school is out; and provide the same comprehensive services that are available to affluent young people. Each program has measurable goals and identifies the out-of-school obstacles children face to achieving their goals. Rich in content and frequent in communication, the programs offer students enrichment activities beyond the classroom. They extend through students’ academic career, offering guidance assistance and support to enroll in, transition to, and complete college.

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