

# The Work for Our Generation: Reimagining Communities of Opportunities for All

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ADVOCATES TODAY ARE faced with a crucial challenge: with income inequality climbing ever higher, we must engage in systems and policy changes that will overcome entrenched inequities and build communities of opportunity—places that offer family-sustaining wages, adequate housing, connections to good jobs, high-performing schools, quality health care, and diverse transit options. Despite decades of antipoverty programs, the United States remains characterized by marked socioeconomic disparities. Structural forces, created over time by the layering of inequitable policies and systems, continue to embed and concentrate poverty within certain communities, resulting in a distribution of opportunity that is heavily influenced by place and race. Great intentionality has gone into designing these systems, which have historically promoted prosperity for certain Americans while physically, socially, and economically isolating others. Great intentionality, therefore, is required to design opportunity back into all places for all American children. Our moment has come to boldly pursue an actionable agenda that promotes equity—just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Doing so will unlock the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.

In seeking solutions to poverty, the influences of place and race cannot easily be decoupled.<sup>1</sup>

Our zip codes act as filters for our life experiences, largely determining our access to opportunity, especially during childhood. Poor communities are more likely to experience decreased tax bases, poorer infrastructure and access to public transportation, failing schools, unhealthy environmental conditions, and anemic local economies that perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty. Where you live thus becomes a proxy for how well you live and your ability to advance socioeconomically. Children whose families live in communities where neighbors earn higher wages ultimately earn more themselves; those who live in neighborhoods where earnings are lower diametrically earn less later in life.<sup>2</sup> Even a child born into a middle- or high-income family will earn 52% less as an adult if that family lives in a high-poverty neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the spatial organization of concentrated poverty—and subsequent lack of opportunity—is racialized in the United States. Even if they are not poor, people of color are significantly more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> Children of color face odds that are even higher. For example, poor Hispanic youth are roughly 3 to 4 times more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods than poor white youth, while black children are about 4.5 to 5.5 times more likely.<sup>5</sup> Matters of place only amplify racial inequality across generations: About 20% of the gap in income between blacks and whites can be attributed to where they grew up.

Thankfully, research also shows that place can be a force for positive change, especially among poor children. As much as 70% of the variance in intergenerational socioeconomic status is due to the influence of place, meaning that when we expose disadvantaged children to communities of opportunity—places with better schools, better housing, and better infrastructure—they show striking resilience, and their potential future earnings begin to look more like those of children who grew up in thriving communities to begin with.<sup>2</sup>

There is greater complexity at play here than the choice to lift one's self up by the bootstraps. The gravitational pull of place and the persistent tides of structural racism are stronger than even the most powerful personal spirit. While it is often difficult for Americans to face our history of racism honestly, its legacy is undeniable and persists in the architecture of inequity that helps or hinders life chances for many American children. There is no silver bullet for reversing the cycle of generational poverty; dismantling decades of racist, place-based systems will take discipline and intentionality.

Scholars, practitioners, and residents now understand that a singular focus on programs and/or initiatives will not work. Leaders must wade into the multifaceted challenges associated with achieving results for entire populations of children living in disinvested communities and be ready to craft solutions commensurate with the complexity and scale of this challenge. Bold, competent leadership is needed within all sectors, aligning efforts and resources toward clear goals. The following

competencies, adapted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, offer insight into how every leader, regardless of sector, can cultivate an adaptive approach to building equity into his or her respective field:

- A point of view linked to action. Develop a sophisticated yet practical point of view about crafting solutions that recognize the complexity and scale of social and economic challenges. Commitment to achieving results at a population-level is no longer optional; it is the necessary challenge of our time.
- Discipline in achieving equitable results. Master an evidenced-based and disciplined approach for moving from talk to action. Results-based accountability (RBA) is a smart approach to change and decision-making. RBA includes defining a result, engaging partners to achieve the result, and using data for learning, continuous improvement and shared accountability.
- Using one's self as an instrument of change. Be capable of holding accountability for achieving population-level results. They must also be a catalyst for partnering with others, including community members, to implement the right mix of solutions.
- Addressing race, class, and culture. Recognize that race, class, and culture affect life options for persons experiencing poverty. Leaders must master the ability to talk about these issues and the willingness to target systems and policies that restrict opportunity on the basis of these factors.
- Adaptive leadership. Understand that deep system and policy reform happen only when leaders use skills to impact key stakeholders' attitudes, values, beliefs, and habits.

The federal government's investment in place-based programs like Promise Neighborhoods has created an opportunity for leaders to implement these leadership approaches to achieve large-scale, equitable results in a community. Inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone, Promise Neighborhoods wrap children in integrated, coordinated, high-quality academic, social, and health programs and supports from cradle to college to career. In North Minneapolis, the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) has collaborated with local families, residents, civic institutions, philanthropists, and social service providers to end multigenerational poverty. They are doing this by creating a cradle-to-career system of supports with strong schools at the center. The NAZ team understands that wide spread opportunity in North Minneapolis cannot be realized without acknowledging and intentionally dismantling the structurally racist systems that persist.

More than 1800 children are currently served by NAZ, and their families are actively engaged in supporting their developmental and academic success. Amy and Shannen are a loving couple who call their family Team Brown. After Shannen was injured in a workplace accident and Amy was diagnosed with cancer, they were unable

to work. They felt frustrated and stuck. They enrolled in NAZ's system of supports and received a scholarship for their youngest daughter, Star, to attend high-quality early childhood education at a NAZ partner, the Family Partnership. This provided just the spark that the family needed. "The scholarships made all the difference for us," Shannen said. Star, who had spent long days at chemotherapy appointments, was now on track to kindergarten readiness. She received on-site speech therapy and has overcome her speech delay. Every day, her parents read with her from their family library. Their son, Elijah, is a bright boy who struggled in school last year. He was often removed from class for inappropriate behavior: "We were getting calls from his school at least 3 days per week," Shannen said. Fortunately, his NAZ connector family coach and academic navigator scholar coach are located on site at school. They are trusted adults who partner with Elijah, school leadership, and his parents to remove barriers to academic success. After a year of academic coaching, he is excelling in school and no longer needs extra support. Amy and Shannen are now members of the NAZ Parent Advisory Board, which keeps the work of NAZ grounded in the experience and perspective of families. Board members are NAZ parents who exhibit a remarkable commitment to supporting their children on a path to college, and are also growing into outstanding community leaders. NAZ is part of Team Brown now.

This is an example of how a community of opportunity is built one family at a time. The Promise Neighborhoods strategy recognizes that if communities of opportunity are to be built and accessed by children living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, then the right mix of solutions must be implemented and sustained by a wide array of community stakeholders. The right mix of solutions includes involving families in the implementation of solutions, high-quality programs, systems, and policy changes that dismantle inequitable systems and policies. This is our charge. Claim the torch!

## REFERENCES

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