

Guest commentary: A bright idea in Harlem lights the way for Detroit kids

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For all the challenges faced by many families, including access to basic social resources such as health care and nutrition, there finally seems to be an emergence of a true, results-based solution.

Many of us in the business of providing assistance have long found ourselves in situations similar to that of our consumers -- dwindling resources, increased needs and a sense of urgency that meant more time was spent addressing immediate, short-term needs rather than focusing on attacking the root of the problems we sought to solve.

In 1997, Geoffrey Canada launched the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) Project in Central Harlem. The New York Times hailed it as "one of the most ambitious social experiments of our time." The project targeted a specific geographic area with a comprehensive range of services designed to not just meet the needs of an otherwise underserved community, parent and student population, but to attack over time the core contributors to generation-old problems. What started on one block now covers more than 100 blocks and serves more than 10,000 children from early childhood through college.

This cradle-to-career approach has long been discussed. But now Detroit has been given the opportunity to collectively duplicate HCZ's success with the Promise Neighborhood Initiative. This is a federal program born out of HCZ's track record and awareness by President Barack Obama of the need to improve educational outcomes for children and support to families in distressed communities. Detroit is ready for this cradle-to-career approach.

Our statistics are staggering, but clear. We have an undeniable need educationally, socially and economically. The initial target areas are Detroit's Osborn and Clark Park

communities. A multi-agency approach will be used to ensure all needed services are made available to students and parents there.

The goals are simple: ensure access to excellent schools, encourage positive youth development, and provide families the support and resources needed to ensure the success of their children.

The process is simple yet profound: Everyone work together, provide doable guidelines -- like reading to children, improving attendance, measuring proficiency in core academic subjects, encouraging physical activity and healthy food consumption, and measuring the impact of the efforts and change over time.

Tracking data and making needed changes -- therein lies the biggest difference in this effort. Rather than allowing a long-standing process to play out and then make a determination of impact, this initiative demands regular monitoring and feedback, so corrections can be made at frequent intervals before it's too late. As it evolves, it -- like HCZ -- will grow and reach into other areas of the city.

Detroit may have invented the automobile, but this time we are not reinventing the wheel. We are simply using what works for the sake of moving our city forward, one community block at a time.

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