

Promise Zones

Nationally recognized practices for school success are being piloted in New York State via an initiative known as the Promise Zones. Promise Zones create learning environments that engage students so that they are on task and ready to learn. To meet these needs, the Promise Zone is a framework and not a specific prescription. Promise Zones include three major components work with and for a local education leader (principal), with district and community agency support: 1) An external change partner 2) A vibrant school support team and social worker 3) A broad community services support network.

Rationale

Promise Zones incorporates evidence informed practice with a unique design that focuses ALL child-serving agencies on three academic outcomes. In pursuit of this unifying goal Promise Zones combines strategies in new ways with exponentially better results.

Goals

Promise Zones were established to have an immediate impact upon the lives of children in high-need communities and to establish a model for service delivery to improve academic achievement, student engagement and to prevent school drop-out for broad replication. Promise Zones are designed to build the necessary supports and structure around children in their communities and better equip them to be successful in school, work and life.

Major Accomplishments during 2010

Partnership among all Child-Serving State Agencies in a joint initiative to incorporate State and national best and evidence-based practices related to academic achievement, student engagement and dropout prevention in high-poverty, high-need schools has been a significant achievement this year. The partnership has yielded redesign and reprioritization of current services, new grant opportunities and a site-specific plan for implementation in the 2010-11 academic year for Promise Zones in Syracuse, New York City and Buffalo. An evaluation of Promise Zones will be conducted during the 2010-11 academic year using an independent agent.

Building a Foundation for Lifelong Success

During the academic year, children spend 60 percent of their waking hours in school. Therefore, schools are the place where we have the greatest opportunity to help them grow and learn. To take advantage of this opportunity, New York State is creating something called, "Promise Zones." These are communities in which local school districts partner with state and local child-serving agencies to work towards creating learning environments that engage students so that they are on task and ready to learn. Promise Zones are based on collaboration within a community among parents, employers, elected leaders, educators and community partners. By everyone working together, we can help children to do well academically and graduate.

Promise Zones are one of the many cross-system initiatives of [*The Children's Plan*](#) In recognition of the multiple and complex needs of children and their families, representatives from education, health, labor, child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, substance use, and community stakeholders from not-for profits and philanthropic organizations invested in children are all at the table devoted to building a model for success. Supporting these efforts is the Council on Children and Families and its Executive Director Deborah Benson, who states "Promise Zones reflect the intent of The Children's Plan and the cross-systems commitments made by state agency commissioners, together with youth and families, over the

past three years. As we forge ahead trying to find better ways to help children achieve improved outcomes in school and in everyday life, we look to partnerships like Promise Zones as opportunities to engage schools and communities toward changing the life course for children and youth. We trust that our collective investments in planning and services will create model approaches and inspire other communities to take the actions necessary to help all children flourish and achieve their dreams."

The State Education Department and its agency representative, Jean C. Stevens, the Associate Commissioner of the Office of Instructional Support and Development shares that, "Under the leadership of Commissioner Steiner and Chancellor Tisch, the Education Department is committed to taking bold and assertive actions to ensure that all students are provided full opportunity to become contributing members of the 21st century workforce. New York Promise Zones for Urban Education is a comprehensive strategy that will help ensure that all students are engaged and provided the services to be successful. We are excited about the potential of the project and look forward to contributing to this initiative with our State and local partners."

The Promise Zone model began with a review of state and national best and evidence-based practices related to school success in high need and challenged communities. The framework for Promise Zones includes: a committed community organization, school-based support teams, a dedicated school social worker and a network of local service providers. Based on this approach, schools will be better able to reduce absences, truancy and incidents. Teachers will have increased time to focus on lessons in their classrooms and students will experience improved educational outcomes.

For communities, this model has the potential to significantly impact students in their schools. Robert C. Long, the Commissioner of the Onondaga County Department of Mental Health agrees, "The Promise Zone provides a great opportunity to build upon our existing collaboration with the Syracuse City School District and "Say Yes to Education," to assess current capacity and challenges and to improve our collective ability to serve the mental health needs of students, all in the context of developing a County-wide "system of care" for children. We're confident that these efforts will lead to children being more successful in school, work and life, and we're excited about identifying core elements of success that can be used by other communities in New York State."

Many of the elements of Promise Zones have already been applied in Buffalo, Syracuse and New York City. However, before now, there was no identification of common elements and state involvement in creating a model approach. Through the Promise Zones Initiative, state agencies are rallying their support behind these communities and helping to determine how best to support and replicate the model framework. From the lessons learned in these first Promise Zones sites, we plan to have a clear model for collaborative planning and service delivery to improve educational and health outcomes for children in high need districts that can be replicated in schools statewide.

This is particularly exciting to OMH Commissioner Michael Hogan, who feels this is a natural next step in how we should be providing services in a way that is more conducive and appropriate for children's social and emotional health and well-being. He states, "Children's mental health care in NYS has succeeded in several major reforms. A system once dominated by hospitals became community-based. The role of parents, and now youth, has moved from passive recipients of care to dynamic agents of change. Now we face new challenges and opportunities.

"With Clinic Plus, we took steps toward engaging in the real world settings where children are, but barriers - including stigma - remain dominant. Now we seek to work directly in settings where mental health skills - both clinical and consultative - are crucial to success. Nowhere is this more important than in high-need urban schools. These schools cannot succeed without exceptional school leaders, school climates that promote social and emotional health and high expectations, and access to treatment and community supports for young people who need them.

“The Promise Zone initiative pulls together three urban communities (the Bronx, Syracuse City Schools and Buffalo schools) that are involved in ground-breaking collaborations. OMH is supporting these efforts and pulling together state agencies dedicated to finding the 'active ingredients' of successful school reform. In this project, we hope to define new roles for community mental health in supporting school reform and student success.”

Through these efforts, we envision a New York in which all people are prepared for citizenship, work and continued learning; in which gaps in achievement have closed, and the overall level of knowledge and skill among the people matches or exceeds the best in the world. In spite of progress made over the last decade, we are still far from achieving that vision. The Promise Zones initiative is an opportunity to build the necessary supports and structure around children in their communities to better equip them to be successful in school, work and life.