

## Changing a Community

An Interview with Geoffrey Canada,  
President and Chief Executive Officer, Harlem Children's Zone



Geoffrey Canada at work with young students

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Geoffrey Canada received a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology in 1974 from Bowdoin College, and entered the Harvard Graduate School of Education shortly thereafter, where he earned a master's degree. After graduation, Canada joined the faculty of the Robert White School in Boston, Massachusetts, and by 1977, he had become its Director. In 1983, Canada came to Harlem as the program director for the Rheedlen Institute's Truancy Prevention Program. In 1990, Canada was appointed President of Rheedlen. He expanded the center and, by 1997, Rheedlen had 11 sites throughout Manhattan. In 2002, it was renamed the Harlem Children's Zone and it began offering tutoring, recreational programs, and community outreach. In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama announced plans to replicate the HCZ model in 20 cities across the nation. Canada has written two books including *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America* (1995) and *Reaching Up for Manhood: Transforming the Lives of Boys in America* (1998).*

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *Harlem Children's Zone (www.bcz.org) began in 1970 as Rheedlen, working with young children and their families as the city's first truancy prevention program. In the early 1990s, HCZ ran a pilot project that brought a range of support services to a single block. HCZ created a 10-year business plan, and in 1997, began a network of programs for a 24-block area: the Harlem Children's Zone Project. By 2007, the Zone Project had grown to almost 100 blocks. Today, the Harlem Children's Zone® Project serves more than 9,400 children and 6,200 adults. Overall, the organization serves more than 11,400 children and more than 10,800 adults. Over the years, the agency introduced several groundbreaking efforts including *The Baby College®* parenting workshops; the *Harlem Gems®* preschool program; the *HCZ Asthma Initiative*; the *Promise Academy Charter Schools*; and an anti-obesity program. All HCZ programs are offered free of charge to the children and families of Harlem.*

### What was the vision behind creating the Harlem Children's Zone?

I was trying to come up with a strategy that would change the outcomes not just for the children that I would be working with but for all of the children in the community.

So this was not just about creating a school but about changing a community that had the worst outcomes for children into one that had terrific outcomes for children.

It was the idea of rebuilding the community, cleaning up the streets, getting rid of graffiti, and making parks and playgrounds safe combined with the idea of starting with children and families from birth and staying with them until they graduated college.

And reaching scale, right now we work with 85 percent of all of the children in our 97 blocks.

We felt that's how you change a community that has been failing its children.

### What are some of the key lessons you have learned since starting the program and how have you innovated to meet the challenges of the different students?

One of the key lessons has been that the work is hard and you shouldn't go into this work thinking that in a year or two, you will have it all figured out.

These families are facing multiple challenges from the past and in the present, and they will face them in the future. These challenges are such that the concept that you're going to solve them in a year or two doesn't make sense. So you have to be in there for the long haul.

Also, you have to put together a team of committed and competent individuals. I want to stress the commitment level that folks feel – they will do whatever is necessary to save kids – but also the competence level; commitment without competence will not produce the results you need.

### How have the different program offerings evolved both inside and outside of the classroom?

The challenge in a community like Harlem is that I worry about whether my children are getting great education and teachers when they are in school, and I worry as much about whether they are hanging out on corners and being exposed to violence and drugs when they're not in school.

So we created a structure that supports children while they're in school but that also spends time working with kids while they are out of school.

We have great sports teams, chess teams, and art programs, and we make sure young people get connected to work; we make sure young people are taught service and to give back to their communities, and that they're

given the skills to handle conflict mediation. We have to create a protective set of supports for our kids six to seven days a week for most of their waking hours.

### How do you collect data to track the impact of these programs?

One of the most important aspects of our work is that we have to determine whether or not we have made a difference – anecdotes and gut feelings are not sufficient.

We collect data sometimes using pre- and post-tests, sometimes using standardized tests, and sometimes creating our own tests, which helps us determine what is and is not working.

It's important for those of us in this business to accept that some things we do aren't going to work as effectively as we had hoped, so we have to create a feedback loop between what we're doing with the child and a measurement of whether it's having the intended impact, and when it doesn't, to evaluate what needs to be done to make that strategy more effective.

### Are there opportunities to duplicate this model and expand into other markets?

President Obama has said he's going to replicate our model in 20 different places across America. He has created something called Promise Neighborhoods, which is based on our model, and has placed that Congress-funded program in the Department of Education. Currently, there are five replication efforts underway, about 20 in the planning stage, and we think another five will begin later this year.

Besides the federal efforts, there are communities all over the country that are replicating our model on their own. We support those communities through our Practitioners Institute, where we share our successes, challenges, and strategies with folks who are interested in doing what we do.

In addition, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute is a collaboration between the Harlem Children's Zone and PolicyLink, and this program helps communities across the country learn how to replicate our work.

### What is one of your proudest accomplishments through HCZ?

This year, we'll have over 1,000 of our kids in college. Because getting kids through college is our final goal, it's heartwarming for me to spend time with these young people, track their progress, and watch them go through their college careers heading towards a more successful life. ●