

SUPPORTING PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES: DATA-DRIVEN PROMISE IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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Many activists engaged in trying to move the needle on intergenerational poverty and counter decades of disinvestment in the human and physical capital of urban neighborhoods believe a comprehensive approach with shared vision of the outcomes and shared measurement of progress is necessary. Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone and the Promise Neighborhoods movement it inspired have taken this view to heart. From the beginning, the leaders of the District of Columbia Promise Neighborhood Initiative (DCPNI) knew they wanted to model this data-driven approach for program planning and monitoring.¹

DCPNI, which focuses on the Kenilworth-Parkside neighborhood in the District of Columbia, originally developed as a collaborative between the Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools, the District of Columbia Public Schools, government agencies, and service providers to carry out a comprehensive cradle-to-career model.²

¹ A longer case study on the use of data in DCPNI is available at <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/library/catalog/helping-children-succeed-data-and-dc-promise-neighborhood-initiative>.

² For more information on DCPNI and Promise Neighborhoods, visit <http://dcpni.org/>, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>, or <http://www.promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org/>.

Incorporated as a nonprofit in 2008, DCPNI lacked the capacity to undertake the data work they knew would be important to help them understand the conditions in Kenilworth-Parkside and to design the right interventions for their community. Fortunately, they knew the Urban Institute (Urban) and its long-term program, NeighborhoodInfo DC, had staff with the expertise to collect data, run surveys and focus groups, analyze results, and help DCPNI strengthen their own capacity to use and interpret data.³ In fact, the mission of NeighborhoodInfo DC aligned directly with DCPNI's data needs.

NeighborhoodInfo DC is part of a national network of similar organizations whose purpose is to collect facts on all aspects of neighborhoods (such as crime, health, housing, and education) and turn them into information that can be used in policymaking, program planning, and community building to improve the quality of life in low-income communities. Partners in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) assemble data from multiple local agencies, regularly updating the information and making it accessible to a wide range of stakeholders: community-based organizations, local government

³ NeighborhoodInfo DC is housed at the nonprofit Urban Institute and benefits from access to a wide array of researchers who focus on applied social and economic policy research.

agencies, foundations, and residents.⁴ Rather than simply posting indicators on a website, NNIP partners like NeighborhoodInfo DC work directly with local groups to help them understand the data and how data can be employed to gain insights into the communities they care about and to improve their programs' performance.

LEVERAGING KNOWLEDGE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

DCPNI was awarded a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant from the US Department of Education in 2010 and contracted with NeighborhoodInfo DC and the Urban Institute to be their data partner. NeighborhoodInfo DC staff conducted a comprehensive analysis of neighborhood conditions and trends, leveraging their local administrative data holdings and past knowledge of the community. They also performed a needs assessment and an analysis to identify and describe which subpopulations in the Kenilworth-Parkside community had the highest needs.

Although other qualified consultants can do the type of work DCPNI needed, there are several advantages to working with an NNIP partner that is committed for the long-term to working in a particular city. DCPNI benefited

⁴ For more information about NNIP, visit www.neighborhoodindicators.org. The history and model of NNIP is described in detail in Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014).

both from the years NeighborhoodInfo DC staff had spent building relationships across the District of Columbia to obtain data and from the information produced from analyses they had conducted on a variety of topics. Because the information NeighborhoodInfo DC produces is a resource that serves the whole community, DCPNI could work from the same facts that were available to the public and charter schools, their funders, and local agencies.

As part of the planning process, DCPNI used "results-driven working groups" to determine priorities and interventions under each of their selected outcomes. DCPNI wanted NeighborhoodInfo DC's information on neighborhood conditions and trends to be part of these conversations and not in an appendix stuck in the end of a long planning document. They asked NeighborhoodInfo DC staff to participate alongside community stakeholders in the working groups, share the data with the groups, and facilitate discussion with the other participants about what the data implied for program design. These "dialogues with data" were credited as having an important influence on the plans that emerged.

One analysis built on previous work that was presented to the results-driven working groups had a big impact on the planning for DCPNI. Several years earlier, NeighborhoodInfo DC and the Urban Institute were the first organizations to plot where students attending traditional schools in the District of Columbia Public Schools and students attending the increasing number of charter schools lived. This analysis showed how school quality and charter

school attendance varied by the neighborhood a child lived in. Over the next few years, NeighborhoodInfo DC and its partner at 21st Century School Fund continued to provide analytical support to the District of Columbia Public Schools and the Office of the State Superintendent for Education on school enrollment and students' residential trends, which led to data-informed decisions around school closings and consolidation.

A look at the data for the Kenilworth-Parkside neighborhood revealed that most of the school-age children who live there actually go to schools outside its boundaries. In 2008–09 only half the resident elementary-age students attended the community's two elementary schools, 29 percent of the middle school students attended its charter middle school, and 15 percent of the high school-age residents attended its charter high school. Students living in the community attended 149 schools in total.⁵ Even though DCPNI leaders were well aware that the District of Columbia is extremely “choice oriented,” these numbers came as a shock. The team continues to assess the implications of this finding for its work, but one immediate move was to increase attention to out-of-school-time programs inside the neighborhood that could help resident children and strengthen their sense of

community regardless of where they attended school.

Several other pieces of information NeighborhoodInfo DC and Urban staff presented during these working groups also led participants to reprioritize activities, including identifying the location of crime hotspots, the dearth of high-quality early childhood programs, and the high school's poor student retention rates between 9th and 12th grades.

EXPANDED DATA CAPACITY IN IMPLEMENTATION

After DCPNI was awarded an implementation grant in 2012, they continued to work with NeighborhoodInfo DC and Urban to meet the federal data collection requirements and inform their program management and continuous learning. Firmly convinced of the value of data in their work, DCPNI bolstered their internal capacity and hired an experienced data manager in 2013. This data management expert allowed DCPNI to lead on the development of the case management system to track the progress of students and families. Although DCPNI had increased their capability to collect data and track trends, it was more efficient to use NeighborhoodInfo DC and their connection to researchers across the Urban Institute for specialized analyses and to administer the neighborhood and school climate surveys.

The neighborhood survey finding that seemed most surprising to many in the community was that food

⁵ Popkin et al. (2011).

insecurity was a much more serious problem than previously recognized. In 2013, 49 percent of neighborhood families faced this problem at some level.⁶ Furthermore, the majority of families have a difficult time accessing healthy and affordable food within a reasonable distance from their home. DCPNI worked through its partners to address this issue soon after the survey results were available. So far they have secured the services of a sizable mobile food market that now visits Kenilworth-Parkside on a weekly basis and are securing an agreement with Capital Area Food Bank to provide more distribution locations in the neighborhood.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

Beyond the data and analysis, NeighborhoodInfo DC and NNIP partners in general hope to contribute to the development of the ability of community-based organizations and local agencies to use information to drive the decisions in their work and to institutionalize the practice. The expectation that an organization can use data and employ the practice of continuous learning is increasingly common, not only for federal place-based initiatives like Promise Neighborhoods, but also for philanthropically driven collective-impact efforts.

DCPNI is an example of an organization that has internalized this notion. They began with a willingness to learn, and today most of DCPNI's key decisions in planning and operations are based on an analysis of relevant data, when such data are available. DCPNI staff now instinctively "look for the data" when they ask basic management questions: "How well is this element of our program doing?" and "What could we do to make it better?" DCPNI staff also led an "I Heart Data" event in Kenilworth-Parkside to engage residents with data, communicate the data in an easily digestible format, and explain how the residents' participation in the neighborhood survey was shaping the interventions that will be delivered.

The experience documented here suggests that employing a trusted NNIP partner like NeighborhoodInfo DC can offer many advantages to local grantees implementing place-based initiatives like Promise. Initiatives can leverage the relationships and data holdings developed over time by NNIP partners and work collaboratively with organizations committed to seeing information inform action.

⁶ *Gallagher, et al. (2015).*

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NNIP is a collaboration between the Urban Institute and partner organizations in more than thirty American cities. NNIP partners democratize data: they make it accessible and easy to understand and then help local stakeholders apply it to solve problems in their communities.

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