**book review**

**It Takes a Community**

*A safety net grows in Harlem*

**Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America**

By Paul Tough

*Houghton Mifflin, 2008, $26; 296 pages.*

As reviewed by Cara Spitalewitz

“The clock is ticking,” Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone, tells *New York Times Magazine* editor Paul Tough. He is referring to the necessity that Promise Academy Charter School deliver satisfactory citywide test results to its board of trustees. But he is also referring to something much larger: the urgent need to save our nation’s poor children. “We better do something today to save these kids,” he says. “We want to be able to talk about how you save kids by the tens of thousands, because that’s how we’re losing them. We’re losing kids by the tens of thousands.” Canada’s sense of urgency is palpable throughout Tough’s *Whatever It Takes*, a breathless account of Canada’s attempt to transform the lives of some 7,500 children inhabiting 97 blocks of Harlem.

Canada’s goal is to create what he conceives of as a web of supports. By changing every aspect of a poor child’s life—schools, families, neighborhoods—he believes that the Harlem Children’s Zone can give youngsters the resources they need to succeed when all odds are against them. Since he founded the Harlem Children’s Zone as a one-block experiment in 1997, he has expanded it to include parenting classes (Baby College and Three-Year-Old Journey), a full-day preschool (Harlem Gems), two elementary schools (Promise Academy I and II), and a middle school (Promise Academy). He also has created afterschool programs for each developmental stage, public health initiatives targeting asthma and obesity, and guidance programs for adolescents transitioning into college or employment.

Canada makes it clear that eradicating poverty is a science and that a broad swath of Harlem is his laboratory: there are methods and techniques that will work, and he will implement and manipulate them methodically until they do. At the same time, Canada insists that early intervention is only one piece of his strategy. Even if science suggests otherwise, he refuses to give up on children who got onto the conveyor belt too late. Similarly, although he stresses that parents are invaluable to childhood development, he refuses to allow disengaged parents to be used as an excuse for their children’s failure.

Tough has been interviewing and observing Canada for five years, and his knowledge of the inner workings of Canada’s programs and the ideas driving them is striking. He provides overviews of the current research on early intervention as well as the evolution of poverty theory, from the controversy surrounding the 1965 Moynihan report to the debate between sociologist William Julius Wilson and political scientist Charles Murray about the root causes of poverty.

Although a varied and massive array of programs comprise the Harlem
Children’s Zone, its charter schools have garnered perhaps the most attention, particularly in the context of controversial New York City school reforms and the larger conversation in the education world about high-stakes tests, charters, and No Child Left Behind.

Tough presents particularly compelling narratives about the progress of one Promise Academy elementary school and the middle school, the former achieving dramatic increases in test scores, and the latter temporarily closing its doors to new students as a result of poor (albeit improving) performance. He offers a glimpse of the challenges and frustrations in the middle school with a scene from a sixth-grade math class that stretches on for pages. It takes students the majority of a class period to figure out how to read aloud a 12-digit number written on the blackboard.

The question among policymakers, of course, is how to quantify the successes and failures of Canada’s experiment. Tough mentions a lack of hard data proving the effectiveness of some of the Harlem Children’s Zone programs. We have Promise Academy test scores and anecdotal evidence about Baby College, he notes, but we do not know how well the other programs that make up Canada’s safety net are working.

However, the data from the schools are a strong interim measure of success: 97 and 100 percent of the 3rd graders at Canada’s two elementary schools performed at grade level on the state math test in 2008. Although 3rd-grade reading scores were lower—68 and 81 percent proficiency—the numbers still topped the citywide average.

How much of this academic success is due to instruction? How much influence do the other safety-net programs have? Roland Fryer, a Harvard University economist, is currently looking at longitudinal data in order to disaggregate the various factors contributing to the success of the Zone’s children.

This research will be particularly useful in attempts to replicate the program. In one of his campaign speeches, President Barack Obama declared his intention to implement the Harlem Children’s Zone model in 20 cities nationwide. Elementary school test scores indicate that it is a promising experiment worthy of replication. As policymakers incorporate ongoing program evaluation and extensive data collection into each new Zone in each new city, we will learn more about the generalizability of the model.

Tough covers a great deal of ground, but what runs through all of his reporting is Canada’s staunch pragmatism. As competing education manifestos vie for policymakers’ allegiance, “which side are you on?” distressingly seems to be a more important question for many than “what works?” Canada, along with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, is one of the few education leaders to have signed both manifests. Who can focus on philosophical debates when we are losing children by the tens of thousands?

What makes Canada’s approach so refreshing is that he does not seek to align himself with one set of policy prescriptions or the other; instead, he picks and chooses from each. For Canada, schools can’t do everything on their own, but they can do a lot more than they are doing now. For those who still seek to categorize him as a supporter of one side of the debate or the other, the answer is he is for both. He is for Whatever It Takes. The clock is ticking.

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