

Agencies teaming for ambitious project for students

BY LAYLA FARMER
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A collaborative of more than 25 local agencies is working to improve outcomes for children and families in the local community.

Promise Neighborhood, an ambitious project that aspires to act as a pipeline of support from the "cradle to career," plans to target citizens in the residential areas that surround Prince Ibrahim Elementary, Mineral Springs Middle and Carver High School, though the exact parameters have yet to be determined. The initiative is modeled after the famous Harlem Children's Zone, created by educator Geoffrey Canada.

Called "one of the most ambitious social-service experiments of our time," the HCZ is a multi-agency, volunteer-supported effort to offset the temptations of street life with positive influences, role models and educational support to produce better outcomes for children and families in a nearly 100-block area in one of the nation's roughest cities. The HCZ has been so successful that President Barack Obama has called for the creation of Promise Neighborhoods based on its model across the nation.

"Having a model that has been so successful is what I think inspired the community," commented Nikki Byers, executive director of Imprints (formerly ABCD—the Association for the Benefit of Child Development) and one of the initial visionaries for

the local effort. "The outcomes are dizzying. What's happened in Harlem is they've essentially closed the black/white achievement gap."

Experiment in Self Reliance (ESR) is serving as lead agency for the collaborative, which encompasses a wide array of community partners including CHANGE, United Way and Habitat for Humanity.

"We really are trying to leverage the partners that have worked together for years," explained ESR Executive Director Twana Wellman-Roebuck. "We want to make sure we're working in concert with agencies that strengthen the community. Our goal is not to be separate and apart."

Tutoring programs, financial literacy workshops and parental education seminars are among the offerings that could materialize under the Promise Neighborhood umbrella, said Byers, a mother of nine, and project leaders hope to attract new resources, such as early childhood education service providers, to the area as well.

"One of the key principles is creating a culture of success," Byers explained. "...The deficiency is not in the children, it's in the environment."

This month, project leaders will begin hosting community meetings to gain input from residents on the elements they feel are most needed to enhance their respective neighborhoods. The hope is that the meetings



Twana Wellman-Roebuck with Nikki Byers.

Photo by Layla Farmer

will shed light on what is needed to dismantle the generational poverty that plagues the area and the societal ills associated with it, said Wellman-Roebuck, who has led ESR for the last 13 years.

"Our goal is to be able to link families to the necessary services so that the whole family can be empowered," she stated. "We really want to strengthen the neighborhood. It does us no good to create a program for them; we have to create a program with them."

The collaborative has already received grants from the Winston-Salem Foundation and Smart Start of Forsyth County to hire a coordinator and an administrative assistant to

help streamline the project's many facets and use the information gleaned from community meetings and other sources to write a grant proposal in hopes of landing federal dollars for the project, Byers said, though its implementation will not be contingent on receiving the grant. Matching funds will be sought from locally-based foundations to diversify the project's funding and reach. The group hopes to expand its efforts to other communities in the future, she added.

"We want to fashion a model that's effective for the Winston-Salem / Forsyth County community so that it can be replicated in other communities," she remarked.

Project leaders are also working to create an assessment group, which will monitor progress in the area in the coming years, Byers said. Though the changes in the community will likely be gradual, group leaders are hoping they will be permanent. Wellman-Roebuck says it will take a concerted effort to make the Promise Neighborhood thrive.


"We have lots of dreams and visions of what we want this to be, but in order for this to be successful, we will need resources from various agencies," she noted. "This is a community-wide effort. We recognize that it truly does take the entire community to make change happen."

Upcoming Promise Neighborhood community meetings are as follows: Thursday, March 17 at 9:00 a.m. at Brown & Douglas Recreation Center. Breakfast will be provided. Monday, March 21 at 6 p.m. at Solid Rock Missionary Baptist Church. Dinner will be provided. Tuesday, March 22 at 12 - 1 p.m. at Brown & Douglas Recreation Center. Lunch will be provided. To register or for more information about the meetings, call (336) 722-6296 ext. 221 or email rbrooks@imprintsforfamilies.org. For more information about Promise Neighborhood or to get involved, email Byers at nbyers@imprintsforfamilies.org or Wellman-Roebuck at twana.wellman@eisr.org.

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