

## What is a “Place-Based” approach? Why are communities like Strathcona urging governments to support place-based strategies?

In its 2006 report to the Prime Minister, the External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, chaired by Mike Harcourt noted that:

“Two groups feature disproportionately within poorer places, Aboriginal peoples and new immigrants. The Aboriginal population on reserves suffers from an “end-of-the-road” effect in receiving public services. Within our cities, the rapidly growing urban Aboriginal population is predominantly clustered into segregated neighbourhoods. Adverse crime, health and education outcomes follow.”

The report goes on to say:

“We take the view that these issues require better main-stream services and policies on places to tackle and address poverty. We believe that it is necessary to change the way government works for the poorest people and places of Canada.”

The prestigious committee that researched and authored this report conclude that **Place Matters** and its first recommendation is that **all governments in Canada adopt a place-based approach.**

Similarly the Obama administration has adopted a place-based strategy to leverage the impact of government dollars, as evidenced by this excerpt from a memorandum to the heads of Executive Departments from the White House, August 11, 2009:

“Place-based policies leverage investments by focusing resources in targeted places and drawing on the compounding effect of well-coordinated action. Effective place-based policies can influence how rural and metropolitan areas develop, how well they function as places to live, work, operate a business, preserve heritage, and more. Such policies can also

streamline otherwise redundant and disconnected programs.”

The growing body of research in Europe, Canada, and the United States points to the need for eliminate the ‘silo’ approach in which different departments make unconnected decisions on policy and funding; and the ‘generalized’ approach in which policy and funding applies uniformly to all individuals and communities. As a more effective strategy, a place-based approach focuses instead on:

- Building on the capacity of local communities
- Encouraging local networks of referral and support
- Targeting benefits to economically disadvantaged families

Successive measurements of school readiness in Strathcona suggests that current approaches have consistently failed to improve the situation for the poorest children in the city. There have been a succession of general programs including: Success by Six; Windows of Opportunity; the Federal Child Benefit; Strong Start; Ready, Set, Learn; Aboriginal Head Start.

None of these have changed the harsh reality for Strathcona’s children:

- Over 66% are vulnerable according to UBC research;
- They are not school ready and drop out of school before graduation;
- They consistently fail to achieve the economic security of peers in other communities who complete secondary and post-secondary education.
- They fail to meet crucial developmental milestones
- They lack access to primary health care and face food insecurity.
- They live in a hostile environment with daily exposure to criminal activity, homelessness, drug abuse, domestic violence and social disorder.

Notwithstanding the availability of early learning opportunities, many vulnerable children cannot participate because parents face structural barriers in obtaining government subsidy. This undermines the very essence of early intervention theory and best practices.

## What We Can Learn from the California Preschool Study

California struggles with the same problem: “Only about half of low-income children are in preschool, compared to 80 percent of children whose families make more than \$100,000. And, far fewer are in high-quality programs that develop language skills and promote higher-order thinking.”

Independent research conducted by the Rand Corporation shows that socio-economically disadvantaged children in California have an increased likelihood of “beginning kindergarten without the basic early reading and social skills that prepare them to learn and succeed,” and children who “start behind tend to stay behind.”

The Preschool Study also cites longitudinal studies showing that “high-quality early childhood education that serves disadvantaged children provides a return of \$7 to \$16 for every dollar spent.”

“High-quality preschool can help bridge the achievement gap, and previous economic research shows the earlier we make investments, the greater our returns will be.”

Service providers on both sides of the border know that investing adequately in early childhood education saves government spending on the K-to-12 education, public assistance, and justice systems. Yet both California’s and British Columbia’s systems are under-funded and fail to “serve the kids who need it most.” The California Preschool Study shows that by the time they were four-years-old, children from poor families were exposed on average to 32 million fewer spoken words than children whose parents are professionals.

Children in affluent areas, therefore, benefit from the intrinsic enrichment surrounding them at home and in the community.

Families in Strathcona, like those from poor neighbourhoods in California, find the early learning system complex and difficult to navigate. Indeed, many Strathcona families, such as those with ESL or illiterate parents, cannot even fill in

the application forms without significant assistance from support workers.

**The key lesson from the Rand research is that economically disadvantaged children benefit more from every public dollar spent than do children from middle and upper class neighbourhoods.**

## What would a place-based approach look like?

The Harlem Children’s Zone is a great example of a place-based approach that “seeks to eradicate poverty through education”. The comprehensive approach “creates a safety net woven so tightly that no child can fall through”. This place-based community capacity development approach goes ‘block by block’ In a 100 square block area of Manhattan with initiatives that include:

- Pre-natal Care (The Baby College)
- A full range of Childcare and Pre-School programs (1 to 4 staff ratio)
- After-School Programs that turn public schools into community centres (Beacon Centres)
- Private Schools (The Promise Academies)
- Tutoring and support through to college graduation
- Job Placement
- Building restoration, community beautification, and community organizing
- Prevention of Child Welfare Apprehensions

These are not simply a listing of programs, but a comprehensive approach where children move seamlessly through the system. **They call this: “The Pipeline”.** It is a pipeline to success.

Learn more at: [www.hcz.org](http://www.hcz.org)

By contrast, in Strathcona, there are wait lists for each successive step: early learning, ability assessments, special needs funding. There is the complex application form for subsidy that poses a significant barrier. Once in kindergarten, there is a further wait list for after school care. This is a road with many potholes, and detours - rarely leading to successful high school completion, let alone post-secondary success.

By contrast, the Harlem Children's Zone has changed the culture to one in which there is an expectation of success: **Children attending the Children Zone's Promise Academies will graduate from college.**

## **How can we move to a culture of Success?**

The Harlem Children's Zone started with a 10 year plan. It is this long term perspective that is needed. In Strathcona we propose a 12 step program to be undertaken in 3 stages. While some individual initiatives are already underway, we endorse a comprehensive vision that links these into a systematic place-based strategy.

A critical element to this systematic strategy is linking with community-based organizations that support the cultural identity of children and families.

### **Immediately: Focus on Early Learning Needs for Strathcona children poised to enter the public school system**

#### **1. Build programs around existing community-based centres**

Strathcona Community Centre and Ray-Cam Community Cooperative Centre are two centres that display key indicators we see in Harlem:

- Trusted sources of child and family support
- Strategically located in Strathcona
- Existing infrastructure with range of programs and services serving children, families, teens, seniors.
- Community-based Boards of Directors
- Capacity development approach
- Active involvement with organizations such as ALIVE, a membership-driven democratic organization for Aboriginal peoples living in Vancouver.

#### **2. Support early learning spaces and outreach.**

- Acknowledge additional staff supports required for high incidence of special needs
- Staff at 1 to 4 ratio, coordinating staffing with existing centres

- Reach out to families where children are not receiving early learning supports.
- On-going monitoring of need and wait lists

#### **3. Link early learning centres with Kindergarten and inner-city elementary school supports**

- Ensure smooth transition from Kindergarten to after-school supports

#### **4. Establish comprehensive access to health care and assessment**

- Coordinate with Social Pediatrics Initiative for primary health care, assessment, and access to specialists
- Access to Family Planning
- Prenatal care for healthy, wanted babies

#### **5. Develop Programs for Community Parents**

- Childcare training at the early learning sites
- Parenting programs
- Food Security
- Family Support- Preventing Child Apprehensions and Ensuring Child Safety

#### **6. Develop and support Community Development Initiatives**

- Examples include community gardens
- Social housing tenant support and empowerment

#### **7. Implement Rigorous Evaluation and Monitoring**

- Create measurement tools and provide on-going updates of progress

#### **8. Establish and maintain coordination, communication and professional development among staff serving children and families.**

## **Mid-Term - 3 to 5 years: Move to support children and families throughout Elementary School Years and Transition to High School**

- 9. Establish a community-based Tutoring Program**
  - All children at elementary schools in the Strathcona catchment area will have access to tutors
- 10. Establish comprehensive After-school Programs**
  - All children will have access to quality after school programs, including recreation and sports programs
- 11. Develop a partnership program to ensure sustainable funding**

## **Long Term - 5 to 10 Years: Move to support children through High School and into Post-Secondary**

- 12. Develop program for high school students that provide for successful transition to post-secondary education.**



These children need your help NOW.

## **We can't expect different results with the same tired old approach.**

### **Moving to a Place Based Strategy:**

Existing community programs will be used as the basis for a comprehensive place-based approach that acknowledges the challenges posed by:

- The high incidence of children with special needs
- Culture of violence and failure in the inner city
- Parents struggling with the legacy of addictions, family violence and abuse.
- The limited choices available to low income families
- Limited publicly funded resources

Funds can be reallocated from existing general programs to be targetted toward this more vulnerable population.

Funding for universal programs in more affluent neighbours often merely displaces private funding that would otherwise be available. In the inner-city, parents cannot afford to pay the fees that would enable programs to be self-sustaining. Public dollars are required.

In other neighbourhoods, parents can afford to pay and public dollars are not necessary for the service to be sustainable. Until such time as the outcomes are equivalent, the inner-city should get greater funding. Once school-readiness and graduation rates are equivalent in all neighbours, this disproportionate funding can be reallocated more evenly.

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