

Promise Neighborhood **Site PROFILE**

Buffalo Promise Neighborhood

GRANTEE ORGANIZATION:

Westminster Foundation

LOCATION:

Buffalo, NY

FEDERAL PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD GRANT:

Date of grant award:
December 2011

Date grant agreement with U.S. Department of Education executed:
First quarter of 2012

Total investment:
\$32 million (\$6 million federal grant and \$26 million in matching funds)

COMMUNITY CONTEXT/ TARGET POPULATION

The Buffalo Promise Neighborhood serves one of Buffalo's poorest communities. The population is 76 percent minority, including 69 percent African American. More than a third of Buffalo Promise Neighborhood residents (38 percent) live in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, and 88 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.¹

A one-square-mile area constituting 97 blocks, the Promise Neighborhood is home to 12,000 residents, including 3,000 children age 18 and younger. Approximately 1,600 of these students attend public schools, but due to school choice policies, the majority attend schools outside the neighborhood, and a similar number of students from other locations commute to Promise Neighborhood partner schools.

KEY PARTNERS AND THEIR ROLES

The lead agency for the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood is the Westminster Foundation, which was established by M&T Bank to support one of the lowest-performing schools in the city, an elementary school serving students in kindergarten through 8th grade. This school was converted to a charter school and renamed Westminster Community Charter School in 2004 and is now one of the two schools in the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood. The other partner school, Highgate Heights Elementary School, is a regular public school serving students in prekindergarten through 8th grade. Until the 2014–2015 school year, the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood also included Bennett High School.

Other key partners provide services for children and families (see sidebar, page 2). For example, in the early childhood area (called Early Education Foundations in Buffalo), Every Person Influences Children (EPIC) provides

parenting classes and referrals for new parents; the Community Health Center of Buffalo (CHCB) provides a medical home for their children; and Community Action Organization (CAO) operates the Children's Academy early childhood education center. Read to Succeed Buffalo provides early literacy intervention with embedded coaching in home-based child care facilities, the Children's Academy, and kindergarten through 2nd-grade classrooms at Westminster and prekindergarten through 1st grade at Highgate Heights. AmeriCorps staff members work with students in partner schools, provide child care for parents attending other Buffalo Promise Neighborhood activities, and help with special events. Belmont Housing is another partner with multiple roles, providing financial education to parents and rehabilitating houses near the partner schools.

M&T Bank provides oversight and financial support for the Promise Neighborhood. Other funding partners, including the John R. Oishei Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and U.S. Departments of Education and Justice support specific components of the initiative. Niagara IT Solutions helped develop the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood data system.

THE PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD INITIATIVE

Major pipeline components and activities of the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood are displayed in Figure 1.

- **Programs.** As the first step in the Promise Neighborhood's Early Education Foundations' services, partner EPIC reaches out to parents in maternity wards after a child's birth, conducts newborn classes, and makes referrals to other services, including CHCB and the Children's Academy early childhood education center. The Children's Academy, which was built from the ground up by the Promise Neighborhood and is operated by partner

Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Key Partners



Early Education Foundations

- Community Action Organization (CAO)
- Community Health Center of Buffalo
- Every Person Influences Children (EPIC)
- Read to Succeed Buffalo



School Transformation

- Buffalo Public Schools
- Highgate Heights Elementary School
- Westminster Community Charter School
- AmeriCorps
- Closing the Gap
- Council for Unity
- Say Yes to Education
- Service Collaborative of Western New York



College and Career Connections^a

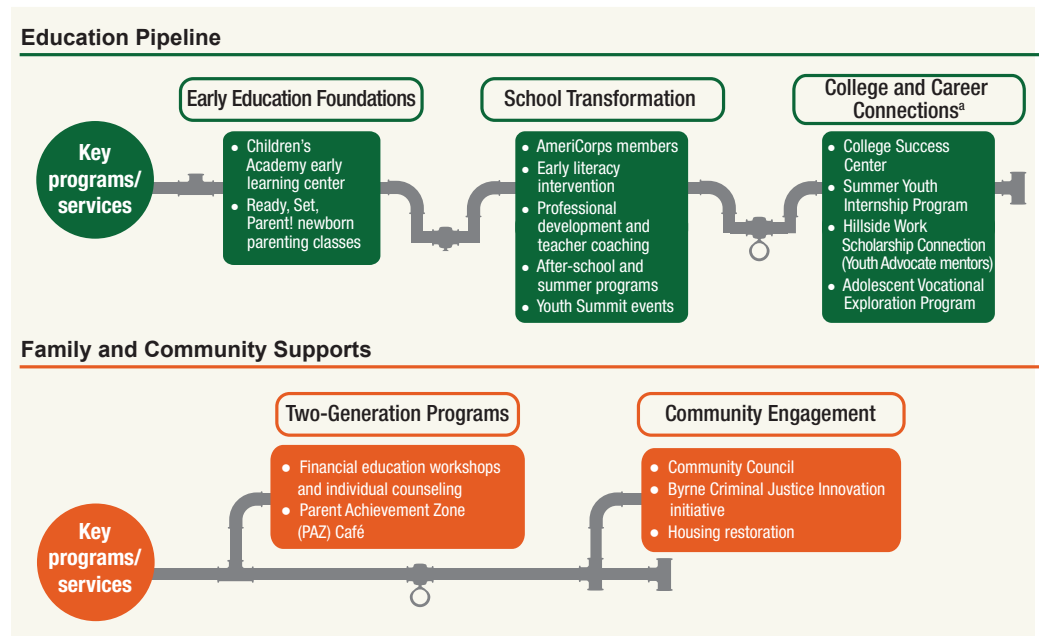
- Buffalo Urban League
- Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection
- Mayor's Summer Youth Internship program
- University of Buffalo



Two-Generation/Parent Achievement Zone

- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Belmont Housing Resources

Figure 1. Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Pipeline Components



Source: Site visit interviews conducted in 2014.

Note: This figure highlights key activities in each area; it does not list all the programs and services the Promise Neighborhood offers.

^a Most College and Career Connections programs ended with the 2013–2014 school year.

CAO, served 80 children ages 3 and 4 years in the 2013–2014 school year and expanded to add 40 infants and toddlers the next year.

The Promise Neighborhood plays a different role in each of the partner schools due to distinct relationships with the two elementary schools. The lead agency has operated one as a charter elementary school for a decade and continues to exercise broad authority over the reforms there. In the other partner elementary school, the Promise Neighborhood's lead agency serves as the managing Educational Partnership Organization under a School Improvement Grant (SIG) from the U.S. Department of Education. In addition to the influence in the school this arrangement gives the Promise Neighborhood, the SIG also provides funding used in part to provide teacher coaching and professional development to build the capacity of school staff.

To prepare students for college and careers, the Promise Neighborhood had offered several programs at Bennett High School, before its partnership with that school ended. At the College Success Center, students could get assistance from University of Buffalo graduate students to complete applications,

write essays, and fill out financial aid forms. The Promise Neighborhood promoted career readiness by connecting students to the Buffalo Urban League's Adolescent Vocational Exploration Program, which helped students define career goals and develop skills; the Hillside Work Scholarship Connection career-readiness dropout prevention program, which paired students with Youth Advocate mentors; and the City of Buffalo Mayor's Summer Youth Internship Program. However, all but the internship program concluded at the end of the 2013–2014 school year.

One Promise Neighborhood activity that is consistent across the partner schools is the placement of AmeriCorps staff, who provide classroom support for teachers, homework help, mentoring, after-school clubs, summer school activities, and other support for students in and out of class. The Service Collaborative of Western New York provides 23 AmeriCorps staff, who are distributed across the partner schools, through its AmeriCorps Builds Lives through Education program.

- **Families.** In the second year of the federal Promise Neighborhoods grant, Buffalo secured additional funding and implemented

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Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Key Partners (continued)

Erie Community College
Buffalo Center for Arts & Technology



Community and Family Engagement/Services

Belmont Housing Resources
Buffalo Police Department
Buffalo Urban League
City of Buffalo
Erie County
Local Initiative Support Corp (LISC)
Peacekeepers
University of Buffalo Regional Institute



Funding Partners

M&T Bank
Annie E. Casey Foundation
John R. Oishei Foundation
U.S. Departments of Education and Justice
NYS Department of Education
Margaret L. Wendt Foundation
City of Buffalo
The Service Collaborative of Western New York

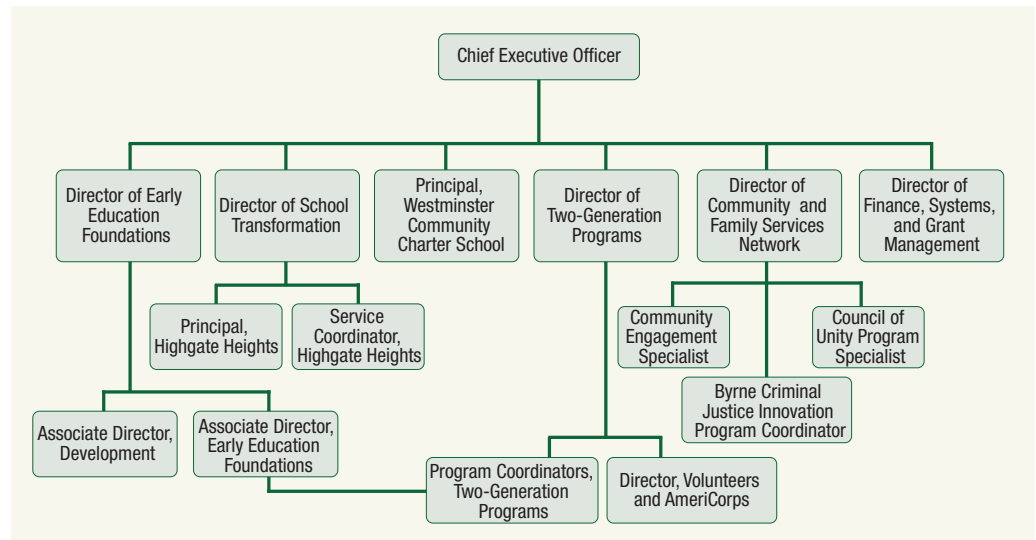


Data System Developer

Niagara IT Solutions

^a Most College and Career Connections programs ended with the 2013–2014 school year.

Figure 2. Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Organizational Structure



Source: Background documents from Buffalo Promise Neighborhood.

components focusing on parents and the community. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Two-Generation Program provides financial education, workforce development, and parenting skill building and support to parents and caregivers of children attending the Children’s Academy or prekindergarten at a partner school. Participants in the first financial education workshop requested ongoing group meetings, and the initiative responded by adding monthly Parent Achievement Zone (PAZ) Cafés, with a different topic each session.

With support from the U.S. Department of Justice through a Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation (BCJI) grant, the Promise Neighborhood partners with the Buffalo Police Department, other law enforcement agencies, and community members to prevent crime and increase safety.

The Buffalo Promise Neighborhood also organized a Community Council, which works to improve the neighborhood. Staff reported that crime and safety is a key focus because it affects all aspects of life in the neighborhood; subcommittees of the council focus on different topics. For example, members of the council were involved in planning and running a youth leadership event with Promise Neighborhood staff and partners. Membership in the council and committees is open, and monthly meetings typically draw between 20 and 25 attendees.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE AND STAFF ROLES

The Buffalo Promise Neighborhood is operated by approximately 25 direct staff members, including directors for each of the key content areas: Early Education Foundations, School Transformation, Two-Generation Programs, and Community and Family Services (Figure 2). Lead agency staff work closely with their counterparts at schools and other partners to implement programs and services. The Promise Neighborhood is overseen by a six-member board of directors that includes senior staff and representatives of key partners, led by the chairman of M&T Bank.

PROGRESS/ ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Organizational/structural expansion.** To administer Buffalo’s Promise Neighborhood initiative, the lead agency developed from a foundation with a few staff that focused on a single charter school into a staff of approximately 25 people who work with schools and numerous other partners to serve community residents of all ages.
- **Establishment of a new child care center.** The Buffalo Promise Neighborhood demolished a dilapidated building in a central neighborhood location and replaced it with a newly-constructed 12,000-square-foot Children’s Academy designed to provide a high quality

learning environment for children in infancy through age 5 years. The lead agency drew on an experienced partner (initially Bethel Head Start; now CAO), to operate the Children's Academy. As of the 2014–2015 school year, the Children's Academy was at capacity, serving 120 children.

- **Visible community changes.** In addition to converting the Children's Academy location, the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood has made other visible improvements. Partner Belmont Housing is rehabilitating 10 houses near the partner schools, increasing property values, and the Promise Neighborhood built a new playground at one of the schools and a community garden near another. Several respondents also attributed the breaking up of a burglary ring to the efforts of the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood through the BCJI-supported safety efforts.
- **Promising early outcomes related to early learning.** After construction of the Children's Academy in 2013, Buffalo noted improvements in Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) indicators 2 and 3.² The percentage of children ages 5 and younger who attended an early learning setting (GPRA 3) increased from 62 percent in 2013 to 73 percent in 2014. The percentage of 3-year-olds and kindergartners who exhibited age-appropriate functioning (GPRA 2)—as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—increased from 90 to 95 percent in the same period.
- **Environmental improvements within partner school.** Leaders at one partner school described changes in the environment within the building while cautioning that they did not expect those changes to immediately be reflected in test scores. Both leaders and teaching staff noted a higher degree of support for staff and students, collaboration between teachers, a greater focus on academics, and reduction in behavioral issues. For example, the number of formal office referrals decreased from 832 in the 2012–2013 school year to 330 in 2013–2014, and the number of suspensions decreased from more than 300 to just 51 during the same period. Leaders consider these environmental changes a necessary first step toward improvements in academic performance.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

- **Local barriers can impede school reform.** Promise Neighborhood leaders reported that district politics and instability at the leadership level make it challenging to work within the Buffalo Public Schools. They also cited difficulty removing ineffective teachers—even at the charter school—due to the strong teachers' union in the district. The Promise Neighborhood attempts to set clear expectations for teachers at the charter school and hopes they will self-select out of the school if they do not buy in to the reforms. In some cases, the lead agency has fired teachers, despite the lengthy appeals process.
- **Communication among staff at all levels is crucial.** It can take time and effort for frontline partner staff to become familiar with all the other Promise Neighborhood partners and programs. For example, during a case study focus group, one frontline staff person from a partner organization reported seeing a staff member from another partner organization at her location but not knowing what she does. Such lack of awareness can hamper effective referrals and limit the extent to which partners learn from each other. Participants in the focus group suggested making formal introductions of staff working in the same location or inviting frontline staff to attend Promise Neighborhood partner meetings.
- **Data system development takes time.** To develop a central data system to meet the complex needs of the initiative, the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood contracted with the same information technology vendor that operates the local public school district's data system. The new data system was expected to be in place by January 2015. During development, partners have submitted data in different ways, such as via Excel spreadsheets, and the Promise Neighborhood was able to access student data through the school district's data system.
- **Loss of a key partner can require reassessment of related activities.** The Promise Neighborhood's relationship with its partner Bennett High School ended after the 2013–2014 school year, as the district had slated the school to be closed. Rather than choose a new high school to partner with, the Promise Neighborhood had tentatively identified an alternative pathway—encouraging

ABOUT PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS CASE STUDIES

The Promise Neighborhoods Institute at Policy Link (PNI) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct in-depth case studies of five selected Promise Neighborhoods, including Buffalo. For these case studies, Mathematica gathered and analyzed data from documents, telephone interviews, and three-to-four-day site visits to each selected Promise Neighborhood at the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

students completing 8th grade at its other partner schools to continue their education in private or public “criteria” magnet schools with proven track records of preparing high school students for college—and was beginning to plan additional supports.

LOOKING FORWARD

- **Redefining supports for high school students.** With the expected loss of its partner high school, the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood is identifying alternative pathways and supports for students progressing through high school and into college and careers. The Promise Neighborhood AmeriCorps staff formerly stationed at the high school will be reallocated to the remaining partner schools. It is not yet clear what other related changes the Promise Neighborhood might make to programs that have taken place in the high school, such as those in the college and career area.
- **Uncertainty regarding sustainability of full initiative.** Although Buffalo leveraged the \$6 million federal Promise Neighborhood grant into \$32 million, continuation beyond that period is in question. One leader expressed concern that without the U.S. Department of Education funds, the matching funding would end as well, and the Promise Neighborhood initiative would have to be scaled back.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

¹ Buffalo Promise Neighborhood implementation grant application, September 2011.

² Buffalo Promise Neighborhood, *U.S. Department of Education Grant Performance Report*, 2014.

Suggested Citation

Hulsey, Lara, and Kimberly Boller. “Promise Neighborhood Site Profile: Buffalo Promise Neighborhood.” Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2015.