

HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Evaluation of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood

Findings from Seven Years of Implementation

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Evaluation of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood

Since 2009, the Promise Heights initiative has provided wraparound, cradle-to-career services for youth and families in the West Baltimore communities of Upton and Druid Heights, with the goal of improving outcomes for students and families related to education, health, and postsecondary pathways. Promise Heights, which is based in the University of Maryland School of Social Work, received a federal Promise Neighborhoods planning grant in 2012 and a \$30 million implementation grant in 2018. Promise Heights used these funds to create a partnership to support programming and services for students and families living within the footprint of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood. This report follows Promise Heights throughout its seven-year period as a Promise Neighborhoods grantee and presents findings from an annual process study evaluation conducted between 2019 and 2025, the final year of the grant.

History of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood

Promise Neighborhoods is a place-based federal grant program directed by the US Department of Education that invests in communities with high poverty to improve access to quality education and family and community supports that will improve educational opportunities and the health and well-being of children.¹ Grantee agencies collaborate with community partners and local schools to provide a continuum of services and supports from cradle to career. The program is designed to be flexible so that each community can tailor programming and supports to address its most pressing needs.

Becoming a Promise Neighborhood

After receiving a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant in 2012 from the US Department of Education, the University of Maryland School of Social Work used additional grants and university funding for implementation. In 2018, they were awarded a \$30 million five-year federal implementation grant, which they used to establish the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood in Upton and Druid Heights.

Upton and Druid Heights

The Upton and Druid Heights neighborhoods that comprise the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood are predominantly Black communities with a rich history as a hub for Black culture and the Civil Rights Movement. The Baltimore chapter of the NAACP was founded there, and some of the oldest Black churches are in Upton and Druid Heights. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church on Druid Hill Avenue is a frequent partner of Promise Heights and one of the founding congregations in the AME Church. Three blocks away is the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School, so named to signify its opening in 1926 as the first elementary school for Black students in the city of Baltimore. A century later, it is a Promise Heights school.

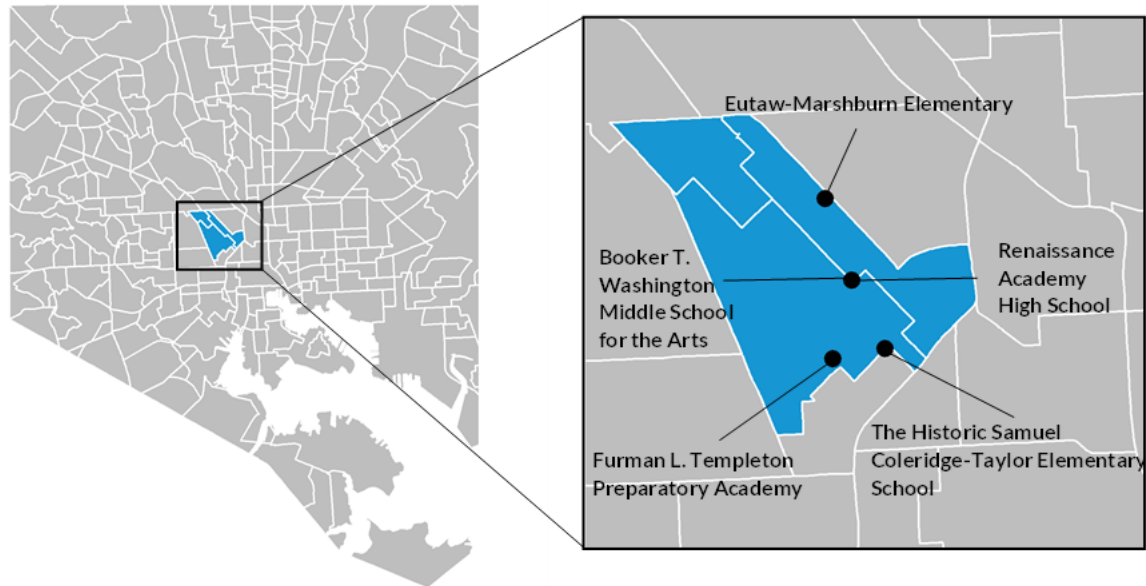
Of the 10,000 residents of Upton and Druid Heights, one-fifth are children. Most residents have low incomes, with 62 percent of children living in poverty as of 2023.² Upton and Druid Heights are in West Baltimore, part of the western wing of a pattern Morgan State University professor Lawrence T. Brown refers to as “the Black butterfly,” indicating the shape of segregated Black communities spreading across the eastern and western neighborhoods in the city (Brown 2021). This geographic pattern of racial segregation and concentrated poverty is the result of discriminatory city ordinances and practices of racially restrictive covenants that began in the early 20th century and lasted until the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968.³ The effects of government-sponsored segregation and decades of disinvestment are still felt today in communities throughout Baltimore—including in Upton and Druid Heights.

During the years of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood grant, Upton and Druid Heights had five community schools in the Baltimore City Public Schools district (figure 1): Eutaw-Marshburn Elementary School (prekindergarten to 5th grade); Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy, a public, year-round charter school (prekindergarten to 5th grade); the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School (prekindergarten to 5th grade); Booker T. Washington Middle School for the Arts (6th to 8th grade); and Renaissance Academy High School (9th to 12th grade). Beginning in middle school, Baltimore City Public Schools students can choose to attend any school in the district. Consequently, many students who attend the target schools do not live in the neighborhood, and many neighborhood youth attend schools outside the neighborhood.

FIGURE 1

The Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood

Upton and Druid Heights neighborhoods and community schools, Baltimore



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Source: Geographic data from Maryland.gov.

Evaluating Promise Neighborhoods: Goals and GPRA Measures

In accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), Promise Neighborhoods grantees are required to track data and report on GPRA performance measures to the Department of Education to measure progress and ensure that their interventions are driving improved outcomes.

Promise Neighborhoods has 10 required results that grantees monitor:

1. Children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school.
2. Students are proficient in core academic subjects.
3. Students successfully transition from middle school grades to high school.
4. Youth graduate from high school.
5. High school graduates obtain a postsecondary degree, certification, or credential.

6. Students are healthy.
7. Students feel safe at school and in their community.
8. Students live in stable communities.
9. Families and community members support learning in Promise Neighborhood schools.
10. Students have access to 21st-century learning tools.

These results are supported by several key metrics (or GPRA measures) that grantees track, including graduation rates, math and reading scores, school attendance, kindergarten readiness, and results from parent surveys and community surveys. Grantees also use the GPRA measures to tailor the programs they offer in schools and communities to their long-term vision for these communities.

BOX 1

Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood Program Evaluation

The Urban Institute’s evaluation sought to assess the longer-term success of Promise Heights by understanding whether outcomes improved over time, as well as the “how” and “why” of various outcomes and trends. As the local evaluation partner, Urban conducted an annual process study to document the implementation of the Promise Neighborhoods grant and to support the Promise Heights team’s work to adjust and refine programming. Urban also documented the implementation of programs and activities and the initiative’s successes and challenges.

Our evaluation centered on two core questions:

- What themes related to program benefits and challenges emerge from interviews with staff members, community members, and school interest holders? How do these responses change over time?
- How does Promise Heights leadership adapt and modify the program over time?

Annual Process Study

Each year, Urban defined a focus of the process study that incorporated the Promise Heights team’s goals for learning and improvement. Annual focuses included assessing the communities’ assets and needs, documenting the impacts of COVID-19 on the initiative, understanding the impacts of a major leadership transition on Promise Heights, evaluating the interest in and feasibility of transitioning Promise Heights from a service-delivery approach to a backbone model, and considering how best to sustain the Promise Heights model.

To answer the research questions, Urban collected data annually through interviews and focus groups with Promise Heights staff members, community members, and school-based staff and partners; observations of events and activities; and, in some years, documentation of Promise Heights’ social

media work. Though data collection varied year by year, participants always included a mix of Promise Heights staff, leadership, community partner representatives, and community members.

Over the course of the initiative, Urban provided information to Promise Heights via reports that summarized key findings and via data workshops—events to engage with community members about data—to share data and findings with staff and community members.

During the final year of the initiative, Urban hosted a data workshop in partnership with community-facing Promise Heights staff (Murray et al. 2015). At the data workshop, community facilitators shared the findings from the final process study about the impact of Promise Heights and gathered feedback from families, including youth (students in grades 5–12) and parents. A total of 55 residents participated in this workshop. Findings from the annual process studies and final data workshop are woven throughout this report.

Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood Implementation

During the fourth year of the original five-year grant period, Promise Heights underwent a leadership transition following a Department of Education review. The dean of the School of Social Work, who was the principal investigator, stepped down from the project and the new dean decided to move the initiative under the leadership of the team running the school's other community-based initiatives. This change spurred major changes in the goals and approach of the program. In this section, we discuss the goals, structure, and strategy of both the original leadership and the new leadership.

Original Leadership Team (2018–21)

The University of Maryland School of Social Work led the Promise Heights initiative from its inception. The original leadership team was overseen by the dean of the School of Social Work. The majority of Promise Heights staff were social workers, infusing the Promise Heights pipeline of services with a trauma-focused social work orientation.

Goals

The original leadership aimed to create a cradle-to-career continuum of services to improve education and outcomes for students in Upton and Druid Heights. During these early years, Promise Heights' goals were focused on individual-level improvements in school attendance, math and reading scores, and health and wellness, as well as other education-, family-, and community-based metrics, to support

children from birth into adulthood. This focus closely followed the expectations of the GPRA performance measures and relied on a traditional clinical social work model.

Structure and Strategy

During this period, the Promise Heights leadership team's approach focused on providing funds and services that support individual-level change and engaged external entities as vendors of services. Their strategy fell into two domains: (1) a K–12 strategy providing and coordinating direct services within schools and (2) an early childhood strategy that relied largely on community-based partner organizations.

School-based strategy. The Promise Heights initiative's school-based strategy included both direct service staff and funding. Early in the grant, Promise Heights was the community school-lead agency for five schools in Upton and Druid Heights: Eutaw-Marshburn Elementary School, the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School, Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy, Booker T. Washington Middle School, and Renaissance Academy High School. Between 2019 and 2020, Promise Heights staff doubled, from 30 to 60 people. As of 2020, at each of the focal schools, Promise Heights was funding two community school leadership positions: community school directors and assistant community school directors. These individuals worked with the principals to determine their community school strategy and identify key needs for the school and partnerships to help address them. Promise Heights also funded early learning and behavioral coordinators and community health workers at Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy, who provided socioemotional learning and support to children from birth to age 5, and a college- and career-readiness coordinator at Booker T. Washington Middle School and Renaissance Academy, to help students prepare for postsecondary opportunities. Through a special chapter of the volunteer AmeriCorps program called Promise Corps, Promise Heights hosted attendance monitors at each school. Promise Heights also placed interns from the University of Maryland School of Social Work in schools. Promise Heights administrative staff working outside schools were hired to support the school-based work. Promise Neighborhood funding also supported several positions based at partner organizations (see subsequent section on partnerships). Beyond these staff members' roles in supporting students and families within their schools, Promise Heights also partnered with out-of-school-time providers, such as the YMCA, for after-school programming.

In addition to the staff and out-of-school-time partners supporting the schools, the Promise Neighborhoods grant allowed Promise Heights to offer flexible funding and resources to support school needs. Community school leaders and principals could decide how to use these funds to best meet students and families' needs. Uses of these funds included school events, food and supplies, and other

emergent needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, Promise Heights leveraged this flexibility to support families with food, internet access, personal protective equipment, and other needs.

Partnerships with community organizations. As part of its early childhood strategy, Promise Heights partnered with the Judith P. Hoyer Center Early Learning Hub (Judy Center) based at Eutaw-Marshburn and the community outreach program B'more for Healthy Babies (BHB), which financially supported several staff positions within each organization. The Judy Center served families with children from infancy to kindergarten, providing early childhood education alongside comprehensive family services to ensure that children were ready for kindergarten. BHB is a citywide initiative to reduce infant mortality and support thriving children and families. Promise Heights worked with BHB as an external partner, but the initiative also supported BHB at Upton and Druid Heights as an internal program within the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood. BHB provided prenatal and postnatal supportive services and classes to parents in Upton and Druid Heights, including Parent University, Breastfeeding Support Group, and Baby Basics. Outside of early childhood, another primary Promise Heights program was Family Prosperity, which provided case management for up to 20 families across Promise Heights schools.

Current Leadership Team (2022–25)

When the new leadership team from the University of Maryland's Social Work Community Outreach Service took over following the Department of Education review in 2022, they ushered in changes to the initiative's goals, staffing, and partnerships. They merged Promise Heights with the Social Work Community Outreach Service to create the Center for Restorative Change (CRC), an umbrella organization for the implementation of a variety of programs in the neighborhoods of Upton and Druid Heights, including BHB, Positive Schools Center, and Family Connections. CRC staff and leadership also moved from the university to an office within the Promise Heights footprint.

Goals

The CRC leadership began a shift from the individual-level approach focused primarily on direct services to a systems-level approach and engagement with schools and community partners to build capacity within the community and to support community leaders' and groups' ability to act on their own behalf. This change reflected a shift in philosophy. The new leadership recognized the structural and systemic nature of the challenges and inequities the Upton and Druid Heights communities faced and aimed to infuse this perspective in their work, such as through the executive director's SHARP

framework.⁴ With this understanding, they felt that the program needed to build community capacity rather than focus only on individuals' achievements. Under the CRC's leadership, services were still offered to address individuals' needs, but they were offered within a framework of capacity and strength rather than a framework of deficit. The CRC also valued supporting partner organizations, whose staff were often members of the Upton and Druid Heights communities, in carrying out Promise Heights programming and services.

The CRC created a new logic model (figure 2) in partnership with the Urban team to define its vision and theory of change. The logic model condensed the 10 GPRA results into four overarching long-term outcomes:

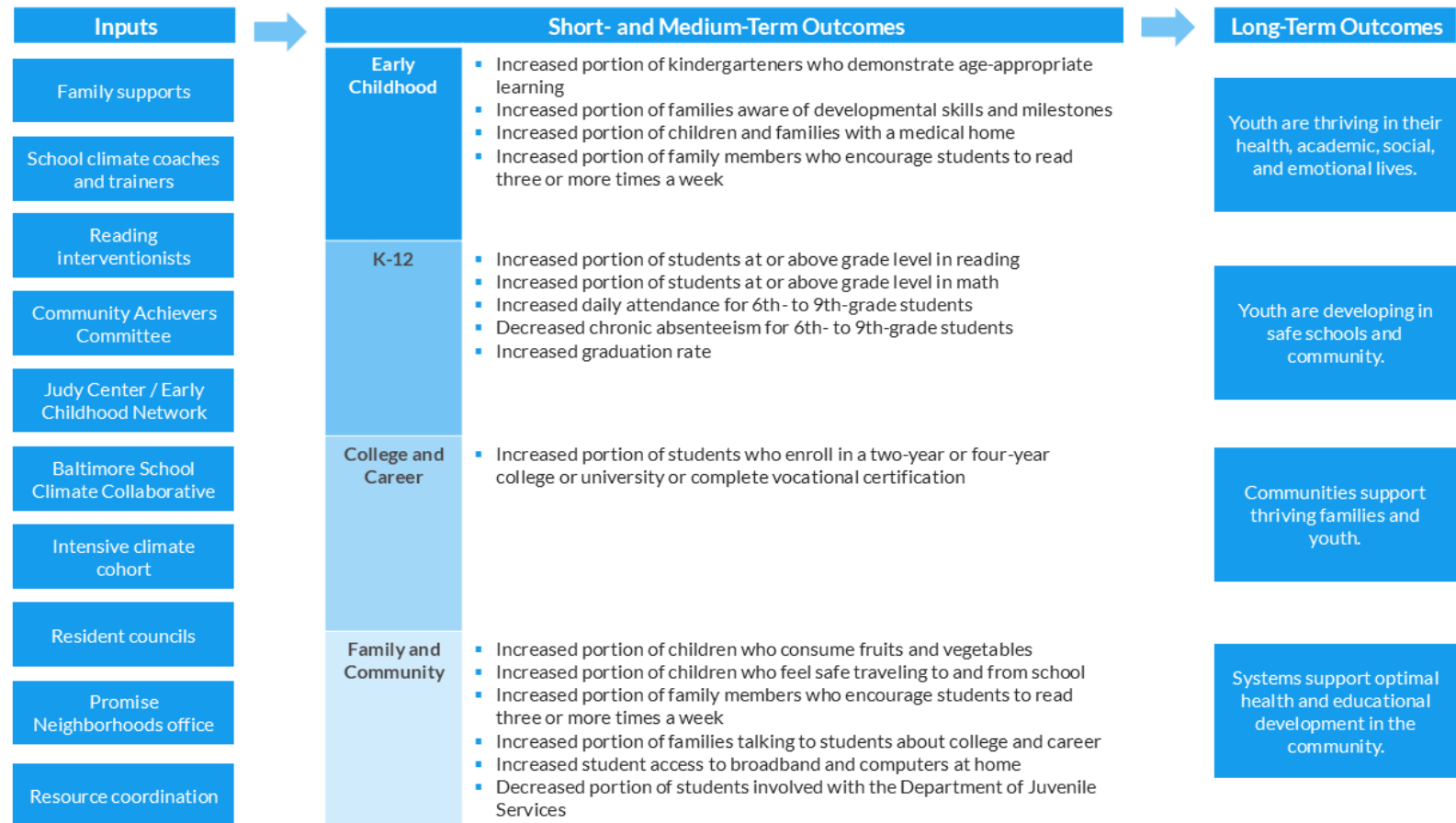
1. Youth are thriving in their health, academic, social, and emotional lives.
2. Youth are developing in safe schools and community.
3. Communities support thriving families and youth.
4. Systems support optimal health and educational development in the community.

The model identified as inputs a diverse set of stakeholders, partnerships, and workstreams, from resource coordination and family supports to school climate work networks. It then divided the activities into target groups—focused on early childhood, K–12, college and career, and family and community—that aim to reach short-term outcomes, measured by GPRA indicators, in these domains.

FIGURE 2

Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood Logic Model

Simplified version of the logic model created by the Center for Restorative Change in 2022



Source: Center for Restorative Change; adapted with permission.

During the remaining grant period under the new leadership, there also were changes to the set of Promise Neighborhood schools. Eutaw-Marshburn closed in 2023, and Harlem Park Elementary and Middle School joined Promise Heights for the 2022–23 school year. In 2023, both Furman L. Templeton and Harlem Park switched community school lead agencies as a result of the Baltimore City Public Schools proposal and selection process, so they were no longer part of Promise Heights.

Structure and Strategy

To align the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood strategy with the new goals and framework, the CRC also made changes to the staffing and partnership structure. A significant shift was the move from a service-provision model to a school-based partnership model wherein the CRC funded community-based partners to provide services in schools and the community. This change meant a reduction in staff positions over time and an expanded set of partnerships. In 2023, the CRC began considering the potential for its university-based umbrella organization, including Promise Heights, to take on a “backbone” role in the community. A backbone model is a strategy that aims for sustainable, collective impact. A backbone organization works in partnership with a diverse group of partners to build on community progress in key areas, scale community-wide efforts, build partners’ capacity to contribute and use data in a shared measurement system, and strategize across organizations and partners to make service delivery as seamless as possible (Anderson et al. 2021).

Staff Changes

The CRC made several changes to the positions funded by the grant over a couple of years as the focus shifted from direct service provision to partner engagement. The CRC eliminated the assistant school director role for community schools, consolidating the director and assistant director roles into a community school director position. After ending the arrangement with AmeriCorps for the Promise Corps program, the CRC initially hired attendance monitors before deciding to hire parents to fill this role as part of a revised Parent Leader program. The new leadership also identified a gap in Promise Heights services for children 3 to 5 years old. In response, they reimagined the director of BHB position to include early childhood and hired early childhood specialists to develop additional programming, although these specialist positions were eliminated once the grant sunset. In addition to the updated director of early childhood position, the CRC filled two leadership roles that had been vacant during the leadership transition: a director of data and evaluation and a director of strategic partnerships.

Program and Partnership Changes

CRC leadership revisited existing partnerships and considered where new partnerships might be needed. They critically reviewed partnerships to assess whether they were contributing to the grant goals, whether they received good feedback from community members and staff, and whether the partners were aligned with CRC's values—for example, using nonpunitive, restorative approaches to improve school climate and student attendance. The CRC maintained support for the BHB at Upton and Druid Heights program, out-of-school-time provider YMCA, and early childhood center Union Baptist Head Start; expanded an existing partnership with the Movement Team, a restorative school climate partner, to more schools; and added new partners, including Bethel AME Church, New Metropolitan Church, KEYS Development (a mental health and substance use support organization), and out-of-school-time provider Child First Authority.

Challenges

Promise Heights underwent several challenges during the seven-year period of the Promise Neighborhood grant. Several of these challenges were internal to Promise Heights leadership, such as navigating a transition in leadership, implementing a community initiative from within a university, and planning for sustainability of that initiative. Other challenges, though, were felt by the whole community. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the preexisting structural, social, and economic challenges in Upton and Druid Heights, sending students home from school and affecting residents' health, financial security, and access to food and other basic needs. Promise Heights struggled to identify a clear path to address these structural challenges within the implementation period. Promise Heights also struggled with how it related to the community. Challenges with community engagement and community partnerships—and collaborating with those partner organizations to measure progress—are explored in this section.

Five-Year Implementation Grant Taking on Structural Challenges

Over the years, partners, staff, and leaders of Promise Heights have spoken about the difficulty of making progress toward goals within a five-year period when many of the challenges are structural or systemic in nature. Stakeholders repeatedly said that while the grant invested money and time into Upton and Druid Heights, the programming alone would not disrupt multigenerational poverty and disinvestment without policy changes and investments across sectors. One interviewee said:

“Moving the levers, the systemic levers and barriers, being patient with systems is hard. It’s hard on my team, and it’s hard on individuals who are part of the determinants—they are born, live, work, play, worship in these communities.”

One leader felt that the structure of Promise Neighborhoods grants, as a holistic, rather than targeted, program, was counterintuitive to making progress:

“One of the challenges with the Promise Neighborhoods model is it focuses on broad sweeping transactional changes, the whole neighborhood, which means you’re chipping at the surface. Thirty million dollars could be used to go deep in a few set areas. All of these structural issues are closely related and compounding. The truth is that all we’ll ever do is scratch the surface if we attack it all at the same time.”

Some staff who worked directly with community members, many of whom faced urgent challenges, said that the frustration from trying to make progress by addressing individual needs while the root causes of problems remained unchanged contributed to feelings of burnout.

COVID-19 Pandemic

While Promise Heights was under the original leadership, the socioeconomic impacts of the early COVID-19 pandemic were felt deeply in Upton and Druid Heights. Exacerbating the preexisting structural, social, and economic challenges, the pandemic affected residents’ employment, income, and financial security; access to food and other basic needs and resources; social connectivity; transportation; and health. To be responsive to the moment, Promise Heights leaders redirected the program’s priorities and focus from long-term strategic outcomes to addressing pressing everyday needs (Walker et al. 2021). This response was possible due to the flexibility of the grant funding. Promise Heights expanded and strengthened its partnerships to provide residents with emergency resources (e.g., food, diapers, cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, rental and utilities assistance, and computers and internet connection). It also went virtual. Promise Heights programs and partners, such as BHB, shifted some existing programming, along with approaches to community outreach, communication, and data collection, to virtual platforms, and the staff created new programming that could be delivered virtually. While this shift was necessary, staff and partners interviewed in 2021 acknowledged that progress on some of the GPRA targets they were working toward had stagnated or been set back. At Promise Heights middle and high schools, the average daily attendance rate fell beneath levels reported at the outset of the grant. In 2022, schools reported an average daily attendance rate of 70.6 percent—10 percentage points below the GPRA target.

Promise Heights Leadership Transition

The new leadership team took over administration of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood in 2022, two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and two years before the grant was set to end. At that time, Promise Heights had not yet been approved for a no-cost extension, so the team took over with the understanding that they had two years to establish their vision and approach for the grant while simultaneously running the program. CRC leadership grappled with how best to move forward during the remaining grant period—one leader said of the transition when interviewed in 2025:

“There were some growing pains where we had to understand the grant and the way it was written to maximize funding and impact on community. We don’t know how collaborative [the original leads] were when they originally wrote the grant. There are things that could’ve been different for schools in the grant. That created some patchy areas. We figured [out] how to work it out.”

When the team that became the CRC took over, they needed time to decide how to spend and direct the remaining funds, and they eventually requested two no-cost extensions, which extended the initiative by two years, through 2025. As discussed above, they needed to align the new goals and targets with the organizational structure, decide which staff positions to keep or change, and determine how best to work with partners. During this time, staff interviewees expressed uncertainty and concern about Promise Heights staff roles as leadership eliminated Promise Neighborhoods–funded staff roles.

In the first year of its leadership, the CRC also faced practical and logistical challenges. Urban’s process study during the transition year identified communication as the largest of these challenges. Initially, some staff and partners were concerned about a lack of clarity regarding the transition, new goals, data measurement, and the future of the grant. This concern affected communication with the community about Promise Heights’ identity and direction. Some interviewees, including principals and partners, called for more cross-stakeholder conversations to better coordinate Promise Heights’ efforts. To address these concerns, the new leadership established new management and communication practices—for example, forgoing newsletters in favor of direct meetings and in-depth conversations with partners, monthly staff meetings, and improved communication and information-sharing with school principals. Despite these improvements to one-on-one communication, interviewees during the second year of the new leadership (a year that also saw some transitions among funded partnerships) said the CRC had not yet established effective communication and coordination across multiple partners, identifying this as a barrier to the CRC’s or Promise Heights’ becoming a backbone model.

Building Partnerships and Measuring Progress

Another challenge that interviewees shared was the red tape that comes with being a university-based initiative, which affects the ability of small partner organizations to carry out the work they have been contracted to do (Levy and Russell 2024). University bureaucracy has affected Promise Heights' ability to partner with community-based organizations and carry out grant activities in several ways. Financially, the university's invoice and approval processes affects the timeliness of payments to Promise Heights partners, which can have serious ramifications for the ability of small organizations to stay afloat. As one staff interviewee said in 2023:

"It's not unusual for ... us to agree to agree to work towards a goal with a partner, commit to paying them based on a grant we receive, and then it takes eight months for them to get paid."

Data collection activities required review and approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, which could take weeks even for small survey efforts. Promise Heights also had to abide by university regulations and policies regarding contractual matters, including the contractual terms concerning intellectual property, which made it difficult for Promise Heights to develop contracts that did not claim rights over partners' work products.

In some ways, the federal grant requirements were restrictive for Promise Heights. Team members reported that when much of the focus of programming and data collection revolved around fulfilling grant requirements, it got in the way of vision setting as an organization and aligning efforts with what community members felt would best serve their needs. According to interviewees, there was tension between grant goals and community goals; staff and leadership felt that GPRA measures and the specific targets laid out in the grant were limiting in that they did not set reasonable expectations for community progress or allow for flexibility when new leadership came on board. One leadership interviewee said of GPRA measure targets, "We should be working together [with school and community partners] to identify what would truly be an achievable goal."

Communication with staff and partners around GPRA measures was also a challenge. Staff interviewed in 2023 reported confusion about the purpose of GPRA measures and how the collected data aligned with their work. One staff member summed up the questions around GPRA measures as follows: "You ask if people know why we are collecting GPRA data and they don't know. They just know they have been told they need this data for funding." That said, these challenges with goal alignment and performance measurement concerned program leadership more than staff active in the schools. At the school level, community school directors conducted annual needs assessments and were able to select community partners to address the needs identified at their school.

Relationship with Community

As a cradle-to-career community initiative, maintaining strong community relationships was a priority for Promise Heights leadership. However, the initiative experienced challenges with school partners and community-based partners that stemmed from issues related to being based in a university and administering a large, multimillion dollar federal grant. Promise Heights also faced difficulties with wider community engagement and made efforts to strengthen their collaboration with community partners and residents over the course of the grant.

Implications of Staff and Leadership Turnover

The 2022 leadership turnover presented an opportunity to establish or reestablish relationships and practices. The first Promise Heights leadership team had a strained relationship with principals from the partner schools. The CRC was able to rebuild trust in the initiative and its goals. For example, the principal at one of the original Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood schools had severed school ties with Promise Heights, but upon hearing how the new leadership was supporting schools through community school directors and partners, the school returned to the partnership in the 2022–2023 school year. Ultimately, the leadership turnover and improved reputation helped community school directors strengthen and renew Promise Heights' relationships with school leadership and families.

University Reputation and Power Dynamics

Promise Heights staff said that Promise Heights benefitted from the stability of its university home while also facing challenges because of the university's history and reputation in West Baltimore. Interviewees referenced distrust from community members, who viewed the institution as self-interested, power-wielding, and uninterested in—or at least ineffective at—making positive changes in the lives of residents. As one interviewee said, “There is a reputation that follows us, rightfully so, and we have to own that and carry it with us.” The reputation and distrust, stemming from what one interviewee called “legacies of harm in West Baltimore,” was described as impeding Promise Heights' efforts and requiring staff to navigate tensions in their work with the community. Several interviewees reflected not only on the historical relationship of the university with the community but the ways in which Promise Heights continued certain patterns and power dynamics. One interviewee assessed the issue this way:

“We are leading with our money ... we have this money, therefore you [the community] should be working with us, as opposed to, we have this money and want to figure out how we use it to support work you're doing.”

This approach supported perceptions of the university as an organization that was external to rather than part of the community.

Collaboration with Community Members

A persistent question that interviewees raised over the years of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood grant was how to better collaborate with community members of Upton and Druid Heights. Staff consistently described increased community involvement and leadership in Promise Heights as key to making progress on program goals. For example, staff interviewed during the first year's process study wanted to expand parent and peer leadership and make the work more collaborative, rather than paternalistic, with community members. "We are not the saviors," one interviewee said.

The CRC made improvements to Promise Heights' strategy for community collaboration by vesting the work in partner organizations and thinking through a shift to a backbone model. However, even as the shift toward more partnerships occurred, the Promise Neighborhoods grant structure meant the initiative relied on funding-based relationships. Though several partners interviewed in 2023 and 2024 said they felt their relationship with Promise Heights was collaborative within the context of their partnership, partners and staff described the overall Promise Heights partnership model as defined by "transactional," funding-based relationships in which partners were more like vendors that provide services. Partners were not involved in Promise Heights decisionmaking, and most said they did not feel like collaborators with Promise Heights. In fact, some partners mentioned that their only communication with leadership had to do with finances. One partner said, "They don't do anything collaborative with us, it's, 'Here's the money; you come up with the budget.'"

Another avenue for promoting community collaboration could have been establishing a community advisory board. Early on, Promise Heights leadership was interested in setting up a community advisory board to gather community input on Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood goals, but never succeeded in doing so.

However, community engagement occurred at other levels. BHB's model has always brought community members into the work through, for example, community member-led classes, and outreach to and education of fathers through community conversations in barbershops. At the school level, community school directors built relationships with community partner organizations and with members of the school community, and they gathered feedback and input from students and parents through various formats to guide resource and event offerings.

Sustainability

The CRC took over leadership of Promise Heights in late 2022, leaving little time for major fundraising or strategic planning for sustainability. Beginning early in their tenure and through the no-cost extensions they received, CRC leadership took a series of actions focused on sustainability. Their changes to the Promise Heights structure—namely, scaling back Promise Neighborhoods–funded staff and shifting more of the work toward partnerships—stemmed in part from the idea that having school partners do the work, rather than supplement the work of Promise Heights staff, would better position the initiative for long-term sustainability, as partners could continue to receive funding after the grant period through a collaborative backbone model or from other sources to continue key aspects of the work. Between 2022 and 2023, the CRC also began a strategic planning process required by the Department of Education. After a monthslong search, the CRC selected a firm and tasked it with helping to plan for next steps guided by community interests and needs.

CRC leadership searched for funding sources—philanthropic and government—that could continue to support the programs they wanted to maintain in schools. They succeeded in winning another Department of Education grant through the Full-Service Community Schools program, which, though smaller, provided resources for Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood school Renaissance Academy and a neighboring high school, Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts. Perhaps the CRC’s biggest push for sustainability was the opening of the Rise Family Support Center, a brick-and-mortar community center in Upton to house the CRC and key partners and services, including Family Connections Baltimore and BHB. The CRC used Promise Neighborhoods funds to purchase materials for Rise, including furniture, cribs, changing tables, learning tools, and art supplies. Rise provides early learning supports, including free childcare for children under age 5, with multigenerational programming to address gaps at the earliest stages of the cradle-to-career pipeline. Partners at Rise have their own funding support; BHB, for example, with its citywide focus and diversified funding streams, will be able to continue its impactful early childhood work. Overall, the CRC hopes the Rise Family Support Center will remain a hub for the community and a legacy of the Promise Heights program.

Not all of the efforts toward sustainability have worked out the way the CRC had hoped. For one, the strategic planning effort did not produce the actionable funding strategy the CRC had hoped to establish to sustain Promise Heights as a backbone entity after the end of the Promise Neighborhoods grant. The CRC’s biggest challenge, though, was obtaining funding that could be braided with Promise Neighborhoods funding and other streams to sustain the full programming. CRC leadership knew that it

was unlikely that they would find funding at the scale of the Promise Neighborhoods grant, but they struggled with the problem of how to supplement their remaining funding.

The CRC continues to look for other funding sources to sustain the work. At the state level, despite recent investments in place-based initiatives, such as the anti-child poverty ENOUGH Act⁵ and state funding for community schools, the state of Maryland is facing a deficit and pulling back investments. One interviewee described the funding environment as competitive and limited:

“Every year there are more Promise Neighborhoods going after the same pool of funding, then also the NGOs and nonprofits. There are only so many ways to get funding: individual donors, NGOs, government.”

Still, CRC leadership has sought creative alternatives—for example, applying for child care grants for the Rise Family Support Center. In the face of uncertainty, one interviewee was optimistic about the sustainability of Promise Heights’ work: “It will look different, but it will continue to move forward.”

Successes and Impacts

Promise Heights set out to meet the 10 early childhood, K–12, college and career, and family and community GPRA measures specified in the Promise Neighborhoods grant. Over the course of the grant, we collected publicly available data and interviewed leadership, staff, partners, and community members about Promise Heights’ progress toward the four long-term outcomes of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood, as defined in the initiative’s logic model:

1. Youth are thriving in their health, academic, social, and emotional lives.
2. Youth are developing in safe schools and community.
3. Communities support thriving families and youth.
4. Systems support optimal health and educational development in the community.

These outcomes, described by some interviewees as lofty and too ambitious to accomplish within the grant period, nevertheless set a path for Promise Heights that has led to success, though many challenges remain. This section draws upon interview data and, where available, school data to identify progress and impacts related to these four outcomes. Promise Heights staff pointed out that progress in school indicator data may be attributable to other factors in addition to Promise Heights programming and initiatives. Nevertheless, we found positive outcomes related to each of the four overall goals.

Long-Term Outcome 1: Youth Are Thriving in Their Health, Academic, Social, and Emotional Lives

Improving outcomes in early childhood was a key area of focus for Promise Heights. With the work of programs like BHB, Promise Heights made substantial progress. Table 1 shows an increase in kindergarten readiness over the last year, exceeding the target value set through the end of the grant.

TABLE 1
Kindergarten Readiness GPRA Results and Targets

GPRA measure	SY 2023–24	SY 2024–25	Target
Percentage of children entering kindergarten with age-appropriate functioning	64.7	77	30.0

Source: Baltimore City Public Schools, “The Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School,” accessed September 24, 2025, <https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/o/bcps/page/122>.

Notes: GPRA = Government Performance and Results Act; SY = school year. This table includes data reported in the 2023–24 and 2024–25 school years and target values through the end of the grant.

Interviewees consistently connected improvements in early childhood outcomes to BHB’s efforts to conduct community outreach and provide support to new parents. Interviewees said that BHB reduced the infant mortality rate, raised awareness of available services and resources, was responsive to community needs, and increased enrollment in pre-K and Early Head Start classes. As a BHB staff member said:

“We’ve reduced infant mortality by 75 percent—that is transformative ... then we [ensure that] the baby goes to Early Head Start, then kindergarten and elementary school. Any time we see that we know we’ve done well.”

BHB’s model of ensuring a warm hand-off throughout pregnancy, early childhood, and into kindergarten was a point of pride for Promise Heights staff not only because of its success within Upton and Druid Heights, but also because of the expansion of its work citywide. Several interviewees shared that BHB has become integral to Baltimore’s public health work, with one staff member saying:

“They’ve become a part of crucial spaces and places in Baltimore City. You can’t talk about 0–5 without talking about BHB Promise Heights. That’s how integral they are in the city.”

Long-Term Outcome 2: Youth Are Developing in Safe Schools and Community

High school graduation rates and student attendance improved at Promise Heights schools over the course of the grant period. As shown in table 2, there were declines in attendance and graduation rates

following the COVID-19 pandemic, but Promise Heights recovered its progress in the final years of the Promise Neighborhoods grant.

TABLE 2

Chronic Absenteeism and Graduation GPRA Results and Targets

GPRA measure	SY 2019–20	SY 2020–21	SY 2021–22	SY 2022–23	SY 2023–24	Target
Chronic absenteeism rate of students in grades 6–8 (Booker T. Washington Middle School)	57.1	81.7	82.9	71.4	70.0	70.0
High school graduation rate	24.6	24.3	14.9	37.3	37.1	40.0

Source: Maryland State Department of Education, “Report Cards,” accessed September 24, 2025, <https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/Graphs/#ReportCards>.

Notes: GPRA = Government Performance and Results Act; SY = school year. This table includes data reported through the 2023–24 school year and target values through the end of the grant.

These improvements were points of pride for Promise Heights staff. The school community at Renaissance Academy was especially proud of the increases in graduation rates at the school. “At Renaissance, they have the most kids graduating that they’ve ever seen,” one staff member said. School-based staff and principals highlighted the availability of extra resources and partnerships as key to supporting families’ basic needs and, in some cases, helping to improve attendance and academic outcomes by reducing barriers. According to staff and partners, socioemotional learning programming, from early childhood through high school, made a difference in school readiness, ability to engage in the classroom, and student opportunities.

While community violence is a consistent, structurally driven barrier to students’ feeling safe in their community, school leaders put great effort into making students feel safer at school. Promise Heights undertook the following activities to increase students’ sense of safety within their schools’ walls.

Community School Directors

Each Promise Heights school had a community school director who led a school and community needs assessment to identify appropriate services and supports. Most community school directors were licensed social workers. Individuals in this role supported the students and their families with issues

such as housing, health, food, benefits screening, financial assistance, and employment. One community school director described the challenge of addressing community safety this way:

“We can do a lot in the school building, but a lot of this is reactionary if the home spaces and community spaces are not becoming stable enough for people to thrive, not just survive.”

That said, the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School successfully advocated for the installation of speed bumps outside the main entrance after a needs assessment conducted by the community school director identified pedestrian safety at that location as a concern, underscoring the potential of schools in the area to serve as starting places for community-driven policy action.

Parent Leader Program

Promise Heights hired and trained parents as parent leaders to work in Promise Heights schools to build social connectedness in the school community and support school attendance efforts. As part of our final process study, Urban held a focus group with parent leaders to understand their experiences with the program and their involvement. Parent leaders said that their participation in the program had led to improvements in the school climate at Promise Heights schools and made a positive difference in their own lives and in the lives of their students. Describing the impacts of the program after two years working there, one parent leader said:

“I’ve seen the change in these kids, the maturity level in them. When we do circles, they are able to express emotions in a calmer way. [By taking an approach that is] nonpunitive, we’re able to fix the situation and move forward. Thinking through decisions before they make them. That’s the most impact I’ve been able to see in these kids. They know it’s OK to come talk to me. They know I can talk it out, and that’s all they need. Once you see the growth in them that you instill, it makes you try ten times harder for these babies.”

The Movement Team

Promise Heights–supported culture and climate work has contributed to safer school environments for students and increased engagement of school-based staff and partners. Interviewees said students felt safer asking for resources through relationships with trusted school staff. One partner said:

“I think that safe schools and safe community is knowing that you have an adult who’s not going to let you down ... it’s about having that person, those people, that you feel safe around, that you can talk to.”

The Movement Team, a Promise Heights community partner, supported schools with its hall monitor staff to foster a positive school culture and climate. The Movement Team was mentioned by school-based staff as an organization with trusted adults who supported students with restorative and

wellness-focused practices and programming to get them back and engaged in the classroom after COVID-19's impact on absenteeism.

Positive Schools Center

Another aspect of Promise Heights' efforts to create a safer school environment was seen through the Positive Schools Center's work to "change the way adults show up in school," which involved training school staff to manage unsafe situations in their classroom and build better relationships with students. One interviewee said, "We are helping schools to operate better, to be more caring and loving for students."

One school-based staff member said that students had become more aware of available resources and felt safe enough to reach out to trusted school adults to ask for help and access supports. In terms of school culture, some interviewees mentioned that a stronger sense of belonging and connection to the school has contributed to a greater sense of safety. Interviewees also connected investments in socioemotional learning with children as part of school safety, from early childhood through high school. Preparing children with "developmentally appropriate strategies" and teaching students how to navigate conflict and acknowledge their emotions was a key part of progress toward school safety.

Long-Term Outcome 3: Communities Support Thriving Families and Youth

Promise Heights' shift to a model that brought in community-based organizations and community members to provide services at schools and invited greater participation from families made an impact, interviewees said. As one partner put it:

"[For students, having] people who look like you, who sound like you, and come from where you are, [ultimately] allows for families and students to feel protected and to feel good and to continue to thrive."

Though interviewees described greater community trust, pride, and investment in the schools thanks to Promise Heights, others said that while the goals touched on both school and community targets, the primarily school-based model limited Promise Heights' potential to have much of an impact at the community level or significantly reduce the ongoing structural issues driving the challenges that families experience in Upton and Druid Heights.

Interviewees discussed the strength of the handoffs between schools and organizations to support young people and their families along their cradle-to-career pathways. One interviewee specifically highlighted the connection from the prenatal, pregnant, and newborn stages to early childhood as

especially strong, sustainable, and worth future investment. Interviews highlighted the impact of two community-oriented initiatives in particular.

Rise Family Support Center

Promise Heights opened the Rise Family Support Center in fall 2024. This center co-locates early learning resources and broader family supports to serve multiple generations, including supports for expectant parents and parents of children under 4 years of age. Rise is located in the same building as BHB and Family Connections Baltimore, creating a comprehensive place for support and family well-being. A director, assistant director, and early childhood specialists based at Rise conduct community outreach to provide wellness checks and linkages to support family economic security, including eviction prevention, food distribution, and financial support for utilities. The Maryland Family Network awarded a \$330,000 state grant to the Rise center in 2024, demonstrating Promise Heights' successful efforts to create a sustainable and scalable early childhood service model.

Annual Back-to-School Bash

For four years in a row, the CRC partnered with Bethel AME Church to host an annual back-to-school event that featured resource tables, a meal and snacks, backpack and other giveaways, games, youth performances, a bouncy house, and a DJ, serving over 500 people. Interviewees described the annual tradition as a celebratory community event that brought community members together before the start of the school year.

Efforts like these to strengthen culture and climate in the community were credited by one interviewee with an improvement in community relationships and trust in schools:

“We center the community and neighborhood in how we created the programming in a way that invited people in. It’s created incredible relationships throughout the community. There is so much trust that has been built in the last few years.”

Programming that involves parents and families in students' learning opportunities (e.g., a fellowship that brings parents in to promote school initiatives, or inviting parents on field trips with students) was also cited as an example of progress toward the goal of supporting thriving families and young people.

Long-Term Outcome 4: Systems Support Optimal Health and Educational Development in the Community

This fourth goal was added after the leadership transition to reflect a shift in the logic model toward a systems- and structural-level focus, and to signify that though many of the activities of the Promise

Heights Promise Neighborhood—namely, providing resources, sustaining community partnerships, and making referrals for supports—might address community needs, they do not tackle the underlying and more “deeply rooted” challenges that the community is facing, as one interviewee put it. Since this shift in the model was relatively new, interviewees said the CRC and Promise Heights were still in the early phases of transitioning the individual-level, direct-service model toward a structural, partner- and community-driven model, even as the grant was coming to a close. Promise Heights leadership grappled with questions around a strategic approach to systems change in the final year of the grant—how to structure, whom to partner with, and what would be realistic to accomplish within the time remaining.

Interviewees agreed that defining the goal of systems change was still in development, though work did get under way. Examples of work toward this goal included Positive School Center efforts to train staff, teachers, and partners through the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond and SHARP frameworks, as well as conversations and events hosted with high school students to teach them about fairness in their community. One staff person said:

“We’ve been finding more ways to have touchpoints to provide ... [collaborative and inclusive] education that teaches students more about their history, the context of where they’re growing up in this area of Baltimore, the systems ... and just ways to operate that are safer, more aware, so they have better outcomes.”

Interviewees said that Promise Heights’ leadership and structure were responsive to what partners and community members wanted to do in their neighborhood. One interviewee shared that Promise Heights gave their school “autonomy in how we spend the money based on [our] schools’ needs. [That] truly made an impact on it being outside of that cookie cutter and truly serving the community as needed.”

Community Recognition of Promise Heights

When asked how community members perceived the impact of Promise Heights, interviewees said that community recognition for the work was mainly limited to awareness of the individual programs or individual staff. “People remember the person; they don’t remember the organization,” said one CRC leader. Interviewees at all levels of the Promise Heights initiative agreed that community members likely did not know that the individual program components were connected to Promise Heights. When Promise Heights itself was recognized by community members, the recognition was often due to the initiative’s role as the recipient of a large grant or due to its affiliation with the University of Maryland.

Promise Heights has tried various tactics over the years to increase community awareness of the initiative, including sending newsletters, posting flyers in school buildings, and sending staff into the community wearing green Promise Heights T-shirts. Ultimately, leadership decided that it was more important for community members to know the staff and be familiar with the direct programs they connected with in schools and in the community than to know about Promise Heights as a whole.

Although staff and partners thought community members didn't generally connect their experiences to Promise Heights, most interviewees felt that Promise Heights programs and staff nevertheless touched community lives in significant ways. Respondents particularly highlighted BHB for the positive impact it has had in reducing the disparity in infant mortality between Black and white infants in Baltimore.

On the school side, several school leaders and school-based staff told us that members of the community viewed Promise Heights schools as a resource connector. One principal said that their school is a space that community members recognize as a resource:

“Community members know that if they have questions or needs, they can come to the school, and the school will direct them outside of academics. There are times when families needed food—they know they can come here.”

At the data workshop held in fall 2024, parents and students reiterated these sentiments toward Promise Heights. When looking at school outcome data related to math and reading scores and graduation rates, parents identified a clear need for Promise Heights resources and attributed improvements in scores and graduation rates to Promise Heights. Parents were impressed and excited by the data that showed improvements in math and reading. They said that the program was “obviously needed” and were glad that this resource existed for their children. Parents also identified key programs that helped their children feel safe and engaged: the Movement Team, Book Club, and BHB. Parents agreed that BHB was an extremely important community resource. Many wrote appreciative comments: “BHB helped me get a job,” “BHB loves our youth,” and “BHB helped me through everything.”

Students at the workshop described Promise Heights as “meaningful” and “important” to their experience in school, especially with regard to school climate. Students shared different aspects that made them want to go to school, including the importance of having a “trusted adult” in school. Another student said that their school had a private center where they could go when they needed a break. School pride was important to a student at Booker T. Washington Middle School, where the principal had created a school house system as a way to foster school pride and community.

Parents expressed disappointment and confusion that the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood grant was ending. They shared that they wanted to “bring [Promise Heights] back,” and that “this community needs Promise Heights.” Reflecting on the end of the Promise Neighborhoods grant, one leader said, “I hope that students and families in West Baltimore feel better off for having this initiative in place.”

Conclusion

This report summarizes seven years of progress to build a cradle-to-career initiative in the West Baltimore neighborhoods of Upton and Druid Heights. Major successes of the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood included the partnerships and relationships built, the services Promise Heights delivered to families and children, and measurable improvements in several of the results areas defined by the Promise Neighborhoods program. Yet challenges remain. As the Promise Neighborhoods grant comes to an end, Promise Heights leaders at the CRC reported a need for funding to sustain the investments, programming, and supports in Upton and Druid Heights and the community schools Promise Heights serves. Additionally, there is still a need to build community governance strategies to sustain Promise Heights. The Full-Service Community Schools grant offers a new direction for the efforts of Promise Heights, as does the Rise Family Support Center, creating promising indications that these efforts will be sustained over time.

Notes

- ¹ “Promise Neighborhoods (PN),” US Department of Education, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-birth-grade-12/school-and-community-improvement-grants/promise-neighborhoods-pn#about>.
- ² “Upton/Druid Heights,” Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, accessed September 19, 2025, https://bniajfi.org/community/Upton_Druid%20Heights/.
- ³ Richard Rothstein, “From Ferguson to Baltimore: The Fruits of Government-Sponsored Segregation,” *Working Economics Blog*, Economic Policy Institute, April 29, 2015, <https://www.epi.org/blog/from-ferguson-to-baltimore-the-fruits-of-government-sponsored-segregation/>.
- ⁴ “SHARP Framework,” Center for Restorative Justice, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://centerforrestorativechange.org/approach/sharp-framework/>.
- ⁵ “ENOUGH Initiative Overview,” Office of Governor Wes Moore, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://goc.maryland.gov/Pages/enough-initiative.aspx>.

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