



Advancing Results through Leadership Development

Reflections on Technical Assistance for the Promise Neighborhoods Program

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Over the past decade, communities nationwide have used federal Promise Neighborhoods grants to develop cradle-to-career solutions, or “pipelines,” to produce better results for children and youth. From Minnesota to Mississippi and from California to Kentucky, these grantees have worked in diverse contexts, both urban and rural, to imagine and realize a better future for young people. Although their communities, populations, and circumstances are unique, Promise Neighborhoods grantees share a common approach (being driven by data and evidence and fostering deep collaboration) and a common aspiration (to achieve population-level changes in a set of results from early childhood to young adulthood). Promise Neighborhoods also share leadership challenges and opportunities that arise from carrying out an enterprise with such large scope and scale. Promise Neighborhoods grantees and the government, philanthropic, and nonprofit partners who support their implementation have learned together and built their collective capacity through leadership development to advance results.

This technical assistance brief explores how a leadership development program supports Promise Neighborhoods grantees in their efforts to achieve population-level results. This brief, written by one of the partners who helped implement the leadership development program, is not an evaluation but rather a description of an approach to technical assistance and a synthesis of reflections offered by some of the people involved with the program. The brief begins by providing key details about the Promise Neighborhoods program and its focus on achieving specific results for children and youth. Next comes context about the use of leadership development to support Promise Neighborhoods grantees and the evolution of a partnership between a federal department, a philanthropic foundation, and nonprofit organizations that led to creation of the leadership development program that is the primary focus of this brief. After that comes a short overview of the leadership development program’s structure and content. Finally, the brief shares reflections on leadership development for results from Promise Neighborhoods staff and partners who participated in the program and implementing partners

who designed and facilitated the leadership development program. This brief aims to highlight frameworks, tools, and reflections on challenges and opportunities in using leadership development to advance results in a complex initiative, as well as a unique partnership and approach to federal training and technical assistance. The hope is that sharing the experiences and reflections of leadership development in Promise Neighborhoods will help funders, leaders, and technical assistance providers of similar initiatives understand the potential value of this type of capacity building and reflect on their own experiences.

This brief was informed by interviews conducted in summer 2020 with 7 people representing the four organizations that implemented the leadership development program and 15 Promise Neighborhoods leaders and partners representing seven grantees who participated in the leadership development program offered in either 2018 or 2019.¹

Defining Features of the Promise Neighborhoods Program

In 2010, the US Department of Education established the Promise Neighborhoods program to support young people and “help revitalize disadvantaged neighborhoods.”² Inspired by the pathbreaking work of the Harlem Children’s Zone, the US Department of Education envisioned “that all children and youth growing up in Promise Neighborhoods have access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and a career.”³ Grantees are charged with working toward that vision by doing the following:⁴

- building a “continuum of cradle-to-career solutions,” more commonly referred to as a “cradle-to-career pipeline”
- “integrating programs and breaking down agency ‘silos’ so that solutions are implemented effectively and efficiently across agencies”
- “developing the local infrastructure of systems and resources needed to sustain and scale up proven, effective solutions”

In addition to the program’s focus on building a cradle-to-career pipeline and fostering greater collaboration among community partners, one defining feature is its “results framework.” Every Promise Neighborhood is expected to propose and implement solutions to improve 10 population-level results (e.g., “children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school”), each of which is measured by one or more indicators (e.g., “the share of children from birth through age five who have a medical home”). This focus on tracking and effecting change at the population level contrasts with the approach of many funders and grantees who only track outcomes for the children and youth they serve directly through the programs they fund or operate. These features of the Promise Neighborhoods program (chief among them, the ultimate goal of population results rather than programmatic outcomes) represent a

departure from the mindsets, tools, and experiences with which most grantees and partners are familiar.

Since 2010, US Department of Education grants have helped communities plan, implement, and expand Promise Neighborhoods.⁵ In fiscal years 2010 and 2011, 21 one-year planning grants of up to \$500,000 were awarded. Between fiscal years 2011 and 2018, the most recent year in which new grants have been offered, 25 five-year implementation grants of up to \$30 million were awarded. Fiscal year 2018 also saw two-year extension grants of up to \$6 million made to help continue and expand the work of three previous implementation grantees. Grantees include entities ranging from nonprofits (e.g., community-based organizations and large social service providers) to institutions of higher education and tribal organizations. Each grantee works with an even wider range of community partners (e.g., schools, school districts, nonprofits, and businesses) that can support the development and success of children and youth from cradle to career. Each grantee's "neighborhood," or target geography, can vary dramatically, from several square miles in urban areas to multiple counties in rural ones.

The Promise Neighborhoods Results Count[®] Program

Promise Neighborhoods leaders and partners have long had various technical assistance supports to aid planning and implementation. Among those supports was the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program. This section provides a brief overview of the leadership development program and details about its structure. The following section shares reflections from some participants about what they found most valuable about the experience.

Background of the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count Program

As part of the federal technical assistance offerings, representatives of the US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods team, the Urban Institute, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation were the implementing partners for the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program, a leadership development program inspired by an earlier such program that had been privately funded and developed for early Promise Neighborhoods implementation grantees.

This earlier foray into leadership development, Skills To Accelerate Results (STAR), was codeveloped by the Promise Neighborhoods Institute—an independent partnership formed in 2009 comprising the Harlem Children's Zone, PolicyLink, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy—and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Drawing on the experience of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's long-standing Children and Family Fellowship[®] and its focus on supporting leaders to achieve measurable, equitable results, Promise Neighborhoods Institute leadership approached the foundation about supporting a leadership development program for leaders from the first federal Promise Neighborhoods implementation grantees from fiscal year 2011, and later selected implementation grantees from fiscal year 2012. By combining the knowledge of the Promise Neighborhoods Institute partners with the funding and leadership development approach—then referred to as Results-Based

Leadership and recently branded as Results Count—of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the STAR program was conceived. The STAR program, though entirely privately funded and more time and resource intensive, was the inspiration for, and Results Count the foundation of, the leadership development program this brief focuses on.

The US Department of Education became more familiar with the STAR program and Results Count in general and decided to formally request that organizations seeking the federal training and technical assistance contract to support the Promise Neighborhoods program provide results-driven leadership development opportunities to grantees. The Urban Institute, in partnership with the Center for the Study of Social Policy and other organizations, was awarded that contract. With supplemental resources (largely in-kind resources in the form of leadership development staff and knowledge but also including additional funds to cover costs for meeting spaces and food), the Annie E. Casey Foundation became a member of the training and technical assistance partnership. Together, representatives from the US Department of Education, the Urban Institute, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation became implementing partners for the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program offered to federal grantees in two cohorts in 2018 and 2019 (table 1).

But this notion of building capacity in a way that is transformative is very different. Particularly if you're talking about not only investing in the organization that you're funding, but you're also investing in the partnership and how they will then eventually work out in the community. And so that notion of kind of the ripple effect of what we're doing...really is transformative. It goes beyond the grant from the standpoint of you're trying to change a mindset and giving the skills to do it.

—Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program implementing partner

TABLE 1

Grantees That Participated in the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count Program

	Grant Information		Location	
	Year awarded	Grantee	City	State
2018 cohort	FY 2016	Berea College ^a	Berea	KY
		Center for Family Services	Camden	NJ
		Delta Health Alliance ^a	Indianola	MS
		Drexel University	Philadelphia	PA
		Paskenta Band of Nomlaki Indians	Corning	CA
		Youth Policy Institute ^a	Los Angeles	CA
2019 cohort	FY 2017	Association of Alaska School Boards	(Southeast)	AK
		Berea College	Berea	KY
		California State University, East Bay ^a	Alameda	CA
		South Ward Children's Alliance	Newark	NJ
	FY 2018	Self Enhancement Inc.	Portland	OR
		University of Maryland, Baltimore	Baltimore	MD
		South Bay Community Services ^a	Chula Vista	CA

Source: US Department of Education.

Note: FY = fiscal year.

^a Grantee received more than one implementation grant to serve different target geographies.

Structure of the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count Program

Each cohort of the leadership development program provided an opportunity for up to 35 people representing participating Promise Neighborhoods grantees and their local partners to learn about the Results Count approach, apply that approach to their work, and connect with teams assembled by their fellow grantees. The implementing partners identified three results they hoped to achieve:

- increase individual capacity: participants make enhanced contributions to support their Promise Neighborhood results work
- broaden local capacity: participants work with local leaders, partners, and stakeholders to develop a concrete process for building the capacity that sustains this work over the long term
- accelerate progress: teams accelerate progress toward meeting targets

Promise Neighborhoods grantees are responsible for making progress on 10 results that span the cradle-to-career pipeline. The frameworks and tools provided in the leadership development program can be used in service of each of those results. To make the experience manageable and to facilitate cross-grantee learning, all teams were asked to focus on one result and its two associated indicators:

- Result: Students successfully transition from middle grades to high school
 - » Indicator: Average daily attendance rate of students in sixth through ninth grades
 - » Indicator: Chronic absenteeism rate of students in sixth through ninth grades

Participants are asked to use their community's data for these indicators throughout the leadership development program, which emphasizes regular analysis, data-driven decisionmaking, and continuous improvement. This particular result and pair of indicators were selected in part because Promise

Neighborhoods should have data on student attendance that are available more frequently and reliably than other indicators, such as high school graduation rates and child consumption of fruits and vegetables, respectively.

The core of the program was composed of three two-day seminars over eight months that took place in either Baltimore, Maryland, home of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, or Washington, DC, home of the Urban Institute and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. These seminars were highly interactive, consisting of segments where participants were quickly introduced to a framework or tool, given time as a team to apply it to their Promise Neighborhood's work, and then invited to reflect on the experience as a cohort and declare "action commitments," or concrete next steps, that would be required to continue their work in their communities. The seminars focused on leadership and strategy development and implementation, but occasional segments featured one or more guests from leading organizations, such as Attendance Works. The evening of the first day of each seminar also included an activity, such as role-alike conversations or a personal journey mapping exercise, to help participants foster stronger connections with their colleagues from other Promise Neighborhoods.

Before and after each session, participants were expected to do preparation and application work, which included reading articles or book chapters, watching short videos, reflecting, and completing an activity introduced during an in-person session. The time between these in-person sessions also allowed for supplemental supports in the form of virtual team coaching sessions and learning sessions or webinars led by leadership development program facilitators or an outside presenter with content expertise related to attendance and chronic absenteeism.

Each Promise Neighborhood grantee was invited to select five people, representing the grantee organization and key partners, to join the leadership development program. The teams varied in composition but typically included the project director or leader of the Promise Neighborhood, several staff members, and one or more representatives from key partners. Given the leadership development program's focus on student attendance, grantees were encouraged to invite school and district leaders to become team members.

You're not just sitting there being talked to. It was very different models of learning...and so there were small group work, large group work, presentations...lots of flip charts and actions. And I appreciated that because that's a good way I learn and I feel like you guys [Results Count facilitators] did a good job of interchanging it so we had visual materials, reading materials, but...also were able to create at the same time.

—Promise Neighborhood project director

The Results Count Approach to Leadership Development

The core content of this latest leadership development program for Promise Neighborhoods grantees drew from the Results Count approach. Building on more than 20 years of experience supporting public and nonprofit leaders, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and partners honed this approach to developing leaders, focused on increasing the ability “of leaders who take a results-oriented approach to accelerate measurable and equitable improvements in outcomes for children and families in communities across the country.”⁶ Table 2 offers a high-level summary of what the Annie E. Casey Foundation refers to as the 5-2-2 of Results Count: five core competencies, two key frameworks, and two foundational skills that are central to the approach. The following section highlights some of the content that participants in the leadership development program found most helpful.

TABLE 2
The 5-2-2 of Results Count

5 core competencies	2 key frameworks	2 foundational skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Is results based and data drivenActs on disparities to advance equitable opportunitiesUses oneself as an instrument of change to move a resultMasters “adaptive leadership”Collaborates with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Theory of Aligned ContributionsPerson-role-system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Results AccountabilityResults-Based Facilitation

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Key Content from the Leadership Development Program

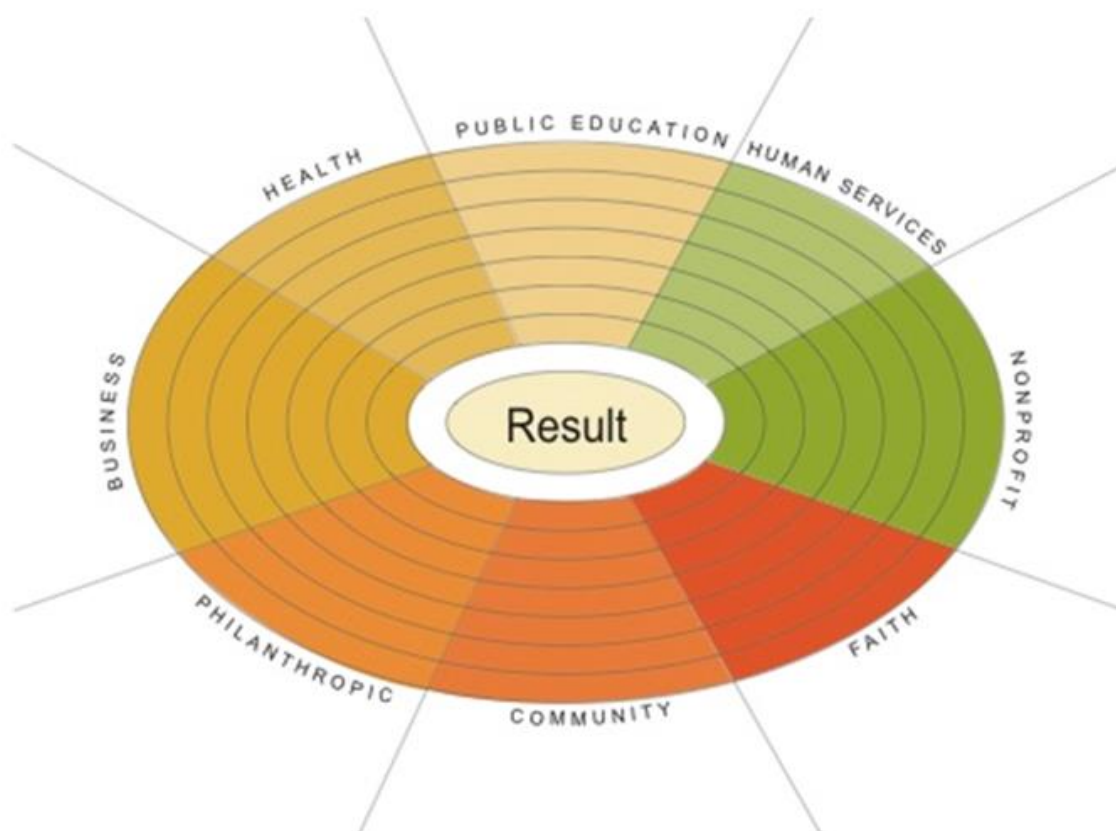
In interviews, leadership development program participants and implementing partners were asked what they thought was most valuable about the program. Their responses included references to experiences, frameworks, and tools. Some of the most commonly cited content is briefly described here and paired with interviewee reflections to provide a glimpse into the program and how it influenced some participants.

Results in the Center

In Promise Neighborhoods, everything leaders do should serve one or more of their cradle-to-career results. This tool invites teams to put their “result in the center” by writing the focal result of the leadership development program (e.g., “students successfully transition from middle grades to high school”) in the center of an oval, which is divided into segments to represent sectors (e.g., education and business) that do or could contribute to that result (figure 1). Participants were then asked to plot their current partners in the diagram, with the proximity of a given partner to the center reflecting how directly they can influence the result—with, for example, a school principal being closer to the center than a school district leader. Then, leaders were encouraged to think about potential partners who might contribute to the result. In this leadership development program, participants sometimes

identified potential partners, such as members of the faith community, that they might not have otherwise considered.

FIGURE 1
Results in the Center



Source: Adapted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Results Count® from Jolie Bain Pillsbury, "Theory of Aligned Contributions: An Emerging Theory of Change Primer" (Arlington, VA: Sherbrooke Consulting, n.d.).

One interviewee shared the following reflection on the value of this tool and process:

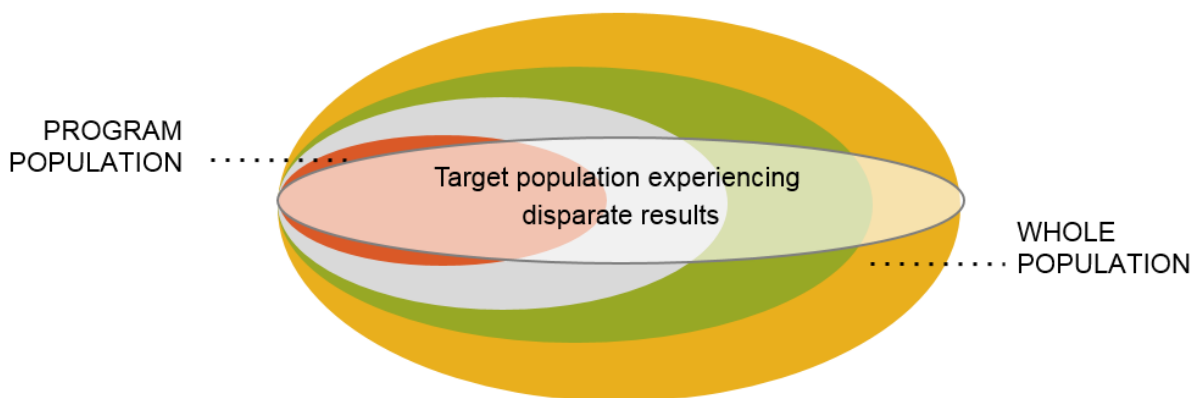
Before this, I looked at it as the high school is working toward graduation results...not realizing that one department cannot achieve everything, that it requires a cross-sector of organizations working together to achieve the best results. And so the results in the center really stood out to me, where the leaders engage in strengthening strategies and mapping out the stakeholders, and in fact, the actual mapping, because I'm more a visual person, helped me to understand the sector slices were important. And it helped me to understand that there's contributors that we normally don't include, and so that process was really important to me.

Program- and Population-Level Distinction

Many participants in the leadership development program had experience managing programs and tracking client outcomes. The Promise Neighborhoods work, however, requires grantees to hold themselves accountable for both program-level outcomes and population-level results, acknowledging that it is unlikely that any single program or organization can achieve a given result. In the seminars, as participants grappled with holding results at the center of their work, this distinction between the program and population levels was often clearest when leaders were asked to map the various overlapping populations in their Promise Neighborhoods. Often referred to as “the egg chart,” the activity requires Promise Neighborhood teams to represent the different populations relevant for a given result using a nested Venn diagram (figure 2). For example, the smallest, innermost oval may represent “students who attend our target schools” while the largest, outermost oval may represent “all students in our school district.” Crucially, participants were also asked to label the diagram with the number and share of children who fall within each oval. For some, the experience of speaking in specific terms about the number and share of people they are trying to affect yielded a humbling acknowledgment of the gap between their population-level ambitions and their programmatic reach. For others, the experience was motivating, as they realized that, for example, achieving an X percent improvement in an indicator may require only reaching a relatively small number of additional individuals.

FIGURE 2

Program Population to Whole Population



Source: Adapted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Results Count® from Results-Based Accountability (RBA) as presented in Mark Friedman, *Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough: How to Produce Measurable Improvements for Customers and Communities* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2005).

One interviewee shared how their experience in the leadership development program shifted their thinking about what it takes to achieve population-level change:

I always thought...the way this work is...if we fund programs, it all rolls up to a population-level result, which is kind of wrong because the programs only serve so many people.... You’re not going to actually get to a population level unless you implement an initiative that is actually a

population-level initiative. So I think this really helped me see that, for one, and then two...gave me a framework for how to do that work.... I would have probably stayed at the program level had I not taken this course...and I feel like I've really kind of leveled up in my thinking.

Factor Analysis

When faced with a problem, leaders often want to move quickly toward identifying and implementing solutions. Participants in the leadership development program were asked to begin by analyzing their team's indicator data—in this case, data for attendance and chronic absenteeism among students in their Promise Neighborhoods—and the trend line formed by whatever data points they had available. Then, they were asked to do a factor analysis, or “root cause” analysis, to identify the things (e.g., behaviors, programs, policies, systems, and beliefs) that were contributing to and constraining improvement. Participants were also encouraged to ask “Five Why's” about each factor to help them move beyond the initial, often superficial, factors they identified. This exploration led some teams in the leadership development program to identify issues (e.g., housing, transportation, and differing family expectations for the behavior of boys and girls) that may, on their face, seem only tangentially related to poor attendance rates. This process of identifying and unpacking factors often raised additional questions for participants, who spent time between leadership development program seminars collecting additional data or input from other community stakeholders to validate their hypotheses.

Participants were also advised to note who was involved in conversations to identify factors, as their teams in the leadership development program and even their broader stakeholder meetings back home might be missing important voices and perspectives, such as those of community members and others who are most affected by a given trend. One interviewee shared how they found the process helpful and how it led them to engage young people:

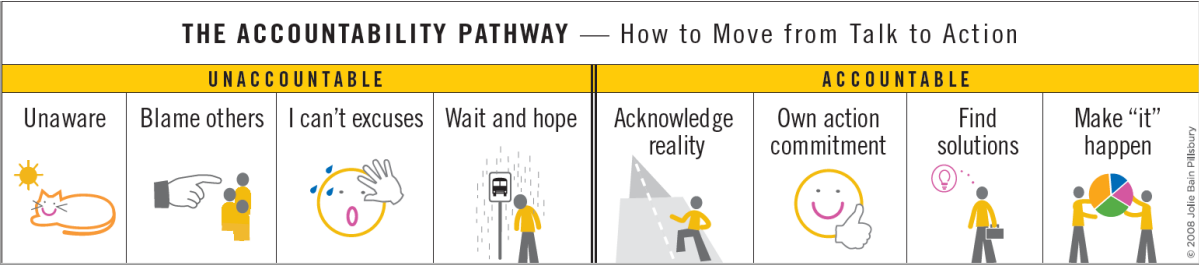
I found it awfully valuable to ask questions...of why is it this way—the Five Why's is very valuable.... We also kind of took that forward into asking questions of our students. Why do you miss school? Why do other people miss school? What is it that you like or don't like about school? What would encourage you to come to school? And, you know, we hadn't really done that before. And so we took our Five Why's to our target audience...and our surveys and our focus groups were incredibly powerful for us.

Accountability Pathway

Another helpful concept commonly cited by interviewees was that of accountability and a related tool, the Accountability Pathway, that was introduced early in the program (figure 3). Participants were encouraged to think of their accountability to the Promise Neighborhoods results, as well as their individual accountability for keeping their commitments and taking actions that they believe in turn would contribute to better results for children and families in their communities. The Accountability Pathway helps normalize often-difficult conversations about accountability. The tool requires users to locate themselves on a continuum, with “unaware” anchoring the “unaccountable” part of the pathway and “making it happen” anchoring the “accountable” part. The tool also prompts users to ask such questions as, What will it take for me to be more accountable and move forward on the pathway?

Leadership development program participants were encouraged to use the Accountability Pathway to help ensure they, their staff members, and their Promise Neighborhoods partners move toward action. Several interviewees said they had used Accountability Pathway bookmarks or posters back home with their colleagues.

FIGURE 3
The Accountability Pathway: Second Edition



Source: Adapted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Results Count® from Jolie Bain Pillsbury.

One interviewee reflected on the accountability conversations and an activity where participants were asked to locate themselves on the pathway by standing near the part of a large poster that best reflected their level of accountability for completing prework for that seminar:

I think one of the lessons I really learned is accountability is sometimes seen as a negative because it usually has negative consequences if you don’t get something done. But it’s also an opportunity to move to action and celebrate that, and then also own when you don’t complete something. And so I think working with that mindset, especially in this kind of work, where things have moved really slowly, when you have different levels of districts and school sites and then community partners.... It’s slow, and to be able to stop and reflect and say, okay, did I meet these commitments or goals? No? Okay, why not? Do some analysis. What needs to happen to move forward? Or, yes I did, and how did that look, and did it make a difference?... We don’t necessarily dive really deep...but we say accountability all the time.... What does that mean to us as an organization, and as leaders in the community?... And so the word’s thrown around all the time, but...I think Results Count really dives into it...and literally we had to get up and move our bodies.

I think results-based leadership and Results Count leadership, it is the work, it is like the framework for Promise Neighborhood. And so going through this experience gave us the common language, common framework to really implement our work.
—Promise Neighborhood staff member

Benefits and Challenges of the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count Program

With a basic understanding of the structure and key content of the leadership development program as context, it is helpful to discuss some of the benefits and challenges interviewees identified.

Benefits of the Leadership Development Program

The previous section described some of the tools and concepts that participants considered valuable, but interviewees also pointed to other, less tangible but important benefits they derived from participation in the leadership development program. The following were among the most commonly cited benefits:

- **Connecting with other Promise Neighborhoods.** Many interviewees appreciated getting to meet people from other Promise Neighborhoods. Because a few grantees had more than one Promise Neighborhoods implementation grant and grantees were in different stages of their grant cycles, each of the two cohorts had a blend of experience from which they could draw. One interviewee described feeling like “we’re not alone in this” because of the opportunity to get to know and learn from the challenges and questions of other Promise Neighborhoods. Another interviewee, representing a new grantee, self-described as “the new kid on the block,” reflected on feeling relief when they saw some teams who were further along in their grants still faced challenges and they realized “it’s not something that I have to know everything right now.” Some interviewees also spoke about keeping in touch with colleagues after the program ended, and a few spoke about how the experience influenced their efforts to formally connect with other Promise Neighborhoods in their region.
- **Getting away from day-to-day management responsibilities.** Several interviewees, including participants and implementing partners, spoke to the value of grantees and partners having the time and space to maintain a dedicated focus on their results work in a way that is difficult when they are back home. One interviewee said, “That’s probably the most powerful thing, spending six solid days on an indicator and quite a bit of time in between doing that as well.”
- **Engaging partners.** Several interviewees spoke about the value of including partners as part of their five-person teams. They noted that having partners, particularly school and district leaders, attend the seminars can help them better understand the Promise Neighborhoods framework and become stronger, more vocal advocates. One interviewee, who had experience in this and the earlier Promise Neighborhoods leadership development program, shared that their partners “became almost like our champions when we came back home.... Anybody who’s pretty much joined us in the session, they go back with a different perspective of and deeper understanding of what Promise Neighborhood is.”

Challenges of the Leadership Development Program

Despite the benefits, leadership development program participants and implementing partners identified several challenges or areas for continued learning and growth, the most frequently mentioned and most significant of which are listed here:

- **Too much content and too little time.** Although seeing much value in the experience, many interviewees noted that six days of seminars, no matter how packed, was not sufficient to fully grasp and internalize the content being shared. Two participants summed up the feeling when they described their experience in the program as leaving them both “energized” and “exhausted.” This is perhaps unsurprising, given that other Results Count programs, such as the Children and Family Fellowship, which is the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s flagship leadership development offering, involve more sessions in a program that spans up to 21 months.
- **Lack of comfort in leading others through the process.** Several interviewees said that even though they found the tools valuable and use them within their teams or organizations, they did not feel as comfortable leading or facilitating others through the process. One interviewee noted the challenge of “holding neutral” while facilitating with partners because the lead agency for the Promise Neighborhood is viewed as a funder. Another interviewee said that although the process of developing a strategy related to attendance was useful, “that brief introduction was not enough to make me an expert to then come back and go through it with others and feel comfortable doing it with others. I was not at all an expert or a coach in any sense.” Because of time constraints and a decision to prioritize other content, the implementing partners could not do more than reference Results-Based Facilitation, one of two foundational skills of Results Count, during the seminars.
- **Timing.** Participants, who represented grantees that were in different stages of their grant cycles, had mixed opinions about the ideal timing for the leadership development program. Although they still found it valuable, some noted it was challenging because their participation came shortly after they took on the project director role, meaning key relationships had not yet been forged and data were not always available. Interestingly, many interviewees thought the program could be most valuable to participants before they received their Promise Neighborhood grants. Others noted that the timing of the seminar series, which began in the spring (as the K–12 school year wound down) and ran into the fall, also made it difficult for school and district leaders to participate.
- **Limited resources.** Despite supplemental funding provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this leadership development program had a smaller budget than STAR. These resource constraints had obvious consequences, such as the decision to offer only three seminars. Limited resources also meant that participants could not visit other Promise Neighborhoods, an experience that a few interviewees who participated in or had heard about STAR thought would be beneficial.

Advancing Results through Leadership Development

This leadership development was customized for the grantees of the Promise Neighborhoods program, but much of the content and features that participants who were interviewed found most valuable could benefit leaders engaged in similar initiatives that require cross-sector collaboration and seek to achieve population-level results. This section draws on some of the thoughts and advice of the leadership development program participants and implementing partners to offer reflections that may benefit funders, technical assistance providers, and others interested in using leadership development to advance results.

A Significant Investment of Resources and Time Is Required

Perhaps the most obvious reflection is that leadership development requires a great deal of funding and time, both on the part of the implementing partners and the participants themselves. The implementing partners spent many hours preparing, facilitating, and debriefing each leadership development program seminar. Participants also invested time to build their teams, complete work before and after each seminar, and travel to the seminars in Baltimore and Washington, DC, from communities as far away as Alaska. Several interviewees shared a version of the advice that you get what you put in, encouraging their colleagues to be present, complete the application work, and meet regularly back home. One participant advised their peers, “Make the time. Create a group and put it on your calendars for meeting weekly or biweekly, but create that meeting. Hold each other accountable, do the readings, do the work, talk about the work.”

Many interviewees acknowledged more time would have been helpful. The decision to offer only three seminars was primarily driven by budget constraints. Although the bulk of the funding came from the US Department of Education, the leadership development program would not have been possible without the additional contributions of funding, staff time, and knowledge from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. But even if additional funding were available to expand the program’s length, it is also important to consider the trade-offs, particularly for local partners who have commitments beyond the Promise Neighborhood, of offering an expanded experience that would require participants to spend more time away from their communities.

Investing in Teams Can Help Expand Influence

The Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program’s team-based approach to leadership development can increase the likelihood that tools and frameworks are adopted and institutionalized. The Promise Neighborhoods program encourages local partners to participate alongside grantee staff in the leadership development program, making an investment in people and organizations beyond the grantee.

Selecting who will be invited to be on the team participating in the leadership development program is the first, and perhaps most consequential, decision grantees will make. With only five seats available on each team, Promise Neighborhood leaders had to think strategically with program facilitators about

who to include. There was sometimes tension between including grantee staff, who may spend much of their time focused on implementing the Promise Neighborhood, and inviting partners, who usually have broader interests but may stand to benefit the most by the immersion in this work afforded by the program. The leadership development program's focus on a single result narrows the list of possible team members, but Promise Neighborhood leaders still want to ensure that they bring what one interviewee described as "the right people," noting further that "the people you send is key in making sure that they touch different parts of the initiative or the organization" to support implementation.

The composition of each team varied, with some more representative of grantee staff and others more inclusive of partners, but it appears that having the person charged with managing data and internal evaluation for the Promise Neighborhood as well as school district leadership can be particularly valuable. Including a director of data and evaluation or similar role can help other team members prepare, interpret, and analyze data before and during seminars, key skills for a data-driven leadership development program. A few of the interviewees who offered advice regarding team composition spoke about the importance of engaging school district leadership, either because they had done so and reaped the benefits or because they could not do so and saw the potential:

Be very strategic on the partners that you bring into part of the program. Even, like, the ones where you struggle the most with.... If you know that your district is the one where you are struggling the most, do your very best you can to find somebody from the district to be part of this.... When we did the STAR leadership, we had one of the execs from the district.... Once they were on board and they knew, same thing as we saw with [our principal in this leadership development program], they understood more about what Promise Neighborhoods was about, and it opened up a lot of doors.

Despite these benefits, as with any investment in people, the transition of leadership development program participants to new roles, organizations, or communities can inhibit the influence on the Promise Neighborhood. During the leadership development program, some Promise Neighborhoods team members could no longer participate in the seminars. More common, however, was the experience of leadership development program alumni who took on new roles that weakened their connections with day-to-day Promise Neighborhoods activities. Some interviewees spoke of the challenges one or more staff transitions posed for the remaining alumni of their five-person team as they tried to put the concepts from the leadership development program into practice. It is worth noting that some interviewees whose teams remained intact after the program concluded also wanted additional leadership development opportunities to help their colleagues back home become familiar with the approach they had learned.

Data Can Drive Action and Attention to Disparities

From the start of the Promise Neighborhoods Result Count program, participants are expected to ground their conversations in data related to a result and its indicators. Participants were encouraged to view data, both quantitative and qualitative, as a tool that could help them understand what strategies might be effective for whom, what improvements might be necessary, and what difference their work was making for children and families in their community. As part of their preparation work

for each seminar, Promise Neighborhoods teams were required to develop a slide deck that included the best available data related to attendance and chronic absenteeism in their community. They were asked to construct trend lines that show how those indicators have changed over time. Critically, each team is also asked to disaggregate its data and identify any disparities that may exist between groups that differ by race, ethnicity, gender, age, or other characteristics.

Each seminar began with a data walk, where participants had the opportunity to review the slides and data prepared by each team and make observations or pose questions. With each successive seminar, participants were asked to revise and expand their slide decks to include additional data, targeted and universal strategies, and targets for rates of attendance and chronic absenteeism. Several interviewees noted the use of data in conversations, and the practice of data walks in particular as something valuable that they had incorporated into their meetings outside of the leadership development program. In addition to discussions about strategy development and implementation, the seminars included segments focused on such topics as personal leadership, conflict management, and racial equity, but this leadership development program made sometimes-abstract concepts and conversations more tangible and actionable by tying them to data and efforts to improve a specific result.

This Work Is Iterative and Needs Reinforcement

Compared with the longer Results Count leadership development programs referenced earlier, one thing participants lose by having only three seminars is the ability to continue refining the strategies for their Promise Neighborhoods and applying the approach to other results and indicators. As more indicator and performance measurement data become available, participants try pilots that yield lessons about what does and does not work, and they develop a deeper understanding of the tools and frameworks. A longer leadership development program provides the opportunity to revise their operating assumptions and adjust their strategies. More time in the leadership development program would also allow for the introduction of tools, processes, and skills, such as Results-Based Facilitation, that can help leaders move groups to more effective action and beyond a reliance on programmatic strategies. Reflecting on the need for more time during and the importance of ongoing support after the conclusion of the leadership development program, one of the implementing partners said, “Anybody can put together a results action plan; they could lead that process, a step-by-step process. It’s their ability to execute, which is the adaptive work and their ability to hang in there and do the large systems work, to do the disparities work.” Even if an extended leadership development program was feasible, on-site coaching for leadership development participants would be critical for increasing their confidence in being able to lead others.

Funders and Technical Assistance Providers Must Increase Their Own Alignment

This brief has focused on the content and experiences of participants in the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program, but the long journey that led to the creation of this leadership development program for federal grantees may be instructive for other funders and technical assistance providers.

As noted, the program was inspired by STAR, an earlier, privately funded and privately implemented leadership development program for federal Promise Neighborhoods grantees. The decision was made to offer STAR to the fiscal year 2011 implementation grantees and some of the fiscal year 2012 grantees, but the experience had its challenges.

Perhaps the biggest challenge was the lack of alignment in the language and approaches used by the various organizations providing support and guidance to grantees. The organizations involved in designing and implementing STAR (i.e., the Promise Neighborhoods Institute partners and the Annie E. Casey Foundation) used language and frameworks and tools embodied within Results-Based Leadership that some of the federally funded technical assistance providers (e.g., the Urban Institute) and the US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods team were unfamiliar with. This lack of alignment was not lost on the grantees participating in the STAR program, particularly those from fiscal year 2011, as they received sometimes conflicting messages from their federal funder and leadership development program facilitators, requiring them to balance the focus on grants management and compliance coming from federal staff with the push to question their original assumptions and plans as described in their grant proposals and focus on what it would take to achieve results.

The organizations supporting the Promise Neighborhoods grantees realized they needed to do some of the work they were expecting grantees to do in their own communities to align the national technical assistance efforts. The tension between managing a large grant program while holding oneself accountable for results that are larger than any single program or organization could achieve was manageable, but it did require effort. For their part, the national partners eventually established regular partner meetings and even participated in a leadership development experience similar to what grantees experienced in STAR. Over several years, the US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods team became more familiar with the approach and moved from being an outsider to being an observer of the STAR leadership development program. But as the program's value in supporting grantees with implementing the Promise Neighborhoods grants became clearer, the US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods team sought to adapt the program—leading to what would become the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program—and offer it as part of the federally funded training and technical assistance to subsequent grantees from fiscal years 2016, 2017, and 2018.

Reflecting on the many partners and individuals who supported the early leadership development work and the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program, one implementing partner spoke about the importance of continuity and commitment, even during difficult times:

But I think what helped this whole effort hang together well and this sort of intentional focus on results, starting way back when Promise Neighborhoods started and lasting as long as it had, was really the intentionality of the co-design team. And so the partners of [the US Department of Education, Center for the Study of Social Policy], PolicyLink when they were in it, Urban Institute, [The Annie E. Casey Foundation], with people who, one, I think worked well together but had a shared interest in trying to make this work, and I just felt like even with the ups and downs that we as an implementation team had over the years, I still felt like it was a really high-functioning team of partners and you don't always get that in every effort.... So I give a lot of credit to the co-

design team and the individual people who were part of it, who just I think had a sincere interest in trying to make this work, and you know, I take it all the way back, even back to those early days when...[Harlem Children's Zone] was part of the whole process.

Although some of the partners, people, and roles changed, what allowed the work to support Promise Neighborhoods grantees to continue was a focus on results, a shared language and approach, and ongoing efforts to learn and increase the alignment between the funder, technical assistance providers, and grantees.

Beyond the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count Program

The Promise Neighborhoods Results Count leadership development program was last offered in 2019, and the perspectives captured in the preceding sections emphasize those of the participants, but the overall evolution of leadership development offerings for Promise Neighborhoods has influenced the implementing partners. As the US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods team and Urban Institute staff observed and learned more about results-based leadership development, they saw value not only for the grantees but for themselves. During the 2019 offering of the Promise Neighborhoods Results Count program, US Department of Education program officers and Urban Institute staff were invited to sit with the grantees and local partners throughout the seminar series to strengthen relationships, develop a shared language, and allow them to better support the results work of the Promise Neighborhoods.

Other technical assistance offered by the implementing partners was influenced by their increased understanding of the Results Count approach to leadership development and what it takes for grantees to implement the Promise Neighborhoods vision. For example, based on feedback from grantees that they needed more support to apply the Results Count tools and skills, at the request of the Urban Institute, the Center for the Study of Social Policy made on-site coaching available to several teams that had completed the leadership development program. Most of those engagements had to be transitioned to virtual coaching opportunities because of the coronavirus pandemic, but the intent was to reinforce and extend the Results Count experience that many grantees found so valuable. One implementing partner said, "Our team learning about Results Count and going through that with the grantees has hugely influenced how we provide the rest of the technical assistance." Key aspects of the leadership development program (e.g., the focus on engaging teams rather than individuals, prioritizing depth over breadth of content, and focusing on application, not just learning) will likely continue to influence and inform the implementing partners' approaches to supporting leaders of Promise Neighborhoods and other complex, collaborative initiatives.

Conclusion

The reflections of the implementing partners and leadership development program participants described in this brief suggest that for many participants, it was a valuable experience that connected them with colleagues doing similar work, provided important tools and frameworks to support Promise Neighborhoods program implementation, and encouraged them to think differently about their ultimate goals (i.e., population-level results) and how to achieve them. But the true value and long-term impact of the leadership development program will be more difficult to ascertain. Even if the Promise Neighborhoods that have leaders who participated in this leadership development opportunity institutionalize the frameworks and tools in their organizations and partnerships, the full value of these investments likely will not be evident for some time. Furthermore, any possible influence generated by participants who transition to other organizations and spread this way of working may never be known. Perhaps the only measure of success fit for such a leadership development program will be changed and sustained practice that ultimately contributes to better results for children and youth in Promise Neighborhoods. What may be easier to conclude, however, is that this approach to technical assistance represented a marked and promising departure from the experiences and supports that are typically offered to the leaders and staff of grantee (especially partner) organizations, particularly through federally funded programs. Hopefully, this program and the insights drawn from it will be an example to others and contribute to continued learning and experimentation regarding the use of leadership development to advance results for children and youth across the nation.

Notes

- ¹ One interviewee did not participate in either the 2018 or the 2019 cohort of the leadership development program but was included because they participated in an earlier leadership development program offered to Promise Neighborhood grantees and described later in this brief.
- ² “Promise Neighborhoods,” US Department of Education, last updated March 5, 2018.
<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>.
- ³ “Promise Neighborhoods,” US Department of Education.
- ⁴ “Promise Neighborhoods,” US Department of Education.
- ⁵ For a list of all grantees, see “Neighborhood Infographics,” Promise Neighborhoods, accessed October 26, 2020,
<https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/data-and-results/infographics>.
- ⁶ “Results Count,” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, accessed October 26, 2020,
<https://www.aecf.org/work/leadership-development/results-count/>.

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