Leaders of Promise Neighborhoods and similar place-based initiatives must work to address racial disparities if they are to improve and sustain positive and equitable outcomes for children and young people on a large scale. This brief argues that Promise Neighborhoods, as well as similarly structured initiatives, are uniquely positioned to serve as a platform—or launching point—for advancing racial equity. This brief offers several considerations and strategies that leaders of Promise Neighborhoods and similar initiatives can use to more powerfully advance racial equity and achieve better outcomes.

Persistently poor outcomes have been observed across the nation in many areas, such as education, health, housing, and income. The data often indicate significant racial disparities in those outcomes. A history of systemic racism, exclusion, and disinvestment in areas such as criminal justice, housing, and transportation have contributed to these disparities in many communities, with access to opportunity varying greatly between communities or even different parts of the same community. One response to these poor outcomes and racial disparities has been the use of place-based initiatives that seek to concentrate resources and increase collaboration among organizations serving a given community. One such place-based initiative is the federal Promise Neighborhoods program (box 1). Grantees of the Promise Neighborhoods program work to develop cradle-to-career solutions, or "pipelines," to produce better results for children and young people in their communities. The federal program specifies a set of population-level (or community) results and indicators from early childhood to young adulthood to guide the work of grantees and against which to measure progress. To achieve these results, Promise Neighborhoods usually engage a wide range of partners, such as community-based organizations, schools, and local government agencies, and play a role in coordinating their work.
Addressing racial and other disparities is critical for Promise Neighborhoods and similar initiatives focused on improving conditions for their entire community. The history of disinvestment and systemic racism that many Promise Neighborhoods have experienced contributes to racial disparities in outcomes and often is a motivating reason for seeking the federal grant and adopting the approach. Advancing racial equity is crucial to the work of Promise Neighborhoods, because to achieve the population-level results grantees seek, they and their partners cannot focus on improving outcomes for only some groups of children and young people. They must identify, understand, and address the racial disparities observed in many education, health, and social indicators. Racism contributes to barriers that communities of color encounter and helps to create or maintain disparities in outcomes. Promise Neighborhoods need to partner with the communities they serve to uncover and unpack the history of racism in America and how it affects and continues to affect those communities. With a deeper and shared understanding of that history and how barriers developed over time, Promise Neighborhoods can work to address the root causes of inequitable outcomes, which is essential for any effort seeking to improve outcomes for an entire community.

BOX 1
Background and 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." 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." Grantees are charged with working toward that vision by doing the following:

- 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"

Since 2010, US Department of Education grants have helped communities plan, implement, and expand Promise Neighborhoods. 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 young people 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. As of this writing, awards include 21 one-year planning grants of up to $500,000; 32 five-year implementation grants of up to $30 million; and 3 two-year extension grants of up to $6 million made to help continue and expand the work of previous implementation grantees.

This technical assistance brief explores the features of Promise Neighborhoods that provide them with both the imperative and the opportunity to advance racial equity and offers several strategies for doing so. It describes how Promise Neighborhoods can be viewed as a platform for advancing racial equity before offering several considerations and strategies that leaders of Promise Neighborhoods can use to reflect on their work and partnerships and to identify opportunities to more powerfully advance racial equity. Leaders of similar initiatives may also find the considerations and strategies helpful in advancing racial equity. This brief was informed by a recent technical assistance offering on racial equity provided to Promise Neighborhoods grantees, interviews with several of its participants, and previous technical assistance offered to grantees.¹

Promise Neighborhoods as a Platform for Advancing Racial Equity

Promise Neighborhoods have both the imperative and the opportunity to advance racial equity in their communities. The Center for the Study of Social Policy defines racial equity as the state in which race is no longer a predictor of outcomes, leading to more just outcomes in policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages.² Promise Neighborhoods grantees seek to achieve an array of population-level results for children and young people by building a cradle-to-career continuum, or pipeline, of programs, services, and supports. Many Promise Neighborhoods sought their federal grant specifically because they observed disparities along racial lines in education and other outcomes in their communities resulting from long-standing systemic racism and disinvestment. Because of these disparities, any attempt to improve outcomes across an entire community must focus on racial equity and understand the assets, cultural and historical context, and challenges facing different groups and use this understanding to inform strategies.

The features of the Promise Neighborhoods approach uniquely position these collaboratives to serve as a platform for advancing racial equity. Platform is meant to convey a launching point from which efforts to advance racial equity can be effectively initiated. In this section, we look at some of the characteristics of Promise Neighborhoods and describe how they can support efforts to advance racial equity.

- **Promise Neighborhoods are focused on achieving population-level results.** Given their aspiration to achieve population-level results, Promise Neighborhoods must understand and address the disparities that exist between subgroups for any particular indicator. This knowledge requires data disaggregation and analysis, which can be a powerful tool for identifying and ultimately addressing any racial disparities that may exist. The goal of achieving population-level results makes it imperative that Promise Neighborhoods make advancing racial equity the focus of their work.

- **Promise Neighborhoods focus their resources on a specific community for an extended period of time.** Although "neighborhoods" can span large geographic areas, in general Promise Neighborhoods have the potential to focus resources (both financial and human) and
strategies in ways that are more responsive to community needs and local cultural contexts than other national or even state-level initiatives. Although many leaders of Promise Neighborhoods and similar place-based efforts often discuss the time horizon for fighting poverty and advancing equity as generational, the five-year time horizon for federal Promise Neighborhoods grants allows for important foundations for the work to be laid in ways that shorter, more narrowly programmatic grants, whether federal or philanthropic, often do not.

- **Promise Neighborhoods support children from cradle to career and have convening power.** Because of their cradle-to-career focus, Promise Neighborhoods must break down silos, and a wide array of partners must be engaged by the lead agency that is managing the work of the collaborative. The cradle-to-career focus allows for a holistic assessment and approach to child and community well-being. Additionally, the lead agency has the ability, both through the provision of direct funding and the crafting of a motivating message, to influence partners and help set the agenda for the collaborative. This influence can include being explicit about the importance of advancing racial equity to the overall success of the collaborative. The lead agency can also help facilitate action and alignment between partners and provide opportunities for learning about racial equity.

- **Promise Neighborhoods must think beyond programs and services and address policies and systems.** High-quality programs and services are necessary but not sufficient for achieving the scope and scale of impact that Promise Neighborhoods aspire to. Their toolkit must also embrace policy and systems change strategies, because those can help to scale promising programs and practices, reach a larger number of children and young people, and address the root causes of racial inequities.

- **Promise Neighborhoods have the flexibility to invest in infrastructure and to pilot and adjust strategies.** Like many federal grantees, Promise Neighborhoods must specify their proposed solutions and the type and level of evidence that supports them. At the same time, they are also able to use funding to build and maintain the collaborative infrastructure, such as shared data systems and staff to support coordination, that are essential to cross-sector approaches. This ability to meet pressing community needs and adapt solutions to match the local context can help advance racial equity by allowing for targeted strategies that can meet the unique needs of different groups in the community.

Given the goals of the Promise Neighborhoods approach and the features forming its platform, Promise Neighborhoods have not only the opportunity but also the imperative to advance racial equity. The following section offers strategies and considerations that Promise Neighborhoods leaders might use to help seize this opportunity to advance racial equity and improve outcomes for all children and families in their communities.
Considerations and Strategies for Advancing Racial Equity in Promise Neighborhoods

This section offers considerations, strategies, and questions Promise Neighborhoods and similar collective impact initiatives can use to advance racial equity in the communities they serve. Leaders of such initiatives may find it helpful to reflect on the content provided here and use the questions to begin conversations with their staff and partners about how to strengthen their focus on and efforts to advance racial equity and the unique opportunity that the Promise Neighborhoods approach affords them to do so. Although the strategies may be used by anyone seeking to advance racial equity, Promise Neighborhoods can be a powerful platform from which to use them given their cross-sector and cradle-to-career focus, targeted investment in a defined neighborhood, and creation of an infrastructure that supports greater collaboration among partners.

The following are actions Promise Neighborhoods can take, ideas they can consider, and questions they can ask to lay a foundation for thoughtful discussion to advance racial equity through their work:

- **Be explicit about the goal of advancing racial equity, and identify disparities that exist in your community.** Promise Neighborhoods can use their convening power to help put racial equity squarely on the partnership’s agenda. This work can be assisted by developing a practice of disaggregating by race the wealth of data that Promise Neighborhoods are charged with collecting. It is critical to disaggregate data to understand how different racial and ethnic groups are faring compared with the overall trend. By identifying racial disparities that may exist in their communities, Promise Neighborhoods can set the stage for focusing their efforts on understanding why those disparities exist and beginning to think about possible solutions to close the gaps. Although disaggregated data can help support work to advance racial equity, Promise Neighborhoods must also be explicit in their commitment and ensure that conversations about equity feel like an integral part of the work rather than a “lens” or special topic to be discussed on certain occasions. Promise Neighborhoods may ask themselves the following questions to spur reflection and discussion:
  - What will it take to disaggregate all our Promise Neighborhood data by race?
  - What racial disparities do we observe in our outcomes data?
  - How can we ensure that racial equity is a leading commitment and concern in all our meetings and work?

- **Define data broadly and dig deep to identify root causes of racial disparities.** Promise Neighborhoods collect data related to cradle-to-career results and indicators, but those population-level data only tell part of the story. It is important to combine those data with the stories and experiences of children, young people, families, and other community stakeholders to help understand why a given trend exists and to uncover root causes that may not be obvious to people who are more removed from the disparities in question. Techniques such as asking the “5 Whys” with a diverse group of stakeholders can help give data richer context.
and move beyond superficial interpretations to identify root causes. One Promise Neighborhood representative reflected on how they might think more broadly about early literacy and how they could measure it in ways that are more inclusive and culturally appropriate. For example, early literacy can be fostered in multiple languages and through a variety of activities, such as singing songs, that would not be captured by measuring a child’s ability to read a book in English.

» How are different racial groups faring for each of our indicators?
» What additional data, both quantitative and qualitative, do we need to understand how our children and young people are faring in our community?
» Who else (e.g., young people, families, community partners) do we need to engage in reviewing and making sense of the data we have?

- Convene partners to develop a shared understanding and language and to align efforts related to racial equity. Promise Neighborhoods can use their convening power to help create opportunities for learning, reflection, and greater alignment of efforts. Everyone has a role to play in understanding and addressing racial disparities, but all of us have different levels and types of knowledge and lived experience. Promise Neighborhoods can use their role as lead agency to assess the needs of their partnership and create the environment and opportunity for partners to have what may be difficult conversations about race and racism in their community. Trainings alone will not advance racial equity, but it is important that the different stakeholders, from the lead agency to community partners, have a shared way of talking about and exploring racial disparities that may exist in a given community and to reflect on their individual and collective identities and experiences. A resource that might help groups develop a shared language is the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s “Key Equity Terms and Concepts: A Glossary for Shared Understanding.” Another resource, the Racial Equity Institute’s “The Groundwater Approach,” can help make complex concepts accessible. The groundwater approach provides a simple story and a framework for understanding racism in the United States and how it influences a wide range of systems and outcomes. As Promise Neighborhoods work with their partners to deepen their understanding of racial equity, they can also encourage action and collaboration to tackle racial disparities and address the root causes they have identified.

» What racial equity terms, topics, and concepts do our Promise Neighborhood and our partners need to learn more about?
» What would racial equity look like in our organization? What would it look like more broadly in our Promise Neighborhood and community?
» What will it take to focus more of our strategies on addressing the root causes of racial disparities?

- Increase awareness of and work to mitigate implicit bias. Implicit bias refers to “a belief or attitude that affects our understanding, decision, and actions, and that exists without our conscious awareness.” All humans have implicit biases, but the key is to identify,
acknowledge, and mitigate them as best we can. Some of this work takes place on an individual level, but organizations and systems can also implement changes that alleviate the conditions that are ripe for implicit bias, such as situations in which people are operating with ambiguous or incomplete information, time constraints, mental fatigue, or overconfidence in their ability to be objective. Actions to mitigate implicit bias might include increasing meaningful intergroup contact and engaging in reflection. To learn more, Promise Neighborhoods may want to complete the Implicit Bias Module Series developed by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and reflect on the questions they contain. Promise Neighborhoods may also want to encourage their staff members and partners to prepare for explorations and conversations about implicit bias by completing one or more of the Implicit Association Tests offered by Project Implicit, a nonprofit developed by researchers who study implicit social cognition.

» In what ways might implicit bias contribute to specific negative outcomes we are observing for children and young people in our community?
» At which key decision points, policies, or practices might implicit bias impact one or more of our Promise Neighborhood results?
» Which of the suggested strategies might we use to reduce implicit bias?

Think beyond programs and services to advance systems and policy changes. Promise Neighborhoods and similar initiatives often focus on providing more and better services and programs to the children and families in their communities. As important as that work is, a reliance on programs and services is unlikely to address deeper, systemic issues that create the need for those programs and services in the first place. This is particularly true when working to address racial disparities. For example, decisions about transportation, such as the placement of highways and level and type of investment in public transportation, can impact outcomes in areas such as economic development, employment, and community safety. The Center for the Study of Social Policy's principles for antiracist policy provide guidance on how policymakers and advocates can help advance racial equity by redressing past injustices, meeting the needs of children and families of color, supporting the whole family, and serving all children and families in need. Because of Promise Neighborhoods' focus on child and youth outcomes from cradle to career and their efforts to improve education outcomes by providing high-quality services and supports, they are well positioned to help the systems they work with and policymakers think more holistically about the needs of children and their families. Although Promise Neighborhoods can play an important role in identifying, educating, and advocating for better policies, they do not have to do this work alone: they can partner with local organizations, advocates, and coalitions that may have more expertise on a given issue and enlist additional support and build greater awareness of the need for change.

» How might policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels help us to address root causes of racial disparities? How might changes in systems (e.g., early childhood, education, child welfare) help us address root causes of racial disparities?
» How can we ensure our policies and systems account for and address the unique needs of different racial and ethnic groups in our community?

» Who can we partner with to help us develop and advance systems and policy changes? Which advocates, organizations, and coalitions can help us increase our understanding and influence?

- Embrace the voices of and share power with impacted communities. As noted, efforts to increase community voice can include engaging a broader range of stakeholders in analyzing and making sense of Promise Neighborhood data. Promise Neighborhoods can also engage community members in the design and delivery of the strategies that seek to address disparities found in the data. For example, some Promise Neighborhoods have adapted the promotoras (lay community health workers) model, hiring community members to serve as advocates in a range of areas such as education. Such community members may have established credibility with and reach into particular racial groups within the Promise Neighborhood. One Promise Neighborhood recently developed an initiative to partner with barbershops to help educate community members about vaccines during the global pandemic. An example of principles and actions that can advance race equity and parent leadership can be found in the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s “Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems,” which was developed by a national group of parent leaders, agency staff, and other stakeholders.\(^1\) Creating opportunities for young people and families to exercise control over programmatic details and resources can also help to better meet community needs, but it must be done with careful thought and intention to avoid tokenization or misaligned expectations about the level of input and control that community members will have. Promise Neighborhoods and similar initiatives can also provide leadership development opportunities, both incidental and intentional, that help community members prepare for taking on formal leadership roles such as serving as a school board member.

» What will it take to truly center the experience of those most impacted in the design, delivery, and oversight of our strategies? What will we have to do differently? What might we have to give up?

» How might we use or develop stronger relationships with institutions that are trusted and valued by different parts of our community?

» How can our Promise Neighborhood create more opportunities for young people, parents, and other community members to provide input, help make decisions, and take on leadership roles?

These are only a few of the strategies and considerations that can be used to address racial disparities, but they serve to illustrate the many opportunities that exist for Promise Neighborhoods to serve as a platform for advancing racial equity in their communities.
Conclusion

Promise Neighborhoods and similar initiatives focused on improving outcomes for their entire community must focus on racial equity. The history of disinvestment and systemic racism that many Promise Neighborhoods have experienced contributes to racial disparities in outcomes. Fortunately, many features of Promise Neighborhoods combine to form a platform that provides a unique opportunity for advancing racial equity. The relatively large infusion of resources in a particular community, the effort to think and work holistically from cradle to career, the need to supplement programs with systems and policy changes, and the flexibility to invest in and build collaborative infrastructure can all support the work of doing business differently and making progress in eliminating racial disparities. These features can facilitate a variety of strategies that Promise Neighborhoods may use to advance racial equity, from using their role as a convener to make racial equity an explicit focus of their work, to disaggregating and digging deep into data to identify root causes, and to thinking beyond programs to develop policy and systems change strategies with their wide array of partners spanning cradle to career. Each of the many strategies Promise Neighborhoods may use to advance racial equity will need to fit the unique history, cultures, and context of the groups and community they serve. The work of advancing racial equity is challenging, long term, and without easy solutions, but it is imperative for Promise Neighborhoods and other initiatives to take it on, and they are well positioned to do so.

Notes

1. Small teams representing lead agency staff and partners from six federal Promise Neighborhoods grantees participated in a recent mini-course on the topic of advancing racial equity. Some of the ideas, strategies, considerations, and resources shared in those sessions are presented in this brief.


5. Center for the Study of Social Policy, “Key Equity Terms and Concepts.”


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