The DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative (DCPNI) began in 2008, before the federal initiative was formally launched. Irasema Salcido, CEO and founder of Cesar Chávez Public Charter Schools, recognized that students were entering Chávez Middle and High Schools-Parkside with academic skills far below grade level. Inspired by the Harlem Children’s Zone, Mrs. Salcido convened a steering committee to figure out how to address students’ challenges comprehensively. DCPNI involved residents from across the Parkside-Kenilworth community, the two neighboring DCPS elementary schools, and local service providers.

By early 2009, DCPNI’s effort had drawn attention from organizations outside Parkside-Kenilworth. It attracted the strong support of the America’s Promise Alliance, which facilitates volunteer action for children and youth, as well as the Children’s National Medical Center. Eventually, the initiative’s efforts attracted a wide array of actors, including the Urban Institute, service providers from throughout the District, city agencies, foundations, and local politicians who participated in the planning and development effort alongside the residents and schools of Parkside-Kenilworth. In October 2010, Cesar Chávez Public Charter Schools, the applicant agency for DCPNI, received one of the U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods Initiative grants.

During DCPNI’s planning year, it engaged residents, developed comprehensive plans, brought together organizations and resources, and laid the groundwork for a sustainable initiative.
the U.S. Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers:

Challenges in Parkside-Kenilworth

Parkside-Kenilworth is an island of concentrated poverty cut off from the rest of the city by the Anacostia Freeway, the Anacostia River, and a decommissioned electrical plant. This isolated area, less than two miles long and less than one mile wide, is home to approximately 5,700 residents and 1,800 children under age 18 and consists of seven contiguous neighborhoods (map 1). To the north are the D.C. Housing Authority’s Kenilworth Courts and Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation (the first public housing project in the city) and a decommissioned electrical plant. To the south are two large subsidized developments: Mayfair Mansions, a 569-unit apartment rental complex, and Paradise, a 652-unit complex. Lotus Square, a new workforce housing development, is located along the freeway, and the Parkside neighborhood has newly constructed subsidized homeownership townhomes.

Residents in the DCPNI targeted area face an array of steep challenges, including crime, a lack of basic services and amenities, and deep poverty. Approximately half of all DCPNI residents live below the federal poverty level, almost three times the city average, and median household incomes in the Parkside-Kenilworth neighborhoods are about half of the city average. Nearly 50 percent of families with children in the DCPNI footprint are headed by single females, and neighborhoods in the northern census tract also have some of the highest shares of teenage births in the District—and the nation. Very few pregnant mothers of any age receive adequate prenatal care. Not surprisingly, babies born in the DCPNI neighborhoods have some of the lowest average birth weights in the city.

Schools Face Steep Challenges

In addition to the Chávez Middle and Chávez High Schools at Parkside, the DCPNI community is home to two traditional D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) elementary schools, Kenilworth and Neval Thomas. All three schools face steep challenges, including students that are extremely low income and struggle with basic skills. Table 1 shows the high proportions of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches and testing as not proficient in reading and math.

An even greater challenge for creating a school-centered Promise Neighborhood continues to be that relatively few children from the DCPNI catchment area actually attend these local schools. Both elementary schools have experienced significant declines in enrollment over the past decade (table 1), likely the result of the liberal school choice policies in Washington, D.C. Indeed, approximately half the elementary students from the DCPNI catchment area attend schools outside the community—87 schools altogether in the 2008–2009 school year (the most recent data available).

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To negotiate these challenges, DCPNI staff developed a comprehensive planning process involving five components: leadership and management, breaking down silos, strategy development, community engagement, and fundraising and sustainability.

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Planning a Comprehensive Community Initiative

Creating a comprehensive community initiative that seeks to engage local residents, service providers, and major systems like schools and health care providers in an effort to improve residents’ life chances is extremely challenging. With all these different players involved, multiple and conflicting agendas are inevitable, and planners must negotiate these carefully to avoid problems. The DCPNI case presents two special challenges: as described above, seven distinct communities were involved, each with its own leadership and specific concerns; and, the initiative needed to mesh the priorities of a federal program with DCPNI’s grassroots effort, and therefore had to convince community residents to engage while ensuring that whatever they designed would comply with federal requirements.

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DCPNI’s Core Values:

- People of the DCPNI community and the focus to build upon its existing capacity
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- Accountability, excellence, and data-driven results
- Close collaboration with DCPNI’s partners and supporters
- Resident engagement and input in all related decisions

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DCPNI had only a small staff during the planning year, with consultants serving as directors of planning, resident engagement, and development, all answerable to DCPNI’s advisory board until the organization was able to hire an executive director. By summer 2013, DCPNI had hired its first programmatic staff member, a director of community dropout prevention and community outreach.

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Breaking Down Silos

One of DCPN’s first successes is that it brought together the principals of two public charter schools and two traditional DCPS schools for joint strategic planning. This achievement cannot be understated, as the eras between DCPS and public charter schools has run deep. There is little evidence of such close planning and coordination happening elsewhere across the city, and the principals of the four schools reported the benefits that they can all reap from close collaboration and shared resources. These planning efforts deserve more attention and replication across the city.

DCPN has developed close working relationships with the four community recreation centers located in the area (each one in the mul-tifamily developments of Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation, Mayfair, and Paradise, and the other in Kenilworth Courts). These recreation centers were already providing varied youth programming in their developments, and DCPN recognized the need to coordinate closely with each of them. In addition, DCPN established strong ties with other District agencies and organizations that are the targeted neighborhoods in the city, and the principal goal was to provide services and capacity during the implementation year. These District agencies and organizations benefit from DCPN’s coordinated effort and its targeted population. Some key organizations include Children’s National Medical Center, the DC Housing Authority, DCPS, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, Educare, East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative, Georgetown University, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and Save the Children.

Strategy Development

The core task of the board and staff was to develop strategies to ensure that children living in the DCPN’s community meet the 10 federal Promise Neighborhood Goals. From the start, DCPN chose not to create new programs, but instead to develop a formal network of already existing neighborhood, city, and national providers. As expected, this umbrella-model of model comes with challenges. One of DCPN’s core values is to sup- port the existing organizational structures and maintain residents in the footprint and help grow their capacity where needed. DCPN gives preference to these organizations over citywide or national programs. Balancing the selection of providers against measured results was a challenge when there were multiple providers in the footprint as well as other groups located elsewhere in the city.

To develop the continuum of solutions, DCPN’s director of planning managed 10 results-driven work groups, each targeting one of the federal initiative’s initiatives. Work group participants consisted of neighborhood and city service providers, content experts, District agencies, interested residents, and Urban Institute staff. Each group had two co-chairs—one person already involved in implementing or advocating for similar efforts in the District and the other person a resident involved and interested in the efforts—and a facilitator (again, a representative of an organization involved in similar efforts). The planning groups were tasked with developing the specific strategies to improve children’s outcomes based on a needs assessment.

As the local evaluation partner, the Urban Institute conducted a needs assessment to both inform planning and comply with Department of Education requirements.7 The Urban Institute team gathered data on the children, families, neighborhoods, and schools in the DCPN target area, and conducted a segmenta-

7 The key providers, including basic management capacity, a mission that aligns with the DCPN target area, an ability to deliver effective, quantifiable evidence-based services, and evidence of strong existing ties to the local community. The planning groups’ proposals for strategies and priorities were reviewed extensively by the director of planning, the principals of the four schools in the DCPN target area, and the full advisory board. The product of this comprehensive planning process was a full continuum of solutions grouped into four category areas with identified partners to address the needs of DCPN children and help them succeed academically (figure 1).

Community Engagement

From the outset, DCPN recognized that resident engagement was critical. The organization faced some challenges in actually developing a strategy. First, being a Promise Neighborhood planning grantee meant that DCPN was obligated to ensure that its activities fit the Department of Education’s guidelines while integrating them with their grassroots efforts. For instance, the guidelines required that the initiative collect information on healthy foods and obesity, while residents believed that mental health and safety were the priority. Second, while the DCPN target area is relatively small, it has seven distinct communities, and many residents felt isolated from the other neighborhoods because they had lacked opportunities to interact in the past. Some teenagers from the focus groups talked about purposely not mixing with youth from other neighborhoods and expecting fights to break out if they crossed neighborhood boundaries.
To support its efforts, DCPI hired a director of resident engagement who lived in Eastland Gardens. He worked closely with the advisory board’s resident engagement team, which held monthly community dinners to inform stakeholders about DCPI, engage them in planning, and solicit feedback. DCPI alternated the location of dinners among the three school campuses to ensure residents from across the neighborhoods could attend more easily. The resident engagement team also organized two large-year-long resident retreats in early 2011 to get residents excited about DCPI’s efforts and improve communication among residents from different neighborhoods. Finally, as noted above, DCPI had a community resident co-chair for each planning group and made concerted efforts to reach out to families to participate in planning DCPI programs and services. Like the community dinners, the planning groups altered their locations to accommodate residents’ needs. In some instances, a community recreation manager picked up and dropped off residents to help ensure their participation.

Fundraising and Sustainability

A critical test for an ambitious effort like DCPI is whether the organization can raise enough funds to be sustainable for the long term. In its first two years, DCPI has been extremely successful in meeting this challenge. First, to qualify for the federalPromise Neighborhood grant, the organization needed to match 50 percent of all proposed federal funds; DCPI was able to far exceed that goal, with a combination of cash and in-kind support. During the planning year, the initiative raised over 5 million, half from the federal planning grant and the remainder from private sources. DCPI has also raised more than $700,000 for the first year of implementation. DCPI established a funders group to keep track of the providers’ performance means developing a longitudinal evaluation. D C PI needs to ensure that the individual partners meet the expected targets and outcomes. If the outcomes are not as expected, DCPI will have to ensure that it can provide resources and assistance to improve the delivery of services and outcomes for children.

Other challenges exist in implementing the formative evaluation. In traditional evaluations, researchers track outcomes for a set group of people experiencing a standard intervention that remains constant over time. However, district-wide and across the initiative like a promise neighborhood is much trickier. Although the intended target population includes all neighborhood residents, not all the children currently attend DCPI partner schools and not all families will be actively engaged in programs and services, making outcomes more difficult to track. Even for those that do live in the DCPI footprint and attend neighborhood schools, we know that low-income populations are highly mobile and may move out of the neighborhoods or switch schools in the near future. Further, the package of services and programs in which each child and family participates will be unique. And, by design, DCPI will evolve over time in order to continually refine the model to best serve the community. To meet these challenges, the Urban Institute, as DCPI’s data and evaluation partner, has crafted a multifaceted approach consisting of two main components: an outcome evaluation

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1. Washington, D.C., has one of the nation’s highest shares of public school students attending public charters and very little out-of-boundary enrollment policy for traditional public schools. Students may choose to attend their neighborhood traditional school, apply for out-of-boundary traditional school enrollment through a city-wide lottery, submit an application to a selective traditional school, or apply for enrollment to any public charter school through a city-wide lottery process. In the 2008–09 school year, only 70 percent of Washington’s public school students attended their in-boundary traditional school; 37 percent went to an out-of-boundary traditional public school, and 13 percent attended a public charter school (Comery and Gross 2010; Flanik and colleagues 2008). Washington, D.C., is second only to New Orleans in the share of public school students enrolled in public charters.


3. See Popkin et al. (2011) for DCPI’s complete needs assessment and segmentation analysis conducted between October 2010 and July 2011.

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5. For instance, in the 2008–09 school year, there were 685 public school preschool through 6th-grade students (either DCPS or public charter) living in the DCPI neighborhoods. Of those 685 students, 33 percent attended either N eval or Kenilworth-District of Columbia Magnet School or Kenilworth elementary school. The remaining 64 percent were dispersed across 8 other DCPS or public charter elementary schools (Popkin et al. 2011).

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Next Steps

Going into the first year of implementation, DCPI will tackle several key tasks that will lay the groundwork for long-term success. These include further developing DCPI as an organization, which involves rolling out flagship programs and planning for a comprehensive performance management and formative evaluation. Transition from a provisional planning grant structure to a more consolidated Neighborhood grant for Kenilworth Courts that requires relocating residents, at least temporarily, during the eventual redevelopment. In addition, new housing development spearheaded by City Interests is expected in the near future. One of DCPI’s core values is accountability and data-driven results. Therefore, processes and infrastructure need to be put in place to track the providers’ performance measures and children’s outcomes. Tracking performance means developing a longitudinal student-level, school-level, and neighborhood-level data system. The challenges in developing such systems are significant, but the payoff is great. Therefore, as DCPI gears up in the first implementation year, it will also have to develop its data systems and the processes to track indicators over time. In addition, DCPI will have to ensure that the individual providers meet the expected targets and outcomes. If the outcomes are not as expected, DCPI will have to ensure that it can provide resources and assistance to improve the delivery of services and outcomes for children.

Other challenges exist in implementing the formative evaluation. In traditional evaluations, researchers track outcomes for a set group of people experiencing a standard intervention that remains constant over time. However, DCPI’s combinatorial approach will complicate this simple framework as the initiative’s neighborhood-based initiative like a promise neighborhood is much trickier. Although the intended target population includes all neighborhood residents, not all the children currently attend DCPI partner schools and not all families will be actively engaged in programs and services, making outcomes more difficult to track. Even for those that do live in the DCPI footprint and attend neighborhood schools, we know that low-income populations are highly mobile and may move out of the neighborhood or switch schools in the near future. Further, the package of services and programs in which each child and family participates will be unique. And, by design, DCPI will evolve over time in order to continually refine the model to best serve the community. To meet these challenges, the Urban Institute, as DCPI’s data and evaluation partner, has crafted a multifaceted approach consisting of two main components: an outcome evaluation

to determine what works and for whom, and a process evaluation to inform implementation.

Bringing about a better future for the children who live in Parkside-Kenilworth’s communities will require a sustained commitment and willingness to learn from mistakes and adapt to changing circumstances. DCPI has already made great strides during its planning process in engaging residents, developing comprehensive plans, bringing together organizations and resources, and laying the groundwork for a sustainable initiative. Its long-term success will depend on the ability of its leadership to build on these achievements and successfully implement its core solutions. **

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<td>1. Washington, D.C., has one of the nation’s highest shares of public school students attending public charter and very liberal out-of-boundary enrollment policies for traditional public schools. Parents may choose to attend their neighborhood traditional school, apply for out-of-boundary traditional school enrollment through a citywide lottery, submit an application to a selective traditional school, or apply for enrollment to any public charter school through a citywide lottery process. In the 2008–09 school year, only 30 percent of Washington’s public school students attended their in-boundary traditional school; 37 percent went to an out-of-boundary traditional public school, and 33 percent attended a public charter school (Comey and Geor 2011). Flaks et al. (2008). Washington, D.C., is second only to New Orleans in the share of public school students enrolled in public charter schools.</td>
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<td>3. See Popkin et al. (2011) for DCPI’s complete needs assessment and segmentation analysis conducted between October 2010 and July 2011.</td>
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<td>4. The Urban Institute collected and analyzed data from a wide variety of secondary data sources including the Census Bureau, local administrative data, and national surveys. The Urban Institute also collected primary data by implemen-</td>
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<td>5. For instance, in the 2008–09 school year, there were 183 public school preschool through fifth grade students (either DCPS or public charter) living in the DCPI neighborhoods. Of those 81 students, 33 percent attended either New North Education Charter or Kenilworth Elementary School. The remaining 48 percent were dispersed across 11 other DCPS or public charter elementary schools (Popkin et al. 2011).</td>
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See Kubisch (2010) and Smith (2011).
The DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative (DCPNI) began in 2008, before the federal initiative was formally launched. Irasema Salcido, CEO and founder of Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools, recognized that students were entering Chavez Middle and High Schools-Parkside with academic skills far below grade level. Inspired by the Harlem Children’s Zone, Mrs. Salcido convened a steering committee to figure out how to address students’ challenges comprehensively. DCPNI involved residents from across the Parkside-Kemilworth community, the two neighboring DCPS elementary schools, and local service providers.

By early 2009, DCPNI’s effort had drawn attention from organizations outside Parkside-Kemilworth. It attracted the strong support of the America’s Promise Alliance, which facilitates volunteer action for children and youth, as well as the Children’s National Medical Center. Eventually, the initiative’s efforts attracted a wide array of actors, including the Urban Institute, service providers from throughout the District, city agencies, foundations, and local politicians who participated in the planning and development effort alongside the residents and schools of Parkside-Kemilworth. In October 2010, Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools, the applicant agency for DCPNI, received one of DCPNI’s planning year, it engaged residents, developed comprehensive plans, brought together organizations and resources, and laid the groundwork for a sustainable initiative.