Never Miss a Beat: Excelling in Education in the Mississippi Delta
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PRELIMINARY PAPER

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Study Site

History of the Promise Community

Delta Health Alliance (DHA), the backbone agency for the Indianola Promise Community, is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization that was originally established to help improve the health and well-being of children and families in the Mississippi Delta. The Delta is a region of 18 rural counties (10,653 square miles) situated in the northwest corner of the state. Understanding the important connection between good health and educational outcomes, DHA uses a mixture of health- and education-focused strategies to improve the lives of children and families in the Delta.

In the late 1990s, the now-CEO of Delta Health Alliance—Karen Matthews, became interested Geoffrey Canada’s holistic approach, specifically the ability to design a comprehensive pipeline, combining health, family and education services to support children from birth to career. Her fascination eventually led her to New York to see the implementation of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) first hand.

After visiting Harlem, Matthews was impressed with the model but still unsure that it could be implemented in a rural setting such as the Mississippi Delta. After all, at the time HCZ was serving XX children and families over 24 city blocks (a few square miles), whereas the rural communities in the Delta are much more isolated and spread out. Still determined, Matthews traveled—this time with key stakeholders from the Delta, back to New York for another site visit at the Zone. During the visit, any initial doubt that the model would work in the Delta had been replaced with excitement and a sense of urgency to return home and begin the work. The visit to HCZ had inspired community

stakeholders that an aligned and coordinated pipeline, along with a dedication to results, could transform communities in the Delta.¹

Upon returning from the visit, DHA coordinated the development of a region-wide, inter-agency committee whose purpose was to conduct a review of Delta communities to identify a location best suited for replication of HCZ model. When conducting the review, the committee considered levels of poverty, academic achievement, school district interest, and access to quality health care and other support services. The committee, supported by a community analysis led by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc, selected Indianola. According to the committee, what set Indianola apart were not test scores or poverty rate, but the intangibles—sense of community ownership and neighborhood cohesiveness.²

As interest was growing in the Delta, the stars began to align at the national policy level. Leading up to the 2008 presidential campaign, Geoffrey Canada was introduced to staff of then-Senator Barack Obama. The initial development began during Obama’s 2008 presidential election and eventually the Office of Innovation and Improvement at the US Department of Education (USDOE) released the federal framework for the Promise Neighborhoods initiative³. In 2010, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the award of 21 USDOE Promise Neighborhoods Planning grants. Delta Health Alliance was among the 21 nonprofits awarded.

DHA leveraged the Promise Neighborhoods planning grant award with a grant from the W.K. Kellogg foundation to begin to lay the foundation for a data-driven, results-based initiative. IPC purchased a longitudinal case-management system, Efforts to Outcomes, and began construction of the early end of the pipeline, working primarily with partners who served children 0-8 years old. The Indianola Promise Community Early Education Collaborative (IPCECC) marked the first coordinated effort by IPC and its partners to align resources, data and best practices. Due in large part to the work started by the IPCEEC, DHA was awarded one of seven (7) FY12 USDOE Promise Neighborhood Implementation grants—roughly $30 million over 5 years to implement a full birth to career pipeline in Indianola.

A closer look at Indianola

Indianola is a rural town located in Sunflower County, MS in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. The city was named and developed in 1882, due to a lumber mill located on the river. Indianola is geographically located at the cross-section of US Routes 82 and 49W. While many small towns in the Mississippi Delta suffered from the mechanization of farming, the location of Indianola allowed the city to remain more economically viable.

Today, the city’s population is nearly all African American (79%). Poverty is pervasive—more than a third (35%) of the population falls below the poverty line, compared to 23% in Mississippi and 15% in the United States⁵. The unemployment rate, at 21%, is double the state and national averages⁶.

² DHA IPC USDOE grant application
⁴ US Census 2010 table DP1
⁵ American community survey 2013 5 year estimates table S1701,poverty status in last 12 months
⁶ American community survey 2013 5-year estimates table S2301
The hardship that living in poverty can cause does not stop at home, but feeds into the local school system. After all, students do not arrive at Kindergarten a blank slate—what happens in the home and community largely determines many academic and life outcomes. Like most of the town itself, the school districts in Indianola are essentially segregated. The public schools are almost entirely African American (98%) and the private school, Indianola Academy (IA), is filled with primarily white students. Following the ruling of Brown v Board of Education, that ruled the racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional, academies similar to IA began popping up everywhere across the South. Unfortunately, the segregation that took place during the 1970s and led to black public schools and white private schools is still very much the case in Indianola today.

In Indianola public schools student proficiency rates in reading and math according to state accountability tests are low. In 2012-2013 (the school year before full pipeline implementation), only 33% of students scored proficient or higher on state English language arts assessment and only 49% scored proficient or higher on state math assessments. At the beginning of the next school year that fall, only 25% of Kindergarteners arrived “ready” to learn, according to school readiness assessments.

The Indianola Promise Community mission is to build a pipeline that will strengthen existing systems and support families and the local public school system so that children graduate from high school, go on to college and become productive adults.

The construction of the pipeline

Within the IPC pipeline, there are 4 systems: Early Childhood, K-12+Afterschool, College + Career, and Family + Community Support. Following the Results-Based Accountability framework that Friedman spells out in Trying Hard is Not Good Enough, IPC has 10 overarching, population level results that stretch across the 4 systems—from birth to meaningful career. Under each result, there is a set of population-level indicators that inform the IPC on how they are doing to achieve each result. Under each indicator there are set of strategies and programs that we will believe will have an impact on the indicator. And, each program or strategies has its own set of performance measures that let us know how program participants are doing.

Early Childhood

Early childhood programs, serving children from birth to five years old and their parents, are a vital component of IPC. How a child learns and develops—socially, emotionally and cognitively, in those first years of life is critical. For this reason, when building the early childhood pipeline IPC used the best evidence base and local knowledge to improve and expand access to high quality early learning programs. IPC has one overarching goal for the early end of the pipeline and several indicators that are tracked on an annual basis, including:

- IPC Goal 1: Children Enter Kindergarten Ready to Learn
  - IPC Indicator 1: the number and percent of children, 0-5 years old, with access to a medical home

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7 Need reference
9 http://reports.mde.k12.ms.us/data/
10 Measurement of Academic Progress math and reading assessments, k-entry 2013
11 Trying hard isn’t good enough, Mark Friedman
In order to achieve results at the population level, IPC leverages what is already working in Indianola for young children and “seals” the pipeline by filling in high quality services where there may be a gap.

Early education has always been a priority area. During the planning grant period, IPC and its partners used the majority of funding to create the Early Education Collaborative (IPCEEC). This earlier children enter the pipeline, the better. Ideally, IPC children enter the pipeline before birth through a maternal home visitation program. The system continues to build and support families by providing: in-home family service workers, early interventions for children who show signs of delay, monthly book programs, childcare supports and other kindergarten readiness programs.

Most recently, in 2015, IPC led a city-wide effort to align curriculum standards and assessments for all early education providers in Indianola, including private childcare centers, the Head Start provider, and the state’s Pre-K Collaborative. Because of this effort, all children attending formal childcare will receive a high-quality, evidence-based education that aligns to the state’s Kindergarten standards. Along with the evidence-based programs IPC offers to families and young children, the alignment of curriculum standards will allow young children to more easily transition to formal K-12 education.

**K-12 + Afterschool**

The K-12 + Afterschool system is driven by 3 results, and 3 indicators:

- IPC Goal 2: Students are proficiency in core subjects
  - IPC Indicator 4: the number and percent of students who are proficient in Math and English language arts
- IPC Goal 3: Students successfully transition from middle to high school
  - IPC Indicator 5: Attendance rate, chronic absenteeism rate
- IPC Goal 4: Students graduate from high school
  - IPC Indicator 6: 4-year cohort graduation rate

In order to make progress on each of the goals, IPC supports a combination of community- and school-based programming. Because students spend the majority of their time in the classroom, it is important to support the services that take place during the school day. IPC supports a comprehensive teacher professional development program, mentoring program, literacy fellows and reading advocates who work with students demonstrating delays in reading and literacy skills, and life skills training courses. Within the community, IPC supports additional reading advocates, after school programming, and arts enrichment.

Recently, IPC has coordinated an effort with the state’s Teach for America (TFA) program, to recruit TFA-certified teachers to remain in Indianola after their 2-year TFA commitment has expired. The position includes high-quality reading intervention during the school day and participation in IPC’s community-based programming after regular school hours.

All of the programs and strategies in the K-12 system have one long-term goal: all participants will graduate from high school and enter college, university, credentialed training program or meaningful employment. Once a child has graduated from high school, she transitions in to the College + Career system.
College + Career

- IPC Goal 5: Students enter college, without need for remediation,

Family + Community Support

If the programs and strategies in the early childhood, K-12, and college and career system are our pipeline, than the Family + Community Support system would be our insulation. In order to ensure that children do not fall out of the pipeline as they move from early childhood to K-12 to college and career, IPC offers several support services, including family case managers, social workers, a parent liaison and neighborhood associations.

IPC’s family case managers are referred to as LINKS (Linking Individuals Neighborhoods and Kids to Services). Using individual-level data from the case management system, LINKS target enrollment of families with children who are considered at-risk for health, course performance, behavior or truancy. Although families may be initially identified at service by one member of the family, once a family is enrolled the LINKS serves the entire family. The LINKS meet with families in their home at least once per month. The purpose is to build a strong relationship with family members in order to identify and refer families to existing support services in the pipeline. As of August 2015, IPC has enrolled around 1 in 4 Indianola families in the program.

Results-based accountability

If IPCs program and strategies are the pipeline, the families and community are the insulation, then Results-Based Accountability (RBA) would be the valves and gauges—a mechanism or framework we use to inform our team of how much we are doing, how well we are doing it and if anyone is better off.

Population-level accountability

To ensure no one falls out of the pipeline, we use individual-level data on children and families in real-time to continually improve existing services and develop new strategies as the need arises.

Program level accountability

Staff accountability

Preliminary Results

Early Childhood

- IPC Indicator 2, kindergarten readiness—increase of 19% pt for the number/percent of Kindergarteners who enter school ready to learn (25 to 44% from 2013 to 2014)
- Enrollment in 2+ IPC programs before Kindergarten—participants, on average, meet k-readiness benchmarks

K-12

- IPC Indicator 4, student proficiency—improvement in the number and percent of 3-8th and 10th graders who score proficient or advanced in core subjects
College + Career

- IPC Indicator 6, high school graduation—decrease from 68% to 61% 4-year cohort graduation rate
- IPC pipeline is not fully activated at the college/career level

Parent + Community Engagement

- IPC Indicators 12, 13, family reading habits
  - improvements
- IPC Indicator 14, family engagement in college/career
  - No improvement (not fully activated at college/career level)

Discussion & Future

Next Steps

- Building out alert system
- Determine most successful pathways across pipeline

Scale and sustainability

- Sustainability of accountability processes
- Transition to backbone
- Support from Annie E. Casey Foundation

Policy Implications