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The Harlem Miracle

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

The fight against poverty produces great programs but disappointing results. You go visit an inner-city school, job-training program or community youth center and you meet incredible people doing wonderful things. Then you look at the results from the serious evaluations and you find that these inspiring places are only producing incremental gains.

That's why I was startled when I received an e-mail message from Roland Fryer, a meticulous Harvard economist. It included this sentence: "The attached study has changed my life as a scientist."

Fryer and his colleague Will Dobbie have just finished a rigorous assessment of the charter schools operated by the Harlem Children's Zone. They compared students in these schools to students in New York City as a whole and to comparable students who entered the lottery to get into the Harlem Children's Zone schools, but weren't selected.

They found that the Harlem Children's Zone schools produced "enormous" gains. The typical student entered the charter middle school, Promise Academy, in sixth grade and scored in the 39th percentile among New York City students in math. By the eighth grade, the typical student in the school was in the 74th percentile. The typical student entered the school scoring in the 39th percentile in English Language Arts (verbal ability). By eighth grade, the typical student was in the 53rd percentile.

Forgive some academic jargon, but the most common education reform ideas — reducing class size, raising teacher pay, enrolling kids in Head Start — produce gains of about 0.1 or 0.2 or 0.3 standard deviations. If you study policy, those are the sorts of improvements you live with every day. Promise Academy produced gains of 1.3 and 1.4 standard deviations. That's off the charts. In math, Promise Academy eliminated the achievement gap between its black students and the city average for white students.

Let me repeat that. It eliminated the black-white achievement gap. "The results changed my life as a researcher because I am no longer interested in marginal changes," Fryer wrote in a subsequent e-mail. What Geoffrey Canada, Harlem Children's Zone's founder and president, has done is "the equivalent of curing cancer for these kids. It's amazing. It should be celebrated. But it almost doesn't matter if we stop there. We don't have a way to replicate his cure, and we need one since so many of our kids are dying — literally and figuratively."

These results are powerful evidence in a long-running debate. Some experts, mostly surrounding the education establishment, argue that schools alone can't produce big changes. The problems are in society, and you have to work on broader issues like economic inequality. Reformers, on the other hand, have argued that school-based approaches can produce big results. The Harlem Children's Zone results suggest the reformers are right. The Promise Academy does provide health and psychological services, but it helps

kids who aren't even involved in the other programs the organization offers.

To my mind, the results also vindicate an emerging model for low-income students. Over the past decade, dozens of charter and independent schools, like Promise Academy, have become no excuses schools. The basic theory is that middle-class kids enter adolescence with certain working models in their heads: what I can achieve; how to control impulses; how to work hard. Many kids from poorer, disorganized homes don't have these internalized models. The schools create a disciplined, orderly and demanding counterculture to inculcate middle-class values.

To understand the culture in these schools, I'd recommend "Whatever It Takes," a gripping account of Harlem Children's Zone by my Times colleague Paul Tough, and "Sweating the Small Stuff," a superb survey of these sorts of schools by David Whitman.

Basically, the no excuses schools pay meticulous attention to behavior and attitudes. They teach students how to look at the person who is talking, how to shake hands. These schools are academically rigorous and college-focused. Promise Academy students who are performing below grade level spent twice as much time in school as other students in New York City. Students who are performing at grade level spend 50 percent more time in school.

They also smash the normal bureaucratic strictures that bind leaders in regular schools. Promise Academy went through a tumultuous period as Canada searched for the right teachers. Nearly half of the teachers did not return for the 2005-2006 school year. A third didn't return for the 2006-2007 year. Assessments are rigorous. Standardized tests are woven into the fabric of school life.

The approach works. Ever since welfare reform, we have had success with intrusive government programs that combine paternalistic leadership, sufficient funding and a ferocious commitment to traditional, middle-class values. We may have found a remedy for the achievement gap. Which city is going to take up the challenge? Omaha? Chicago? Yours?

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