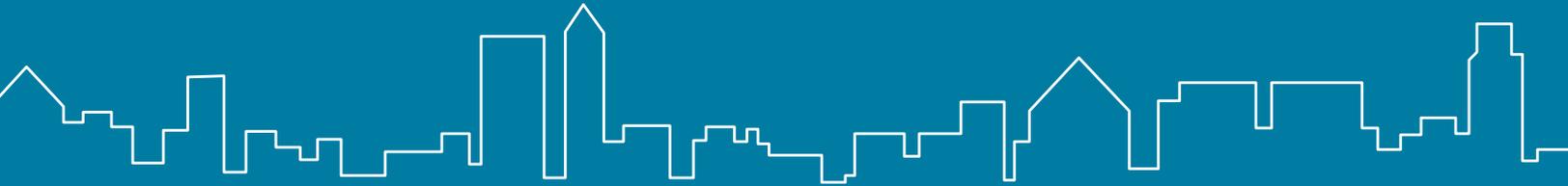


# Making the Case for Promise Neighborhoods



Megan Gallagher, Lori Nathanson, Peter Tatian, Jarle Crocker

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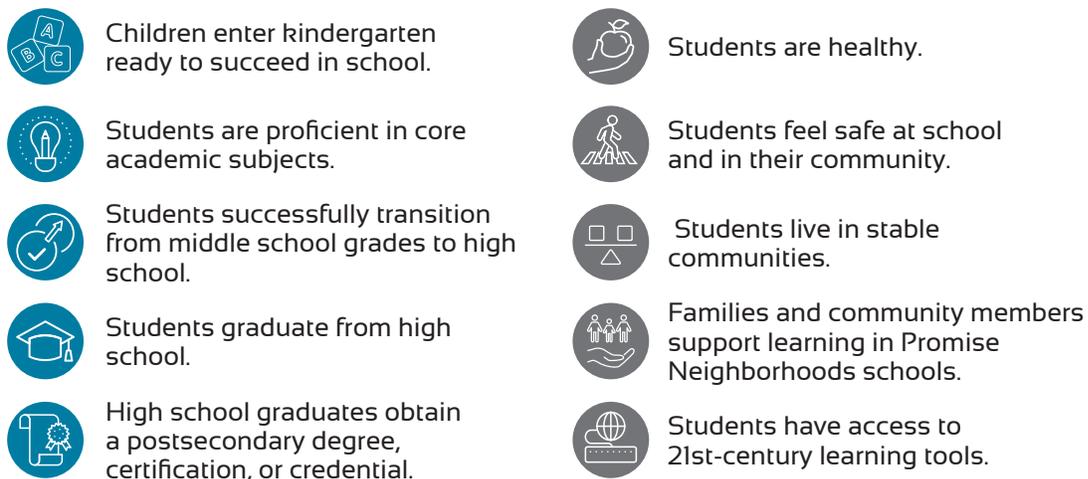
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## Introduction

The [U.S. Department of Education \(ED\) Promise Neighborhoods grants](#) catalyze opportunities in places by transforming the way schools, youth, and family-serving organizations work with one another and with members of the community. Promise Neighborhoods employ evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes from early childhood through adulthood. They implement robust data collection and continuous improvement practices that empower practitioners to understand and use data in their work. Most importantly, these neighborhoods invite their communities to play a pivotal role in shaping and driving the initiatives for success.

The Promise Neighborhoods grant program empowers growth, community by community, in places that have been the most historically disinvested. It provides up to 5 years of funding to a nonprofit organization, institution of higher education, or Tribal organization responsible for administering the grant and convening partners to offer a cradle-to-career continuum of supports that focus on [10 population-level results](#) (see figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Promise Neighborhoods results



Promise Neighborhoods are places and sets of strategies for improving outcomes for children. Promise Neighborhoods can be rural, urban, or suburban places and can range in size from a few census tracts to several counties. The Promise Neighborhoods strategy starts with building a coalition of community members, practitioners, and leaders who know how to achieve results for their communities. Promise Neighborhoods grantees typically serve as the backbone organization that convenes partners, including schools, districts, families, and nonprofits, and facilitates collaboration among them. Promise Neighborhoods track population-level results and ensure their partners' work contributes to results at the school or neighborhood level. Partners can contribute to results through evidence-based programs and changes to organizational and public policies that limit opportunity.

When the Promise Neighborhoods grant program initially launched planning grants in 2010, the Promise Neighborhoods model was not a new concept. It built on efforts already underway in communities nationwide, such as the [Harlem Children's Zone \(HCZ\)](#) in New York City. Today, Promise Neighborhoods is part of an ecosystem of child-focused, place-based initiatives that include HCZ; former Promise Neighborhoods grantees that have sustained their work over time, such as [Northside Achievement Zone](#) in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and organizations in the [StriveTogether](#) and [Purpose Built Communities](#) networks.

*The remainder of this document brings the Promise Neighborhoods program and strategy to life with examples from Promise Neighborhoods' 10 year-history and a vision for the next 10 years and beyond. The next section focuses on "Promising" stories about communities that exemplify the transformative opportunity that Promise offers. The final section concludes with a vision for the program going forward.*

# Promising Stories

No two Promise Neighborhoods are alike; each has its own unique economic, social, and cultural history and context. The ED Promise Neighborhoods grants program has become more than the sum of its parts, generating various types of growth and change in both urban and rural communities. Successful Promise Neighborhoods implement diverse strategies that may inspire other communities within their own neighborhoods. Investments that ED has made have stimulated many other investments of time and money in communities. When more constituents invest in the Promise Neighborhoods approach—from public and private funders investing in affordable housing to partners opening wellness centers—lasting large-scale change occurs to realize the potential of communities across the United States.

The remainder of this section provides illustrative stories about Promise Neighborhoods in California, Kentucky, and New Jersey:

- **Mission Promise Neighborhood Blossoms Into Promise City.** [Mission Economic Development Agency](#) built Mission Promise Neighborhoods in “the Mission” neighborhood of San Francisco, California. Two inflection points—a housing crisis related to the tech boom and the COVID-19 pandemic—helped a Promise Neighborhood grow into Promise City.
- **A National Movement for Rural Communities From Appalachian Kentucky.** [Partners for Rural Impact](#) (PRI) formed in May 2022 and traces its roots to Partners for Education at Berea College, the backbone organization for four Promise Neighborhoods. PRI supports 62,000 students across Appalachian Kentucky through Promise Neighborhoods, Full-Service Community Schools, and Gear UP. It is a hub for other rural communities across the United States to build a national movement.
- **Cradle-to-Career and Social and Economic Mobility in South Ward Promise Neighborhood.** [Building Resilient Intelligent Creative Kids](#) (BRICK) Education Network is a charter management organization that established South Ward Promise Neighborhood through two grants (fiscal years [FYs] 2017 and 21) in Newark, New Jersey. Through Promise Neighborhoods, BRICK expanded its kindergarten (K)–12 focus with the help of 30 community partners to build a continuum of services that begin before the cradle (e.g., supporting maternal health) and extend through postsecondary programs to revitalize the whole community.

Additional details follow to highlight these Promise Neighborhoods' strengths and journeys plus the regional and national networks that help sustain their communities.

## Mission Promise Neighborhood Blossoms Into Promise City

The Mission District (“the Mission”) is traditionally a Latino immigrant gateway in San Francisco, California, marked by its legacy of art, culture, and activism. [Mission Promise Neighborhood](#) cultivates the strengths of multigeneration Latino families who live, study, and work in the Mission through a two-generation approach. Mission Promise Neighborhood connects children and their families with low incomes to academic enrichment, affordable housing, income assistance, mental health counseling, and other essential services in the Mission.

Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA) has coordinated this mix of services as Mission Promise Neighborhood’s backbone organization since awarded a 2012 ED grant followed by an extension grant in 2018. By the time Mission Promise Neighborhood had concluded its ED funding in 2022, it had blossomed into Promise City (see [MEDA’s press release for additional information](#)).



*Caption: The Mission’s legacy of art, culture, and activism includes murals, a lowrider, and street theater.  
Source: Mission Economic Development Agency*

Staff, students, and families in Mission Promise Neighborhood implemented a variety of strategies to cultivate its success. MEDA organized a network of 15 community organizations that coordinated services at 9 schools and 3 early learning centers in the Mission District. Family success coaches have played key roles working directly with families to integrate economic strategies, support services, and academic support for students. For example, a coach may organize job training for a parent, help register their youngest child in a quality early learning program, and guide an older sibling toward graduation with academic support through [Mission Graduates](#). Another family may benefit from a combination of services, such as learning about tenants' rights, coaching to build credit, assistance to secure affordable housing, and mental health services. Over its 10 years of implementation with ED and matching fund investments, Mission Promise Neighborhood yielded gains across the cradle-to-career approach in kindergarten readiness and high school graduation.

Understanding the landscape on which Mission Promise Neighborhood was built provides important context. MEDA was founded in 1973 with a focus on asset building for Latino prosperity in the Mission around the same time the broader region became known as Silicon Valley, the hub of technology development. Silicon Valley had its highs and lows, affecting the Mission and its residents. The tech boom in the 1990s increased rents across the region and displaced Latino residents from the Mission.

In 2018, MEDA combined Neighborhood Survey findings with census data to understand the stressors of many Mission Promise Neighborhood families who earned less than \$25,000 in annual earnings. Between 2011 and 2017, two-bedroom rental unit costs rose by 45 percent, from an already high of \$3,143 to a staggering \$4,563. To put this increase in perspective, the annual rent totaled \$54,756—more than double what families with annual incomes of \$25,000 made and still beyond the means of the 27 percent of families in the Mission who earned less than \$35,000 a year.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it was no surprise that, when founding Mission Promise Neighborhood staff asked families about the best way they could help their children succeed academically in biannual Neighborhood Surveys, the answer was “affordable housing.”

*“The scale of the solution had to match the scale of the problem.”*

—Richard Raya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MEDA. (n.d.). *The Stressors of Families Earning Less Than \$35,000 Annually*. Retrieved from [https://medasf.org/redesign2/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Income-and-Rents\\_v5.pdf](https://medasf.org/redesign2/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Income-and-Rents_v5.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Raya, R. (2023, December 12). *Finding Our Place in Place-Based Initiatives*. Opening plenary session of the Promise Neighborhoods Full-Service Community Schools National Network Conference, Arlington, VA.

# Mission Promise Neighborhood

Mission Promise Neighborhood staff listened and acknowledged that, in addition to its two-generation model rooted in economic development and academic support, MEDA needed to address housing. With the help of a housing expert funded with Promise Neighborhood dollars, MEDA and Mission residents pressured city hall to take action, which resulted in qualified nonprofits winning first right of refusal when properties in the neighborhood went up for sale through the Community Opportunity to Purchase Act. At the request of residents, MEDA worked with city hall and private investors to purchase apartment buildings. In some cases, tenants could stay while MEDA rehabilitated their apartments, catching up on deferred maintenance. If the rehabilitation needs were too extensive, MEDA worked with residents on a relocation solution that met the residents' needs to stay as close as possible to school, work, and transportation options.

MEDA also created new buildings, including [Casa Adelante](#), with community gardens, on-site laundry, and accessible units. For every building MEDA erects, the neighborhood weighs in on the murals that adorn it. The rear facade of Casa Adelante greets passersby who enter the Mission from the Financial District with the message "Basta Ya!"—"Enough already!"—and the visage of local artist and activist Yolanda Margarita López. Even with MEDA counting over 700 affordable housing units preserved, 500 units created since 2019, and more than 700 new units in the pipeline, the supply is not enough. MEDA continues to develop affordable housing out of necessity, leveraging local and state funding. Housing helped retain families in the Mission, and early childhood services expanded to meet the needs of young children and families.



*Caption: Each unit at 126 Casa Adelante (pictured front and rear) is affordable and all electric. The building features community gardens and murals that reflect the community. Residents selected Jessica Sabogal to create a mural honoring local artist and activist, Yolanda Margarita López (November 1, 1942–September 3, 2021), who was part of the Chicano Movement and influenced by the Black Panthers. "Basta Ya!"—"Enough already!"—greeted folks as they enter the Mission District from downtown. Sources: (1) Raya, R. (2023, December 12). Finding Our Place in Place-Based Initiatives. Opening plenary session of the Promise Neighborhoods Full-Service Community Schools National Network Conference, Arlington, VA. (2) Hom, A. (2022, June 3). Casa Adelante, 100% Affordable and Electric Building, Took Decades of Advocacy. Mission Local. Retrieved from <https://missionlocal.org/2022/06/casa-adelante-100-percent-affordable-and-electric-building-took-decades-of-advocacy/>.*

The next inflection point for Mission Promise Neighborhood was related not to housing or economic development but to a global health crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. Across the globe and country, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities. In San Francisco, where Latinos account for 15 percent of the city population, they accounted for [50 percent of COVID-19 cases in fall 2020](#). City officials looked to MEDA because of the trust and relationships Mission Promise Neighborhood staff and partners had built with Latino residents over the years. Drawing on these relationships and Mission Promise Neighborhood's direct communication in English and Spanish, MEDA successfully led vaccine outreach to over 11,200 residents.<sup>3</sup> It also provided \$6.3 million in income relief to 5,000 families since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> MEDA's Community Development Financial Institution and business development provider, Fondo Adelante, helped over 350 small businesses procure \$17.6 million in pandemic response loans between 2020 and 2022.<sup>5</sup> Mission Promise Neighborhood contributed to the 87-percent COVID-19 vaccination rate for the Latino community in San Francisco.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the grantee's quick and comprehensive action during COVID-19, Mayor London Breed praised the Promise Neighborhood's achievements in education: Seventy-one percent of Mission Promise early learning center students were ready for kindergarten when parents engaged in programming compared with the neighborhood average of 47 percent in 2019.<sup>7</sup> At Mission Promise target high schools, the high school graduation rates increased for all students from 73 to 83 percent over 10 years.<sup>8</sup> Latino students graduated at higher rates than the overall San Francisco high school average for 3 years in a row at one Mission Promise Neighborhood high school, as shown in figure 2 from the Mission Promise Neighborhoods 2021 ad hoc Summary Report.

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<sup>3</sup> Mission Economic Development Agency. (2023). *Community Real Estate Portfolio*. Retrieved September 1, 2023, from MEDA's internal community real estate portfolio tracker.

<sup>4</sup> Mission Economic Development Agency. (2024). *HRSA Vaccine Survey Outreach Report*. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from MEDA's internal Salesforce data management system.

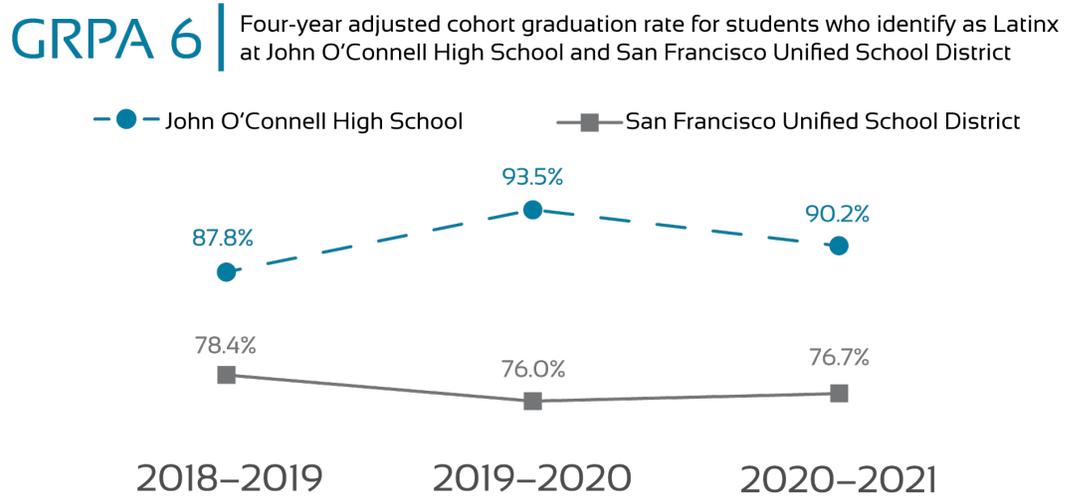
<sup>5</sup> Mission Economic Development Agency. (2024). *Approved Family Relief Grants Distribution Report*. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from MEDA's internal Salesforce data management system.

<sup>6</sup> Nathanson, L., and Worden, M. (2023). *Mission Promise Neighborhood ad hoc Annual Performance Report 2022 Summary: Fiscal Year 2012/Extension Grantee, Year 10 Report*. U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>7</sup> StriveTogether. (2023, October 24). *Nested Civic Infrastructure | Mission Promise Neighborhood spotlight*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17eYhHHlycc>.

<sup>8</sup> Nathanson, L., and Worden, M. (2023). *Mission Promise Neighborhood ad hoc Annual Performance Report 2022 Summary: Fiscal Year 2012/Extension Grantee, Year 10 Report*. U.S. Department of Education.

**Figure 2.** Four-year adjusted graduation rate for students who identify as Latinx at John O’Connell High School and San Francisco Unified School District



*Note: Latino students at John O’Connell High School graduated at higher rates than the overall San Francisco Unified School district average for 3 years in a row.*  
*Source: Nathanson, L., and Worden, M. (2023). Mission Promise Neighborhood ad hoc Annual Performance Report 2021 Summary: Fiscal Year 2012/Extension Grantee, Year 9 Report. U.S. Department of Education.*

In 2022, Mayor Breed recognized Mission Promise Neighborhood as a model<sup>9</sup> and supported the plan to re-create this neighborhood-based approach in three new neighborhoods—the Bayview, Chinatown, and District 11 communities—to seed Promise City in San Francisco. MEDA, a Latino-led organization, was a natural leader that could build on Mission Promise Neighborhood’s success and expand from a Latino neighborhood to support other lead agencies to reflect more of the diversity of San Francisco neighborhoods. In 2023, a three-person team at MEDA’s Equitable Recovery Institute supported planning processes in these neighborhoods using templates, tools, and lessons learned from Mission Promise Neighborhood. Promise City is a multiracial initiative seeking Black leadership in the Bayview neighborhood and working with Asian leadership at Community Youth Center to drive the work in Chinatown.

Mission Promise Neighborhood’s cradle-to-career approach is a shining example of how Promise’s key elements weave together to spark community-driven change in a neighborhood, expanding its impact to encompass an entire city. Promise City continues the cradle-to-career place-based work by coordinating city, school district, and partner organizations for disinvested communities. Sustaining Mission Promise

<sup>9</sup> Mission Economic Development Agency. (2022, October 19). *Promise City Initiative Launched, Joint Effort by City, SFUSD and Community Organizations* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://medasf.org/promise-city-initiative-launched-joint-effort-by-city-sfusd-and-community-organizations/>.

Neighborhoods is essential to Promise City. Governor Gavin Newsom added \$3 million for Mission Promise Neighborhood to the California's state budget, related to advocacy for Assembly Bill 2517, the It Takes a Village Act).<sup>10</sup> The It Takes a Village Act ultimately did not pass, but advocates continue to push for more funding to create additional Promise Neighborhoods in California in the new legislative cycle. Blue Meridian Partners' Place Matters portfolio awarded \$6 million to MEDA, primarily to sustain Mission Promise Neighborhood, following the sunset of its federal funding from ED. A portion of this award supports a three-person team that works on Promise City programs and partnerships in new neighborhoods.

Promise City seeks to leverage and align programs and services at 28 schools and community sites, which are currently supported through a multimillion dollar investment from the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and their Families (\$12.3 million). Successful implementation of Promise City looks like a community-led backbone agency in each neighborhood that coordinates programs and services to align with holistic, neighborhood-based plans.



*Caption: A three-person team at Mission Economic Development Agency's new Equitable Recovery Institute, including Liz Cortez, Ana Avilez, and Richard Raya (from left to right), will support Promise City using lessons learned from Mission Promise Neighborhood. Liz served Mission Promise Neighborhood for more than 9 years in several roles, most recently as associate director, and in 2022, she transitioned to the role of director of programs and partnerships for Promise City.*

In the Mission, throughout San Francisco, and in other California communities, neighborhood-based cradle-to-career collaboratives are becoming the norm. The Promise Neighborhoods grant program catalyzed these neighborhoods and other communities from Florida to Alaska.

*"If these types of neighborhood-based cradle-to-career collaboratives are normalized across the country, there's no telling how many more successful children we will see over time."*

—Richard Raya, [Nested Civic Infrastructure: Mission Promise Neighborhood Spotlight](#) (video)

<sup>10</sup> The full text of the act is available at California Coordinated Neighborhood and Community Services Grant Program, AB-2517 (2022), retrieved from [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB2517](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB2517). As a result of statewide advocacy in California, the FY 22 state budget, signed by Governor Newsom, funded four Promise Neighborhoods communities, including Mission Promise Neighborhood, at \$1 million each for 3 years.

## A National Movement for Rural Communities from Appalachian Kentucky

Berea College has always been a pioneer in developing innovative and radical approaches to combating rural poverty, particularly in Appalachia. The first integrated, coeducational college in the South, it has been tuition free since its founding in 1892. Most Berea College students come from Kentucky and Appalachia, with a significant number from economically distressed and at-risk counties. The college aspires that many graduates will “continue to reside in Kentucky and Appalachia to make our region an even better place to live and work.”<sup>11</sup>



*Caption: Jackson County High School agriculture teacher Doug Wilson explains the growing cycle of plants to visiting preschool students as part of the first Promise Neighborhood's work.*

This commitment to improving the well-being of people living and working in rural Kentucky prompted Berea College to apply for its first Promise Neighborhoods implementation grant in 2011. During the next 12 years, this initial investment led to three more federally supported Promise Neighborhoods in Kentucky and to the formation of an organization later created to lead this work, Partners for Rural Impact (PRI), which began as a division of the college. Over the past decade, PRI has used the investments and experiences within the Promise Neighborhoods framework to develop a comprehensive, place-based approach. This model empowers rural leaders and communities to accelerate educational outcomes for all students.

<sup>11</sup> Berea College. (n.d.). *Serving Appalachia*. Retrieved from <https://www.berea.edu/serving-appalachia>.

Under the leadership of Dreama Gentry, PRI's founder, president, and CEO, the college obtained the first Promise Neighborhoods implementation grant awarded to a rural community in FY 11. The initial Promise Neighborhood comprised three rural counties in Kentucky: Clay, Jackson, and Owsley. With a collective population of almost 40,000, this area was home to 8,500 children—6,300 of whom were enrolled in Promise Neighborhood partner schools. The application for the Promise Neighborhoods grant noted, "Residents live in poverty at three times the national poverty rate, have the shortest life span in the nation, face an epidemic of prescription drug abuse and face a myriad of health problems. All middle and high schools in our Promise Neighborhood are Persistently Lowest-Achieving schools."

In another first, Gentry's team helped launch the first designated rural [Promise Zone](#) in the nation. The college also successfully executed an innovative approach to braiding together various sources of federal and private funding to sustain and expand its efforts. By combining funds from programs such as [GEAR UP](#), [Investing in Innovation](#), [Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation](#), and [Upward Bound](#), PRI effectively leveraged over \$39 million in federal funds annually.

Still, PRI faced several challenges at the beginning of its Promise Neighborhoods journey, including creating a solid infrastructure among its management team, core partners, and working groups and developing a true results-based process by which all parties are accountable for tracking and affecting outcomes. Under Gentry's leadership, at that time as head of Berea College's Office of External Programs, the management team operated with a visionary approach to creating lasting change in the community. Both the management team and staff in the field prioritized the recruitment of local residents with ties to the communities and the college who were passionate about the work. The three school districts and all schools actively partnered as shared owners of the Promise Neighborhood's goals.



*Caption: Dreama Gentry has been involved with Promise Neighborhoods in Kentucky since the beginning in 2011. She founded and leads Partners for Rural Impact as president and CEO. Source: Partners for Rural Impact. (n.d.). About Us. Retrieved from <https://partnersrural.org/about-us/>.*

These efforts paid off. The Promise Neighborhood's early childhood services were successful in increasing kindergarten readiness rates through a teacher coaching initiative and a comprehensive approach to providing services to children and families. Rates of kindergarten readiness at target schools in Berea College Promise Neighborhood increased from 16 percent when first reported to 38 percent in Year 3

and up to 42 percent in Year 4 when data were last reported. Families could access services for their young children, including home visits, early childhood care centers, and enrichment programs.

*“My son started receiving intervention services at age three and was so excited when the specialist visited. We participated in the programs and field trips. When he entered kindergarten, he tested as ready. I know the services that he received helped him be ready.”*

—Berea College Promise Neighborhoods parent

The success of this first Promise Neighborhood encouraged PRI to expand these efforts to more counties through additional Promise Neighborhoods grant funding. Knox County Promise Neighborhood was awarded an implementation grant in FY 16 and Perry County Promise Neighborhood in FY 17. Both counties experienced high poverty and disinvestment. The mining industry formerly dominated the job market in Perry County, but the decline of coal and the subsequent loss of thousands of jobs led to families moving away from the region, and the population fell considerably. The area’s remaining residents have faced the challenges of opioid use, persistent poverty, and a lack of investment in the region to create new job opportunities.



*Caption: Student leaders help connect and inform their peers about college opportunities, changes to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, dual credit in high school, and new career opportunities via the Work Ready Scholarship.*

Gentry and the team at PRI refined their approach from Berea College Promise Neighborhood to Knox and Perry contexts, including the use of family navigators to bridge the relations between families and schools. Misty Maxie, a first-generation college student and Perry County Promise Neighborhood family navigator, recognized that education has not always been a focus for some people in the community. Families that do not have personal experience with higher education may not feel comfortable spending time at their children’s schools, asking questions, or volunteering for school activities. Misty sees part of her role as bridging any gaps between families and school staff to open lines of communication and possibilities in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education.

*“I see it as my role to break the ice and make the transition a lot easier for families. I kind of have my foot in both worlds, so I can connect and make these relationships with families a lot easier.”*

—Misty Maxie

Today, PRI’s place-based approach is clearly rooted in the Promise Neighborhoods experience, emphasizing

- addressing the program gap found in rural areas to ensure students have equitable access to resources;
- building the capacity of rural schools and communities to be data-driven and equity-focused; and
- aligning local, regional, and national systems to ensure student success.

Initiatives of PRI focus on Kentucky but seek to engage key constituents on a national level. For example, PRI’s Rural Library Network is a forum engaging rural libraries across the United States, including public libraries, school libraries, and community college libraries working to advance educational outcomes of rural students. PRI also produces a series of monthly webinars, [Conversations for Action](#), that feature discussions with people committed to serving the needs of rural students. These webinars are posted to PRI’s YouTube channel and enable audiences to learn best practices from experts in place-based approaches to community change.

PRI's efforts have continued and grown with the fourth Promise Neighborhood in Letcher County. Located in eastern Kentucky, the county is an area of persistent poverty described as "the hardest place to live in the United States. Statistically speaking."<sup>12</sup> Letcher County was devastated by a historic flood in July 2022.

*"More than 1,250 homes were left uninhabitable, and around 1,100 students were displaced.... Many of the roads and bridges are so damaged that some believe driving a heavy school bus on them could lead to an accident."*

—Phil McCausland<sup>13</sup> and Partners for Rural Impact Promise Neighborhoods application

In Letcher Promise Neighborhood, PRI followed the successful model of braiding services and aligning funding to optimize results for the children and youth of Appalachia. PRI's solutions for Letcher County include an array of federal, state, local, and privately supported programming for the entire cradle-to-career continuum, including case managers and navigators who will help families access the essential services they need.

Since 2011, Dreama Gentry has learned directly from [Harlem Children's Zone](#) (HCZ) founder Geoffrey Canada. With his mentorship, she applied a rural lens to the HCZ model, developing a Promise Neighborhood model that works in rural America. Following Canada's example, Gentry developed PRI's capacity, partnerships, funding, and infrastructure to scale Promise Neighborhoods in rural areas.

*"We're family here. It's kind of like the road's real crooked instead of straight for everybody. You have to stop at a couple of places, you know?"*

—Letcher County resident

For Letcher County resident Derenia Dunbar, and so many more in eastern Kentucky, rebuilding after the flood is essential, but they know it will not be easy. The newest Letcher Promise Neighborhood will provide the support that Dunbar and other community members will need to successfully navigate those crooked roads.

<sup>12</sup> Lowery, A. (2014, June 29). What's the Matter With Eastern Kentucky? *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/magazine/whats-the-matter-with-eastern-kentucky.html>.

<sup>13</sup> McCausland, P. (2022, August 31). *Records Lost, Hundreds of Displaced Students: Kentucky Floods Have Thrown Schools Into Crisis Mode*. NBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/records-lost-hundreds-displaced-students-kentucky-floods-thrown-school-rcna45555>.

## Cradle-to-Career and Community Revitalization in South Ward Promise Neighborhood

The South Ward was historically one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Newark, New Jersey. Like many cities, shifting demographics in the 1950s and 1960s, along with racist practices of redlining, meant many of its affluent, predominantly White residents departed from Newark's urban core. "The federal government subsidized the growth of suburbs while neglecting cities, and it was racialized in the sense that low-interest mortgages were made available to white people and new housing was made available to white people and those opportunities were not available for black people," said Max Herman, a professor of sociology and anthropology at New Jersey City University.<sup>14</sup> These changes left the South Ward grappling with economic and political neglect. The mostly African-American and Latino populations that remained were disproportionately affected by social problems such as high unemployment, underresourced schools, and lack of access to critical social supports, including affordable housing and healthcare. Despite these challenges, the residents of the South Ward pride themselves on their community's resiliency, strong social networks of mutually supportive relationships, and a shared vision of building thriving neighborhoods and families. It is exactly these strong foundations upon which the [South Ward Promise Neighborhood](#) is built.



*Caption: Murals adorn BRICK's new school location and community garden site.*

<sup>14</sup> O'Dea, C. (September 4, 2019). *Newark Before the Comeback: A City Marked by White Flight, Poor Policy*. NJ Spotlight News. Retrieved from <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2019/09/19-09-02-newark-before-the-comeback-a-city-marked-by-white-flight-and-poor-policy/>.

[Building Resilient Intelligent Creative Kids \(BRICK\) Education Network](#) is the backbone organization of South Ward Promise Neighborhood. BRICK is a pre-cradle-to-career nonprofit focused on improving the social and economic mobility of children and families. BRICK operates two charter schools in the South Ward and uses its network of over 30 community partners to provide a multigeneration approach to break the cycle of poverty in the neighborhood it serves. The South Ward comprises five neighborhoods that include some of the highest concentrations of poverty in the city. BRICK received its first Promise Neighborhood grant in 2017 with a focus on the Upper Clinton Hill and Dayton communities. It received its second grant in 2021 that expanded services into the Lower Clinton Hill and Weequahic neighborhoods.

*“Growing up on Weequahic Avenue in the Weequahic Section of the South Ward of Newark, NJ, this work is deeply personal to me. I am honored to have the opportunity to serve a community and neighborhood that has nurtured me and allowed me to pursue my dreams.”*

—Nichelle Holder, Chief Advancement Officer

The 56,000 residents of South Ward Promise Neighborhood include over 12,000 children aged 0–18 and 19 schools composed of charter and district schools. BRICK’s ability to forge collaborative relationships with the public school system, charters, and the diverse community organizations that provide its broad range of cradle-to-career supports has been critical to South Ward Promise Neighborhood’s success. These connections extend South Ward Promise Neighborhood’s impact beyond the K–12 schools as exemplified by two initiatives: (1) the [South Ward Wellness Center](#) that opened in 2022 to increase healthcare access in the community with a specific focus on maternal and pediatric health and (2) the innovative [College and Career Community Action Network](#) (College and Career CAN) that seeks to build the earnings potential of neighborhood residents.

Local healthcare providers and South Ward Promise Neighborhood conducted surveys that uncovered a striking reality: Despite the presence of the Newark Beth Israel Medical Center (Newark’s second largest hospital) and three Federally Qualified Health Centers, residents reported they lacked access to essential health services.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ekyalongo, Y., Lloyd, C., Steber, K., Patel, A., and Rivera, J. (2022). *Newark’s South Ward Can Help Understand Health Care Access for Black Families with Children*. Child Trends. Retrieved from [https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/SWHealthBrief\\_ChildTrends\\_Dec2022.pdf](https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/SWHealthBrief_ChildTrends_Dec2022.pdf).

# South Ward Promise Neighborhood

Underscoring this problem, the federal Health Resources and Services Administration designated the Dayton neighborhood as a Medically Underserved Area in 2022. The lack of affordable and conveniently located primary care providers within the community was a key driver. Consequently, many families resorted to seeking healthcare in emergency rooms when faced with medical needs.

South Ward Promise Neighborhood responded by partnering with [St. James Health](#), a community-based healthcare services organization, to open the South Ward Wellness Center in 2022. The South Ward Wellness Center served almost 1,000 residents in its first 2 years. It is a “one stop shop” for a range of preventive health services and specializes in serving families with young children.

To achieve a true community-level impact, the South Ward Wellness Center connects residents to a myriad of supports that extend its impact far beyond healthcare. Expectant and new parents are referred to a care management team as part of South Ward Promise Neighborhood’s Healthy Beginnings program. Families receive integrated services such as parent education, kindergarten readiness, mental health, and comprehensive early childhood healthcare supports.

Promise Navigators, who connect clients to South Ward Promise Neighborhood’s Promise Navigation program, operate out of the South Ward Wellness Center. Promise Navigation offers wraparound services, including free legal aid, crisis intervention, housing assistance, and food security. Plans to further expand the Wellness Center are underway through the generous partnership with RWJBarnabas, the largest comprehensive academic healthcare system in New Jersey. By 2026, the new construction will host in-house pediatric and adult healthcare services plus referrals to specialists. The expanded space will also house a community room for meetings, a full Healthy Beginnings maternal health suite, a pharmacy, and a microgym operated by the YMCA of Newark and Vicinity.



*Caption: The South Ward Wellness Center is open—come in!*

In addition to these extensive benefits to the community, the South Ward Wellness Center also serves as an anchor in a broader effort to economically revitalize the Clinton Avenue corridor through its ability to draw other businesses and families to the neighborhood. Clinton Avenue runs through the heart of Clinton Hill, a neighborhood especially scarred by suburbanization in the 1950s and 1960s. Economic development efforts along Clinton Avenue will serve as the cornerstone for the broader revitalization of the whole neighborhood.

The South Ward Promise Neighborhood also focuses on the need of its residents for access to postsecondary education and living-wage careers. In the South Ward, more than 70 percent of families earning a wage still make less than what is required to be above the poverty line.<sup>16</sup> However, many working residents are underemployed or cannot advance in their careers because they face skill gaps. As a result, a third of South Ward residents live below the federal poverty guidelines. The median household income in the South Ward is \$24,004—less than half the national median and 64 percent below Essex County’s living-wage level for a two-person household.<sup>17</sup>

*“To break families free of the cycle of intergenerational poverty and the systems they are built upon, it has become clear that singularly-focused initiatives are not enough. In response, South Ward Promise Neighborhood has employed holistic strategies to effectively eliminate the multifaceted drivers of poverty and allow families to thrive.”*

—Dominique Lee, Chief Executive Officer

Newark, New Jersey, is a college town home to Rutgers University–Newark Campus, Rutgers Business School, New Jersey Institute of Technology, and Essex County College. However, most South Ward residents are not college graduates. Students are accepted to a host of postsecondary institutions and have attempted to pursue degrees or certificates but have not persisted for a host of reasons, contributing to skill gaps and accrued debt from student loans and expenses. For the South Ward to become a more financially stable neighborhood, those skill gaps must be closed.

<sup>16</sup> Health Resources in Action. (2022). *Newark Beth Israel Medical Center Community Health Needs Assessment*. RWJBarnabas Health. Retrieved from <https://www.rwjbh.org/documents/community-health-needs-assessment/NBI-CHNA-2022.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Health Resources in Action. (2022). *Newark Beth Israel Medical Center Community Health Needs Assessment*. RWJBarnabas Health. Retrieved from <https://www.rwjbh.org/documents/community-health-needs-assessment/NBI-CHNA-2022.pdf>.

As part of the solution for closing skill and income gaps, South Ward Promise Neighborhood capitalizes on its unique network of relationships in the work of its College and Career CAN. No single organization can solve the deep-seated issues of unemployment, cycles of generational poverty, and racial wealth divides in the community. The College and Career CAN brings together South Ward Promise Neighborhood schools, postsecondary institutions, and workforce development organizations. The network ensures students have access to a broad range of college and career options and the supports essential to complete their education and career training. Most importantly, the College and Career CAN helps young people secure a career that enables them to have economic mobility or liberation and thrive.

The College and Career CAN aims to provide many pathways for students and families. Most students first access supportive services through the [Career Pathways Program](#), which starts in middle school to expose students to a broad variety of careers and expand their sense of potential educational options. More intensive supports then start in high school. For example, the [Abbot Leadership Institute](#) provides one-on-one individualized assistance to help students and their families with the college process through workshops on college readiness, college tours, and support with applications. Other providers, such as [YouthBuild Newark/Newark Opportunity Youth Network](#), work to reengage young adults with educational opportunities to finish high school and obtain professional credentials that lead to living-wage jobs.

As students enter college and job training programs, South Ward Promise Neighborhood provides wraparound services to support their success. [Gateway U](#) partners with Southern New Hampshire University to offer a nontraditional degree format. The program caps tuition so that students can cover most costs with a Pell Grant of \$7,000. The program pairs one-on-one coaching with project-based learning to help students master real-world skills and connects them with future employers. As of 2023, Gateway U enrolled 124 students from the South Ward.

*"I have been with the South Ward for years and they have been a blessing through the good times and bad times.... They have been very supportive through all my tribulations and helped me with so much support when I struggled with my toddler before she was diagnosed with autism."*

—South Ward Promise Neighborhood parent

For students who want to become medical assistants, [Propel America](#) provides tuition-free training, personalized career coaching, and pipelines to local employers. Other service providers assist students with needs such as child care, housing, and food security to help keep them on track.

In the tech industry, [The Knowledge House's Innovation Fellowship](#) provides 12 months of job training that prepares participants for competitive, well-paid tech careers. The fellowship offers four learning tracks: Data Science with Python, Web Development, Cyber Security, and Networking and User Experience Design (UX/UI). Participants also receive career development support. They may be eligible for monthly work-study stipends to support them while they earn certifications, complete internships, and secure full-time jobs. In 2022–23, nine students enrolled, and four completed the program. Seventeen students are enrolled in the 2023–24 cohort.

The goal of South Ward Promise Neighborhood's college and career efforts is to put young adults on the pathway to economic liberation by providing access to long-term careers and stable jobs. In turn, many of these individuals will make their homes in the South Ward, creating a virtuous cycle of economic revitalization that will have long-term community impact.



Caption: [South Ward Promise Neighborhood's Facebook page](#) is one way to guide residents onto a pathway to a more promising future.

# Conclusion

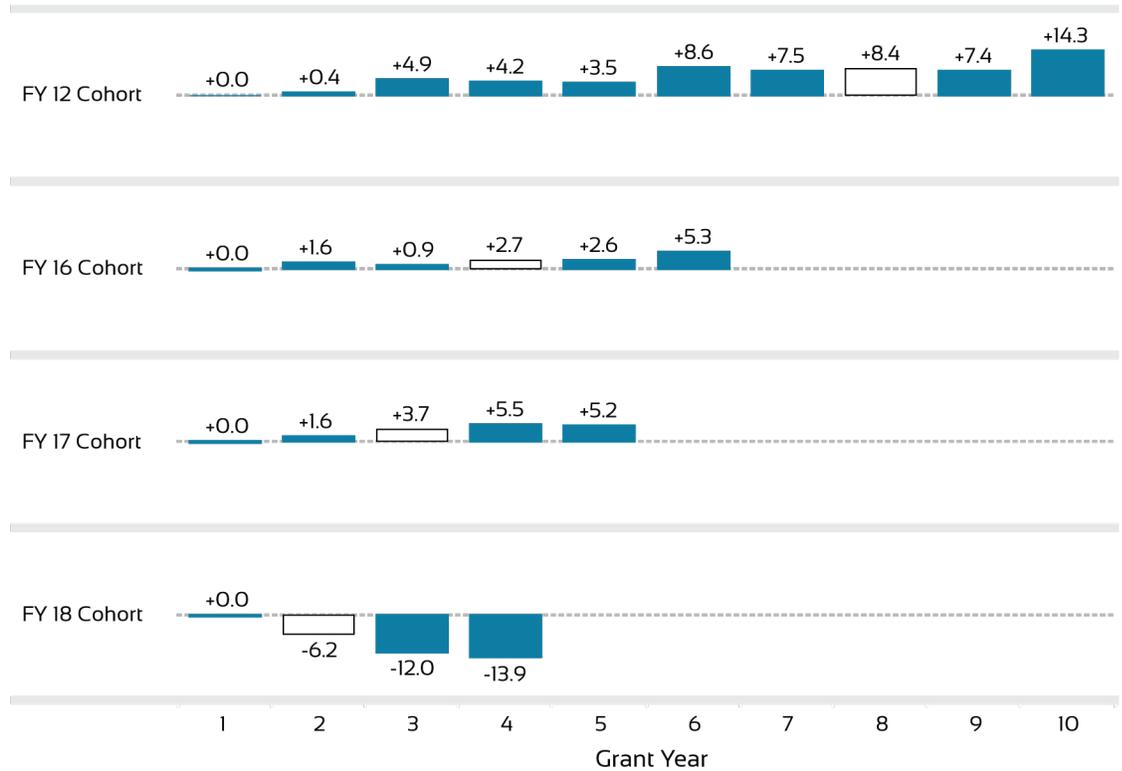
This publication illustrates the transformative, catalytic benefits of ED's Promise Neighborhoods program, which has been awarding grants for the past 10 years. To date, Promise Neighborhoods grants have served over [300,000 children in the collective geographic footprint and partnered with over 300 schools](#). Unlike many other public programs that provide a set of services for a discrete period, the Promise Neighborhoods grants fund a set of services, create an entirely new approach to supporting children and families, and build the capacity of communities to continue the work. This approach enables these efforts to expand beyond education, last beyond the grant period, and be activated during times of crisis.<sup>18</sup> Many grantees have used the opportunity to transform how they work, collaborate with other organizations, and most importantly, achieve outcomes for young people.

We highlighted Mission Promise Neighborhood's evolution into San Francisco's Promise City; Berea College's Promise team, which fostered the creation of Partners for Rural Impact, a regional and national rural education organization; and Newark's South Ward Promise Neighborhood, which sparked the establishment of a community Wellness Center. Each of these grantees used the Promise Neighborhoods grant program to ignite systems-level change and improve outcomes. For example, high school graduation rates for Promise Neighborhoods grantees have increased from baseline rates for most cohorts. The five grantees in the FY 16 cohort increased by an average of 4 percentage points over a 6-year period (2016–22, unweighted). They increased by an average of 14 percentage points over a 10-year period (2012–22, unweighted) for the FY 12 cohort. See figure 3 for the average change in high school graduation rates from the baseline for cohorts FY 12, FY 16, FY 17, and FY 18.

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<sup>18</sup> Spindle, J., and Nathanson, L. (2023). *COVID-19 Response and Recovery in Promise Neighborhoods 2020-2022*. Retrieved from [https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/pdf/Promise\\_Neighborhoods\\_and\\_COVID19\\_Response\\_Recovery.pdf](https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/pdf/Promise_Neighborhoods_and_COVID19_Response_Recovery.pdf).

**Figure 3.** Average change in high school graduation rates from baseline by cohort



□ 2020 data: May be affected by COVID-19

*Note.* This figure displays the average percentage point difference from baseline graduation rate by cohort. Each datapoint is calculated by averaging the difference from the baseline across all grantees in the cohort. Cohorts contain between three and five grantees. Averages are not weighted based on high school populations.

Over the next 10 years, Promise Neighborhoods will build on its impactful legacy, showcasing its value as both an education grant program and a comprehensive investment in bolstering the capacity of children, families, and communities. Grantees carry forward effective programs and practices, supported by federal, state, and philanthropic investors. These investors know that Promise grantees understand how to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of investments and translate their work into results.

We will also see former grantees scale up in their towns and regions with state and local support. They will unite with other place-based, community-engaged, data-driven efforts to change state and national policy. Individuals—children, community members, practitioners, analysts, and policymakers—will benefit from the profound transformation Promise Neighborhoods brought into their lives. Their dedication and enthusiasm for their work will stem from the impact of Promise.

## About the Authors

Megan Gallagher is a Principal Research Associate at the Urban Institute. Her research focuses on how schools, housing, and community programs affect the lives of low-income children and families. She is skilled in quantitative and qualitative research methods. In addition to her research and evaluation work, she conducts training and technical assistance for place-based cradle-to-career initiatives. She has a B.A. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an M.P.P. from Georgetown University.

Lori Nathanson, Ph.D., is a Principal Research Associate for education studies at Westat. Her goal of making research findings accessible and actionable for policymakers, educators, students, and their families has guided over 20 years designing and conducting mixed-methods educational research. Dr. Nathanson provides training and technical assistance for the U.S. Department of Education and directs evaluation work for state and local clients. She earned her bachelor's degree from Duke University and completed her doctorate at the University of Virginia.

Peter Tatian is a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and research director for Urban–Greater DC. He advises nonprofits on performance management and evaluation and heads Urban's work providing technical assistance on data collection and use for place-based cradle-to-career initiatives. He directed the evaluation of the National Foreclosure Mitigation Counseling program, which provided counseling services to more than 1 million troubled homeowners during the foreclosure crisis, and has studied the impacts of public and supportive housing on neighborhoods. He earned a bachelor's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jarle Crocker, Ph.D., is a Principal Research Associate for education studies at Westat. He provides training, technical assistance, and management support for federal grants and other funders to improve human services and education programs for children and families. Dr. Crocker has worked with public agencies, nonprofits and coalitions of community-based stakeholders to build policy agendas, design governance structures to manage collaborative initiatives, and facilitate complex planning processes. He earned a bachelor's degree from University of Pittsburgh and completed a doctorate at George Mason University.

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## About Westat

Westat improves lives by delivering exceptional data-driven research and technical assistance, fostering insights and solutions to advance health, education, and social and economic opportunity. Our approach is rooted in rigorous statistical and data science methods with an unflagging dedication to improving lives through research—we approach each project with investigative curiosity, data rigor, adaptive methods, and advanced technology. These attributes, unchanged since our establishment in 1963, combined with our innovative thinking, transparency, and adaptability, are why clients find exceptional value in our work.

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