

Intermediaries and Their Potential Role in Support of *Promise Neighborhoods*' Development and Implementation

An Issue Brief



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Overview

To achieve the ambitious results that *Promise Neighborhoods* are expected to achieve, local sites will not only have to be strategic and intentional in their own work, but will need external support. In thinking about how this support can best be provided -- and the type of organizations that could provide it -- past initiatives' experience suggests a valuable role for organizations that function as *intermediaries*.

Intermediaries are organizations that support one or more sites in multiple ways, as described below. They strengthen sites' work to achieve their desired results, help build local capacity, and over time assist sites to sustain their efforts. Intermediaries can operate at a state level or regionally (supporting sites within those jurisdictions) or nationally (supporting all sites).

In their support roles, intermediaries act on behalf of both funders and local sites. That is, they offer sites the specialized skills, expertise, knowledge, connections, and/or influence that no single community could be expected to have, or even to mobilize, on its own. In turn, intermediary organizations can often communicate "back" to funders the "on the ground" experience that is essential information for wise guidance of the initiative.

To convey the potential usefulness of an intermediary, it is helpful to consider an example, such as the experience in the early development of the Beacon Schools in New York City. The Beacons were among the earliest successful after-school programs and were in some ways a forerunner of the Harlem Children's Zone. Richard Murphy, who served as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Youth Services from 1990-1994, when the Beacons were being developed, says that one of the reasons the Beacons experienced a nearly uniform record of success -- even though they differed greatly from one another in every other respect -- is that none was left to its own devices to start from scratch and to cope in isolation with the challenges of design and implementation. This was due in large part to the creation by the City's Department of Youth Services and the Fund for the City of New York of a new entity -- an intermediary -- the Youth Development Institute (YDI). YDI was charged with a range of supportive and technical assistance roles to ensure that the network of Beacon sites succeeded in achieving their desired results.

¹ This is one of several briefs prepared by the Center for the Study of Social Policy for the Office of Innovation and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education, to assist the OII in its planning for the launch of *Promise Neighborhoods*.

While YDI was a city-based intermediary supporting multiple sites, the roles that it played are illustrative of the added value that other regional and national intermediaries have contributed to ambitious initiatives. The outline of functions and characteristics provided below are drawn from the work of YDI and other effective intermediaries, and from reviews and analyses of the functions and roles of intermediaries done by the Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on Community Change and the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

The roles and functions of intermediaries that can support the work of Promise Neighborhoods

Intermediaries can perform several roles. The most commonly encountered are (1) technical assistance and support – that is, helping sites obtain access to the information, skills, knowledge and expertise that can help them do their work; (2) creating opportunities for peer learning and/or organization of communities of practice/learning communities; (3) support in the form of leadership development, training, or other forms of skill-building for the people involved in this work; and (4) using the intermediary’s additional clout and authority to influence decisions when the site needs external support, particularly in the arenas of policy development and systems change. In addition, in some instances, foundations in particular have used intermediaries to manage initiatives. In these cases, intermediary organizations play a vital role in maintaining accountability for an initiative’s results. In implementing *Promise Neighborhoods*, DOE could consider some or all of these roles as being appropriate for intermediary organizations.

Another way to look at intermediary responsibilities is the skills they require from the intermediary organization. Some forms of support provided by intermediaries are highly strategic, requiring a “close-up” knowledge of local conditions. Other forms of assistance are more programmatic and technical in nature. Some of the more frequently encountered intermediary roles are described below, linked to one or another of these categories.

I. Work that is likely to be “high-touch” and requiring intermediary organizations that have the capacity to develop nuanced familiarity with the local scene, with considerable political and organizational savvy, and if possible with standing or reputation in the local community. Examples of these functions include:

- a. Support and protect the local innovators as they
 - i. Simultaneously build on what’s already working in a community and introduce new practices and polices; seek to establish the legitimacy for their battles with vested interests to put the required changes in place and sustain them over time.
 - ii. Develop a common vision and plans for achieving the vision
 - iii. Respond to common challenges, letting site leaders realize they are not alone

- iv. Identify and pursue funding opportunities
 - v. Seek to align the capacities and resources of the community, the public sector, and the private sector, using the influence of the intermediary institution to counterbalance the inequities in power, information, expertise and money
- b. Provide information, “friendly” and coherent technical assistance and consultation across systems and disciplines on
 - i. Selecting, developing and combining effective programs and their common practices that are likely to contribute to achieving stipulated results
 - ii. Replication/ implementation challenges
 - iii. Capacity-building
 - iv. Collaborative problem solving
 - v. Training for staff in new forms of professional practice and program management
 - vi. Working across domains and silos and in blending funding from categorical sources
 - vii. Accessing technical expertise
 - viii. Creating partnerships
 - ix. Managing communications
 - x. Community mobilization
 - c. Provide a forum for site personnel to look for and develop solutions to shared problems
 - d. Assist sites in establishing “communities of practice”

II. Work that requires knowledge, credibility and experience that is less tied to the specific conditions of each site (although such experience is always a plus). Examples of these functions include:

- a. Continuing source of technical support in the collection, analysis, communication and application of data; helping local sites not to be afraid of data, build capacity to understand data and use it strategically to forge partnerships, resolve conflicts, monitor progress and document accountability
- b. Become a source of the most current information about “what works,” including especially the common core practice principles that characterize the interventions that change life trajectories for the children and families facing the greatest obstacles, as these emerge from *Promise Neighborhoods*’ communities of practice and other experience and research

- c. Broker and leverage outside public, business, and philanthropic funding, influence, and expertise; providing connections to decision makers and clout and political influence that can remove or reduce political, bureaucratic, regulatory obstacles that interfere with the design and implementation of coherent sets of interventions
- d. Providing “non-technical” technical assistance, including training and consultation on capacity building issues such as strategic planning, results based accountability and development of a “results culture”, goal and target setting, benchmarking, evaluation, governance, family and resident engagement, resident leadership development, community assessments, local decision-making, common standards of practice, self-assessment tools, public reporting, and other capacity-building training
- e. Provide fiscal planning assistance through training in fiscal agent practices, responsibilities and reporting
- f. Provide or mobilize political clout to address larger structural issues, such as
 - Mobilizing resources, including recruiting, training, and supervising mentors
 - Modifying policies that undermine community work, including the conditions of funding
 - Building public understanding of what initiatives are doing
 - Addressing community issues that may be beyond the scope of an initiative but which can affect its results, such as ensuring that leadership in the community is addressing issues of safety, violence and drugs
- g. Facilitating peer learning, including information exchanges, knowledge development and dissemination, and creation of learning communities
- h. Helping sites to deal with the common problem that expenditures for interventions come out of different budgets than the savings that result; that savings tend not to result within the terms of office of many public officials
- i. Provide assistance with communications, including training on and sharing of public awareness campaigns and tools (press releases, newsletters, brochures); advocacy with state agencies and policymakers to educate and raise awareness

- j. Provide assistance with new approaches to assessing progress and with identifying the components of reform that are essential to effectiveness

The distinction between the two broad categories outlined above is not absolute, and the same intermediary organization could in fact provide both types of support. We make the distinction in order to emphasize the fact that, to be useful in many supportive and technical assistance roles, an intermediary often needs to cultivate and use a deep understanding of the particular needs and context of each local site.

A wide variety of institutions can qualify as intermediaries. Intermediaries can operate under the auspices of public or nonprofit agencies and organizations, and of public-private partnerships. However, regardless of the auspice, the essential characteristics of intermediaries are:

- They have the trust of the people and institutions with whom they work, and
- Their legitimacy in this role, and their capacity to perform the identified functions, is widely recognized.

If it is possible to work out the logistics and the funding, it would probably be optimal for the relationships between intermediaries and the sites to begin soon after the sites have been selected.