Whatever It Takes

a new afterword

by

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The morning of January 20, 2009, was a cold one in Harlem, but the sun shone brightly, and inside the Promise Academy gymnasium, shafts of light sliced down through the heavy curtains that had been pulled across the windows facing 125th Street. A few hundred metal folding chairs, arranged in rows, were filled with mostly middle-school students, and they all were turned toward the front of the room, where a giant projection screen hung down from the ceiling. One floor above, in the cafeteria, two hundred four-year-olds from the Harlem Gems prekindergarten sat watching their own big screen while teachers and parents plied them with juice boxes and sandwiches, trying to keep them awake and meltdown-free right through nap time, determined that even the youngest kids would be able to say, in later years, that they had witnessed history.

It was rare that Geoffrey Canada would miss an event like this at Promise Academy, but on this particular Tuesday morning, he was far from Harlem. To explain his absence, Canada had made a short video for the children. Now the lights were lowered, the students grew quiet, and Canada's face appeared on the big screen. He was alone, sitting in front of a bookshelf, no jacket, just a light blue button-down shirt and a tie.

"The reason that I'm talking to you by video," Canada began, "is that as you're watching this, I am currently at the inauguration of the country's first African American president. Today, President-elect Barack Obama will become the forty-fourth president of these United States."

Harlem Children's
ZONE

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The students of Promise Academy knew this, of course; no one needed to tell them that this was a big day. Obama was a celebrity among the youth of Harlem, held in an esteem that, until recently, had been reserved exclusively for basketball players and hip hop artists. But for weeks now, even months, the adults who surrounded them, their parents and grandparents and teachers and principals, had been going over it again and again, trying to impress on them just *how* significant – how unlikely – this event really was.

Now it was Canada's turn to try. "You may wonder why this moment is so great," he said on the tape. "Let me give you a reason." He told a story about a trip he and his mother had taken to North Carolina in 1955, when he was just three years old, to visit his great-grandmother, who had stayed behind when Canada's grandparents migrated north to Harlem early in the twentieth century. When he and his mother boarded the Trailways bus in New York, Canada told the students, they sat up front, so young Geoff could see where they were going. But when they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and passed into the South, Mrs. Canada turned to her sun and explained that they had to give up their seats and move to the back of the bus.

"The thing you have to know about this moment we're in right now," Canada continued, "is that my great-grandmother, her grandmother was a slave. You all who are watching this moment in history need to know why some people like myself will probably be in tears today as we look at the fabulous change that has taken place in this country – from a time when some of us remember that we had to move to the back of the bus to a time when we can see an African American become the leader of this great country."

What Canada didn't say, but was surely thinking, was that the inauguration of Barack Obama had another, separate meaning for him as well – one that went beyond the new president's race, beyond Canada's own family history, to the heart of the work that he had been doing in Harlem for the past twenty-five years.

Though he was a little embarrassed to admit it these days, Canada hadn't paid a whole lot of attention, back in July 2007, when Obama gave his speech that wholeheartedly embraced the Harlem Children's Zone. He didn't attend the event, which was held at a community center in a beaten-down corner of southeast Washington, D.C.; he didn't ask to see the video afterward, didn't even read the text, though it was posted on Obama's campaign website. It wasn't until months later that Canada finally saw the speech. When he did, he was taken aback. Not only had

Obama gone on at length about the work Canada was doing in Harlem, he had also done something that Canada had only rarely seen politicians attempt: he had articulated a fully formed vision of how and why to combat the entrenched, relentless poverty that for generations had kept a hold on certain neighborhoods in almost every American city.

"What's most overwhelming about urban poverty is that it's so difficult to escape," Obama said. "It's isolating and it's everywhere. If you are an African American child unlucky enough to be born into one of these neighborhoods, you are most likely to start life hungry or malnourished. You are less likely to start with a father in your household, and if he is there, there's a fifty-fifty chance that he never finished high school and the same chance he doesn't have a job. Your school isn't likely to have the right books or the best teachers. You're more likely to encounter gang activities than after-school activities. . . Opportunity is scarce, role models are few, and there is little contact with the normalcy of life outside those streets."

But there was hope, Obama continued, and it could be found in programs like the Harlem Children's Zone. The centerpiece of his urban-poverty policy, he said, would be to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in twenty cities across the country. He had a name for the zone he was proposing – Promise Neighborhoods – and he said he was committed to spending billions of federal dollars to make them a reality. "We won't just spend the money because we can," he explained. "Every step these cities take will be evaluated, and if certain plans or programs aren't working, we will stop them and try something else." It was a big commitment, he acknowledged, but an essential one. "The moral question about poverty in America – How can a country like this allow it? – has an easy answer: we can't," he said. "The political question that follows – What do we do about it? – has always been more difficult. But now that we're finally seeing the beginnings of an answer, this country has an obligation to keep trying."

Though Obama's speech made Canada pleased and proud, he didn't honestly expect much to come of it. Like most African Americans – like most Americans of any race – he was skeptical of Obama's chances in the presidential campaign. But then Obama won the Iowa caucuses, and then the South Carolina primary, and then Colorado and Minnesota and Virginia. He won the primary in North Carolina, the state where Canada's great-great-great-grandmother had toiled as a slave. And Canada's hopes started to rise, almost despite himself. And now, on Inauguration Day, Canada sat shivering in his seat on the Capitol lawn,

one hundred yards from where the president-elect would soon take the oath of office, thinking about history, and thinking about what Obama's presidency might mean for the Harlem Children's Zone.

Back in the Promise Academy gymnasium, the students sat decked out in their school uniforms, red sweater vests pulled over white shirts and blouses. There were about three hundred of them, ranging in age from nine to fifteen, almost all of them African American, most of them growing up in poverty, many of them dealing with difficult circumstances at home. They were seated by grade, from right to left, the fourth-grade students, who had been with Promise Academy since kindergarten and had notched impressive scores, the previous year, on their New York State standardized tests, to the ninth grade, all graduates of Promise Academy middle school, who now made up the inaugural class of Promise Academy High.

There was a noticeable absence in the middle of the school, a missing sixth and seventh grade. That gap was a legacy of the struggles the middle school had endured in its first few years, culminating in Canada's decision in the spring of 2007 to temporarily suspend admission to the school. There was still a debate over whether that step had been the right one to take, but the strategy seemed to have worked. During the 2007-8 school year, Glen Pinder and his staff focused their attention on the two remaining classes, the seventh and eighth grades. On the 2008 statewide tests, eighth-grade reading scores stayed where they were the previous year: 33 percent of students on or above grade level. But the math scores jumped considerably, with 97 percent of eighth-grade students scoring on or above grade level. And in the spring of 2008, Geoffrey Canada decided that the high school would finally open that fall, a year behind schedule, and that the middle school would resume admissions as well (though the new incoming class would be a fifth grade rather than a sixth grade).

The day after the inauguration, the middle-school students would begin another round of statewide tests, and as always at Promise Academy, it felt like everyone's job was on the line. Today, though, was a day for celebration. Up on the big screen, CNN's live coverage of the inauguration was playing, and when Malia and Sasha Obama appeared, the students cheered. They hooted for Aretha Franklin; they clapped for Joe Biden. When Barack Obama appeared, they howled. And then, as a classical quartet performed, Wolf Blitzer broke into the audio.

"I just want to point out to our viewers, it's now past noon Eastern here in Washington, D.C.," he announced. "Barack Obama, even though

he has not yet been administered the oath of office, he is now the president of the United States."

In Washington, Geoffrey Canada and hundreds of thousands of others continued to watch in silence, listening to the music, but in the Promise Academy gym, the students erupted in cheers. Blitzer's word was good enough for them; they weren't waiting for the oath. Teachers broke into grins and laughter, exchanging hugs and congratulatory handshakes, some wiping away a tear or two. The fourth-graders hopped up and down with excitement, and in the front row, a few of the ninth-grade girls started to dance. Suddenly, for this one moment, the possibilities before them seemed limitless. It wasn't a feeling the students of Promise Academy got to experience very often, and they wanted to make it last.

The Harlem Children's Zone is not the first attempt to deal with urban American poverty by focusing on a specific geographical area. Far from it. There is in fact a long history in the United States of neighborhood-based anti-poverty strategies, from the settlement houses of the early twentieth century to the federal "urban renewal" programs of the 1950s and 1960s; from Lyndon Johnson's model cities to Jack Kemp's enterprise zones to Bill Clinton's empowerment zones. What distinguishes the Harlem Children's Zone's strategy from those that preceded it is its focus on children – and, specifically, on their education. Geoffrey Canada and his staff collect a lot of data, but the only markers of success that really matter to them are the ones measuring educational attainment: higher college-graduation rates, lower high-school drop-out rates, better scores on tests of school-readiness in the prekindergarten or of math and English ability in the middle school. Hypothetically, Canada could be accomplishing all sorts of good and worthy things in Harlem – reducing asthma, improving nutrition and dental care, providing job training to young adults, cleaning up parks and streets – but if he wasn't raising test scores and graduation rates, he would consider his whole operation to be a failure. Every one of the organization's disparate initiatives, from the health clinic to the parenting classes to the prekindergarten, exists for the same reason: to give children in Harlem the skills and support they need to succeed in school and to graduate from college.

Canada's single-minded focus is based not on a particular love of standardized tests or on a sentimental belief in the importance of education. It is rooted instead in a fundamental economic understanding: in the twenty-first century, in low-income urban neighborhoods like

Harlem, the best way for children to escape poverty is through educational achievement. Economists have long been aware that there is a connection between education and economic success, but in recent years, new research has demonstrated just how crucial that connection is. In their 2008 book *The Race Between Education and Technology,* Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, two economists at Harvard, divide the twentieth-century economic history of the United States into two distinct periods. In the first era, which lasted from 1900 to the 1970s, levels of educational attainment rose quickly. In 1910, they write, the American high-school graduation rate was barely 9 percent; in 1970, it was 77 percent. A radical transformation of the nation's educational and social landscape had occurred over just a few decades.

According to Goldin and Katz, this unprecedented democratization of education had two profound effects. First, it helped make the United States the wealthiest country on earth. Second, it flattened the class structure, leveling much of the economic inequality of the Gilded Age. As more and more Americans attained the skills necessary to perform high-level tasks, the distance between rich and poor narrowed considerably. The gap between the wages of a college graduate and a high-school graduate, or between a high-school graduate and a high-school dropout – what economists call the "returns to education" – grew smaller and less pronounced.

But around 1980, something strange happened: both trends came to a halt, and rather abruptly. In 1970, after its rapid ascent over the previous sixty years, the high-school graduation rate stood at 77 percent. Today, almost forty years later, the graduation rate stands at . . . about 77 percent. Meanwhile, measures of inequality began rising sharply in the 1970s and 1980s, as the vast American middle class of the mid-twentieth century lost ground, splintering off at either end to form both a new underclass living in concentrated poverty in the inner cities and a new super-class of astounding wealth.

There are several reasons for this reorientation, Goldin and Katz write, but chief among them is the increasingly dismal educational achievement of the country's urban poor. Although the "returns to education" are, at present, sky-high – the more years you spend in school, the more you earn, and by a wide margin – inner-city youth seem, to a disturbing degree, unable to take advantage of those returns.

The conclusion of Goldin and Katz and many other economists – and the premise behind the work of the Harlem Children's Zone – is that solving the problem, increasing the educational success rate of children in

poverty, is essential to the nation's future. Correcting those imbalances would not only make the United States a more egalitarian nation, these economists say, but a more economically powerful one as well, better able to compete against the many European and Asian countries that, over the past couple of decades, have caught up with and in many cases surpassed the test scores and graduation rates of American children. (In 1995, the United States was tied for first, globally, in college and university graduation rates; but by 2006, the country had dropped to fourteenth on the list.)

The problem is, raising those educational success rates – whether for a neighborhood or a nation – is not an easy task. The changes that transformed the American educational system in the first three quarters of the twentieth century were mostly about access: building more schools, creating better systems of public financing, reducing the impediments that kept middle-class and working-class kids from staying in school. The obstacles that today keep kids in neighborhoods like Harlem from graduating from college are more complicated, and they begin to take shape long before those children reach college age – for many children, before they even reach kindergarten. Better schools would help poor kids overcome some of those obstacles, Goldin and Katz write, "but even policies that target school-age children may come too late for kids from troubled families and inadequate early learning environments. It may be difficult for schools to overcome the lack of school readiness without earlier interventions."

It is this problem that the Harlem Children's Zone and President Obama's Promise Neighborhoods are designed to address. The way Canada sees it, the middle-class children he wants Harlem's kids to compete with are surrounded by a cocoon of support – educational support, emotional support, medical support – that starts at birth and never stops. The only way for his kids to catch up and keep up, he believes, is for his organization to emulate that cocoon as closely as possible, to create an alternative ongoing safety net to the one that invisibly supports middle-class kids all the way through childhood. If he can accomplish that, Canada says, children in his program can do as well as kids anywhere.

When the latest statewide test results came out in May 2009, Canada had stronger evidence than ever that his strategy was working. In the middle school, reading scores finally improved significantly: 58 percent of the eighth-grade students were on or above grade level, which was higher than the New York City average (though lower than the New

York State average). Math scores remained high, though not quite as high as the previous year, with 87 percent of students in the eighth grade scoring on or above grade level, which was above both the state and city average. If the middle-school scores were laudable, the 2009 elementary-school scores were truly astonishing. In Dennis McKesey's school, 100 percent of the students in third grade scored on or above grade level in math; in reading, 94 percent of them did. At the second Promise Academy elementary school, the scores were similarly impressive, with 100 percent of the students in the third grade scoring on or above grade level in math and 86 percent doing so in reading. Both schools were now just a few students away from McKesey's audacious goal: to bring every single child up to the state standard.

After the hardcover edition of *Whatever It Takes* was published in September 2008, I spent time in cities across the country in conversations with people – educators, philanthropists, activists, mayors – who were interested in the idea of replicating the Harlem Children's Zone. After the election of Barack Obama two months later, those conversations increased, both in number and in intensity. Whether we were in Baltimore, Philadelphia, or Washington, D.C.; in Youngstown, Ohio; Jacksonville, Florida; or New Haven, Connecticut, the people I spoke with were generally in a situation something like the one Geoffrey Canada found himself in a dozen years earlier, when he first dreamed up the Harlem Children's Zone. They were working hard to improve the lives of poor children in their communities, and they could see they were having a real and positive effect on the children they served. But still, they often felt stuck, overwhelmed by the enormity of the task before them, discouraged by the experience of helping just a few children, while many others failed; frustrated by the feeling that they were reaching kids too late or letting go of them too early. They wanted to try something new.

For every conversation like this I was having last winter, Geoffrey Canada was having dozens. In the months after the inauguration, Canada and his staff were inundated with requests for information, tours, and meetings, and one question was always at the heart of these requests: What is the White House going to do about Promise Neighborhoods, and when is it going to do it? The answer to that question is not yet entirely clear. But some outlines are taking shape. Early in the new administration, after discussions with Canada and some of his staff, officials in the President's Domestic Policy Council convened a cross-department meeting on Promise Neighborhoods, bringing together

representatives of the Department of Education, the Office of Management and Budget, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, all of which would likely be involved in the implementation of the program. And when the Obama administration submitted its 2010 budget request to Congress at the beginning of May, the budget for the Department of Education included a request for $10 million for planning grants to go to community-based non-profits interested in applying to start a Promise Neighborhood.

As of this writing, in June 2009, Congress has not yet approved the White House's request. But if it does, administration officials say they expect that soon, perhaps this fall, groups from around the country will be able to apply for these planning grants, of $500,000 or so, that would give them the resources and support they need to write an official proposal for a Promise Neighborhood. (In other words, they will apply for a grant that will help them apply for the program.) The expectation is that once those initial grants are issued, each city's planning process might take a year, meaning that the White House would hope to be able to select a first round of Promise Neighborhoods, probably fewer than five, in the fall of 2010.

Canada and others are quick to point out that there are dozens of potential ways for the plan to fall apart before that happens, and dozens of ways for Promise Neighborhoods to fail even if they do get that far. But Canada is optimistic, if tentatively so, and unquestionably excited. And he's not the only one. If Promise Neighborhoods do become federal policy, they would mark the first serious new approach to poverty to come to Washington since welfare reform, and arguably the first truly comprehensive plan since the War on Poverty. And this would be a program quite different from either predecessor: more proactive than welfare reform; more data-driven and targeted than the initiatives that made up the War on Poverty.

Whenever I talk to local civic leaders or educators about Promise Neighborhoods, one question invariably comes up: Is it really possible to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone without a Geoffrey Canada to run the replication, or was the success of the original essentially a fluke, dependent entirely on Canada's unique combination of experiences and abilities? It is an understandable question: anyone who was worked in or around urban education has encountered stories of a charismatic teacher or school leader who seemed to have solved the achievement gap – but then others try to imitate his or her system or method, they fall short.

It may be true that only someone with Geoffrey Canada's particular training, personal background, and dedication could have built the first Harlem Children's Zone. At the very least, it seems unlikely that anyone else could have won over so many financial backers before he had much in the way of measurable results. But I don't believe future replications will require anything like that same set of skills. As the preceding chapters have shown, Canada and his staff made many mistakes during the five years I spent reporting on their work in Harlem. They took some wrong turns, and they hit a few dead ends. Their results are indeed impressive. But in the end, what really persuaded me that the Harlem Children's Zone was such a promising model was not just the results in Harlem; it was also the surrounding research, a slew of recent studies by economists, sociologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists, much of which I've explored in this book and all of which independently points, as I read it, toward a set of solutions very much like the ones that Geoffrey Canada has chosen to follow. To change the trajectory of a poor child in an inner-city neighborhood, this research shows, you need to: intervene early in the child's life; continue to intervene throughout adolescence; give him extra time in school and extra support outside of school; involve his parents if possible but be prepared to compensate for their absence; focus on improving his cognitive skills but also nurture his noncognitive, social, and emotional skills. To my mind, the essential ingredient in the Harlem Children's Zone is the particular set of ideas and practices that Geoffrey Canada has championed. If future replication models can learn from the Zone's accomplishments and avoid its mistakes, I believe they won't just match the level of success he has achieved thus far in Harlem, but they may well go beyond it.

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