BEYOND LESSONS IN THE FIELD
Using Data to Make a Difference: Keys to Success

Building Promise Neighborhoods, By the Numbers

The rigorous, ongoing use of data is essential for improving outcomes and opportunities for children, and it is required for Promise Neighborhoods. Data enable organizational partners, practitioners, and neighborhood residents to:

- Understand their communities more deeply;
- Make sure the initiative targets the children and families most in need;
- Design effective interventions, programs, and policies;
- Track progress and revise strategies as necessary;
- Establish a "culture of results" so that all children succeed in school, graduate from high school, and obtain a post-secondary education.

Each site must think carefully about the best ways to collect, share, and use information to document community needs, design appropriate solutions, and monitor progress.

Data can seem highly technical, even intimating. Yet a group of community-based initiatives have accumulated experience and insights about working with data that are relevant to Promise Neighborhoods. This paper presents lessons learned as well as data resources and tools that sites can draw on to guide their work.

Department of Education Requirements

The Department of Education outlines requirements for the collection, analysis, and use of data as part of the 10 specific activities to be undertaken during the planning year.[1] The Department asks for three main data deliverables:

1. Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment of children in the target area. Sites must collect data on 12 indicators of academic achievement and family and community support. As an example of an academic indicator, sites must document "the number and percentage of three-year-olds and children in kindergarten who demonstrate … age-appropriate functioning across multiple domains of early learning." As a family and community support indicator, sites must determine how many children in kindergarten through the eighth grade have family members who encourage them to read books outside of school.

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2. **Conduct a "segmentation analysis."** This takes data from the needs assessment and examines the numbers by specific demographic, economic, and geographic characteristics such as race, gender, income, or zip code. The analysis sheds light on the circumstances and needs of various subpopulations, which is critical for targeting and prioritizing programs for the greatest impact.

3. **Develop (or build on an existing) longitudinal data management system** that can regularly collect and facilitate analysis of data from multiple sources. This will enable partners in Promise Neighborhoods to measure the impact of their programs over time, make adjustments based on hard data, and hold themselves and one another accountable for results.

In addition to these deliverables, sites are required to use data to meet other requirements of their planning grants. They must use the results of the needs assessment and segmentation analysis as the basis for designing their continuum of solutions. Sites also must develop a process to keep the community informed on outcomes and progress toward goals.[2]

Five Key Questions, and Answers from the Field

1. **How do sites collect data for Promise Neighborhoods indicators?**

As a starting point, sites may find it useful to group the data they need into two broad categories:

- *Administrative data*, or data that government agencies, school districts, and other public organizations already collect. Common sets of administrative data include school test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates, all of which are available from school districts.
- *Primary data,* or data that sites will have to collect independently because they are not available from other sources. For example, the Department of Education asks sites to track whether students feel safe at school and in their community. If nobody else has collected such data for the target neighborhood, the site may have to conduct a community or school survey. Focus groups can be a good source of contextual information, providing information on important topics such as a community's perceived assets and strengths, or residents' insights about barriers to opportunity[3]. This kind of information can help sites determine what additional data they need to design programs that address community needs and aspirations.

Promise Neighborhoods can expect to work with data at both the individual and the aggregate levels. Both offer important insights. Individual-level data, which identify each person by name, enable a site to confirm that a student lives in the target area, coordinate services for that child and her family, and evaluate the initiative's impact over time based on her test scores, grades, and other measures. Aggregate data are important for understanding school and neighborhood trends, informing policy, and building a case for support. Data may be aggregated by grade, school, school district, census tract, city, or other groupings.

Each Promise Neighborhood will need to determine the right balance of individual versus aggregate information to collect for the 12 required indicators, and commit to a deadline for developing the capacity to gather and work with confidential individual-level data. Factors that influence this balance include the strength of relationships with agencies that house the data and the technical capacity of the site to handle different types of data. Eventually, sites are expected to build the capacity to collect and track individual-level data for as many indicators as possible.

Some individual-level data should be fairly accessible through school districts with parental consent. This includes information on student proficiency in core academic subjects, transitions from middle

school to high school (as measured by school attendance), and high school graduation. For other outcomes, gathering individual-level information may be more challenging. For instance, the Department of Education proposes as an indicator of student health, "the number and percentage of children who participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily and consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily." Sites may use this indicator or develop their own, but either way they will require more time to collect and track this information at the individual level.

Tips and Tools: Requesting individual-level data from school districts

Establishing strong, consistent relationships with school districts is a prerequisite for accessing student data for Promise Neighborhoods projects. Every school district possesses and regularly releases aggregate data about student test scores and other student proficiency measures. School districts also maintain individual student records, but they may be reluctant to release information that identifies the child and family.

Promise Neighborhoods ultimately will need to incorporate personally-identifiable individual-level data from these records into their longitudinal data management systems. Schools are not legally required to share these data with Promise Neighborhoods initiatives; however, as partners in a comprehensive initiative with a strong investment in improving academic outcomes, schools may recognize their stake in providing the best information possible, with appropriate consents.

Sites should plan to take the following steps to get personally-identifiable student data:
- Determine which school district agency or department has the data;
- Find out if there is a research liaison on the school district staff and what process is required to obtain the data;
- Develop confidentiality procedures and be prepared to describe how the information will be used (see more about federal privacy laws below);
- Develop a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the agency to receive data on a regular basis (see the Additional Resources section for links to sample MOUs).

If the school district denies a request for personally-identifiable individual-level data, sites have several options. They may request aggregated data at the school level for all schools in the target neighborhood, along with district-wide averages for comparisons. Or sites may request individual-level records stripped of identifying information. Intentional efforts to build and strengthen relationships with school district officials and personnel can pave the way toward obtaining personally-identifiable individual-level data in the future.

Data Collection and Privacy Laws

The federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits schools from disclosing personal information about a student in most circumstances. For example, an elementary school generally may not reveal a specific student's reading scores to anyone outside the school district other than the child's parents or guardian, unless the parent gives written consent. Aggregate data, for instance, data describing how the third grade at that school performed on standardized reading tests, and individual-level data stripped of identifiers and thus anonymous are not subject to FERPA.

Promise Neighborhoods initiatives should plan to obtain written parental consent to access data in student records. The consent can be obtained once for multiple disclosures over time.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) protects the privacy of patient health information. Under HIPAA, sites may need to get a signed authorization from a parent or guardian to access a child's health records that contain information relevant to Promise Neighborhoods indicators.

In addition to federal privacy laws, Promise Neighborhoods should find out if any state laws apply to their efforts to collect and share data. For more detail about how FERPA and HIPAA apply to Promise Neighborhoods, as well as outlines for FERPA consent forms and HIPAA authorization forms, see the PowerPoint presentation from the January 25 webinar "Designing a Longitudinal Data System."

2. What skills and capacity are needed to conduct the community needs assessment?

A community needs assessment provides detailed information on the target population and highlights complex phenomena (for example, poverty, unemployment, neighborhood safety) that influence local conditions and suggest the improvements needed. To do this work well, sites need analysts, statisticians, Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping technicians, and/or others with the expertise to evaluate, clean, and work with various data sets. Some Promise Neighborhoods partnerships already have these capacities in-house. Others will develop them. Still others will contract with consultants or partner with organizations that specialize in community data collection and analysis, such as local member organizations of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.

Sites will mine a variety of sources for information, and each may provide a different level of data, from county and city to school district and school. Whenever possible, sites should request consistent data (by census tract, by block, or by address, for example). The more precise the location, the easier it is to link data from different sources for meaningful analysis. Sites will need to connect the data through computerized tools such as GIS software or a relational database management system.
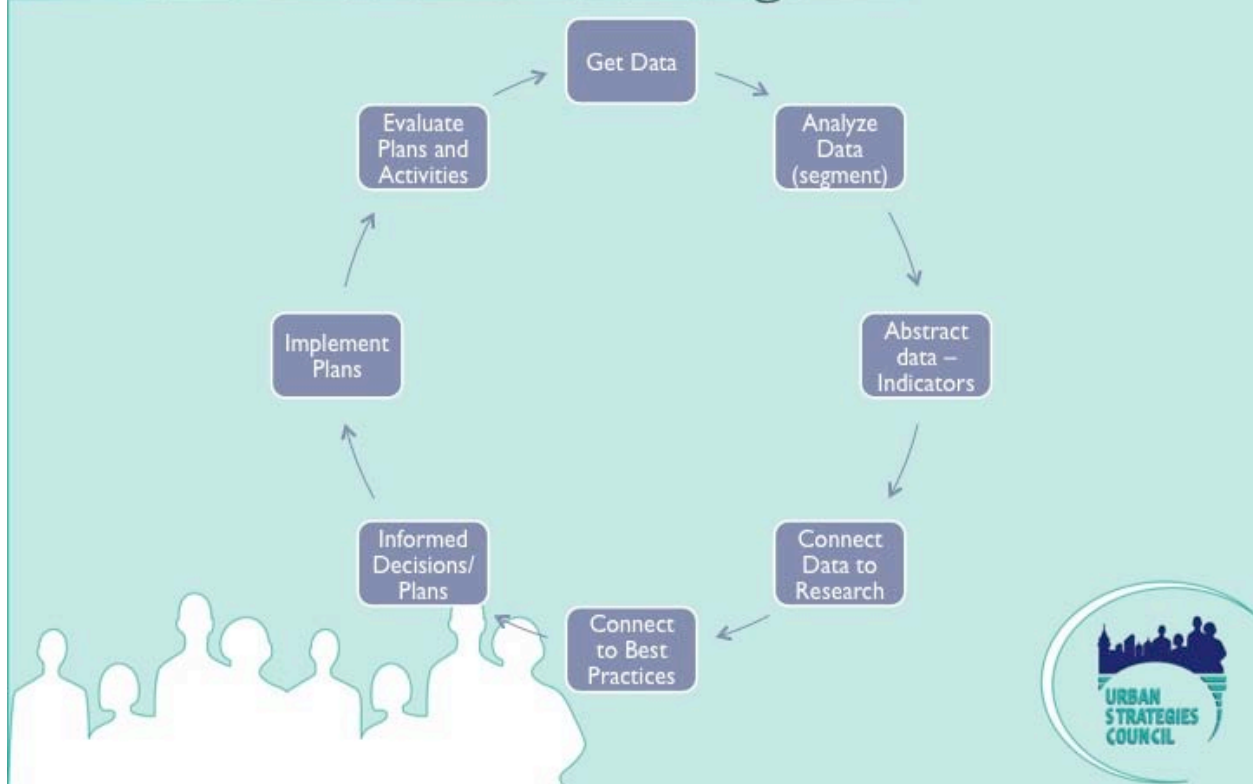
3. How should sites do a segmentation analysis?

The segmentation analysis examines the data on the 12 indicators for specific subpopulations. This involves drilling down, splitting, and aggregating the data in different ways, for example by neighborhood, ethnicity, age, grade, language, special education needs, mobility, or family income. A Promise Neighborhoods site might start by looking at the graduation rates of all students in the target area and then segment those rates by gender or race[4]. Going further, the site might then analyze a single school's graduation rate and segment it by the same characteristics.

A site's data capacity, the results of the needs assessment, and local circumstances will drive decisions about how to segment the data. For instance, if a needs assessment reveals that many second graders are performing below grade level in math, the site would want determine which students are most affected, and break out this information by school, home address, and demographics. Local knowledge of community challenges and strengths can also provide guidance. For example, if focus groups indicate a high level of community concern about truant teenagers, sites would want to gather absenteeism rates by school and segment the data by subgroup to understand how to target truancy prevention strategies.

The Urban Strategies Council of Oakland, California, has developed strong community data capacity. The diagram below demonstrates how data collection and segmentation are part of a cyclical process to design effective interventions and improve community outcomes.

Info for Action and Change

4. **What does it take to develop a community-based longitudinal data management system?**

Promise Neighborhoods partnerships will require a centralized capacity to manage a huge store of information. Specifically, sites will need to address overall data quality issues, system maintenance, report creation, and training capability. Some partnerships will contract with a data management vendor to manage some or all of these areas, while other sites will create and operate their own systems. This is just the data management piece; sites will need separate capacities around evaluation and applying the data.

Providence, Rhode Island, a Making Connections site funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is developing a system similar in its objectives and capabilities to the systems that Promise Neighborhoods must put in place. Three parties joined forces to create this shared system: Full Service Community Schools, a school-based initiative that brings together partners to improve student outcomes; the Providence Plan, a data warehouse and intermediary; and the Providence Public School District. Their goals are to examine the academic impact of various interventions over time; give partners in the initiative access to data they need to assess and improve their work; and link individual-level student data from the state and school district with data from other Providence programs serving those students.

A web platform, the DataHUB, provides comprehensive access to shared data. It incorporates both single-agency and combined-agency indicators and uses tiered permissions so users can access different

kinds of data based on their roles and needs. The Providence School District took the lead in establishing the data-sharing agreements among the partners.

The system is designed to provide information in both aggregate and individual forms. The public as well as the partners can access aggregate data. The system's individual-level capability, under development, will enable partners to track the progress of each student they collectively serve and use the information for planning, refining interventions, and strengthening handoffs between programs.

5. How do community-based partnerships use data to foster accountability?

Developing a shared understanding about accountability up front lays the groundwork for Promise Neighborhoods to use data effectively within their partnerships and with the community. Key steps include:

- Be clear on what accountability means in the partnership and how far it will go in community settings;
- Discuss among partners how willing and able they are to share data with each other and to discuss their measures of success in public;
- Build a culture of accountability for continuous learning;
- Determine how and to what extent partners will be held accountable for strategies and results not fully under their control;
- Know to whom the partnership is accountable.

Building accountability also means building capacity. High internal data capacity on the part of individual partners does not necessarily translate into high capacity in a collaborative setting. In addition, some Promise Neighborhoods partners will possess less data expertise and infrastructure than others. Intentional capacity building with smaller partner organizations and community residents helps build and cement effective, accountable partnerships.

San Antonio, Texas, the site of another Annie E. Casey Foundation Making Connections collaborative, invested considerable resources in training and coaching partner organizations and community residents in data literacy and results-based accountability. The collaborative convened "results tables" — representatives of partner organizations and residents who met monthly to track results for a specific focus area. Results tables provided an opportunity for partners and community members to:

- Agree on and define desired results;
- Agree on measures of progress and monitor them;
- Collaboratively interpret data and develop hypotheses about stories behind the data;
- Jointly make decisions about strategies based on data;
- Hold one another accountable for progress;
- Add transparency to decision-making;
- Exchange best-practice approaches.

San Antonio conceived of results tables as opportunities to learn together and make corrections when necessary, rather than to assign blame. The collaborative learned not to overload a results table with too many measures, but to choose indicators with the greatest power to communicate key information. The partners also learned to start with the data available and work from there rather than wait to act until they found a way to collect all the data they might need. Finally, they defined the data team not as the "owners" of the data or the results "police," but as valued support staff who can point out

discrepancies between commitments and visible results. The group also learned that every results table needed to have the active participation of partner organization representatives who could speak knowledgeably about the data, discuss solutions if results fell short, and make decisions for their organization.

This document summarizes guidance on data from:

Bill Shepardson, Center for the Study of Social Policy
Jazmine Lewis, The Harlem Children's Zone
Shana Brodnax, Harlem Children's Zone
Sebastian Schreiner, Making Connections San Antonio
Vanessa Bekkouche-Samuelson, The Providence Plan
Steve Winnick, Education Counsel
Jon Neiditz, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough
Jennifer Comey, Urban Institute
Steve Spiker, Urban Strategies Council

These presenters participated in a series of three webinars hosted by the Promise Neighborhoods Institute in January and February 2011 These webinars can be found at PromiseNeighborhoodsInstitute.org/Technical-Assistance/Webinars.

Additional Resources

1. *Resources for Data and Evaluation to Assist Communities Implementing a Promise Neighborhoods Approach*, Promise Neighborhoods Institute

2. *Promise Neighborhoods Needs Assessment Guide: Methods and Data Sources for a Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment*, United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA)

3. *Catalog of Administrative Data Sources for Neighborhood Indicators*, Urban Institute

4. *NNIP Lessons on Local Data Sharing*, National Neighborhood Indicators Project

5. *Models for Change Information Sharing Toolkit*, Child Welfare League of America and the Juvenile Law Center

6. On Results Based Accountability, *http://www.raguide.org*

7. On the concept of a Local Learning Partnership, *http://tarc.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/llp/guidebook.htm*

8. On data products suitable for context rich data tracking, *http://www.resultsleadership.org/scorecard/*, *http://www.socialtext.com/*

9. Tool for visual outcomes modeling – DoView, *http://www.doview.com/*

[1] Department of Education, "Notice Inviting Applications," Federal Register / Vol 75, No. 86 / Wednesday, May 5, 2010 / Notices, Page 24672

[2] Ibid.

[3] As is also true of surveys, focus groups should elicit responses from a representative sample of individuals; focus groups should include a sufficient number of participants with different community perspectives and/or roles so as to provide meaningful data.

[4] Of course, communities must collect data in such a way as to facilitate disaggregation later on (communities must collect data on important characteristics of those participating in data collection, such as race, age, and gender).