

# Stillwater Gazette



Al Fan

## Fan: Charter schools offer greatest opportunity for achievement

By AL FAN

(Created: Tuesday, June 2, 2009 1:00 PM CDT)

Last week, Geoffrey Canada, Harlem Children's Zone founder and CEO, had more than 1,000 Minnesotans spellbound when describing his remarkable journey to eliminate the racial and poverty achievement gap in one of American's most challenging urban environments.

No one leaving the Minneapolis Foundation luncheon at the Minneapolis Convention Center - a group of educators, community leaders, activists and legislators - truly could ever again be comfortable in explaining away why Minnesota has one of the nation's largest achievement gaps between white students and those who have traditionally underperformed in our public schools: children of color, children in poverty, and children for whom English is a second language. There can no longer be any excuse for the persistence of this gap because groups like Harlem Children's Zone are proving it can be closed.

Harlem Children's Zone, a community of charter schools, is a remarkable project. The New York Times called it "one of the most ambitious social experiments of our time." It targets a specific geographic area in Central Harlem and offers a comprehensive range of educational, social, and medical services, starting at a child's birth and follows him or her through college. The program covers 100 blocks and serves 10,000 children. It is an example of how the innovation allowed in charter schools, free from the shackles of traditional public schools, can be a catalyst for innovation and achievement.

The ideal Harlem Children Zone's program, as envisioned by Canada, is a seamless string of successful environments from birth through college - an ideal that is seldom the reality for the children of Harlem. The environments Canada fosters have a "no excuse, whatever it takes" mindset. This relentless pursuit of excellence is evident at Promise Academy, one of Harlem Children's Zone schools, where the average student entered the sixth-grade charter middle school and scored in the 39th percentile of all New York City students in math. By the eighth grade, the typical student in the school was in the 74th percentile.

In his passionate "no excuse, whatever it takes," common-sense story, which was openly critical of an urban education system "designed for a different time," Canada kept referring to his Blackberry as a symbol of his responsiveness and future orientation. Further, he said that "competition is good" - an anathema to many in the educational community. He also was openly critical of superintendents in America's urban school districts who continue to fail and "every three years simply get hired by another school district."

Most impressive was Canada's sense of personal accountability and responsibility for turning around Harlem's schools.

"I've met several presidents, governors and education secretaries. They don't have the answer. In fact, they turned to me and asked me what the answer is. It was then I said: 'I am completely accountable for these schools and these children achieving. Someone must be responsible.'"

When he started Harlem Children's Zone, he told his funders that if he did not show a complete turnaround of the abysmal performances of Harlem's schools within five years, that he should be fired. In explaining this to his teachers he said, "Yeah, but I'm the last to go." He instilled a sense of responsibility in his entire staff. "It's hard work, but infinitely doable," said Canada.

No excuse, whatever it takes, means just that. Some Harlem Children's Zone schools are open from 8:45 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. 11 months out of the year because that is what is needed to get many of these students "college ready."

Canada said there are many other criteria for success: having high expectations, beginning true education early - before birth, nurturing parents as partners, being academically rigorous and college focused. All

tremendous challenges.

Minnesota, the home of the first charter school and many educational innovations, must do better. How has it ever been acceptable that African American students, on average, perform 40 points lower on achievement tests than their white counterparts?

Given the flexibility allowed by the charter school structure, we believe the greatest opportunity for improving achievement in Minnesota is in charter schools. The charter school community nationally has evolved from its initial focus on offering "choice and innovation" to one that now demands the creation and replication of successful schools. While never losing the connection to innovation, the commitment now is that quality is paramount and academic achievement is a reality for every child.

We in Minnesota, need to be able to say: succeed, turn it around, or shut it down.

---

*Al Fan is the executive director for Charter School Partners ([\*\[partners.org\]\(http://partners.org\)\), a newly formed nonprofit whose mission is solely focused on improving academic achievement in Minnesota's charter schools.\*](http://charterschool</a></i></p></div><div data-bbox=)*

---

The Stillwater Gazette is published daily Monday-Friday  
This website and all its contents ©2005 The Stillwater Gazette.  
Do Not Call Policy

651-439-3130 [stwgztte@acnpapers.com](mailto:stwgztte@acnpapers.com)

