

Blueprint for the Next Generation of Place-Based Policy

Policy Example—Promise Neighborhoods

Advancing racial equity and boosting upward mobility across the United States will require a robust national commitment to reversing the legacy of segregation and disinvestment that disproportionately harms low-income communities of color. As policymakers design new place-based policies and programs and strengthen those already in place, they must contend with key design decisions that will determine how effective the policy is in catalyzing lasting improvements in places for the benefit of current and future residents.

This policy example on the **Promise Neighborhoods program** is a companion to the report *A Blueprint for the Next Generation of Federal Place-Based Policy*.^{*} The blueprint offers a two-step process for policy analysis and program design that starts with high-level, analytical questions that help provide the aspirational framework for then addressing a series of specific design decisions. It aims to help federal agency officials, congressional staff, and policy advocates design place-based policies and programs that respond to the priorities of local practitioners to actively address racial inequity and injustice, bridge sectors and policy domains, respect and build community voice and power, deliver sufficient resources and lasting system reforms, and promote continuous learning.

^{*} With support from Blue Meridian Partners, the Urban Institute and PolicyLink developed a policy blueprint for the next generation of federal place-based policy. The blueprint offers actionable guidelines and examples federal policy makers can apply to both design new place-based policies and improve implementation practices at different scales and in different policy domains. It draws upon community voices, research evidence, and practitioner insights to lay out principles and a structure for incorporating lessons from the past into future place-based policies that confront long-standing racial inequities and injustices. This effort was informed by a policy working group that advised on lessons learned from past place-based programs, and it aims to clear a path forward for communities and policymakers interested in strengthening federal investments in place-based work and improving upward mobility for people regardless of where they live [Margery Austin Turner, James Ladi Williams, Justin Milner, Jessical Pizarek, and Ashleigh Gardere, *A Blueprint For the Next Generation of Federal Place-Based Policy* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute; Oakland, CA: PolicyLink, 2021)].

Figure 1. Key Design Questions

Design decision	Guidance
Which federal agency or agencies will implement this program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Clearly define roles for lead and contributing agencies. ➤ Specify governance mechanisms for interagency collaboration.
What types of local entities will be eligible to receive funding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Establish requirements that engage and strengthen entities with deep community relationships. ➤ Give weight to the full spectrum of qualifications and capacities required to lead place-based efforts across different geographies.
How will participating local entities be selected from among those eligible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Clearly specify an equitable formula for allocating funding (if applicable). ➤ Define equitable selection criteria that advance the program’s aspirations. ➤ Establish mechanisms to monitor equity outcomes of the selection process.
What scale of federal funding will be provided?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Match funding to program goals for population-level impact. ➤ Consider giving participating organizations preference for other federal funding sources.
What additional supports will the program provide?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide flexibility with accountability. ➤ Build in needed technical assistance supports. ➤ Include support for data collection and learning.
What will participating organizations be obligated to do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Specify both authorized and required activities. ➤ Formalize community ownership beyond engagement. ➤ Include pathways to partnership.
How will the program’s effectiveness be measured?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Establish a parsimonious set of data requirements. ➤ Encourage the use of multiple sources and types of data. ➤ Plan any formal evaluation from the outset.

Source: Authors’ analysis of federal place-based programs.

By offering recommendations across key design decisions, this policy example illustrates how the federal government can deploy resources to local entities to improve outcomes for people living in disinvested urban and rural neighborhoods.

Step 1: Frame the Aspiration

As a first step, it is essential to articulate the broader goals of the program and how it will improve the lives of real people.

What population outcomes does the program aim to improve and for whom?

Overview

The Promise Neighborhoods program aims to “significantly improve the academic and developmental outcomes of children living in under-resourced communities of the United States, including ensuring school readiness, high school graduation, and access to a community-based continuum of high-quality services. The program serves neighborhoods with both high concentrations of low-income individuals and multiple signs of distress, which may include high rates of poverty, childhood obesity, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency, adjudication, or incarceration; and schools implementing comprehensive support and improvement activities or targeted support and improvement activities.”¹

Design Recommendation

- **Add to the current framing with a few revisions.** The existing vision, outcomes, and framing of the program are strong. Three proposed revisions include adding language that Promise Neighborhoods (1) serves areas that “have experienced persistent poverty,” (2) “provides support for local solutions to pressing problems,” and (3) could better reflect in vision, outcomes, and framing that the program intends to serve all communities (e.g., urban, rural, and Tribal). One way to do this could be to provide examples of what geographic areas are eligible for the program, as terminology like “neighborhood” is not used in some places.

Step 2: Define Policy and Program Details

By proposing recommendations across key design decisions, this example demonstrates how the federal government can deploy resources to local entities to improve outcomes for people living in disinvested urban and rural neighborhoods.

Which federal agency or agencies will implement this program?

Overview

The US Department of Education has primary oversight authority for the Promise Neighborhoods program, which was established under the legislative authority of the Fund for the Improvement of Education.² Promise Neighborhoods is an \$80 million program (based on FY 2020 budget allocations), awarding annual implementation grants ranging from \$4 million to \$6 million per site for up to five years. In FY 2021, seven new Promise Neighborhood grants were awarded, and a total of 81 planning and implementation grants have been awarded between 2010 and 2021.³

The Promise Neighborhoods program does not explicitly require coordination among federal agencies. However, the Department of Education encourages collaboration between Promise Neighborhood grantees and grantees participating in other federal programs by offering competitive preference points. Promise Neighborhoods considers braiding of federal and other resources as a tool to achieve better results for people and communities.⁴

Design Recommendation

- ▶ **Encourage interagency collaboration to support grantees on their Promise Neighborhoods program work.** Explore alignment opportunities with other agencies that facilitate a pipeline of supportive programming throughout an individual's lifetime. For example, the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, oversees early education through both Head Start and child care.

What types of local entities will be eligible to receive funding?

Overview

Eligible entities are separated into three priority categories: urban, rural, and Tribal. Across all categories, eligible entities for Promise Neighborhoods funding include

- institutions of higher education,
- Indian tribes and Tribal organizations, and
- nonprofit organizations, including faith-based nonprofit organizations, working in formal partnership with a high-need local education agency (LEA), an institute of higher education, an office of a chief elected official of a unit of local government, or an Indian tribe or Tribal organization.⁵

To be eligible, entities must “be representative of the geographic area proposed to be served.” Entities must also “operate or propose to work with and involve in carrying out its proposed project, in coordination with the school’s LEA, at least one public elementary or secondary school that is located within the identified geographic area that the grant will serve.” In addition, entities must provide at least one solution from their proposed pipeline services in the geographic area proposed to be served. Finally, entities must demonstrate that one or more entities in the public or private sector has committed matching funds.⁶

Design Recommendation

- **Maintain current structure.** The flexibility of the geography requirement is important and should be maintained, but Promise Neighborhoods could encourage applicants by providing examples of eligible locations in program materials. Not every community that is eligible for Promise Neighborhoods considers itself a “neighborhood”; providing an inclusive list of eligible communities may help these potential applicants understand that the program is for them.

How will participating local entities be selected from among those eligible?

Overview

The Promise Neighborhoods program is a competitive grant with structured grantee selection criteria. The criteria include the need for the project, the quality of project design, the quality of project services, the quality of the management plan, and adequacy of resources. Points are awarded to applicants for each of these criteria out of a total of 100. Applicants can also gain an additional 1 to 8 points for meeting competitive preference priorities through participation in other identified federal initiatives. Detailed information on the selection process is outlined in the [2021 notice of funding availability](#).⁷

Design Recommendations

► Update the areas that receive competitive preference points.

- Offer competitive preference points for applicants proposing to serve places that include initiatives covering more sectors such as health and housing, as well as participation in any other place-based initiatives. Offer applicants guidance on determining and demonstrating eligibility for preference points.
- Add preference points to applications that demonstrate participation or alignment with other federal grants, just as areas designated as Promise Zones enjoy competitive preference points for federal grant programs that advance cross-sector goals in disinvested neighborhoods.
- To support existing grantees that are performing well, include prior experience points in the selection criteria based on how many outcomes existing grantees have met, similar to how prior experience points are used as part of the [TRIO programs](#).⁸

► Incentivize local leadership and young people to engage in the application process.

Encourage applicants to engage leaders and young people from the communities in which programs will be implemented. The goal will be to uplift the work of people already invested in these communities, uplift young people's voices, and facilitate community ownership. Promise Neighborhoods currently requires a governing board, of which at least one-third must be residents who live in the areas targeted by program activities. It is also expected that the board reflect the racial and ethnic composition of neighborhood residents and the languages they speak. While the board is a good first step to encourage and incentivize local leadership and youth engagement, it doesn't go far enough to ensure programs reflect the needs and interests of community members, including young people.

What scale of federal funding will be provided?

Overview

The Promise Neighborhoods program delivers competitive project-based grants to backbone organizations selected through an application process. Grant recipients partner with and fund other local organizations. Eighty-one planning and implementation grants have been awarded from fiscal year 2010 through 2021 totaling about \$874 million. In the first year of the program, 21 planning grants were awarded for a duration of one year, averaging \$476,205. A mix of one-year planning grants and five-year implementation grants were awarded from fiscal year 2011 to 2012, and primarily implementation grants were awarded from fiscal year 2016 through 2020. No grants were awarded in fiscal years 2013 through 2015. In fiscal year 2021, 7 implementation grants were awarded for a duration of five years (with the possibility of extensions), with annual awards ranging from \$4 million to \$6 million.⁹

Design Recommendations

- ▶ **Increase the duration of funding.** Promise Neighborhoods aspires for long-term changes that, in many communities, address decades of disinvestment. These changes will require decades of investment in the same community. Currently, a grantee receiving both implementation and extension funding is only capitalized for seven years. Acknowledging the purpose of the program's investment to build communitywide infrastructure, extension grants should be extended to 5 years (for a total of 10 years of funding) to allow grantees scale their efforts and execute plans to sustain the work after federal support ends.
- ▶ **Support existing grantees to expand the geographic area they are serving through extension grants.** Applicants may be successful in serving one area under their first grant and want to expand a successful model to a new area while continuing to serve the original area.
- ▶ **Maintain a level of funding for existing sites that demonstrate strong outcomes, while adding funding for new sites.** Offering new sites funding is essential to expand the impact of the program geographically but ideally, this should not come at the expense of funding existing sites. Maintaining funding for existing sites as they look to sustain services without federal funding is necessary to create meaningful long-term impacts in these communities.
- ▶ **As federal investment decreases for sites, support increased local sustainability.** Consider supporting site sustainability by providing a structure for phasing out funding as local support builds. At the same time, recognize that some sites may not be able to build resources independent of the federal government for a longer period of time.
- ▶ **Consider awarding one-year planning grants in the future.** Promise Neighborhoods used to award planning grants to applicants, but this practice has been discontinued over the past few fiscal years. These one-year grants dedicated to planning offer an opportunity to support applicants that haven't been awarded Promise Neighborhoods grants before and need dedicated time and resources for planning. These grants also allow sites to organize, develop partnerships, and build a strong strategy before implementation begins.

What additional supports will the program provide?

Overview

Grantees receive a range of [technical assistance](#) from third-party providers (including the Urban Institute and PolicyLink) via federal support.¹⁰ This technical assistance includes aid with programming, data collection, community outreach, and sustainability. Technical assistance also includes a national leadership conference, leadership training, site visits, and webinars. In addition to this support, Promise Neighborhoods offers a [resource page](#) that directs grantees to relevant publications.¹¹ Promise Neighborhoods grantees also have access to online [communities of practice](#) to collaborate and learn from each other.¹²

Design Recommendations

▶ **Maintain support for flexibility and customization in the technical assistance sites receive.**

Flexibility in design, with accountability to outcomes, is key to the success of Promise Neighborhoods.

▶ **Continue to pair technical assistance with funding to build local capacity.** In line with the overarching goals of the program, technical assistance should be paired with funding and provided in a way that builds up knowledge, power, and capacity in local communities.

▶ **Enhance outreach efforts** so that prospective grantees fully understand the range of federal supports Promise Neighborhoods offers.

What will participating organizations be obligated to do?

Overview

Promise Neighborhoods supports a range of evidence-based cradle-to-career activities designed to improve children and young people’s educational and developmental outcomes. Services should be coordinated, targeting interrelated drivers of distress, and designed to expand opportunities over key life course milestones. According to the program’s [2017 Notice of Funding Availability](#),¹³ those activities include

- “High-quality early childhood education programs.
- High-quality school and out-of-school-time programs and strategies.
- Support for a child’s transition to elementary school, from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school into and through postsecondary education and into the workforce, including any comprehensive readiness assessment determined necessary.
- Family and community engagement and supports, which may include engaging or supporting families at school or at home.
- Activities that support postsecondary and workforce readiness, which may include job training, internship opportunities, and career counseling.
- Community-based support for students who have attended the schools in the area served by the pipeline, or students who are members of the community, facilitating their continued connection to the community and success in postsecondary education and the workforce.
- Social, health, nutrition, and mental health services and supports.
- Juvenile crime prevention and rehabilitation programs.”

Design Recommendations

- ▶ **Maintain the current structure.** The flexibility of the Promise Neighborhoods program, which allows local communities freedom to determine the appropriate needs and strategies accountable to set outcomes, is core to the program's success and should be maintained.
- ▶ **Encourage grantees to seek state, municipal, and philanthropic funding early on.** Building relationships with funders early will aid in long-term sustainability efforts. Gaining additional funding at the beginning stages of a program will allow for funding to support first-year implementation.

How will the program's effectiveness be measured?

Overview

Promise Neighborhoods grantees are expected to use evidence-based strategies to inform program design. Additionally, grantees are required to collect data on the individuals and neighborhoods they serve, as well as on the services they provided and to report on outcomes annually. The program focuses on outcomes related to educational achievement and tracks indicators such as attendance, absenteeism, graduation rates, number and percentage of students at or above grade level (according to state assessments required by the Every Student Succeeds Act), and family involvement and support. More details on outcomes and evaluation requirements can be found in the [2014 GAO Evaluation Plan](#).¹⁴

Design Recommendations

- ▶ **Maintain accountability to outcomes.** Measurement of key outcomes helps Promise Neighborhoods and its grantees understand progress and maintain accountability. This component of the program's design should be maintained, though program managers should understand that achievement of key outcomes often requires significant time and may not be measurably demonstrable in early phases of implementation.
- ▶ **Support grantees in establishing strong performance measures early in implementation.** Understanding that population-level change will require years of continuous improvement, the US Department of Education should support grantees in establishing performance measures from the outset of their implementation awards. These should be shorter-term measurements that allow grantees to assess how many strategies their partnerships are supporting to improve outcomes and how well they are executing those strategies, while building to the ultimate outcomes of improving well-being for whole populations of students and families over their grants' lifespan.

➤ **Offer flexibility in how outcomes are measured.**

- Encourage grantees to identify and report on outcome measures that are directly related to their strategies and keep them accountable to their communities. The standardized outcomes grantees are accountable to are important to the success of grantee strategies, but other outcomes and measures from nonstandardized data sources (e.g., indicators collected through local surveys) may better capture impact for some strategies in some communities.
- Maintain the mechanism for grantees to elevate and share qualitative findings and personal stories, but don't require this information as a part of formalized monitoring and reporting. Quantitative data sources such as administrative data are good ways to consistently measure outcomes, but they don't always offer the full picture of a program's success. Qualitative data such as observations, interviews, and focus groups may offer insights into programs that the quantitative data misses. While qualitative data can offer important insights, it can be cumbersome to collect, analyze, and report on a regular basis.

➤ **Ensure grant funding is sufficient to support evaluation.** Evaluating programs is critical to understanding their success, but it takes time and resources. Encourage rigorous and thoughtful evaluation by providing grantees with necessary resources to engage third-party entities to conduct them, and invest in a programwide evaluation to assess efficacy across communities.

Notes

- 1 “Applications for New Awards; Promise Neighborhoods (PN) Program,” 86 FR 5154, January 19, 2021, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-07-21/pdf/2017-15359.pdf>.
- 2 “About ED Initiatives: Promise Neighborhoods,” US Department of Education, March 5, 2018, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>.
- 3 “Promise Neighborhood Awards,” US Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, September 28, 2021, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/promise-neighborhoods-pn/awards/>.
- 4 “Promise Neighborhoods Program,” Promise Neighborhoods, 2018, <https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/background/promise-neighborhoods-program>.
- 5 “Applications for New Awards.”
- 6 “Applications for New Awards.”
- 7 “Promise Neighborhoods (PN),” US Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, April 9, 2021, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/promise-neighborhoods-pn/>.
- 8 Cassandra Dortch, *The TRIO Programs: A Primer* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018), 7-5700 www.crs.gov R42724 <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R42724.pdf>.
- 9 “Promise Neighborhood Awards.”
- 10 “Metropolitan Housing and Communities Center,” Urban Institute, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/promise-neighborhoods>; “Promise Neighborhoods Institute,” PolicyLink, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.policylink.org/our-work/community/pni>.
- 11 “Resources,” Promise Neighborhoods, 2018, <https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/resources>.
- 12 “Grantee Tools Overview,” Promise Neighborhoods, 2018, <https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/grantee-tools/overview>.
- 13 “Applications for New Awards.”
- 14 *Education Grants: Promise Neighborhoods Promotes Collaboration but Needs National Evaluation Plan*, Report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives (Washington, DC: US Government Accountability Office, 2014), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-14-432.pdf>.



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