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New Bill Targets College Access, Academic Success in Low-Income Areas

by Charles Dervarics, June 15, 2011

Education leaders in the U.S. Senate want to promote college success in low-income communities through a new “cradle-to-career” educational support program in the nation’s highest poverty neighborhoods.

Proposed by U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, chairman of the Senate’s education committee, and five other Democrats, the Promise Neighborhoods Act would create a new national initiative based on a model developed by the Harlem Children’s Zone to serve at-risk students in New York City.

That program, which began on one city block, has spread to cover more than 10,000 Harlem children. Integrated within the Children’s Zone are early childhood education programs, charter schools and support to prepare children for college.

“Promise Neighborhoods is a new kind of federal grant,” says Harkin, noting that the grant requires agencies and organizations to revitalize a single neighborhood at a time. He says his bill would spread the concept nationally through competitive grants for neighborhood-based “continuums of care” for children in low-income communities.

The bill takes “a holistic approach to improving not only children’s academic success but also their lives,” says Harkin. “It also supports communities in working together to combat the devastating effects poverty has on children’s development and academic achievement.”

Schools and community-based organizations would form partnerships with other organizations, including colleges, to provide services such as prenatal education and college and career readiness activities. The act also would provide financial support for a number of other programs, including:

- High-quality early education initiatives
- High-quality before- and after-school activities
- Programs focused on easing the transition to elementary school, between elementary school and middle school and from middle school to high school
- Career readiness activities, such as subsidized employment opportunities
- Programs supporting college-age students.

“Our experience in Harlem shows that working hard over the long term, holding ourselves accountable and eliminating all the barriers to academic success is our best shot at saving poor children,” says Children’s Zone president Geoffrey Canada.

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College services include admissions counseling and support for students to take college prep curricula and enroll in early college programs.

While the Children's Zone has long focused on pre-K through high school issues, leaders gradually recognized the need to broaden its services to include support for students after they reach college. It created a College Success Office in which caseworkers each work with about 40 students to help them find the best college match.

Through electronic communication and in-person meetings, they also stay in touch after students begin their college careers. Some of the most important issues are time management, help with financial aid and academic support. Such support even continues after the regular academic year. Shantha Susman, a spokeswoman for Policy Link, a national research and action institute that has studied the project, says the program has a broad reach that goes beyond classroom-based education.

"It arranges summer and winter break internships, provides community service opportunities and helps facilitate internships," she says.

So far, the Children's Zone has helped more than 600 students get to college; students who graduated in 2010 received more than \$6 million in scholarships. More than 250 students from the 2011 graduating class, about 90 percent, have been accepted into college. Harkin hopes new federally funded programs would have similar effects.

At the K-12 level, services also include a TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center that provides free after-school programs in fitness, dance and karate along with nutrition information. As of August 2010, 97 percent of seniors who had participated in TRUCE had graduated from high school, and all these students had been accepted to at least one college.

In seeking to replicate this program through federal legislation, Harkin would attach his bill to legislation renewing the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The House and Senate are holding hearings on ESEA but have yet to take formal action.

Harkin's bill, S. 1004, has five co-sponsors: Sens. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md.; John Kerry, D-Mass.; Kirstin Gillibrand, D-N.Y.; Bob Casey, D-Pa.; and Al Franken, D-Minn. It was referred to the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which Harkin heads. There is no sponsor as yet in the House of Representatives.