

# Breaking the Cycle for Public Housing

BY MARY ELLEN LOWNEY, WITH WILLIAM H. ABRASHKIN, SALLY C. FULLER AND MAURA GEARY

A CENTRAL GOAL of HUD's 2010–2015 Strategic Plan is to “Utilize Housing as a Platform for Improving Quality of Life.” This Plan is consistent with the experience of New York City’s Harlem Children’s Zone, which has famously demonstrated that a place-based approach is the

most effective way to help poor people improve their circumstances and future prospects. When services and programs are made available where people live and in a coordinated way, it is far easier for them to overcome the many obstacles that otherwise block their path and to access the skills, education, employment prospects, and other tools they

need to improve their circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Housing authority officials whose residents are stuck in the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=HUDStrategicPE\\_goal3.pdf](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=HUDStrategicPE_goal3.pdf): “Stable housing, made possible with HUD support, provides an ideal platform for delivering a wide variety of health and social services to improve health, education, and economic outcomes.”



In a city with one of the highest child poverty rates in the country, the Springfield, Mass.

Housing Authority's *Talk/Read/Succeed!* program shows that it can be done by using public housing as a platform for improving quality of life

# e of Disadvantage Residents

Jeremiah Wiggins, 7, pauses as he paints a building at the Eric Carle Museum in Amherst on a recent field trip from Dorman Elementary School in Springfield.

cycle of disadvantage are all too familiar with the many obstacles that must be dealt with, and the negative outcomes to which they contribute. They watch as housing created as a temporary stepping stone turns into a permanent destination. They see children who are raised by parents with little education and parenting skills performing poorly in school and often

condemned to low-paying jobs, public benefits—and, in the worst cases, the underground economy of drugs and crime. They see those children having babies with little means to support them. They see the cycle passed onto yet another generation.

Upon reading these words, many housing authority officials will think, "Welcome to my world!"

This is also the world of Springfield, Massachusetts, an older industrial city—and home to the Basketball Hall of Fame—fallen on hard times. Many of today's 150,000 Springfield residents are desperately poor. Forty percent of the population lives on less than \$25,000 per year. The official poverty rate for female heads of households with young children—





Dorman summer learning pupils listen as Meghan Burch, guided art program educator at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, prepares them for a arts project.

not including the many near-poor—is a staggering 55 percent.

Many of the poorest of the poor live in the Springfield Housing Authority's fourteen family developments. It is for these families, many of whom are trapped in the cycle of disadvantage, that the program that came to be known as Talk/Read/Succeed! was designed.

## The Birth of Talk/Read/Succeed!

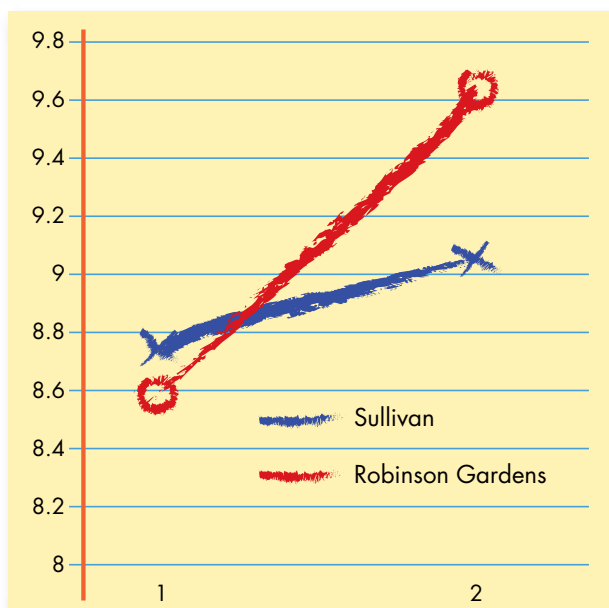
Sally C. Fuller is the project director of Reading Success by 4<sup>th</sup> Grade, a program of Springfield's Irene E. & George A. Davis Family Foundation. While the Davis Foundation was aiming its sights on literacy in the Springfield community, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation approached Fuller to partner in the work of engaging families in their children's education, with a special focus on empowering isolated families.

Crucially, both foundations understood that reading proficiency could not be achieved in school alone, and was certainly not as an isolated issue. It required a holistic approach, the classic full-court press, starting with outreach to families where they live and to their children from the earliest ages.

The Davis Foundation developed a proposal for W.K. Kellogg to help move public housing children toward the critical milestone of reading proficiency by the end of third grade. This would entail reaching out to parents, connecting them with support systems, and develop-

ing and nurturing their skills as their children's first teachers. With the Kellogg grant in place, Fuller

Summer Program Pre and Post reading scores, 2012 sessions. Students made reading gains over a five-week period starting in early July. Children without summer programs typically lose ground in reading skills.



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approached SHA Executive Director William H. Abrashkin, a former Trial Court judge, with the germ of an idea which she described as “turning SHA developments into mini-Harlem Children’s Zones, but with the lens of early literacy and reading proficiency by the end of third grade.”

**“Our evaluation shows strong parent engagement in student learning and in schools that has direct positive results on student achievement. This engagement also transforms parent practices.”**

—Jessica Payne Consulting Co.

Abrashkin and the SHA Board of Commissioners quickly agreed.

“I had seen these kids coming through the court system for decades,” Abrashkin said. “One of the reasons I came to the Housing Authority was to see what could be done to reach the next generation before the damage was done. There was no question that the approach suggested by Sally was exactly what was needed.”

Springfield may be a poor community, but it is also home to an impressive array of people and organizations that understand the problems and challenges. “It was amazing to see the shared understanding that we were living in the midst of a slow-motion disaster, losing successive generations of young people,” said Abrashkin. “Figuring out how to break this cycle was an idea whose time had

come. No one had to be convinced to get on board. They were all eager to take this on.”

With Fuller’s encouragement, a core governing body came together. Initial participants included the Housing Authority, the Davis Foundation, the Regional Employment Board (which has a focus on early education as an essential part of long-term workforce development), and the United Way. Impressively, initial participants also included the local teachers’ union and the public school administration, working together for the shared goal of improving children’s lives.

“Mini-Harlem Children’s Zone” was quite a mouthful. Drawing on the studies comparing the limited communication skills between poor parents and their children with those of more affluent fami-





*Above:* The Talk/Read/Succeed! team is a collaboration of two dozen groups and agencies whose representatives meet regularly to review progress and challenges. In this group are participants from the Springfield Housing Authority, with Executive Director William H. Abrashkin on the left, the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, the Springfield School Department, the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, Springfield City Library, and Massachusetts Teachers Association; *Left:* Melissa Seery, and Cianna Seery, 7, celebrate the last day of Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative at Dorman Elementary School.



lies, the name, "Talk/Read/Succeed!" was selected.<sup>2</sup> "It all starts with how you talk with children from the very youngest age," Fuller said. "That's why our first

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Hart & Risley study of 2003 showed that by age four, children in families receiving welfare have heard 32 million fewer words than children from professional families. Those children also hear far more words of discouragement than their wealthier counterparts.

name is, "Talk." Soon, participants began to refer to the program by its initials: TRS.

TRS began in two SHA developments that were selected on the basis of family demographics and the strong interest shown by the neighborhood schools that their children attended. The program targeted approximately 185 families with children from birth to age nine in the two sites, and began its work with trained Outreach Coordinators, Lynne Cimino and Zenaida Burgos, making personal and persistent outreach to engage parents. "The underlying strategy is that outreach is critical to family engagement, that programs need to be responsive to family needs and interests, and that families who are engaged will take on stronger roles in supporting their children's development and learning," said Maura Geary, Director of Literacy at the Regional

Employment Board.

Cimino has been with TRS since its beginning in 2010. She and Burgos, who joined TRS more recently, spend much time working with parents and children, either in the form of delivering services or getting more families involved. "Are we connecting?" Cimino asked. "Yes. We're out there all the time, looking to match people up with the things they need. I hear all the time, 'I need a job!' So we've always got our eye on that. We're connecting them with GED programs, even college. We also go around and make sure children are registered for school, and that helps us get more families involved."

Big events, such as summer and back-to-school kickoff picnics held at both SHA developments each year, draw in many parents and children who otherwise might not otherwise avail themselves TRS



Talk/Read/Succeed! Outreach Coordinator Zenaida Burgos, left, greets families at a back-to-school celebration at Springfield Housing Authority's Sullivan Apartments.

services. Last summer, the back-to-school picnics even featured a dental clinic set up inside the

community rooms of each development. While families enjoy music, food and fun outdoors,



Melquisedec Santiago, 8, gets a teeth-cleaning at the Commonwealth Mobile Oral Health Services clinic set up for the day at Springfield Housing Authority's Sullivan Apartments. Standing next to him is dental assistant Trung Nguyen.

Cimino and Burgos are busy cementing established connections and making new ones, always working to draw more families into the fold. "You can't just send people a memo to come to a meeting," Cimino observed. "You have to engage with them where they are, on terms that make sense to them." Once sufficiently engaged to move forward, parents are offered programs to build the capacity of the targeted families to support the development of their children's early literacy skills.

## Ask and Learn

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When TRS was in its early stage, planners recruited families from both housing developments and surveyed them to rate a list of their needs. The top two needs listed were eye-opening: psychological counseling for depression, and help with children's behavior. "When we saw the two top things people were looking for, it confirmed for us how difficult it is to contend with all of the things that burden people when they're poor," said Abrashkin. "Poor people live very demanding lives. The image of people living carefree lives in public housing does not reflect reality."

With that in mind, TRS founders set out to make psychological help a focus of the program. They found a community partner in the Behavioral Health Network (BHN) to do just that.





Jennifer McNally with her son Jonathan Alvarez on the last day of the T/R/S Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative at Boland Elementary School.

BHN is a large multi-service agency headquartered in downtown Springfield. In addition to the substance and breadth of its counseling programs, BHN offered another advantage integral to the work of TRS. “There was a stream of funding out there through MassHealth (Medicaid) for services to meet people’s needs,” Abrashkin said. “But those who needed it most couldn’t access it. It was the job of TRS to connect those dots. This was done by working with BHN to bring its counselors both to the developments where people live and to the schools their children attend.” In other words, the TRS program uses housing as a platform for the provision of needed services.

A small residential unit at each development was taken off line and devoted to special use to serve as office and community room space for TRS activities. Several times each week, counselors from

BHN began to visit both the participating elementary schools and the developments, offering individual counseling and family activities that focus on communication, understanding, and dealing with conflict. The results have been impressive, and BHN services are often cited first by parents as centrally important to what TRS has to offer.

“I like the programs that help me with my kids,” said Carla Santiago, a mother of three young daughters who has participated in the program since the early days. “It’s helped all of us get along better, and understand each other better,” she added. “I’m much better at helping them with their school work. Before I used to get frustrated. I can see the difference in all of us. We work better as a family.” Santiago has also become much more involved in her neighborhood. She is now an officer in the recently formed Robinson Gardens Residents Association.

## Collaboration is the Key

The great baseball manager, Casey Stengel, is said to have remarked that “Getting good players is easy; getting them to play together is the hard part.”

Indeed, as more and more services started to be brought into the TRS program, it wasn’t always smooth sailing. “Were there bumps in the process?” asked Pam Wells, Resident Services Manager for the Springfield Housing Authority. “Of course. We had been operating a pretty good resident services program for many years, and all of a sudden there were all of these new folks who didn’t necessarily know our residents or our work. But fortunately, everyone pretty quickly put aside their turf and ego issues and began to work together.”

Once the initial TRS team had been assembled and the first round of parents engaged, the task was to begin to marshal the services and programs, in addition to the Behavioral Health Network, that

*“Literacy is the main aspect of the program throughout the whole day...even if it was a nature walk, children recalled the information from the books we read, and then they saw what we were talking about. They were making connections from the literacy to hands-on learning outside.”*

*—Jessica Payne Consulting Co.*

families needed to begin to realize improvements in their children's reading. The two elementary schools that children from these developments attended quickly became enthusiastic participants in the TRS program. "We had done a good job and taken things about as far as we could inside the school," said Principal Thomas O'Brien of the Boland Elementary School. "But beyond that point, we understood that we had to engage the families where they live in order to reach the next level for our children."

"Imagine," said Rhonda Stowell-Lewis, Principal of the Dorman School, "not long ago the relationship between the school and public housing parents was quite alienated, with little parent participation. Now public housing tenants are running the PTO!" In fact, the same Carmen Santiago who is active in the Robinson Gardens Tenant Association is also a member of the Parent-Teachers Organization at her daughters' school, the nearby Dorman Elementary School.

"Some parents used to be very challenging," Stowell-Lewis noted. "It is so much better now. We've seen holistic results from TRS. It really set the wheels in motion of setting a positive tone with parents. More parents are involved. Attendance is better. We had math night recently and our turnout was amazing. Good news travels. We used to have events and no one would show up. Now, our parking lot is often full." The management of TRS has contributed to a culture of collaboration that demands continuous dedication to process. Frequent meetings and close management support have been necessary to ensure timely communication, ongoing assessment of strategies and shared problem solving, and coordination of resources and activities. In addition



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tion to monthly Project Team and quarterly Policy Council meetings, weekly meetings with key TRS members, the local housing authority, and Behavioral Health Network staff became the central hub supporting collaborative partnerships that were not always self-evident at first.

Abreshkin said he believes that the collaborative approach that TRS uses is the only effective way

for any community to take on an issue like literacy among children and make improvements. When a new program or event develops, staff from additional organizations join the weekly meetings to help ensure successful implementation. Although all groups began with a common desire to increase education outcomes for TRS families, the actual work of aligning services and resources requires dedicated



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T/R/S participants visited the Harlem Children's Zone this summer for a look at the program model. From left to right: Lynne Cimino, T/R/S outreach coordinator, Nicole Contois, SHA deputy executive director, Lisa Sanford (seated) SHA property manager, Pamela Wells (seated) SHA resident services director, Carolyn Andrews, Behavioral Health Network counselor, Sean Cahillane, SHA real estate development project administrator, and William H. Abrashkin, SHA executive director.

effort to oversee the process, maintain relationships, and monitor results.

Bit by bit, in addition to the Springfield Housing Authority, the Regional Employment Board, the United Way, the Davis Foundation, and the public schools and teachers' union, the following programs have been added to the TRS program:

- Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative
- Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art
- Ready! For Kindergarten administered by Home City Families
- Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
- Partners for a Healthier Community
- Raising a Reader
- Springfield Parent Academy
- Head Start

## Stemming Summer Learning Loss

Principal Stowell-Lewis said one component of TRS that has made a mark at her Dorman School is the Hasbro Summer Learning

Initiative, which immerses children in an outdoor-based literacy program that has shown strong results.

Following the first summer, 27 of the 48 participating children had advanced one level in reading, and nine had advanced two levels, on their return to school in September. All of the remaining children retained even reading skills—a feat in itself considering that children without summer programming typically slip at least a level during summer months, and then rarely, if ever, catch up.

And children in public housing are usually not the beneficiaries of summer learning, making what TRS is doing on this front something of a literacy coup.

"The summer program has helped a lot with the regressions," Stowell-Lewis said. "It's been a great way for our teachers to get to know the children they'll be having in September in the regular classroom. And the children who participate in the summer program come in higher than a lot of the other kids because of that," she said.

## The Four Pillars of TRS

"The formal goal of TRS is to have the children of participating families reading at grade level by the time they enter fourth grade," Abrashkin noted. "This simple-sounding goal is actually quite complex and ambitious when it is considered that we are starting from a point at which fully two thirds of our children are deficient or failing in reading by fourth grade."

The TRS model to achieve this goal is organized around four principles, or "pillars": Family Engagement, Parenting Education, Child Education, and Family Self-Sufficiency.

*Family engagement* includes home visits, on-site programs and activities at housing developments and in the schools, and peer outreach via a growing group of "parent ambassadors."

*Parenting education* includes workshops that focus on promoting early literacy in the home, programs that help three- and



SHA Executive Director William H. Abrashkin with Sullivan Apartments resident Carla Vaughan.

four-year-olds get ready for kindergarten, and play-to-learn and parent-infant playgroups, with professionals guiding the way.

*Child education* involves work to increase access to high-quality early childhood education, summer, and after-school programs that align with goals and curricula from participating schools.

*Family self-sufficiency* encompasses ongoing efforts to connect parents with General Education Development preparation classes, computer training, ESL, and training in job interview skills, financial literacy, and of course, help in finding job training and work.

Within each of these categories, a menu of programs and services is evolving and growing to fit whatever needs exist. Not all children and families need the same level of support, and the initiative tailors its programmatic offerings to family need and interest, as established by a comprehensive needs assessment. TRS helps match families, teachers, and community staff to the

most appropriate programs. Some families need ongoing support to overcome barriers to attend and participate in workshops or school events. Some families need help accessing early childhood education or summer programs for their children. Others may need help enrolling in GED classes or job training programs.

nerable young children to develop and learn. By supporting collaboration, Talk/Read/Succeed! helped coordinate and focus existing services and programs to be more responsive to family needs and reach families where they live and where their children go to school. The adults in vulnerable families engaged in activities that built stronger relationships between parents and children, among families living in the same area, and with schools and community agencies. Through community collaboration and parent engagement, young children received supports for their language and literacy development at home, in child care and school, and in out-of-school-time settings.

Participating families also have good things to say about the program. Kelly Robblets is the mother of a four-year-old daughter and a year-old son. She, her partner and the children have participated in several of the programs, including the weekly playgroup and parenting classes. "TRS has helped me a lot," Robblets said. "The playgroup has helped my daughter open up with other children and make friendships. The parenting group has helped me learn how to deal with family issues—what to do when your kids get angry, stuff like that. It's made a difference. I use different methods now and I know how to calm situations down," she said.

Besides all that, TRS has got her to thinking about improving her life in other ways. A high school dropout, she recently completed testing for a local GED program and with the help of Cimino, will soon be taking classes. "I want to finish school and do something good with my life," Robblets explained. "I want to be a good example to my children, so they'll see that education is important." ■

"(The program) has the potential to instigate a life-changing path for students. Positive experiences with learning and literacy, connected relationships with teachers, and repeated experiences of success and improvement have the power to transform students' identities as they are seen and see themselves as capable learners on a course of supported growth and advancement."

—Jessica Payne Consulting Co.

## Evaluation and Metrics: TRS Works

In the words of a September, 2012 independent Center for Assessment and Policy Development evaluation:

... Talk/Read/Succeed! succeeded in transforming the relationships among agencies, schools, and families through community collaboration and family engagement and by so doing strengthened opportunities for vul-