



Center
for the
Study
of
Social
Policy

Northside Achievement Zone:

Building Evidence for Achieving Success, at Scale

FRIENDS OF EVIDENCE

CASE STUDY

This is one of a series of illustrative case studies, under the auspices of the Friends of Evidence, describing powerful approaches to evidence being taken by initiatives currently engaged in efforts to improve outcomes among disadvantaged children, families, youth and neighborhoods.

The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) is both a non-profit agency and a strategy across more than 40 organizational partners and schools that works to close the achievement gap and end multigenerational poverty in north Minneapolis, by using education as a lever. As one of 12 US Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods Implementation Grant recipients, the NAZ collaborative aligns resources that holistically address gaps and needs related to education, housing, career and finance, and health, to support children's academic success and move them through a cradle to college pipeline.

NAZ is committed to infusing a broad spectrum of evidence into all aspects of its work. Based on this evidence, NAZ continually shapes and reshapes its continuum of solutions over time to improve the outcomes of the children and families it serves.

Although NAZ is at an early stage in its work, it has already documented measurable progress towards achieving several of its goals. For example:



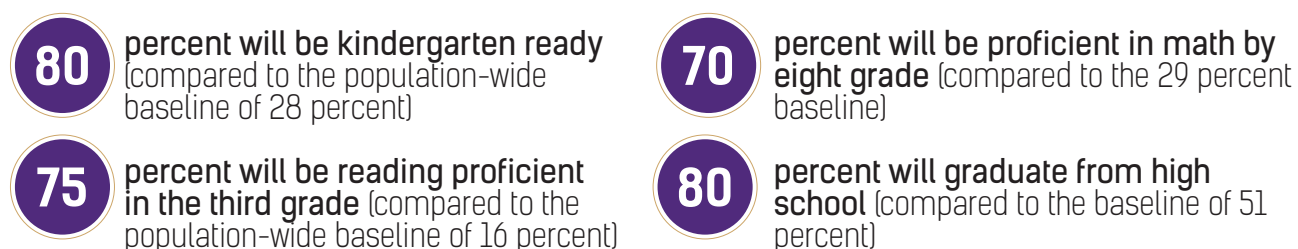
- 49 percent of the children served by NAZ (referred to as “NAZ Scholars”) are kindergarten ready as compared to only 35 percent of children in the entire Zone.
- NAZ scholars have improved their reading and math proficiency by 52 percent, and
- NAZ has reduced housing instability for its families by one-third.

This case study looks at a particular feature of NAZ: how the initiative uses and generates evidence in order to accomplish the goals listed above. We look at five characteristics of an inclusive approach to evidence – characteristics that CSSP and the Friends of Evidence have identified as frequently encountered in initiatives that can be considered “evidence innovators.” We examine each of these in turn.

Figure 1.

NAZ Population-Level Goals

NAZ's goal is to support the 2,500 children living in north Minneapolis so that:



1.

NAZ Uses Many Sources of Evidence to Design and Adapt its Interventions

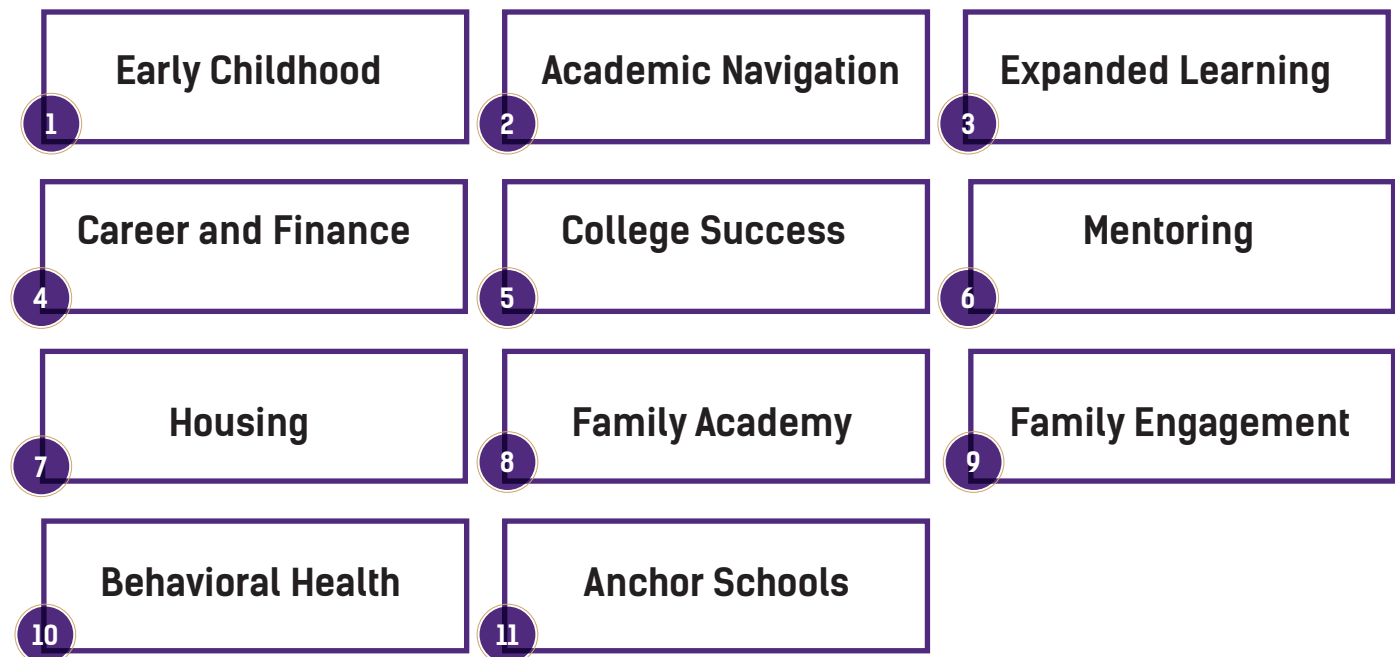
NAZ draws on a wide range of research literature, as well as community and partner knowledge, to identify evidence-based programs, and to tailor, add to, and continuously improve them. It uses a process called the “NAZ Seal of Effectiveness,” in which NAZ partners work together to develop Solution Plans that include proven and promising programs and an ongoing monitoring and review of progress to inform the improvement of services over time.

The Seal of Effectiveness process begins with careful “solution development planning” among Action Teams -- groups made up of NAZ core staff, staff of partner organizations (generally the service providers implementing solutions directly to scholars and families), and the internal evaluation partner Wilder Research, based at the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. These groups review scientifically-validated and promising practices and draw upon their own knowledge of the NAZ community to develop evidence-informed Solution Plans, or blueprints for action, in each of eleven program areas. Wilder Research helps to further define the plan by defining and recommending the “active ingredients,” “necessary conditions” and “frequency/dosage” for each intervention or strategy, based on review of the research literature. Outside experts in the field related to that action area provide additional comments and suggestions about proposed interventions, ensuring that field-based practice that may not be in the literature is brought to bear as well.

NAZ stresses that incorporating the knowledge of local experts and partners assures that programs will be adapted to the Northside neighborhood’s needs and context. “The evidence base and literature were an essential component of developing the plans,” says Tracy Roloff, former Evaluation Director at NAZ. “However, those were equally balanced by expert knowledge and best practice from the practitioners in the community who are doing this work. It was really meant to be a marriage between the two ways of knowing what will work from the beginning, but we were unable to take any existing evidence based program or practice and adopt it as a full, standardized implementation of that evidence based-based program. We adapted every solution to fit the needs of our organization and our community.”

Figure 2.

NAZ Solution Plan Areas



Copies of the Solutions Plans are available on NAZ's website: <http://northsideachievement.org/what-we-do/best-practices/>

2.

Results Establish Accountability and Guide Continuous Improvement

NAZ pairs its Seal of Effectiveness process with a complementary process called “Results NAZ”, which involves both routine evaluation among Action Team members and Results Roundtables, held every other month, at which families, NAZ staff and Board of Directors and other stakeholders come together to document progress, to lift up successful approaches, and to identify shortcomings in order to learn what needs to be done differently to reach its ambitious goals.

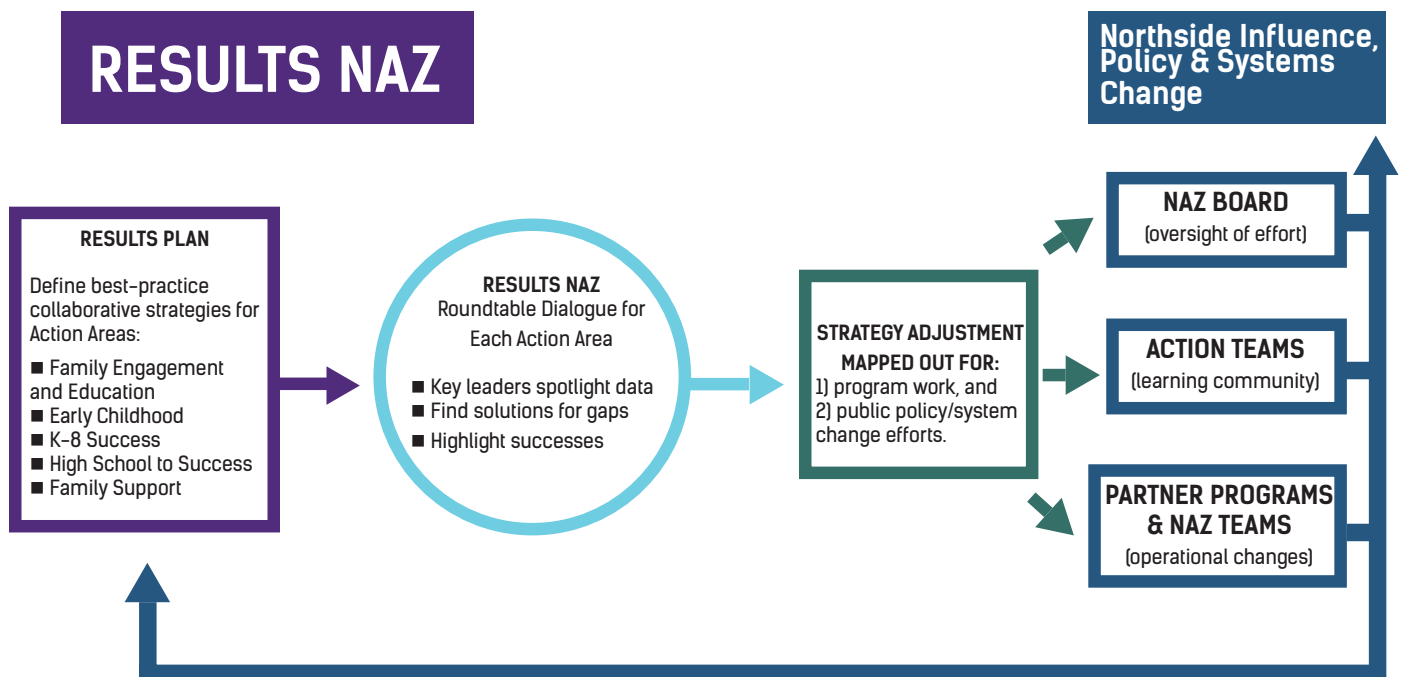
For each Solution Plan, the Action Team develops a set of goals, with end-outcome benchmarks that define how they will measure progress. Several of these goals, or desired results, overlap with the 10 results and 15 indicators required by the U.S. Department of Education under the Promise Neighborhoods program. NAZ Action Teams identify their own results and have fully embraced the Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework, which provides a model and vocabulary for establishing desired population quality of life results, indicators for measuring those results, and a process for developing and tracking the effectiveness of solutions that are employed to improve upon the baseline for each result. “Results NAZ” embodies this RBA practice and allows NAZ leaders and community stakeholders to routinely answer the following questions:

1. How much of the intended intervention was provided?
2. How well was this intervention implemented?
3. Was anyone better off, or what were the short-term effects of this intervention that work towards long term outcomes?

Wilder Research helps NAZ to answer these questions, aggregating and providing the data to answer the “how much” and “how well” and “was anyone better off” on a regular basis. The intervals at which these reports are provided differ based on the solution area. For programs related to academic achievement, such as early childhood and after- or out-of- school programs, Action Teams receive these data for review approximately every six months. The data are gathered partially through an online tool called NAZ Connect, which serves as an achievement planning and data collection platform for the NAZ collaborative. It allows NAZ to track family and program data at the program, solution area or Zone-wide population levels. NAZ Connect also allows partners to view what they call “family achievement plans”, or plans that the family develops jointly with their NAZ Family Achievement

Figure 3.

Results NAZ



KEY LEARNINGS are used to adjust plans for direct impact with participating families.

Coach and compare the achievement plans with periodic assessment results. If families are not meeting their plan's benchmarks, NAZ Family Achievement Coaches and program staff can make the needed adjustments in real time to set them on course to do so.

As mentioned previously, Results NAZ also includes Roundtable meetings, held every other month, on each of the 11 solution areas during which NAZ staff and key stakeholders, including parents, meet to listen to a presentation of the data on one solution area and then provide insight and guidance on how well the Solution Plan is working and -- more importantly -- how it can be improved.

For example, the data reported to one Roundtable showed that the utilization of Healthy Start supports by pregnant mothers in NAZ families was only at 17 percent (6 out of 34). (Healthy Start is a service for pregnant and parenting families run by the City of Minneapolis.) Roundtable participants brainstormed about ways to improve utilization, and agreed to revise the Solution Plan to include a different referral practice: referring pregnant mothers to Healthy Start for a varied range of issues rather than for medical support alone.

The Roundtables are used to create a space for broader community input, especially from families served, and this, too, is an essential element of how NAZ uses data to drive results. "There is a huge value in involving all of the stakeholders through Results NAZ," Tracy Roloff explains. "When we identify gaps or challenges, we have the solution generation happening in one conversation that captures the vantage points of all of our stakeholders simultaneously."

At another Early Childhood Roundtable session, one parent said, "I used to think I had good care for my child. Then I got enrolled in a high quality center and was amazed by how much he was learning. I used to be happy that a nice lady was taking care of my child. Now I know that I need a nice lady who also knows how to teach my child." This parent's insights led to adjusting implementation to not only help parents find available childcare, but to support them in gauging the quality of their childcare as well.



3. NAZ Uses Multiple Methods of Evaluation Matched to Diverse Purpose

NAZ uses a variety of evaluation techniques matched to the following purposes:

- To gain an expanded understanding of the impact of specific parts of its continuum of solutions as well as the impact of its whole collaborative.
- To ensure that the solutions being implemented are working and are constantly improved upon in order to work even better.
- To meet its obligation to its stakeholders, including funders, partners and families, to demonstrate effectiveness and the value of public and private investments on both the population and performance levels.
- To capture the scale at which the NAZ collaborative is reaching scholars and families in their footprint as well as the fidelity with which it is implementing a range of solutions.
- To demonstrate the contribution of the NAZ collaborative towards the improvement of specific population level indicators – such as high school graduation rates and the rate of kindergarten readiness.

At present, NAZ evaluation partner Wilder Research primarily uses formative evaluations, which were developed in partnership with a team of evaluators from the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) at the University of Minnesota. These evaluations report on

short-term effects of the solutions that NAZ implements as well as process results for the same solutions, drawing on data ranging from case management information in NAZ Connect and attendance data from partners, to assessments administered within the programs.

For example, a recent internal evaluation report on Early Childhood solutions included (1) program data from NAZ Connect, (2) attendance data from the Twin Cities Healthy Start initiative, (3) information from the Parent Aware program (which helps parents find quality childcare), (4) ratings on the implementation of the solution plan from both NAZ staff and members of the Early Childhood Action Team, (5) analysis of scholar performance on the Beginning of Kindergarten Assessment, (6) analysis of supply and demand of early care and education services within the Zone, and (7) information from the waiting list for access to Minnesota's Child Care Assistance Program. The report offers findings both on the "performance level" (i.e., how well the intervention is being implemented, what problems are encountered, etc.) and on the "population level," (i.e., what impact is it having). As an example, on the performance level, the evaluation reports on data such as the number and percent of 0 to 5-year olds who had their progress monitored in the past year, and the number and percent of known-to-be pregnant women attending regular prenatal visits. For the population level results, the evaluation reports on measures such as NAZ scholar achievement on Early Literacy and Numeracy measures, as well as results on the Beginning of Kindergarten Assessment.

CEED, the organization conducting internal evaluation at the time of interviews (2015), observed that intervention services provided by the NAZ collaborative “are still under some degree of development, and are ‘settling’ or maturing to a stable, constant, and rigorous state. As this rapid-cycle development work is completed, careful evaluation of activities over an extended period will be even more useful.”

NAZ uses a number of other evaluation methods to better gauge whether specific programs are working and to understand how to make them work better. For example, NAZ’s Family Academy (a series of classes that provide parents with children from birth to eighth grade with the skills needed to both strengthen the stability of their family and support the academic success of their children), has recently been evaluated in a three-year longitudinal evaluation project funded by the Brady Education Foundation, using a randomized wait list control group design.

NAZ’s external evaluator, Wilder Research, has also recently completed a social return on investment (SROI) study that quantified the costs and potential benefits of a few selected programs, including early childhood education, K-12 solutions such as mentoring, and parent and family solutions such as the Family Academy. It found the benefits of implementing NAZ’s solutions amounted to \$6.12 for every dollar invested.

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4. NAZ Has Built a Strong Infrastructure and a Culture That Supports its Commitment to Rigor, to Achieving Big Results, and to Continuous Learning for Improvement

Recognizing that initiatives that wish to use data to drive results in real time require an investment in a strong infrastructure, NAZ has been able to put in place a number of key infrastructure pieces that will ensure the systematic and rigorous use of data to drive continuous improvements to their continuum of solutions over time. These include:

- **Well-established processes, including mechanisms for routine community feedback:** By investing the time and resources in the naming and documentation of processes such as the “NAZ Seal of Effectiveness” and “Results NAZ”, the NAZ collaborative has embedded the process of continuous learning in its everyday operations.
- **Investment in a multi-functional data system:** NAZ has invested in the development of NAZ Connect as a tool for its leaders, staff and partners to drive achievement and support family partnerships; to support coordination across the NAZ system of partner organizations; to track both family and program data; and to contribute to a longitudinal data system.
- **Staff dedicated to evaluation and continuous improvement:** NAZ employs a full-time Evaluation Director who leads the NAZ partners through the data use processes, continuous improvement system, database development, stakeholder reporting and research and replication. Both NAZ core staff and staff from its collaborating partners also receive training in results based accountability to foster a culture of results across the entire collaborative.
- **Evaluation partners that include an academic institution:** NAZ evaluation partner, Wilder Research, implements NAZ’s internal evaluations and monitors the effects of these practices to support continuous improvement. Wilder Research conducts external evaluations as well, examining the population level, large scale effectiveness of NAZ’s solutions.
- **Participation in learning networks:** Learning and continuous improvement at NAZ has also been driven by its participation in a results-based network hosted by the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink, called Skills to Accelerate Results (STAR). NAZ leaders feel that STAR significantly built its capacity to use data to drive results and to build RBA tools into the culture of its entire collaborative. Designed to build the capacity of Promise Neighborhoods to implement rapid and effective changes to their strategies at their sites, the 13-month STAR program trains Promise Neighborhoods grantees around skills that include:
 - Using data to make decisions and ensure accountability
 - Tracking progress over time and making mid-course corrections when targets are not being met
 - Implementing a comprehensive, longitudinal data system

NAZ also participates in a number of other learning networks such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s grantee network and the Generation Next network, a coalition of civic, business and education leaders that supports students of color in Minneapolis and St. Paul using rigorous data analysis and community engagement to identify what works and to replicate the most promising findings.

- **Involving participants who are either implementing or receiving the intervention in the process of generating and analyzing evidence and**

reshaping intervention design: NAZ recognizes the importance of creating a transparent, data-driven culture across all the members of its ecosystem, including the families it serves. To this end, NAZ has committed to providing the families involved with NAZ with ongoing access to data, and to partner with providers and families in efforts to continuously improve its services and outcomes. This happens mainly through the Results NAZ Roundtables, which include at least two Parent Advisory Board members, and are also open to all NAZ stakeholders. Parent involvement has proved to be valuable in both understanding the story behind the data presented at the Roundtables and to help inform the changes to Solution Plans to ensure that the NAZ solutions are evolving and adapting over time.

5. Conclusion

NAZ demonstrates how initiatives that involve multiple players and systems can use rigorous and broad approaches to evidence to demonstrate accountability and continually improve. Specifically, NAZ demonstrates the usefulness of drawing on multiple sources of evidence to steer and adapt its strategies and to create the interventions that address the unique needs of a particular community. Furthermore, it illustrates how to use different evaluation tools, including randomized control trials, for different purposes -- in other words, to fit the tool to the task. It has created model systems, infrastructure and processes that regularly engage a broad group of stakeholders in analyzing and using data in order to continually improve. Finally it has created an evidence base about what they have done, how they did it, and the impact they've had that will be useful to many other communities in Minnesota and nationwide.

For more information about the Northside Achievement Zone and the tools available for building similar initiatives, please go to <http://northsideachievement.org/> and http://www.cssp.org/community/neighborhood-investment/body/Building_a_Culture_of_Results.pdf, specifically pages 13-16, 56-58.

Acknowledgments

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