

# EDUCATION DAILY®

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## CAMPAIGN 2008

### Palin lauded for attention to special education

But special education advocates criticize proposed voucher plan

By Mark W. Sherman

Republican vice presidential candidate Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin is receiving credit in Washington, D.C., for proposing to boost funding for special education under an administration led by presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. Her plan to create a federal special education voucher has not been as warmly received, however, by school officials or disability groups.

Friday, Palin used her experience as the parent of a special needs child to call for increasing federal special education spending over five years to \$26 billion from the current \$11 billion level.

"In a McCain-Palin administration, we will ... fully fund the IDEA," she said.

Palin also proposed stronger efforts to make sure children with disabilities find gainful employment after graduating and to augment the role of Parent Training and Information centers.

Palin's proposal to put more money into IDEA is encouraging, especially in light of McCain's proposal to hold almost all other federal spending at current levels, said Nancy Reder, deputy executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

"It's nice to know that she's talking about carving it out" from such a freeze, Reder said. "She's clearly struck a chord with individuals with disabilities."

#### Little support for vouchers

But Reder does not favor efforts like the McKay Scholarship Program in Florida, which Palin cited as a model for her plan.

"We don't support the McKay Scholarship because ... NASDSE does not support the use of public funds for private school vouchers," she said.

Private schools get a "proportionate" share of IDEA dollars to serve children with disabilities.

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## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

### Children's Zone provides policy lessons, advocates say

Early intervention, positive role models shape student motivation

By Frank Wolfe

As community schools become a hot topic on the national policy stage, supporters say the Harlem Children's Zone proves the concept holds promise.

HCZ began in 1970 as Rheedlen, a truancy-prevention program. In the 1990s, under the leadership of Chief Executive Officer Geoffrey Canada, it greatly expanded to provide a comprehensive set of educational, medical and social services to Harlem residents. HCZ now serves about 8,000 children in 97 square blocks of Harlem.

Such services include health and after-school programs; Baby College parenting classes; the Three-Year-Old Journey program, which focuses on

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## Secondary schools seek to streamline turnaround

By Sarah D. Sparks

Superfluous or contradictory programs can distract educators from solving a school's underlying problems. That's why administrators must ensure a school's improvement plan matches the reality of the classroom, said principals from the National Association of Secondary School Principals Breakthrough Schools program.

At a turnaround seminar by the American Youth Policy Forum, they recommended district and school officials use school improvement or restructuring plans to streamline existing programs.

"Everybody knows how to fix my school, and everybody wanted to give me programs to fix my school," said Misti Taton, principal of James E. Cashman Middle School in Las Vegas. "But programs don't fix a school. Educators in the building fix the school. We had to learn to say, 'No, thank you.'"

Taton said she was "appalled" the first time she walked through the struggling Cashman,

when it had already missed adequate yearly progress several years in a row. She recalled that "the people who made the [improvement] plan had never been in our classrooms," and as a result, much of the plan had not been implemented.

Taton gathered staff members to audit every program and determine how it aligned to the school's improvement plan and served students. For the most part, they found programs tacked on to the school curriculum rather than being properly integrated.

The program review allowed the school to use the school improvement plan actively, as criteria to determine the school's academic needs. Now, teachers and students look at their own data and decide what professional development and enrichment programs to include each year.

In the process, the school reduced the percentage of black and white students below proficiency in reading by 30 percent and cut by 10 percent the Hispanic, black and poor students below proficiency in math.

## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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language enrichment; and three Promise Academy charter schools, which feature extended day programs.

Using HCZ as a model, Democratic presidential candidate Illinois Sen. Barack Obama has pledged to create 20 Promise Neighborhoods in high-poverty areas plagued by crime and low student achievement.

"We think that this kind of comprehensive, results-based approach makes great sense," said Marty Blank, president of the Coalition for Community Schools. "But we have to recognize that each community is distinct. Which communities are ready must be given serious thought and consideration."

At a Center for American Progress event last week, Canada said he had decided in the late 1990s to move toward a block-by-block approach to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty in Harlem.

"I'm convinced that in some communities, there's not [just] one thing going wrong, and that's presenting an obstacle for children," Canada said. "It's literally everything."

With community and governmental partners, HCZ has used its \$60 million annual budget to create its web of services.

HCZ has shown particular merit at the elementary school level, as students in the zone's charter schools have shown "off-the-chart" gains in math and are absent from school significantly less than other public school students in the zone, said Roland Fryer, a Harvard University economics professor and the founder of the Education Innovation Laboratory. The achievement needle for middle school students, however, has proven much harder to move.

### Sustainment and replication

Canada acknowledged sustaining HCZ and similar efforts through continued personal commitments and public and private sector funding are major challenges, especially as investment in early education and even the middle school years pays off much later.

"Success for me is pretty straightforward — getting our young people through college," Canada said. "Anything short of that may have some hope for being successful somewhere down the line, but you just don't know."

For his part, Canada is able to serve as a role model, a well-to-do entrepreneur who has made accountability and student and teacher performance watchwords. Middle school students are in particular need of such role models and mentors, Canada and Fryer said. Canada said HCZ students who wear uniforms are teased when they return home and face significant "cultural push back" and pressure to conform.

"One of the things we need to do is get everyday role models out there — dentists, accountants, grocery store owners," Fryer said. "Trying to flip that culture is incredibly important" to carry achievement gains through middle and high school.

Canada said the increased student and family support, such as that found in community schools such as HCZ, could push students to succeed in the global economy.

"We want to provide young people with a set of opportunities that prepare them to compete successfully for jobs so they can take care of themselves and their families and become participating citizens of our country," he said.