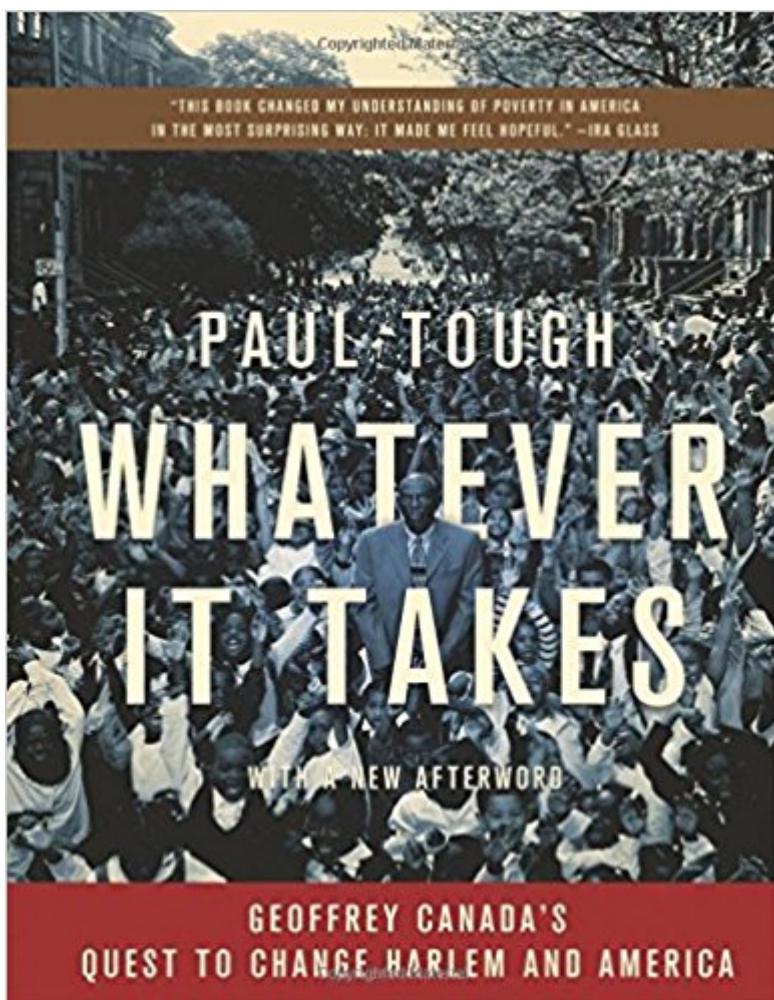


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# Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest To Change Harlem And America



## Synopsis

What would it take? That was the question that Geoffrey Canada found himself asking. What would it take to change the lives of poor children—not one by one, through heroic interventions and occasional miracles, but in big numbers, and in a way that could be replicated nationwide? The question led him to create the Harlem Children's Zone, a ninety-seven-block laboratory in central Harlem where he is testing new and sometimes controversial ideas about poverty in America. His conclusion: if you want poor kids to be able to compete with their middle-class peers, you need to change everything in their lives—their schools, their neighborhoods, even the child-rearing practices of their parents. *Whatever It Takes* is a tour de force of reporting, an inspired portrait not only of Geoffrey Canada but also of the parents and children in Harlem who are struggling to better their lives, often against great odds. Carefully researched and deeply affecting, this is a dispatch from inside the most daring and potentially transformative social experiment of our time.

## Book Information

Paperback: 310 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; 1 edition (September 10, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0547247966

ISBN-13: 978-0547247960

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 100 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #15,659 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Canadian #14 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Educators #15 in Books > Textbooks > Education > Educational Philosophy

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poverty in America. His conclusion: if you want poor kids to be able to compete with their middle-class peers, you need to change everything in their lives--their schools, their neighborhoods, even the child-rearing practices of their parents. Whatever It Takes is a tour de force of reporting, an inspired portrait not only of Geoffrey Canada but also of the parents and children in Harlem who are struggling to better their lives, often against great odds. Carefully researched and deeply affecting, this is a dispatch from inside the most daring and potentially transformative social experiment of our time. About the Author Paul Tough is an editor at the New York Times Magazine and one of America's foremost writers on poverty, education, and the achievement gap. His reporting on Geoffrey Canada and the Harlem Children's Zone originally appeared as a Times Magazine cover story. He lives with his wife in New York City. Questions for Paul Tough .com: What makes Geoffrey Canada's approach to educating poor city kids different than the many reforms that have come before? Tough: Geoff is taking a much more comprehensive approach than earlier reformers. His premise is that kids in neighborhoods like Harlem face so many disadvantages--poorly run schools, poorly educated parents, dangerous streets--that it doesn't make sense to tackle just one or two of those problems and ignore the rest. And so he has created, in the Harlem Children's Zone, an integrated set of programs that support the neighborhood's children from cradle to college, in school and out of school. .com: This is a short book about a long story. How did you find a way to tell the story of such a complicated, long-term transformation? Tough: When I set out to write this book, my main goal was to tell an engaging story, to find characters and moments and conflicts that would reflect the changes that were going on in Harlem. I wanted to present Geoff Canada more as a protagonist in a drama than as a static subject of a biography. And in that respect, I got lucky in my choice of subject, because during the years I spent reporting on his work, Geoff was in the middle of some major transformations, both personal and organizational. I was also lucky to find a variety of other characters in Harlem, from teachers and administrators to students and parents, who really opened up to me, speaking candidly and eloquently about their own hopes and fears for their children and their futures. With their help, I think I was able to make the book not just an account of some important new ideas in poverty and education, but a human story as well. .com: You've spent much of the past five years reporting in Harlem. Beyond the school successes, do you see differences between the parts of the city within the Children's Zone and nearby neighborhoods where the program hasn't expanded yet? Tough: Harlem as a whole has improved a great deal over the last decade--a process that Geoffrey Canada can take some credit for, though there were plenty of other people and forces that played a role. On a block-by-block level, though, it's not always possible to see the difference between a street that is in the zone and one that's outside of it. The

most important changes in the zone are going on out of view, inside schools and apartments and housing projects, where children are, for the first time, learning the skills they need to succeed. .com: Barack Obama has said that he would replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in 20 other cities. Have any other organizations begun to follow Canada's model in other places, or are they waiting to see how it goes (or waiting for Obama to be elected)? Tough: There is a tremendous amount of interest right now in Geoffrey Canada's work among people working in education and philanthropy and social-service non-profits. And there are fledgling zone projects in a handful of cities, all drawing upon the Harlem Children's Zone to some degree. But there's nothing yet happening on the scale that Obama has proposed. I do think people are waiting to see what Obama does. Will he take the steps necessary to put his replication plan into effect? .com: How much of its effectiveness depends on Canada himself? Can you model him, as well as his program? Tough: He's a unique guy. His personal story--born in poverty in the South Bronx, growing up around drugs and violence, then making it out of the ghetto and winding up at Harvard--was what gave him the passion and the commitment to create the Harlem Children's Zone in the face of numerous obstacles and widespread skepticism. So it's probably true that no one else could have built the first zone. But I think this next stage, the process of expanding the zone model around the country, will require leaders of a different type--people who are passionate about the mission of improving the lives of poor children, of course, but more importantly people who are very focused on results and how to achieve them. Those people may be rare, but they're out there. .com: Finally, how are Victor and Cheryl [a young couple who went through the Zone's Baby College in the book] doing? Tough: They're doing pretty well! They're still struggling with all the issues that most young adults in Harlem struggle with, like finding affordable housing and a decent job. But they're committed to their son, Victor Jr., and to the new parenting techniques they learned in Baby College. They're determined to do whatever it takes to give Victor Jr. a shot at a very different kind of future than they were able to imagine for themselves, growing up. Questions for Geoffrey Canada .com: How do you change the culture of a neighborhood while keeping its local values? Canada: We are not changing Harlem's culture--we are working to provide an alternative to the toxic popular culture and street culture that glorify violence and anti-social behavior. When you are a scared kid, all this tough-guy stuff is very seductive. We are working with people from the community to provide safe, enriching, and engaging environments for children so they can develop just like their middle-class peers. By encompassing an entire neighborhood, we hope to reach a tipping point where the dominant culture is one that explicitly and implicitly moves children toward success. .com: You say in the book, "It is my fundamental belief that the folk who care about public education the most, who really want to see it

work, are destroying it." Can you explain what you mean by that? Have you been able to change any of those minds through your work? Canada: First, let me say that I believe school staff--particularly teachers--perform one of the most important jobs in our country, and many of them are the most dedicated, hard-working professionals I know. I believe it is absolutely scandalous that they are not paid more and given more respect as professionals. That said, I believe our country's education bureaucracy has become calcified and resistant to change--and we are in dire need of change. When education self-interest groups defend practices that get in the way of improving schools for the sake of children, then I am absolutely opposed to them. I believe that the successes we are having in Harlem are beginning to turn some heads in this country, and making people realize that things are not hopeless--that we adults can improve student achievement at a much-larger scale than we have been doing. It's obvious that the system that got us here is not the one that is going to get us out. So everyone is going to have to re-evaluate their roles, their assumptions and their positions. I think that has begun, but we are not there yet as a country. .com: The story in the book ends in the summer of 2007. What has happened in your work, especially at Promise Academy, in the past year? Canada: This past academic year was very encouraging and it really seemed like the school began to coalesce. The most obvious sign of that were the scores on the citywide math exam at our middle school, which had been the school with the most challenges. This past spring, 97 percent of the eighth graders were at or above grade level. For an area like Harlem, that is incredible, particularly since these were kids that were randomly picked by lottery from the neighborhood, were massively behind, and were with us for just three years. So we are very optimistic about the future of our kids. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

New York Times journalist Tough profiles educational visionary Geoffrey Canada, whose Harlem Children's Zone—currently serving more than 7,000 children and encompassing 97 city blocks—represents an audacious effort to end poverty within underserved communities. Canada's radical experiment is predicated upon changing everything in these communities—creating an interlocking web of services targeted at the poorest and least likely to succeed children: establishing programs to prepare and support parents, a demanding k-8 charter school and a range of after-school programs for high school students. Tough adeptly integrates the intensely personal stories of the staff, students and teachers of the Children's Zone with expert opinions and the broiling debates over poverty, race and education. The author's admiration for Canada and his social experiment is obvious yet tempered by journalistic restraint as

he summarizes the current understanding of the causes of poverty and academic underperformance—and their remedies. Smoothly narrated, affecting and heartening, this book gives readers a solid look at the problems facing poor communities and their reformers, as well as good cause to be optimistic about the future. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In *Whatever It Takes*, Paul Tough tells the inspiring story of how Geoffrey Canada (founder of Harlem Children Zone) is attempting to change Harlem by radically reforming the way that children are raised and educated in Harlem. Canada's vision is to create a "conveyor belt" (yes, he actually calls it that) to success. With its gamut of schools and services, Harlem Children Zone is designed to provide parents and their children with the support structure that they need to enter and succeed in the American higher education system. For Canada, Harlem Children Zone is designed to be a virus that will infect and contaminate all of Harlem, forever transforming it. This book praises Geoffrey Canada as a charismatic visionary who has done his research. Half of the book details how Harlem Children Zone actually functions, and the other half explains the academic debate around education empowerment. For both Paul Tough and Geoffrey Canada, the scientific evidence says this: Yes, nature and nurture are important, but so is schooling. Through early, sustained, and deliberate intervention, children can adopt the habits, attitudes, and ways of thinking that will transform their lives. And Geoffrey Canada is obsessed with transforming the lives of Harlem residents, whatever it takes. Paul Tough is a very good and diligent reporter, but much of the book is unsettling. It reads more like a hagiography rather than a nuanced and sophisticated look at the American education reform debate. For one thing, he never questions Geoffrey Canada's obsession with test scores, and he would never dream of questioning the agenda of the hedge-fund billionaire who is financing Geoffrey's quest to change Harlem and America. For both author and protagonist, the ends justify the means. Yes, the focus on test scores means that teachers and students are stressed-out all the time, and are deeply unhappy, leading to massive turnover among the faculty. But getting into college changes lives, doesn't it? Isn't getting Harlem kids into the middle-class worth all the sacrifice? These are questions that no one

can answer except the parents and the kids themselves, but I don't think anyone has really bothered to ask them these questions. There is something deeply repugnant about the top-down, results-oriented, data-driven approach that Geoffrey Canada has opted for in Harlem. Whether or not he succeeds in creating the conveyor belt to success he envisions, the fact that he thinks it is a worthy goal to properly and rationally structure the lives of children is worrisome in itself.

Whatever It Takes chronicles the struggle of the Geoffrey Canada and the Harlem Children's Zone in their work against institutional poverty here in Harlem, NY. This powerful reflection examines how organizational structures and services evolved from Canada's recognition that historically disenfranchised communities especially those like the one he grew up in, developed "contaminated" cultures that did not support young people as they embarked on academic ventures in their schools. Recognizing the disparities between the childhoods of middle class white Americans and the childhoods students of color endured in poverty stricken inner city communities, Canada and the Harlem Children's Zone began identifying programs that would counteract the hardship students in Harlem endured. The book illustrates some interesting aspects these programs took on to inform both their structure and management. For instance, since the Harlem Children's Zone was a charter school a significant source of its funding was through private foundations. As a result the school operates with a different requirements and methods for accountability than of most public schools. Canada used this to make student achievement the goal that would drive every aspect of their work. Canada believed the best way to achieve that goal was to act not like a bighearted altruist but like a ruthless capitalist, devoted to the bottom line. He didn't think it was right to hold himself or his employees to a looser standard of achievement simply because they happened to be making the world a better place. (pg. 135) This perspective raises some concerns regarding what motivates our work in education and what we truly value about schools and the growth of the young people we serve. Although I struggle with this idea of acting like a ruthless capitalist, I can certainly agree with the notion of using data to drive decision making and the urgency of work and change that needs to take place within an organization to facilitate progress towards making all of our students successful. This in part certainly motivated the community partnerships that allow the Harlem Children's zone to engage in so much of the social education and services work that has made their work so successful. As schools consider their place and roles within communities

“Whatever It Takes” offers valuable insight on how and why organizational partnerships within local networks don’t happen nearly enough within our schools. In this way the Harlem Children’s Zone is a fantastic model for school leaders to use in examining how they can better utilize resources already present within their communities to support the families and children they serve. The way the book describes how these partnerships and programs have interwoven into the organization fabric of the Harlem Children’s Zone made this idea of the Conveyor Belt of safety nets and support structures that have made the school so successful. What I think is lost in the book is that Organizational frames were consciously used to inform how develop these programs developed. (Structure, Human Resources, Political, Symbolic) But, the context was unique to Harlem and although Canada’s quest has been to change Harlem and America the book fails to illustrate the degree of impact that context has on this work. While Baby College, 3 Year Old Journey, and Pre-Kinder (All Day) programs did wonders for Harlem many other factors need to be considered in developing functioning “Conveyor Belts” across schools in the United States. “Whatever It Takes” gives school leaders an opportunity to consider how relations with external organizations can be worked into the fabric of a school’s structure. There are many lessons to be gained from considering how social capital can be cultivated from similar work and there are plenty of things to consider with regard to how Canada’s very authoritarian leadership style drove change in this institution through passion, dedication, and an unrivaled commitment to the students and community he serves in Harlem. Although this would not be a recommended read if you’re looking for examples of distributed leadership, there are important lessons that can inform leaders of times that require more definitive charge and direction from a leader. “Whatever It Takes” is a wonderful read for leaders considering the structure and connections within their organizations and will challenge readers to consider the role leadership should take in driving school reforms.

Geoffrey Canada has developed a comprehensive, holistic formula to successfully educate poor kids in Harlem who historically have not had a good educational outcome. This book details the work that went into the program his Harlem Children’s Zone developed and administers. One of the best parts of the book is the detailed discussion of why kids who come from a background of poverty more often than not do not do well in school. It debunks myths that these kids have inferior intellects. It covers how their upbringing by well-meaning but highly stressed and beleaguered parents puts them behind their affluent peers. It details how Canada, who was born in a poor

neighborhood in the South Bronx, decided that if these kids were going to succeed in large numbers that his approach was going to have to affect every part of their lives, not just what happens while they are in school. The city I live in, Charlotte, NC, struggles with many of the same problems of a wide achievement gap between affluent white kids and poor black and Latino children. I am telling anyone who will listen that there is a way to educate all of the kids in our community and that what Geoffrey Canada has come up with may be the best approach. This is a great book that anyone who is passionate about public education and the inequities that exist in them will enjoy reading.

I thought this book was a great read and summarizes what I believe is the true cause of the great divide. Lack of access and knowledge by the poor that they truly have choices. And that part of having choices is that they can make add choices to the list of options not only select from the options presented. More access and belief in true choices is what is necessary. Easy to say, near impossible to achieve but no reason not to try!

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