



Sondra Samuels, Northside Achievement Zone CEO & President

NAZ leading revolutionary culture shift in north Minneapolis

A Civic Caucus [Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process](#) Interview
March 17, 2017

Present

Dave Broden, Janis Clay (executive director), Rob Jacobs, Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz, Bill Rudelius, Sondra Samuels, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: Steve Anderson, Paul Gilje, Paul Ostrow (chair).

Summary

The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) is focused on shifting the culture of North Minneapolis through a place-based model aimed at ending multigenerational poverty through education and family stability. According to NAZ President and CEO Sondra Samuels, NAZ and its 40 partners--schools and nonprofits--work together on a single goal: to prepare low-income North Minneapolis children to graduate from high school ready for college.

In 2012, NAZ was awarded a \$27 million, five-year grant by the U.S. Department of Education. Samuels says this allowed NAZ to scale up, so that it now supports more than 1,000 families and 2,300 children, leading in the creation of a college-bound culture throughout the North Minneapolis community. To offer total family support, NAZ works with early-childhood programs and with eight K-12 partner schools and collaborates with housing, career and health partners.

Samuels talks about the problems with Minneapolis alternative schools, where she says the school district "gets rid of" some of its kids. She says she doesn't understand why Minnesota doesn't offer reciprocity for licensed teachers moving to the state, which most other states do. She describes NAZ's participation in a pilot program aimed at stabilizing housing for highly mobile families, which has had a positive effect on the achievement of students from families whose housing has been stabilized.

She explains why she's both cynical and hopeful about the November 2016 Civic Caucus report, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). She questions the need for more study of education, saying people working "in the trenches" know what the problem is, but "what's lacking is the will to address it." But she thinks the process for attacking problems that the Civic Caucus is suggesting is needed, because we've lost our spaces for convening and talking about issues and policies.

Biography

Sondra Samuels is president and CEO of the [Northside Achievement Zone](#) (NAZ), a collaborative of over 40 partner nonprofits and schools. Along with parents, students, partners and staff, Samuels is leading a revolutionary culture shift in North Minneapolis that is focused on ending multigenerational poverty through education and family stability.

Samuels is a 20-year resident of North Minneapolis and a national leader committed to results-based leadership and accountability. She serves on the boards of the Minnesota Private College Council and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, is a member of the 2018 Super Bowl Host Committee Advisory Board and is part of the leadership team at Generation Next. She also was appointed by Governor Mark Dayton to serve on the Hennepin County Fourth Judicial District Selection Commission.

Samuels has an MBA from Clark Atlanta University and a B.S. from Morgan State University. *Twin Cities Business* magazine recognized Samuels as one of 100 people to watch in 2017.

About the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ).

NAZ began in 2003 as the PEACE Foundation, which built a grassroots movement across race, class and geography toward the common goal of significantly reducing violence in North Minneapolis. Desperate for real change and inspired by the results of the [Harlem Children's Zone](#), North Minneapolis community organizations and residents pulled together in 2008 to explore solutions to seemingly intractable issues that plagued the neighborhood. They determined there was a link between violence in the neighborhood and lack of both education and family stability.

Together, they developed an achievement-focused model that creates a permanent solution to the "cradle to prison/grave pipeline"--and builds a roadmap for sustainable community transformation. They developed a place-based model that carved out part of North Minneapolis with the worst outcomes for children. (NAZ now serves all of North Minneapolis.) They determined that the new organization's mission would be to end multigenerational poverty within North Minneapolis.

Today, the NAZ Collaborative--made up of 40 schools and nonprofits--works together on a single goal: to prepare low-income North Minneapolis children to graduate from high school ready for college. NAZ has a staff of 75 people, half of whom work in schools and other partner locations.

Under President and CEO Sondra Samuels, NAZ was awarded a five-year Promise Neighborhood Implementation grant of \$27 million by the U.S. Department of Education in 2011. This seed money has supported the scale-up of NAZ programs and exponentially increased family enrollment. NAZ now supports about 1,000 parents and 2,300 students as it turns the social-service model on its head and leads the creation of a college-bound culture throughout the community. Each enrolled family moves through a "cradle-to-career" ecosystem that provides comprehensive support from prenatal through college to career.

Samuels, her staff and NAZ partners work to ensure the integration of effective cradle-to-career solutions across the NAZ collaborative, to scale and sustain results across the community, and to achieve the systems and policy changes needed for low-income families and children of color to truly share in the prosperity of the Twin Cities region. Through their efforts, NAZ has become a nationally recognized model for community and systems change.

Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) President and CEO Sondra Samuels to get her reaction to the report and to learn about NAZ's mission and its work to improve educational success and family stability in North Minneapolis.

Discussion

Northside Achievement Zone's (NAZ) Sondra Samuels is both cynical and encouraged by what the Civic Caucus is doing. She said she came to that conclusion after talking to Civic Caucus interview group member T. Williams and reviewing the recent Civic Caucus report [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). "I thank you," she said. "We need the kind of work you're doing to keep our democracy going," she said.

Samuels said she does have some cynicism about the Civic Caucus report. "The idea in the report of studying education some more made me fatigued just thinking about it," she said. "Those of us who are in the trenches know what the problem is. What's lacking is the will to address it."

"If we want to get at the opportunity gap in education, we have to have great teachers," she said. "Any business that wants to turn itself around gets the best CEO. We have to start passing policies that ensure the children who need it most will get the best educators. That is not what happens."

"Minnesota's schools of education haven't been producing as many high-quality teachers as we would hope," she said. "Because if they were, we wouldn't have the results we're getting."

And she noted that although most states have reciprocity for teachers, Minnesota does not. Reciprocity allows teachers licensed in other states to teach when they move to a new state. But when teachers from other states come to Minnesota, they have to go back to school and get another degree from one of our schools of education before they can teach, even if they were teachers of the year in their own districts. And that has happened, she said.

"But I also have hopefulness for what the Civic Caucus is doing," she said. "What the Civic Caucus is talking about doing gets us all on the same page. We have lost our public centers where these kinds of dialogues and richness take place. How do those of us who care get in the know? I have to keep talking about the achievement gap and must patiently explain it to people who don't understand. What you're talking about is absolutely needed. We have to do that, because we've lost our spaces where we convene and talk about the issues of our day and the policies."

"What you're doing is needed and the issues you highlighted in the report are the right issues," Samuels said.

NAZ grew out of the PEACE Foundation. Samuels said she and her husband, Don Samuels, a Minneapolis School Board member and former Minneapolis City Council member, moved 20 years ago to become part of the North Minneapolis community. They saw that North Minneapolis had, within a decade, changed dramatically, with Jewish and other white flight and middle-class African American flight.

In 2003, Don Samuels and NAZ's current COO, Michelle Martin, started the PEACE (Public Engagement and Community Empowerment) Foundation, a grassroots movement in North Minneapolis and the broader community addressing the policies and social conditions causing the violence in North Minneapolis. The PEACE Foundation built a coalition of people within and outside of North Minneapolis.

Over the years, the violence was cyclical, Sondra Samuels said. It would go down and then spike back up the next year. "We knew what we were doing was not a permanent solution," she said. They heard about the Harlem Children's Zone in 2008, after the McKnight Foundation took a group of people to New York City to see the program. McKnight then convened about 50 of its nonprofit grantees in North Minneapolis to hear from the group that had traveled to Harlem. Inspired by the information shared about Harlem's successful place-based strategy to end multigenerational poverty, using education as a lever, the nonprofit leaders decided to execute a similar strategy in North Minneapolis, NAZ.

Following its \$27 million five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2011, Samuels said NAZ's budget has grown from \$1 million to \$11 million. It now has 75 employees, half of whom are from the Northside. Many are co-located at key partner locations. The program uses the levers of whole family support and education to provide "an ecosystem of support."

NAZ has an early-childhood pipeline of mostly four-star-rated centers, along with eight K-12 partner schools:

- One parochial school: Ascension Catholic School;
- Four Minneapolis public district schools: Elizabeth Hall International Elementary School, Nellie Stone Johnson Elementary School, North Senior Academy and Patrick Henry High School;
- One Minneapolis public schools contract alternative school: PYC (Plymouth Christian Youth Center) Arts & Technology High School;

- Two public chartered schools: The Mastery School and KIPP North Star Academy.

Samuels said action teams from the schools and nonprofits meet regularly and have set results plans. The college success team, for example, has reframed the question of how low-income kids should prepare for college to how colleges should get ready for low-income kids.

For total family support, NAZ collaborates with housing, career and health partners. Samuels said there are 29 family achievement coaches hired from the community, some of them parents who were in the NAZ pipeline. They're located in the partner schools and early learning centers, as well as at-large, for families whose children don't attend one of the NAZ partner schools.

Nearly all of the 1,000 families currently participating in NAZ (98 percent) are people of color, with more than three-quarters (79 percent) of them African American. Forty-three percent of the families have incomes below \$10,000, with another 30 percent at incomes between \$10,000 and \$20,000. Most families are headed by single women.

NAZ parents complete family achievement plans. Each family has a team surrounding it, such as partners who provide after-school programming, housing assistance, career programs or behavioral health. "With a shared data system and co-located staff, people not having to go from nonprofit to nonprofit, telling their story over and over again, cuts down on the time it takes to be poor," Samuels said. NAZ offers parenting education classes, which she called a "significant part" of why the program sees improved outcomes.

She said more NAZ students are ready for kindergarten and they are doing better on the third- through fifth-grade proficiency tests in reading and math.

The Achieving Through Stability fund has undertaken a pilot program to stabilize families in housing.

Samuels said the program started two years ago with funding of \$800,000 from the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA) and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). The departments said the research is clear that if children are housing unstable or homeless, they're not going to show up at school ready to learn.

The pilot included NAZ, the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood and Clay County (where Moorhead is the county seat). The pilot program funded housing organizations that help to stabilize highly mobile families, Samuels said. It was just for people with kids in public schools. Project for Pride in Living (PPL) administered the program.

"We're finding that the families who are in our pilot program and who were able to stabilize get wrap-around services from NAZ or the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood," she said. "We're seeing some amazing success."

The NAZ federal grant ended in December 2016, so \$5 million to \$6 million goes away now each year.

"Corporations and foundations are stepping up now, because of our results," Samuels said. "It's the combination of customized layered supports for families that's making the difference."

Post-federal grant, she said, NAZ is spending a lot of time trying to align its work with Hennepin County and trying to increase funding from the Legislature. The organization is undertaking a \$35 million investment campaign for corporations, philanthropic organizations and individuals. "We really feel we have a model that can turn North Minneapolis from being an underperforming asset to being a real powerhouse for the region," she said. "We're looked at as a model of Promise Neighborhoods in the nation."

NAZ is part of a statewide education partnership coalition, which also includes St. Paul, Northfield, Austin, Red Wing and St. Cloud. This statewide initiative went to the Legislature, which invested \$2.4 million

each in NAZ and the St. Paul Promise Neighborhood for the biennium. The state also funded the Greater Minnesota initiatives, although Austin, the newest member of the coalition, hasn't been funded yet.

NAZ is encouraged by its results, but has a lot of work ahead of it. "We feel like we have a really effective model," Samuels said. "Even if we go away tomorrow--and funding for nonprofits is precarious now--I believe the way we are organizing in the social sector in North Minneapolis, in terms of cross-sector, cross-discipline sharing of data on results, joint fundraising and working together on a shared goal, is what's necessary if we're going to put a dent in the opportunity gaps that are absolutely killing our state and our citizens."

Samuels prefers not to call the gap in education the "achievement gap," but, instead, the "opportunity gap" in education, in housing and in income.

Our problems are our opportunities. Samuels made that comment and said, "Wherever we have a problem, that's the greatest place for potential gain as a state, if we can grab hold of it as an opportunity and see it with new eyes."

Perhaps the Civic Caucus should try to unveil the open secrets of what's happening at publicly funded Minneapolis Level 4 schools. Samuels made that comment in response to an interviewer's question about whether kids at the alternative schools are learning much of anything. She said people at regular district schools think kids who are referred to alternative schools "are not our problem anymore."

Alternative schools are for kids who have behavior problems or can't keep up academically, Samuels said. NAZ is working with an alternative school run by the Plymouth Christian Youth Center. "We don't recruit children into that school," she said. "You can't do that. Students are referred into the alternative schools."

"I'm an education transformationist," she said. "I used to think it was either black or white: either you were educating kids or you weren't. Now I know there's a third way. The alternative schools are given an almost undoable task. They are asked to take a ninth grader who may be reading at a third-grade level and graduate him or her four years later. They can come any time of the year. It is absolutely a losing game from the time they enter the door." PCYC, she said, is doing the unimaginable and using the arts to get high schoolers on track to graduate, with some going on to college.

"In the past, we have called alternative schools 'soft prisons,' but they really aren't," Samuels said. "The Level 4 schools are the soft prisons. Those are not the alternative schools." In North Minneapolis, she said, the Level 4 schools are Harrison Education Center, a high school, and River Bend Education Center, a K-8 school.

"These are schools that are basically prisons," Samuels said. "They are on lock-down. You cannot go and come. When I visited Harrison, even the students' backpacks were orange. Students looked like prisoners."

She said it's not true when the school district says, "We have to accept all students." Samuels said, "No they don't. They get rid of some of their kids."

People in education have been admiring the problem for decades now. "I call it disparities gazing," Samuels said. "One of the reasons people don't engage is that it's too confusing. There is too much data around what the problem is and how we fix it."

The student becomes the canary in the mine. Samuels said that far too often, for students who are most imperiled, much can be tracked back to their family and community situations.

She said there are 63,000 people in North Minneapolis, with 30 percent of them aged 18 or under. Most other areas in the city have 20 percent aged 18 or under. She said many of the families NAZ works with are in its original 250-block area, but there are many other families scattered throughout North Minneapolis.

An interviewer asked Samuels what NAZ has done specifically to get buy-in from single-parent households for education programs. He said in some schools he worked with around the state, the problem was getting parents to go to parent-teacher meetings and to get involved in their kids' education.

Samuels responded that schools have been the same over the past 124 years. "We've done very little innovation," she said. For schools, its customers are parents. For a school to say that the problem is that their customer doesn't show up for their events is so unlike what business would say. "They'd never do it," she said. "They'd figure it out."

"We've discovered," she continued, "there has been a lack of willingness to change the very foundation of how we educate and engage the public." She said one thing that's been working for NAZ is having parents as family achievement coaches located at its partner schools and early childhood centers. Families are coming to the schools to talk to those coaches about their achievement plans, not just when they get a call from the school that their child is doing poorly or is a problem at school. "Too often the kids who are most imperiled have parents who had bad outcomes in schools when they were little," she said. "They're already traumatized."

It's critical to get parents to schools with family supports. Samuels made that remark and said that schools must actually be inviting. She said NAZ is in some schools where parents are subjects of arrest warrants, due to threatening behavior. And, she admitted, there *are* some problems with parent behavior. "But you have parents who themselves have gone through adverse childhood experiences. They might lack some emotional intelligence, as exemplified by hair-trigger tempers. Understanding where they are coming from and setting the school up to be inviting, yet firm and respectful, is the key."

Communication without change doesn't matter. An interviewer made that comment and said it really comes down to influence and change. His frustration with public policy is that people have already decided what they believe; data don't really matter.

He asked Samuels if she had any examples that can be replicated where she has facilitated change, where she's been able to move stakeholders from Point A to Point B in order to make progress.

Samuels said that recently a ranked-choice-voting (RCV) expert talked about the importance of that system, not as a panacea, but as a way of having a full democracy.

He also showed bell curves of where Republicans and Democrats have fallen over the last 100 years. The bell curves always came together in the past, Samuels said, and the center part was where the moderate Republicans and Democrats were. In that center part, she said, we could get things done, in terms of policy. But the expert showed that today the bell curves don't touch.

"When the bell curves don't touch," she said, "no amount of research is going to make a difference. When they're dug in, they're dug in. There are still moderates out there, but some of them are in the closet, because it's not safe to go against their party." But, she said, we can move those moderates who are in the closet.

She said NAZ is always putting results out there for people to see. "We're trying to reach the moderates with our results," Samuels said. "And it's not just *our* results. I love it when people are succeeding and addressing some of our seemingly most intractable issues. I want to hold it up and know about it. And I'm trying to figure out how to hold up failure, in terms of what we've learned from it and how we've changed. In innovation, you always have failure. If you don't fail, you're not innovating."

She noted that three of NAZ's eight partner schools are showing statistically significant differences in student achievement between NAZ-enrolled scholars and non-NAZ students. "We can tell you what we're learning and what doesn't work," she said.

What could the Civic Caucus do to encourage open and honest dialogue on important issues? An interviewer raised that question and asked how the Civic Caucus might be of value in promoting and displaying open, honest and real debate on issues like education. "What could we offer more publicly to enhance this conversation?" he asked.

Samuels responded that when there is a proposal under consideration, she'd like to hear the pros and cons on the issue. "That's what people want to know," she said. She said people attend debates, which create a space where people can talk about the pros and the cons. Sometimes she's found herself jumping to a policy position without hearing the cons on the policy.

Samuels said often people don't listen in a conversation; instead, they reload to come up with their next point. She suggested that the Civic Caucus try to uplift the art of listening in order for people to understand each other. "We're more polarized than we've ever been in our lifetime," she said. "We need a group to come down the middle. The Civic Caucus could do that. Somebody has to play that role. Why not you?"