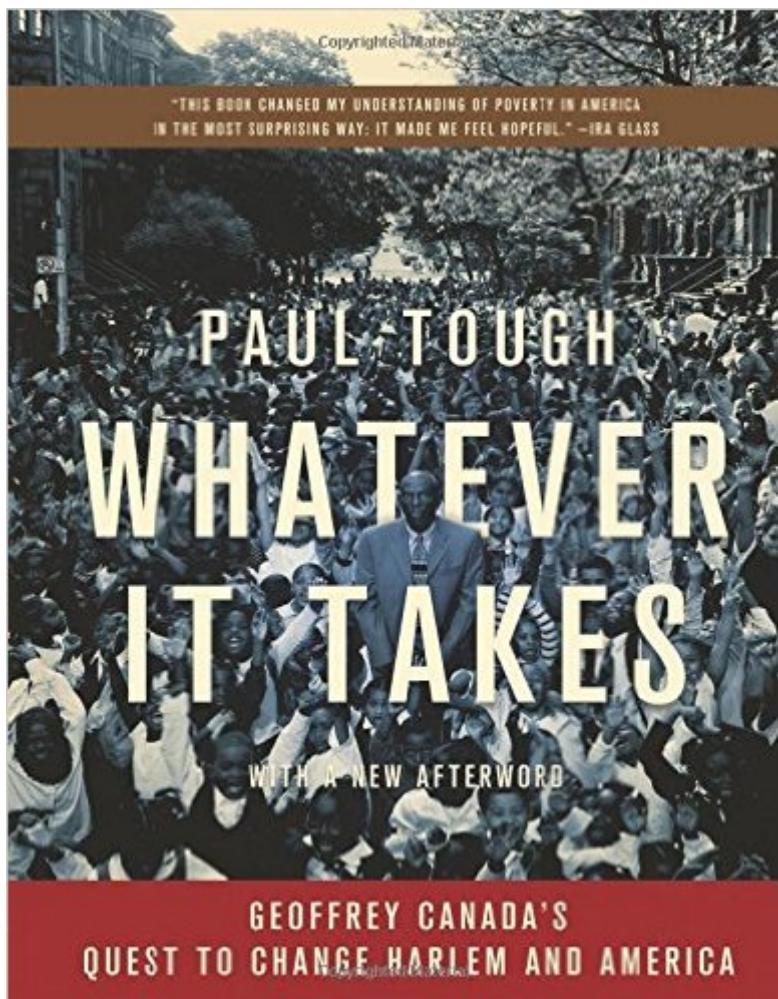


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Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest To Change Harlem And America



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 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.

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Customer Reviews

... and see what life we can make for our children", a quote by Sitting Bull, embraces the philosophy and vision of outstanding educator, reformer, and leader Geoffrey Canada, creator of the Harlem Children's Zone. Part biography, part call to action, "Whatever it Takes" is a transformative book of the highest order, one that challenges, inspires, and calls people to do what's best for our children. Author Paul Tough writes a compelling and highly readable story of Geoffrey Canada's struggle from social service agency manager to this hugely comprehensive program designed to

hold students in a web of great education and accountability until they enter college. Frustrated by seeing too many students who were in need of help and not receiving it, Canada envisioned a dream in which the children would be taken care of, from womb to high school, so that they wouldn't be haggled by overwhelming needs that often interfered with their development and hence, education. Canada dared to ask the hard what, "What if?", and now, years after asking it, the Harlem Children's Zone is proving it's results. What's interesting about the book is that Tough doesn't sugar coat anything. The HCZ has had it's ups and down, its issues and celebrations. Canada's philosophical battle with the Promise Academy's first principal Terri Grey, shows the conflicts that arose; two people with the same intentions, disagreeing on the way to go about it. Often, in a book like this, there is a temptation to be upbeat and happy about something new and innovative, probably so as not to give potential critics ammunition to shoot it down. Tough paints its honesty. It's simply refreshing. Dealing with students in poverty comes with no easy answers. The work, however, is some of the most personally rewarding work that anyone can do, and that shines clear through every single page. Another interesting focus of this book is the role that race plays in our society, and the issues of race that our society is still choosing to ignore. Through Canada's life story, which stems from an inner city urban upbringing, to an almost improbable life as a college student in Maine, Tough echoes challenges people of color have in our still majority white society. Canada lives in both worlds, and has raised kids in both worlds. His ability to see the benefits and challenges in each world makes him effective in his current job. I devoured this book, and now I'm anxiously awaiting to watch the HCZ over the years, to see the ultimate benefit of their students. Canada and his team has put their minds together ... and now let's see what kind of world his students will have.

"Whatever It Takes" is a very good book with some significant limitations that prevent it from becoming a great book. The book's strengths include the following:*** It provides some profiles of the challenges facing individuals in poverty in Harlem.*** It provides an in-depth description of the workings of the Harlem Children's Zone, focusing in particular on its parenting programs and middle school programs.*** It provides an interesting profile of Geoffrey Canada, the creator and director of the Harlem Children's Zone, who is certainly a fascinating man who deserves the spotlight.*** It provides a good and user-friendly summary of the research literatures on the influence of parenting practices on how children do in the short-run and long-run, the disparities in parental environment across socioeconomic classes in the U.S., and how quality preschool programs affect how children fare as adults. It also includes some brief but interesting discussions of the KIPP charter school

program. What are the book's limitations?*** It never provides a real summary of what Geoffrey Canada's vision would cost if implemented on a large scale. What would it really cost for the nation to provide parenting classes, high quality preschool, longer and high quality school years, and high quality after school programs, for all parents and children who need these services? This omission of cost estimates prevents the debate over the merits of Geoffrey Canada's vision from being fully joined in this book.*** Geoffrey Canada's vision is that there are large synergies between all these different services: that is, the social return to implementing parenting classes for at risk families, for example, are affected by whether their children also have high quality schools to go to, or high quality preschool. The book does not in any serious way critique the vision of the visionary it is discussing. Yet there is no real evidence either for or against such synergies. Geoffrey Canada might well be right, but he might be wrong. For example, as mentioned in the book, there appear to be high social returns to high-quality preschool even if the children subsequently go to a lousy public school. Do we need to undertake all these programs together, or can they be pursued separately? If they must be pursued together, then this creates much larger logistical and cost barriers to seriously pursuing anti-poverty policies.*** The book does not include much in-depth description of the pre-K component of the Harlem Children's Zone. The elementary school also receives less attention than the parenting program and the middle school program. However, at least as judged from the book's evidence, the pre-K program and the elementary program components of the Harlem Children's Zone may be more successful than the HCZ's middle school program and parenting program. Overall, this book is essential reading for anyone who is interesting in anti-poverty policy or urban policy in the U.S. Comprehensive and concentrated anti-poverty policy in urban neighborhoods is certainly an important policy option to consider, and I know of no book that considers this option in as much depth. While one wishes the book had included additional information, what it does provide is a very useful start.

The book is an excellent narrative of an inspired yet incomplete effort to transform urban education in a way that seeks to transform a community. It's a thoughtful description of some of the contending philosophies on poverty and education. It dramatically describes the required flexibility and willingness to change course (sometimes effectively and sometimes not) in developing a new model. It reflects the inevitable tensions between the range of stakeholders that a visionary like Canada must manage. I bought 25 copies for the teaching and management staff at our school on the West Side of Chicago--Austin Polytechnical Academy--and eagerly await the discussion. Dan Swinney, Center for Labor and Community Research

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