



**LEADER**  
Sondra Samuels

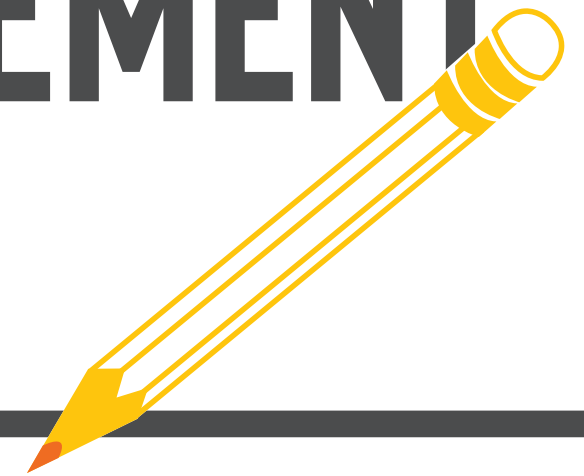
**BUDGET**  
\$5,000,000+

**GEOGRAPHY**  
Minnesota,  
Native Nations

**YEARS ACTIVE**  
Founded in 2010

INNOVATION STORY **No 6**

# NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE



## NEIGHBORHOOD AGENTS OF CHANGE

Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) works to end multi-generational poverty in the 13-by-18 block area that constitutes North Minneapolis. Their uniquely collaborative and hyper-local approach brings together 43 organizations, 10 schools and thousands of neighbors in pursuit of that common goal, moving from a patchwork of isolated programs to a coordinated, holistic effort.

**“PROGRAMS AREN’T ENOUGH FOR NAZ. WE WANT TO SEE RESULTS.”**

— SONDRA SAMUELS, NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE

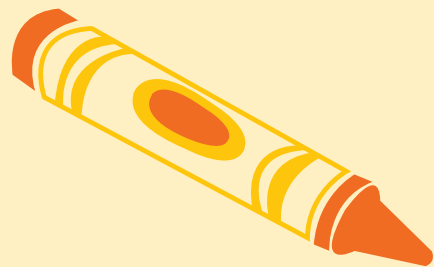
STORY BY DANIELLE BYLUND AND MORGAN MERCER

# INNOVATION

## NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE

BORNE FROM A COMMUNITY SEEKING LASTING CHANGE IN NORTH MINNEAPOLIS, NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE BROUGHT RESIDENTS, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, FUNDERS AND EDUCATORS TOGETHER IN ACTIVE PARTNERSHIP

### BREAKTHROUGH



In a neighborhood that has typically seen many like-minded organizations operating in silos, Northside Achievement Zone thrives by focusing on collaboration and results, not individual programs. They operate with a mindset focused on growth as defined by the needs of individual families, and use data to measure success and drive further innovation.



### One Community, Indivisible

Collaboration is a core tenet of NAZ's work—with 43 partner organizations in their network, 30 NAZ staff co-located at many of those organizations, and coaches working directly out of schools and early childhood centers. NAZ also prioritizes finding staff that have roots in the community and drawing on their lived experience.



### Data that Drives Results

Whenever NAZ or a partner organization works with a family, they collect data on which strategies are effective and which aren't. They use that data to continually refine their best practices for similar situations. If a particular solution doesn't work as well as planned, NAZ's evaluation teams analyze the data and brainstorm new solutions.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



SHARED VISION



EMPHASIZE LEARNING



VALUE EXPERTISE

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 6

### NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE



NAZ STAFF, PARTNERS AND KIDS

Shakira Campbell hit a breaking point. Her seven-year-old son, Macklin, wasn't doing well in school. He was disruptive in the classroom and doing poorly on schoolwork.

Every time Macklin got in trouble, the school called Shakira at work. The single mom didn't know how to support her son. She felt like she wasn't getting any help from the school, just reports of bad behavior. The constant calls left her frustrated and stressed out. She was at the end of her rope.

Growing up, Shakira had bounced in and out of foster care, then dropped out of high school her senior year. She feared Macklin was headed down a similar road.

Recognizing she needed help, her daycare provider and a school administrator pointed her toward NAZ.

**THE LIFELINE SHE WAS LOOKING FOR HAD BEEN IN HER SON'S SCHOOL ALL ALONG, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF A NONDESCRIPT DOOR.**

# MACKLIN NEEDED A MENTOR AND ROLE MODEL, SOMEONE WHO COULD HELP HIM REACH HIS FULL POTENTIAL BOTH IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL.

For the seven-year-old, that person was Kenneth Scales, a NAZ coach based at his elementary school. The two started checking in regularly. They talked about Macklin's

favorite foods, what he liked to do for fun and the goals he mapped out for himself, like staying on task in class or walking safely in the hallway.

"He didn't view me as a superior adult telling him what he does wrong all the time, but rather someone who had his back through good days and bad days," says Kenneth, who visited Macklin in class to encourage him to keep up good behavior and curb disruptive conduct before it escalated.

Whenever the school scheduled a meeting for Macklin, Kenneth was there. The coach even sat with Shakira through parent teacher conferences. Before each meeting, Kenneth met with Shakira to plot out her vision. After, the pair always made time to hash out how it went. Within a few months, Shakira saw a complete turnaround in Macklin. Her son talked to Kenneth differently. They had their own relationship, and even developed a secret handshake.



NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE STAFF

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 6

### NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE

#### CHARACTERISTIC No 1



#### SHARED VISION

Part of what makes NAZ special is its narrative on achievement. "[There are] nonprofit leaders, teachers, police, judges and politicians who don't believe kids from a certain background can make it," says Sondra Samuels, president and CEO of NAZ. "We're saying, 'Be a part of NAZ, and you are going to achieve. We are a community of achievement.' Everywhere a family goes, we want them to be saturated with the message that we believe in them and we believe in their children." The organization has distributed nearly 500 lawn signs throughout North Minneapolis printed with the phrase, "A Northside future college graduate lives here," and outfits babies and children with T-shirts that read, "Future College Graduate." NAZ is creating a story that ends with achieving goals, not fixing problems. Changing the narrative is a powerful tool to reframe the conversation.



NAZ PARTNER NEW HORIZON ACADEMY

"It was different than how he responded to me or anyone else. Everything was about Mr. Kenneth," Shakira jokes. That first call to NAZ didn't just change Macklin's life, though. It changed hers. Shakira was underemployed and struggling. Her housing was unstable. Kenneth became her coach, too. Together, they started goal-planning to help create a more supportive and stable environment for both her and Macklin. Kenneth eventually pointed her toward the NAZ Family Academy and the Foundations class it offered. There, he hoped Shakira could begin to address the "core hurts" or the barriers preventing her from reaching her goals. Shakira walked in skeptical. Years of pain and distrust had built up like a wall inside her.

"I trusted my mother to take care of me and to not allow anyone to harm me. She failed. I trusted my father to never leave me. He didn't do that," says Shakira. But when Jatón White, the leader of the Foundations class, opened the first session by sharing her personal story of struggle,



**EMPHASIZE LEARNING**

Family Academy is a series of education classes that empower parents to support their children’s academic success. NAZ initially faced challenges getting Northside parents to participate. Through conversations with parents in North Minneapolis, NAZ found that few low-income moms of color knew about opportunities for parent education. They also learned that for most middle-class and white parents in more affluent neighborhoods, participation in parent education was expected. In these areas, neighbors attended classes and encouraged other parents to as well, making parent education a cultural norm. NAZ realized relationships were the driving force, so they socially engineered connections to increase participation in Family Academy. They created a family engagement strategist position at NAZ to build relationships with parents and encourage frontline staff to take parent education classes so they could share the experience with others. NAZ also phoned parents to remind them of classes and aided with transportation. As parents began to engage in Family Academy and realize the benefits of participation, they replicated the process with their neighbors and brought more parents into the fold through peer referrals.



**NAZ TEAM MEMBER WITH YOUTH**

the wall within Shakira cracked. “At that time I realized, I’m not alone. Other people are going through things just like me.” This allowed Shakira to trust Jatou, and by extension, NAZ as an organization.

“I’ve never met a group of people who were willing to take the extra mile,” says Shakira. “I was in this sunken place. I had seen the light, but I couldn’t touch it.

**“BECAUSE OF NAZ, I FINALLY WAS ABLE TO GET OUT OF THAT DARK PLACE.”**

**— SHAKIRA CAMBPELL, MINNEAPOLIS, MN**



**NAZ PARTNER WITH YOUTH**

**One Community, Indivisible**

Ask any math teacher to solve the equation of one plus one, and they’ll tell you the answer is two. Ask someone at NAZ the same question and they’ll explain that bringing two organizations together to work toward the same goals doesn’t just multiply the collective impact by two, it increases it tenfold.

**“WE ARE ONE COMMUNITY, INDIVISIBLE.”**

**— SONDRASAMUELS, NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE**

“This is the power of the Northside Achievement Zone. Our families and children

don’t come in pieces, so we can no longer support them in pieces,” says Sondra Samuels, president and CEO of NAZ.

“We really have to have this holistic approach to their needs.” That’s what our nonprofit partners have been willing to do.”

Collaboration is embedded at every level of NAZ’s work. The nonprofit works with a whopping list of partner organizations—43 in all. The co-location of 30 NAZ staff across 15 partner community-based organizations allows NAZ employees to move beyond surface-level collaboration and deeply integrate within these organizations. NAZ family achievement coaches don’t work in offices—NAZ places them in schools and partner sites like early childhood centers, so they can work with NAZ scholars during class and observe what is happening on the ground. Some coaches think of themselves as teaching assistants because of how intermingled they are in day-to-day classroom activities.

About half of the staff at NAZ have lived in the Northside and experienced the challenges unique to the community. In addition, 25 percent of NAZ employees come from families that once went through the same programs they now assist with or lead. Jatou, formerly a family achievement coach and now a health access specialist at NAZ, says that the leadership at the organization allows coaches and other staff to use their lived experience to connect with people. Employees understand what it means to be a Northside parent and share the concerns of program participants.

“What teachers have told us is that they can tell the difference between NAZ scholars and non-NAZ scholars because the NAZ scholars have an air of, ‘I’m not alone. I have a community that has my back,’” says Sondra. “That makes a difference in their academic achievement, and fundamentally in their confidence.”

Parents are a crucial part of that support network. After years of gathering regular input from families, NAZ saw an opportunity to put parents at the center of the cultural change needed to transform the community and counteract the “belief gap,” or lack of faith that Northside residents have what it takes to succeed.

“We have some of the highest disparities in the entire nation across race and class,” says Sondra.

# “ADDRESSING ISSUES CENTURIES IN THE MAKING REQUIRES BOTH CONCRETE ACTION AND SHIFTING BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT OURSELVES, EACH OTHER AND OUR COMMUNITY.”

— **SONDRA SAMUELS, NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE**

To do that, NAZ identifies parents in the community who are ready to take on leadership roles, then equips them with the tools they need to be agents of change—able to transform the perceptions of the capabilities of Northside students. In less than a year, NAZ grew its number of parent leaders from 31 to 65.

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 6

### NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE

#### CHARACTERISTIC No 3



#### VALUE EXPERTISE

To achieve community-wide change, NAZ organizes their leadership structure to mirror two of its top values—collaboration and making families the true leaders of the community. NAZ’s 23-member board includes community members, staff of partner organizations and government agencies, elected officials, professors and others connected to academia, fundraisers, corporate leaders and parents from NAZ-enrolled families. As a true collaborative, NAZ develops their strategies through a 12-member Parent Advisory Board of parents from NAZ families who provide guidance and feedback to the board and leadership. Finally, a 20-member Strategic Leadership Team of executive staff from partner organizations oversees the on-the-ground work across NAZ’s network. This leadership structure allows NAZ to base its work in professional expertise while never losing sight of the real-world experience of families in the Northside.



NAZ PARTNER WITH YOUTH

## Data that Drives Results

NAZ envisions a new generation of Northside kids: students who succeed in school, graduate from college, start a career and return to the community to repeat the cycle. Making sure children feel ready to start kindergarten is a milestone that often predicts whether they’re on track to meet those goals. When NAZ saw low kindergarten readiness rates threatening their vision for the community, it formed an “action team” of nearly 10 key partners, including early learning centers, schools and health organizations. Together, the group drafted a solution plan that included strategies like training parents to build kids’ academic skills at home and giving families consistent access to development screenings. From there, the Early Childhood Action Team started testing solutions.

Whenever a family achievement coach or NAZ partner organization works with a family, they collect data and add it to a growing database of evidence that informs the community about what works and what doesn't. Decisions and revisions are based on solid information. Even if a solution doesn't pan out the first time, the data NAZ gathers allows partners to backtrack and rethink their approach until they find a solution that works for families and delivers results.

This happens in two ways. First, NAZ puts together action teams around its core areas of interest, like K-8 success or family support. Groups meet regularly to evaluate data and refine the shared goals and strategies in each of their specific solution plans. At the same time, NAZ also hosts a larger evaluation team, called Results NAZ, that meets upward of 10 times a year. Each gathering focuses on one of the organizations' core focus areas, such as early childhood. At these meetings, staff, partner organizations, parents, board members and the public are invited to analyze data and brainstorm new solutions through a series of roundtable discussions where participants discuss failures, shortcomings and successes.

In December 2014, Results NAZ held a session focused on early childhood. Contributors identified ways NAZ could strengthen that area of their work by increasing support for pregnant women and better tracking of developmental screenings. The Early Childhood Action Team adjusted their solution plan to match the feedback.

At a second Results NAZ session in July 2015, the team assessed the last round of changes and identified even more ways to tweak the original solution. This continuous evaluation process allows NAZ to strike a balance between following best practices while adapting its ideas to the on-the-ground realities of the families it serves.

**“WHEN WE LOOK AT THIS COMMUNITY IN NORTH MINNEAPOLIS, WE’RE TALKING ABOUT HISTORICAL RACISM. WE’RE TALKING ABOUT TRAUMA. WE’RE TALKING ABOUT STRUCTURAL INEQUITY,”**

**— SONDRA SAMUELS NEIGHBORHOOD ACHIEVEMENT ZONE**

“The table has been set for them for a long time,” says Sondra. That’s why programs aren’t enough for NAZ. It wants to see results. By tracking each win and innovation that partner organizations develop, the collaborative is able to build a foundation of knowledge and craft a new narrative that drives community-wide change.

**INNOVATION STORY NO. 6**  
**NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE**



NAZ TEAM MEMBER WITH YOUTH



NAZ BUILDING IN NORTH MINNEAPOLIS