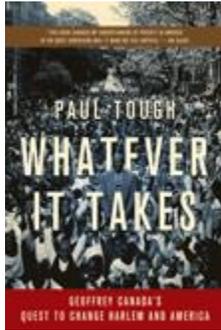


# Whatever It Takes by Paul Tough



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.

## Discussion Questions

1. In the first chapter of *Whatever It Takes*, children are selected by lottery to enter a charter school—similar to the way students are selected in the film *Waiting for “Superman.”* Do you think a lottery is a fair way to choose students? Why or why not?
2. In the first chapter, Geoffrey Canada describes a crisis of confidence he suffered when he realized that his methods just weren’t reaching enough kids to make a difference. What do you think about that revelation? Was it true that he wasn’t doing enough?
3. In the second chapter, Paul Tough discuss two opposing theories about poverty in America. One theory argues that the government isn’t doing enough to help the poor. The other theory argues that in fact the government is doing too much for the poor, and thus removing people’s motivation to succeed. What do you think about the evidence for each of those arguments?
4. How do you think Geoffrey Canada’s own experiences of growing up in the South Bronx affected his work in Harlem? Could he have built the Harlem Children’s Zone if he’d grown up in a middle-class suburb?

5. In the “Baby College” chapter, Canada talks about the “baby revolution” that occurred in many parts of the country in the 1990s, leading parents to buy Baby Einstein videos and play Mozart in the crib. Did the revolution hit your part of the country? Do you think it made things better for kids, or worse?
6. With regard to Baby College, does it work to try to teach parenting skills to low-income parents? What details about Baby College seem most important to making it potentially successful?
7. Look at the statistics on poverty at the beginning of the “Contamination” chapter. Is there a connection between race and poverty? Is poverty in America mostly an African-American problem, or is poverty color-blind? Should we ignore race altogether when addressing poverty?
8. Did the story of Geoffrey Canada’s experience at Bowdoin College remind you of other 1970s college experiences or stories? Did it surprise you?
9. In the “Battle Mode” chapter, Canada says, “I’m for vouchers, I’m for charter schools—I’m for anything that blows up the status quo.” How did you react to that?
10. In the “Bad Apples” chapter, we learn about a fundamental difference in the lotteries for entrance to KIPP schools and to the Harlem Children Zone’s Promise Academy. What is that difference, and why is Canada committed to his way?
11. In *Whatever It Takes* we meet both teachers and principals in high-stakes situations. What did you learn about “fit” and philosophy from the Terri Grey and Glen Pinder principalships of Promise Academy?
12. In the “Conveyor Belt” chapter, Paul Tough writes, “Canada had become convinced that he and his staff weren’t pushing parents hard enough, especially in the earliest years of their children’s lives. The parents were ready to do more, Canada believed, but no one had figured out yet how much to demand from them and just how to demand it.” Do you agree? Do you think American public schools ask too much or too little of parents?
13. In the final chapter, Geoffrey Canada tells Paul Tough: “If the stars align, there could be a real conversation developing in America about a new strategy on poverty. If it happens, I think it would give Americans a belief again that not only can you do something, but we should do something—that there’s a self-interest involved in helping these kids. In the end, it’s going to make America a stronger country.” How did this book leave you feeling about America’s ability to move forward on the issues of poverty and education?