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## How do Promise programs benefit K-12 schools?

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***Promise programs can help bring about positive change in K-12 school districts, including a more robust culture around educational opportunities after high school.***

**Promise programs allow school districts to deliver the message that college tuition is affordable and accessible early in a student's K-12 years, encouraging K-12 academic achievement and providing a platform for college-readiness activities at all grade levels. In a few cases, Promise programs have led to increases in K-12 enrollment mainly by attaching families more securely to their school districts, and there is some research showing they can generate improvements in academic achievement and student behavior. These effects are most likely to be seen in community-based Promise programs; statewide Promise programs or those initiated by community colleges are less focused on creating change in K-12 schools.**

### Policy Considerations

- Promise programs can bring about positive change in K-12 settings, but this will not happen automatically; stakeholders should work to align their efforts to promote a college-going culture and provide students with resources to make use of their Promise funding.
- School districts are well positioned to deliver key college-readiness services to students, especially during their high school years.
- The strongest effects of Promise programs on K-12 school districts will come from more inclusive programs—that is, those without GPA, attendance, or need requirements.

### What We Know

By awarding scholarships at scale and in a given place, Promise programs can have impacts beyond increased college-going. These include changes in the K-12 school district(s) most affected by a Promise program, as well as the community and economic development outcomes discussed elsewhere in this handbook. The effects on school districts are most pronounced for community-based Promise programs that are aligned with local school district boundaries.

Promise programs at the school district level are common within the Promise movement and can be found in places like El Dorado, Arkansas; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania;

New Haven, Connecticut; Richmond, California; and the Say Yes communities of Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and Syracuse, New York. Such district-based programs continue to be developed; one of the most recent is in Columbus, Ohio. While these programs vary in their design details, they all make a commitment to providing college scholarships to graduates of specific school districts, often using sliding scales that reward long-term attendance. It is thus not surprising that these districts experience effects from the introduction and implementation of a Promise program, even when district-level interventions are not an explicit part of the Promise program.

The nature of the relationship between Promise programs and K-12 school districts varies across communities. Some Promise programs are tightly integrated into the school district; for example, the El Dorado Promise is operated by the El Dorado Educational Foundation, and its staff is housed at the district's high school. In other places, school districts are formal partners in Promise initiatives; for example, Columbus City Schools is one of the five entities that launched and operates the Columbus Promise, and the Pittsburgh school district leadership sits on the Pittsburgh Promise board. In still other places, school districts are essential partners in free-standing Promise programs, but their role is not a formal one; examples of this kind of structure can be found in Kalamazoo and many other places.

The extent to which Promise programs affect K-12 districts depends heavily on the degree of alignment between the school district and a local Promise program, regardless of formal structure.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that Promise programs can serve as catalysts for change in several areas, including K-12 enrollment, student behavior and achievement, and college-going culture.

By delivering a message to the entire student body that postsecondary education or training is attainable, schools can amplify their college-readiness activities and help students plan for their postsecondary education early in the game. Promise eligibility requirements that screen out some portion of the student body will make these schoolwide cultural changes and service delivery more challenging.

**Enrollment effects.** Some Promise programs include increases in a school district's enrollment among their goals, and it is easy to understand why. Many urban and rural school districts have experienced enrollment declines in recent decades that have hurt their funding and operations. With the incentive of a scholarship for most or all graduates of a school district, parents may choose to move to or remain in a given locale or enroll their students in Promise-eligible K-12 schools so their children can benefit. One challenge is that for parents of young children, a scholarship benefit may be far down the road (and hence have a high

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<sup>1</sup> Iriti, J., Page, L. C., & Bickel, W. E. (2018). [Place-based scholarships: Catalysts for systems reform to improve postsecondary attainment](#). *International Journal of Educational Development*, (58), 137–148.

discount rate), while other decisions, such as a job change, are more pressing. This high discount rate may help explain why the evidence is mixed about the K-12 enrollment impacts of Promise programs.

- Research has shown initial large enrollment increases<sup>2</sup> for the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) district following the implementation of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2006. Subsequent, more detailed analysis showed that growth in student enrollment came, first, from an initial influx of students, then a relative decline in exit rates.<sup>3</sup> Between 2006 and 2019 (the last pre-pandemic year), KPS fell by almost 25 percent;<sup>4</sup> however, the Kalamazoo Promise is one of the simplest and most generous Promise scholarship programs, so similar results have not been seen in other settings.
- A study of a diverse group of Promise communities<sup>5</sup> showed that public school enrollments increased in Promise communities relative to their surrounding areas following the announcement of Promise programs; however, program design variation raises challenges for drawing general conclusions from this research.

The bottom line is not to count on enrollment effects from your Promise program.

**Behavior/achievement effects.** This is an underresearched topic, although two studies of relatively generous Promise programs, those in Kalamazoo and El Dorado, have shown positive effects on student behavior and achievement. The Kalamazoo Promise led to a reduction in suspensions and higher GPAs for African American students.<sup>6</sup> The El Dorado Promise was related to improvements in math scores<sup>7</sup> relative to a matched comparison group.

**School culture effects.** There is limited research but ample anecdotal evidence that community-based Promise programs can change the culture of a K-12 school district. By making a multiyear (sometimes open-ended) commitment to send successive classes of high school graduates to college at reduced cost, Promise programs can help K-12 school districts strengthen their college-going culture, change student and family expectations around the likelihood of college-going, and enlist community support for students' postsecondary pathways. Many of these changes show up in high school, where Promise programs have led to increased Advanced Placement offerings; the creation of college readiness courses; SAT/ACT preparation and test-taking; greater support for FAFSA completion; and new college guidance, tutoring, and mentoring efforts. These changes have been documented in studies of Kalamazoo,<sup>8</sup> Pittsburgh,<sup>9</sup> and Say Yess Buffalo,<sup>10</sup> but they are present in most Promise communities.

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<sup>2</sup>Bartik, T. J., Eberts, R., & Huang, W.-J. (2010). *The Kalamazoo Promise, and enrollment and achievement trends in Kalamazoo Public Schools*. Presented at the PromiseNet 2010 Conference, June 16–18, Kalamazoo, MI.

<sup>3</sup>Hershbein, B. J. (2013). *A second look at enrollment changes after the Kalamazoo Promise*. (Upjohn Institute Working Paper No. 13-200). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>LeGower, M., & Walsh, R. (2014). *Promise scholarship programs as place-making policy: Evidence from school enrollment and housing prices*. (NBER Working Paper No. 20056). National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>6</sup>Bartik, T. J., & Lachowska, M. (2014). *The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship*. *Education Next*, Spring.

<sup>7</sup>Ash, J., Swanson E., & Ritter G. (2021). *A promise kept? The impact of the El Dorado Promise scholarship on student achievement*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 43(1), 83–107.

<sup>8</sup>Miron, G., Jones, J.N., & Kelaher-Young, A. J. (2011). *The Kalamazoo Promise and perceived changes in school climate*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19(17).

## Recommended Reading

Bartik, T. J., & Lachowska, M. (2014, Spring). [\*The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship\*](#). Education Next.

*This study examines the effects of the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise on student behavior and academic outcomes. The study found strong evidence that the Kalamazoo Promise decreased student behavioral issues among all groups. It also found that student academic performance measured in terms of GPA increased for all students in the years following the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, although the increase was not statistically significant. For African American Students however, the increase was statistically significant. All students saw a statistically significant increase in the chance of earning any credits in high school. On the whole, the study provides strong evidence that the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise had positive effects.*

Miron, G., Jones, J. N., & Kelaher-Young, A. J. (2010). [\*Kalamazoo Promise: Can a universal college scholarship reform urban education?\*](#) Phi Delta Kappan.

*This article discusses the history of the Kalamazoo Promise and what has made it a success compared to initiatives led by outsiders to the school system that prescribe specific interventions. In contrast, the establishment of the Kalamazoo Promise gave stakeholders in the local school community incentive to work together and find ways for the district to ensure as many students as possible could use the scholarship program. The program has triggered increased parental and community involvement with the school system, improved the school system's internal culture, boosted students' academic performance and participation, and reversed the trend of declining enrollment the school system was experiencing prior to the creation of the Kalamazoo Promise.*

Reeves, R., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). [\*Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education\*](#). Brookings Institution.

*An in-depth report on the history and essential elements of the Say Yes to Education model of community-wide social change (including a college Promise, as well as other student and community supports), as well as the evolution and effects of Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo, NY; Guilford County, NC; and Syracuse, NY.*

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<sup>9</sup> Gonzalez, G. C., Bozick, R., Tharp-Gilliam, S., & Phillips, A. (2011). [\*Fulfilling The Pittsburgh Promise®: Early progress of Pittsburgh's postsecondary scholarship program\*](#). RAND Corporation.

<sup>10</sup> Reeves, R., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). [\*Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education\*](#). Brookings Institution.