

State and Community-based Promise Programs: Early Commitments of Financial Assistance for College



States, regions, and cities across the nation are struggling to strengthen their economies and provide stability when most are grappling with lower-than-projected revenue streams, job losses, and growing expenditures. The challenge of cutting expenses without impacting quality and amounts of services is particularly complex in education programs, especially when we see an increasing number of students dropping out of school and those who do plan to go on to college facing increasing costs of higher education.

It is a difficult time for policymakers, business leaders, and education leaders to think about ways to increase the numbers of students graduating from high school prepared for college and the work force when their focus is on reducing budgets. But now is the best time to plan for the future. Now is the time to explore programs that may bear fruit in five or six years and stem the flow of students out the side door of high school and into the welfare system and low-paying jobs.

An earlier policy brief on **individual development accounts (IDAs)** (see *Individual Development Accounts for Higher Education*) published by the Pathways to College Network addressed alternatives that may put more students, especially those from low-income and first-generation families, on the path to college, in part by providing them with assurance they will have funds to pay for college. This brief focuses on other approaches to giving students such assurances: special financial aid initiatives that are often referred to as **early commitment of financial aid** or **promise programs**. The term “early commitment of financial aid” is used here as an umbrella descriptor for a wide variety of programs that target low-income students while they are in middle or high school. In many instances, these initiatives make a promise of financial assistance for college in return for a commitment from the student and his/her family that the student will do certain things, such as maintain a minimum grade point average and be a good public citizen.

This paper describes the different approaches to early commitment programs, provides examples of existing programs, and suggests questions or topics that policymakers and other leaders might find helpful in understanding whether such programs are the best options for their constituents.

Early Financial Aid Commitment - Promise Programs

Early commitment programs differ from traditional state financial aid programs that have been available in most states for a number of years. In 2005, the Pathways to College Network released a report describing early commitment financial aid programs. The intent of the paper was to provide a scan of efforts at state and institutional levels to earmark certain financial aid initiatives for low-income students and their families while these students were still in middle or early high school. While there were various models in place



and others emerging at the time the report was developed, only programs that demonstrated three basic characteristics were identified as “early commitment” programs: (1) the programs make a *guarantee* of aid; (2) they designated aid only for economically disadvantaged students; and (3) they identified and enrolled students in elementary, middle, or early high school for the program well before the student graduates from high school.

In a more recent paper, Saul Schwartz reviewed a number of financial aid programs, some of which he includes as early commitment programs, defines “early commitment” programs more broadly, and analyzes their characteristics (Schwartz, 2008).

While recognizing that there are many financial aid options that could be depicted as early commitment programs, this brief will continue to reflect the Pathways to College Network’s primary focus on increasing college access and success for low-income students and emphasize those initiatives that restrict funding to financially needy students. Prior to 2005, early commitment programs that guaranteed aid for economically disadvantaged students and identified these students in middle or early high school were statewide in scope. Since 2005, however, an adaptation of this model has evolved which restricts eligibility to students in local communities. This brief examines examples of both types of early commitment programs and compares and contrasts them on several characteristics.

Statewide Promise Programs

Two well-established early commitment statewide programs meet the Pathways’ criteria—Indiana’s **Twenty-first Century Scholars Program** and Oklahoma’s **Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP)** or **Oklahoma Promise**. Both are described in detail in the 2005 Pathways report, *Early Commitment Financial Aid Programs: Promises, Practices, and Policies*. New programs established since the publication of that report are in California, Wisconsin, and Washington.

California established a voluntary Early Commitment to College program based on Senate Bill 890 and signed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2008. The program is managed by the California Department of Education. The Superintendent of Public Instruction must identify College Opportunity Zones—the 30 percent of the state’s school districts with middle and high schools that have the highest proportion of low-income students. Schools in a College Opportunity Zone must give pupils and parents or guardians the opportunity to sign a *Save Me a Spot in College* pledge; schools not in a Zone are required to give students eligible for free and reduced-price meals the opportunity to sign a pledge. The measure calls for financial assistance for eligible students with need, but it does not provide funding to school districts should they choose to participate in the program. Four schools districts initiated the program in Spring 2009, and over 20 more are expected to begin the program in Fall 2009. In support of the Early Commitment program, The Campaign for College Opportunity, a California non-profit organization founded in 2003, has been sponsoring an annual scholarship contest for students in grades 6 through 12. Awards ranging from \$500 to \$2,500 are made to high school and middle school students for essays, posters, and TV ads.



The Wisconsin Covenant program, created by Governor Jim Doyle in 2006, is a partnership among the Office of the Governor, the State Department of Public Instruction, the University of Wisconsin System, the Wisconsin Technical College System, the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, Wisconsin businesses, and the philanthropic community. These partners have agreed to work together to ensure that there is a place for each Covenant Scholar in higher education and that scholars can access available financial resources. Partners will provide support for the Scholars in middle and high school to help them achieve their goals through the continuation, expansion, or establishment of pre-college programming, mentoring, tutoring, and other local supports. Unlike similar programs in Indiana, Oklahoma, and Washington programs, the Wisconsin program does not promise full tuition coverage for qualifying low-income students.

The Washington College Bound Scholarship was established in legislation in 2007 as a joint initiative between the legislature and Governor Christine Gregoire. The scholarship covers the cost of college tuition, fees and books for low-income students who sign a pledge in 7th or 8th grade promising to graduate from high school and demonstrate good citizenship. Related legislation created the Passport to College Promise program to attract more foster-care youth to enroll and succeed in college. The program is designed to encourage current and former foster care youth to prepare for, attend, and successfully complete higher education and to provide them with the educational planning, information, institutional support, and direct financial resources necessary for them to succeed in college.

Other states also are exploring or have established early commitment-type programs.

- Arizona's Governor Janet Napolitano included remarks in her State-of-the-State address in early 2008 suggesting that she would like to see a program in Arizona that guarantees free tuition at a state community college or state university for eighth graders who pledge to stay out of trouble and maintain at least a B average in high school.
- Colorado modified an existing program to establish the Collegenest Early Achiever Scholarship. The aid targets 7th, 8th, or 9th graders who complete pre-collegiate coursework and graduate from high school with at least a 2.5 GPA. There is no requirement for a signed "pledge" nor a guarantee that students will receive a future scholarship or that they will receive the full \$1,000 per year. Also, the aid is available to all students—not just economically disadvantaged students.
- As part of a statewide policy initiative on affordability, the **State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV)** looked at early commitment programs and found that the state's existing Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program (VGAP) resembled early commitment programs "in form, but not in substance".¹ Noting the lack of a student pledge and no state commitment of a guarantee as missing elements of Virginia's approach, SCHEV pointed out that "guaranteed access is more difficult in a decentralized system such as Virginia, where every four year institution makes its own admissions decisions. However, access to the Community College system is guaranteed to every high school graduate...Virginia should be able to provide a high school graduate with



good grades and a clean record reasonable assurance of access to four years of higher education.” While not suggesting conversion of VGAP to an early commitment program, SCHEV recommended that the incentives and benefits of VGAP be more broadly communicated to residents through a comprehensive marketing effort.

Community Promise Programs

The most notable growth in early commitment financial aid programs has occurred among community-based initiatives. Community or local programs began emerging only very recently. These programs are typically limited to a geographic area, normally a single city or neighboring cities that form a regional group, with the basis of the coalition formed around economic and workforce development goals. The programs described here are the Kalamazoo (MI) Promise, the El Dorado (AR) Promise, and the Pittsburgh (PA) Promise. The Kalamazoo Promise claims to be the first local or community-based effort. Its Web site identifies several cities that intend to implement similar programs or already have them underway. Other new city or regional promise programs include El Dorado Promise in Arkansas and the Pittsburgh Promise. While each of the community-based promise programs has unique features, their common elements include reliance on local funding sources rather than state funding and eligibility requirements that exclude students from outside their school districts.

In 2008 and 2009, individuals from around the nation met in Kalamazoo, Michigan as “Promise Net.” The initial convening brought together over 200 community leaders from 22 states interested in learning more about community-based promise programs. Discussions centered on key issues for individuals interested in setting up a program similar to the Kalamazoo Promise, including funding, administration, research and evaluation, and scholarship structure. Organizers from the Kalamazoo Promise, Pittsburgh Promise, El Dorado Promise, and the Upjohn Institute explored with participants the potential of a Promise Network to support established and emerging programs. This unique gathering underscores the spreading interest in promise-type programs to not only increase success rates among students, but also help stimulate economic and workforce development goals by building human resource capacity at the local level.

Statewide and City/Regional Programs: Similarities and Differences

Whether early commitment financial aid programs are statewide or community based, they have been established for many of the same reasons—primarily to increase access for students and to advance economic and workforce goals. While they have broad-based objectives in common, they differ in significant ways on a number of characteristics.

- **Level of aid** – In most city or community-based programs the level of aid is indexed to the number of years the student has been in the local school district—students who have attended school in the district most of their elementary and secondary years receive maximum benefits, and those who enter the district later receive a proportion of the full award. In statewide programs, however, the enrollment period is established in legislation and occurs in a specific grade—for example, seventh and eighth graders in Washington and eighth, ninth, and tenth graders in Oklahoma.

There is no reduction in benefits if students and their families have only recently moved into the state, and students in other grades are not eligible.

- **Targeted grades and application period** – Current early commitment programs target eligibility to middle and high school youth. Statewide programs usually require that students and their families apply while in middle school or early high school; community-based programs may not allow applications to be filed until the student's senior year in high school. Programs that identify and enroll students in middle- or early high school have the advantage of time to achieve essential programmatic goals, notably stronger academic preparation, involvement of family and significant others, and personal motivation and encouragement. Programs that limit enrollment to students at the end of their high school period have little time to help weaker students strengthen their academic preparation, to ensure that the student has great choice among postsecondary institutions when applying, avoid remedial coursework once they enroll in college. The tendency for community-based programs to allow students to enter the program at the end of their high school enrollment may be a reflection of their newness and founders' desires to make this opportunity available to as many students and as quickly as possible. These initiatives usually are more nimble and more easily established rapidly, while statewide programs can take three or four years just to put legislation and funding in place and establish the infrastructure to oversee the program.
- **Program control and administration** – The locus of control for an early commitment program varies by level (state or local). Community-based programs are generally administered by the local school district(s), but in some communities that responsibility may rest with a local philanthropic organization. Statewide programs are administered by an existing state agency or a new separate non-profit entity created for that purpose, as is the case in Wisconsin.
- **Eligible participants** – Criteria in community-based programs limit the aid to students in the participating school districts and often to students who have been enrolled a minimum number of years. Statewide programs encompass a number of school districts and may target either all economically-disadvantaged families in the state or only families in communities with high numbers of low-income students.
- **Income threshold** – One of the significant differences between statewide and community programs is an income requirement. Most community-based programs have no income threshold—students from any family income who otherwise qualify are eligible for an award. This generous approach may be due to the benefactors' interest in assuring that all students in the targeted community have the same opportunity to benefit, regardless of their family's income. Statewide programs, on the other hand, usually serve thousands, rather than a few hundred students, making it costly to support all students. Those who support the enabling state legislation have tended to view this aid as an access strategy. They believe that, by limiting participation to students from low-income families, the state will benefit from helping students who might otherwise have little chance of getting a postsecondary education.



Funding – A key difference between statewide programs and community programs is the source and amount of the funding. Three of the four current statewide programs are supported through state appropriations. The Wisconsin program is unique in that a separate, private, non-profit foundation was established to raise and distribute funds. An initial endowment of \$40 million from the Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation was given to “challenge Wisconsin businesses and philanthropists to make similar contributions to the Wisconsin Covenant and provide grants to Wisconsin Covenant Scholars.” Cost data for the Oklahoma Promise program reveal significant state investments in recent years: actual expenditures in academic year 2003–04 for 5,888 scholarship recipients was \$10.4 million; that number is projected to reach \$54 million to serve 19,000 students in 2009–10.ⁱⁱ Scholarship expenditures for Indiana’s 21st Century Scholars Program, which is state-funded, have risen considerably as the program has grown. In 1995, the initial cohort of 1,463 students received nearly \$1.9 million in aid. In 2007, the program served close to 10,000 students, with total dollars awarded amounting to nearly \$22.8 million.ⁱⁱⁱ

Community-based programs depend on local sources to providing financing, including business and philanthropic organizations that believe they will accrue benefits from such investments in their communities. For example, anonymous local donors provided funding for the Kalamazoo Promise Program. The El Dorado Promise was established and funded exclusively by Murphy Oil Corporation. Similarly, the Pittsburgh Promise was initially funded by a \$10 million commitment from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, with another \$90 million available as a challenge grant. The philanthropic community in Pittsburgh has responded, and contributions from local foundations exceed \$36 million over several years.

Philanthropic organizations are playing an increasingly important role in supporting both statewide and community-based early-commitment initiatives in other ways as well. In Indiana, state commitments are augmented with financial support from foundations. For example, the Eli Lilly Foundation has supported the parent component of the 21st Century Scholars program and Lumina Foundation for Education has awarded funds to conduct program evaluation studies. A similar joint effort is occurring in at least one of the community-based programs: program evaluation and other research activities for the Kalamazoo Promise program are being conducted by the Upjohn Institute and Western Michigan University.

- **Pledge criteria** – All the statewide programs require participants to sign a promise or pledge. Common elements of the pledge include having a minimum grade point average (GPA), being crime-free, having state residency, graduating from a high school in the state, and meeting family income requirements. The specific requirements related to these criteria differ, however, with programs requiring different GPAs and family income thresholds.

Community-based programs often have fewer and more general criteria. Most of these programs tailor their criteria to local needs; their programs usually require

students to have attended the local schools for at least part of the high school years and to have graduated from the local high school district. For example, the El Dorado Promise requires that eligible students graduate from El Dorado High School, reside in the district, and have been in the El Dorado public schools since at least 9th grade. Similar requirements hold for the Kalamazoo Promise and the Pittsburgh Promise. The Pittsburgh program also has an attendance requirement: students must maintain at least a 90 percent attendance record.

- **Scope of coverage** – State and community programs often differ significantly on how students may use the financial aid funds, either in terms of the kinds and locations of the institutions or the specific expenditures. Both state and community programs tend to restrict the use of the aid dollars to certain kinds of postsecondary institutions located within the state. For example, recipients must attend public two- or four-year colleges, accredited private colleges, or public technology centers. Community promise programs usually have slightly different restrictions: the Kalamazoo Promise can be used at only at Michigan public state universities or community colleges; the Pittsburgh Promise, however, can be used at private schools as well as Pennsylvania state-funded schools, community colleges, and, many trade schools. The El Dorado Promise is perhaps the most expansive in that it allows recipients to also attend out-of-state institutions.

In addition to stipulating where students may use their awards, states and communities specify how the money can be used; these details differ between state and community programs. Most typically, all programs cover at least undergraduate tuition, and some also pay for certain fees—usually those assessed to all students. But state programs like Indiana’s and Oklahoma’s limit their coverage to these areas and do not cover books or room and board. Community programs such as Pittsburgh’s and El Dorado’s, on the other hand, often cover other expenses in their awards such as books, room and board, and perhaps meal plans.

- **Measuring impact** – One of the most important structural components of any program is evaluation and determining reasonable expectations for program success. As programs are designed, policymakers, funders, and education leaders should ensure that there is a component that provides for evidence-based research studies in addition to the more common collection of descriptive information on numbers of students served and funds expended. In designing an evaluation component, it is important to use measures and milestones that are appropriate to the goal and target program’s audience.

Various measures are being used by community promise programs to assess their effectiveness. For example, enrollment trends are used in areas where one of the purposes of the program is to turn around declining enrollments in the school district. Enrollment is a key indicator used by the Kalamazoo Promise program to estimate the program’s impact of the Greater Kalamazoo district. Over a 20-year period starting in the mid 1980s, enrollments in the city’s public schools declined steadily from nearly 13,000 to about 10,200. After the announcement of the program in November 2005, enrollments turned upward and were at 11,434 during the 2007–



08 academic year. An external evaluation of the program states, “The growth in enrollment after the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise suggests that the existence of this scholarship program has been successful in attracting new students and improving the retention of current students.”^{iv} The El Dorado Promise program has a similar goal. Data there show that following a 20-year enrollment decline, the school district experienced a 3 percent enrollment increase for the 2007–2008 school year, with kindergarten enrollment growing by 12 percent.^v

Another common tracking indicator is college enrollment and persistence. Some state programs have longitudinal data on their grantees, but it is too early for most community-based programs to show such results. Some examples of the data available on state and community-based program Web sites document how well the program is meeting access goals:

- **Indiana’s 21st Century Scholars Program** – This statewide program has the most comprehensive set of evaluation information of all state and community programs, due in part to its longevity and also to investments that the state and the Lumina Foundation for Education have made in program evaluation.^{vi} The Indiana program is intended to increase college enrollment among low-income students. Since its inception in 1995, the Scholars Program has nearly doubled participation and it enrolls approximately 7,500 students annually, close to one-third of eligible 8th graders statewide and 9 percent of all 8th graders in Indiana. In 2005, 21st Century Scholars represented 10 percent of all the new college students in the state. Researchers have found that, “Up to 85 percent of Scholars who signed up for the program in eighth grade were in college within a year after their expected high school graduation in 1999.”^{vii}
- **Oklahoma’s Promise Program** – Over several years, Promise recipients have outperformed Oklahoma high school graduates on several levels. Promise students have higher college-going rates; in addition, they have lower remediation rates in college, higher percentages of students maintaining a GPA of at least 2.0, and higher college freshman-to-sophomore persistence rates.^{viii}
- **Kalamazoo Promise** – In 2006, nearly 73 percent of the school district’s high school graduates who were eligible for the Promise award used it in their first semester after graduation to enroll in college; that percentage had risen to 78 percent by 2008. ^{ix}
- **El Dorado Promise** – In 2007, over 80 percent of the graduates from El Dorado High School enrolled in college, compared to 60 percent in previous years.^x

In addition to solid quantitative information, pertinent qualitative measures are used to assess other programmatic impacts. For example, less than a week after the Kalamazoo Promise was unveiled, newspapers reported that the scholarship program appeared to be shifting the culture at Kalamazoo Public Schools’ high schools.



Schools were stepping up efforts to provide academic help and direction, and parents were volunteering as tutors and mentors. Principals said that schools and students felt positive pressure to rise to the challenge, and students themselves said they were motivated by the program. According to another report from external evaluators, early indicators suggest that the Kalamazoo Promise has positively influenced student aspiration. “A majority of students and two thirds of educators interviewed report that student attitudes about school work have improved.^{xi}

Designing quantitative and qualitative studies to capture and measure these effects is important in order to assess a program’s full impact. Statewide programs in existence for more than a few years have undergone research-based evaluation. Lumina Foundation for Education has funded multiple studies of Indiana’s 21st Century Scholars program. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has sponsored similar assessments of the Washington Scholars program. Oklahoma’s Promise program is annually reviewed and data reported by the Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education.

Community-based programs also invest in data collection, analysis, and evaluation. Leaders of the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the City of Pittsburgh have retained McKinsey & Company to evaluate the potential benefits of promise program. The W. E. Upjohn Institute has been monitoring the Kalamazoo Promise program since its inception and has an extensive evaluation design in place, with activities that include:

- Research into the origins and initial impact of the Kalamazoo Promise, including the alignment of the community around its goals,
- A project funded by the U.S. Department of Education to evaluate the short- and intermediate-term outcomes of the Kalamazoo Promise, carried out in partnership with Western Michigan University’s Evaluation Center and the Midwest Educational Reform Consortium based at WMU’s College of Education.
- A long-term evaluation of the Kalamazoo Promise.
- “Investing in the Success of the Kalamazoo Promise,” an initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to strengthen the outcomes of the scholarship program by investing in its evaluation and research infrastructure, and deepening community engagement.

Concluding Observations

The early 21st century has witnessed a rapid development of alternative financial aid programs to provide need-based aid, especially for students facing economic challenges. In many states, the amount of total aid dedicated to needy students has increased both in total dollars and in the proportion of total aid dedicated to need-based aid for economically disadvantaged students. At the same time, in local communities around the nation, individuals and philanthropic organizations have stepped forward to support students in their school districts with additional financial assistance. And at the postsecondary level, a wide range of public and private colleges and universities have developed programs and committed institutional funds to provide “covenant” programs, such as the University of

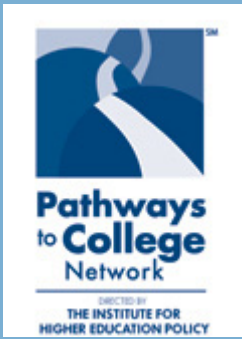


North Carolina's Carolina Covenant program, and other initiatives that enable needy students to attend college without taking out loans to cover their tuition and related costs. As these generous initiatives are further refined and expanded and as state economies strengthen, we may see a growing interest in states to move a community-based initiative to the state level. The El Dorado Promise funded by Murphy Oil Corporation has encouraged such discussion at the state level in Arkansas.

With a number of varied approaches now available from which to learn, state and local policymakers have greater opportunity to ask key questions about early commitment financial aid programs. There are also a growing number of individuals with experience in designing, implementing, and evaluating these efforts, particularly statewide and community based initiatives, who can provide insight into important policy questions such as those listed below.

Policy Questions

- *What are the criteria a state or community might use to determine if an early financial aid commitment program is a viable opportunity to increase the number of students from low-income families who finish high school prepared for success in college and the work place?* A central question for most states and communities is how an early commitment program would fit with existing financial aid programs. For statewide programs, absent new resources or identifying an untapped revenue source to support a new early commitment program, the logical default position is to reduce funding or eliminate existing programs—a move usually perceived as robbing Peter to pay Paul. States and communities with higher education and workforce development goals that emphasize the imperative of increasing college access and success for low-income families may find that good public policy supports a redistribution of existing funds to enhance opportunity for these students and better position the state to build workforce capacity by increasing the educational attainment of the population.
- *What other options would produce similar results for the investment?* This question speaks to the heart of a state's goals and the role of financial aid in achieving them. States and communities that see financial aid as a tool to address college access and success rates for low-income families may view the role of early commitment programs differently than states and communities that have other priorities for their student assistance funds. Additionally, areas that want to use financial aid as a lever to achieve a better educated workforce and view a college-educated workforce as a necessity for economic development and sustainability will want to examine the return on investment for each financial aid program they offer to students.
- *Can the state or community sustain such a program for an extended period?* Early commitment programs are not quick-turnaround programs, and it will usually take a few years to see results. If 7th graders are the target audience for a program, then it will take five years for the first cohort of 7th graders to graduate from high school and at least another four to six years to attain a bachelor's degree. A well-designed business plan will help leaders project the cost of program continuation over a



number of years and address program sustainability concerns as part of the original program design activities.

Sustainability becomes a serious issue during economic recessions. Developed in a period of strong economic growth, these programs may find their stability challenged during economic downturns. Funding for state programs is always at risk, and severe declines in state revenues typically result in cuts in nearly every budgetary area, including state supported financial aid programs. Utah's experience with its New Century Scholarships illustrates this problem: students enrolled in fall 2009 who qualified for the scholarships were originally guaranteed 75 percent of tuition over two years, but subsequent budget reductions allowed only 40 percent for 2009 and 25 percent for 2010. In local communities, the challenge to maintain a promise program may be daunting when local donors find their resources diminished at the same time that more students need to rely on these funds to go to college.

- *What kinds of public/private partnerships are possible to support an early commitment program?* Many existing early commitment programs have leveraged public and private funds to provide a more robust package of aid coupled with supplementary activities such as special events for parents and academic and social support activities. In addition to philanthropic organizations such as foundations, several community-based organizations may be eager to participate in an early commitment program through in-kind contributions as well as financial support because the effort aligns with their mission. This is especially true for with community-based early commitment programs where the impact is most closely and immediately apparent for neighbors and families who may reside within a few miles of donors and see each other frequently because they shop at the same stores and enjoy the same public facilities.
- *What are the potential benefits and downsides of limiting a program to only low-income students versus opening the program to all eligible students at the targeted grade level?* One of the central questions with any financial aid program is deciding who will be served. This issue has political as well as fiscal implications at any level. Statewide programs in Oklahoma, Indiana, and Washington have chosen to limit eligibility to students from economically disadvantaged families. Most community-based programs, however, make awards to any student who qualifies without applying a needs test. The decision concerning which students will be served is a direct reflection of the program's purpose and goals.
- *At what grade level(s) should an early commitment program be implemented?* The grade levels targeted and the application period may have an effect on important academic qualifications. Programs that identify and enroll students in middle or early high school have the advantage of time to achieve essential programmatic goals, notably stronger academic preparation, involvement of family and significant others, and personal motivation and encouragement. Programs that limit enrollment to students at the end of their high school career have little time to help weaker students strengthen their academic preparation, thus avoiding remedial coursework

in college, and to ensure that the student has greater choice among postsecondary institutions when applying.

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Information on Selected Promise Programs



California's Early Commitment to College Program

(<http://www.collegecampaign.org/assets/docs/stds/ECC-Report-Final.pdf> and www.collegecampaign.org)

California created a voluntary Early Commitment to College program in 2008. Managed by the California Department of Education, legislation calls for the Superintendent of Public Instruction to identify College Opportunity Zones—the 30 percent of school districts with middle and high schools that have the highest proportion of low-income students. Schools in a College Opportunity Zone must give pupils and parents or guardians the opportunity to sign a *Save Me a Spot in College* pledge; participating districts agree to provide specified support services to pupils to aid in their readiness for college. Schools not in a designated Zone are required to give students eligible for free and reduced-price meals the opportunity to sign a pledge. The measure calls for financial assistance for eligible students with need, but it does not provide funding to school districts should they choose to participate in the program.

Pledge signers agree to:

- Meet all graduation requirements to finish high school in California.
- Enroll in college preparatory coursework, which may include career technical coursework and courses required for admission to the University of California and the California State University.
- Seek to achieve proficiency in mathematics and in reading and writing in English,
- Complete and file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid and submit his or her GPA to the Student Aid Commission.
- Meet application and other requirements for university admission or enroll directly in community college within 12 months after high school graduation.

Legislation encourages the public and private postsecondary sectors, the Student Aid Commission, community organizations, and others to provide support services as needed in coordination with local school districts.

El Dorado Promise

(www.eldoradopromise.com)

In January 2007, the Superintendent of Public Schools in El Dorado, Arkansas announced the “El Dorado Promise,” a scholarship program for El Dorado high school students. It can be used at any accredited two- or four-year, public or private, college or university, in state or out of state. The maximum amount of the scholarship is based on the maximum level tuition payable at an Arkansas public university. Applications must be completed during the student’s senior year.

The El Dorado Promise scholarship is available to all students who graduate from El Dorado High School, reside in the district, and have been an El Dorado Public School student since at least 9th grade. The scholarship amount is based on the number of years the student has attended school in the district. Graduates who attended all 13 years in the district receive 100 percent of the scholarship; those who attend grades nine through twelve receive up to 65 percent of the scholarship.

The El Dorado Promise was established and funded exclusively by Murphy Oil Corporation.

Kalamazoo Promise

(<https://www.kalamazoopromise.com/>)

Creation of the Kalamazoo Promise program was driven by an economic development agenda to revitalize the city and the region. Announced in November 2005, the Kalamazoo Promise guarantees full college scholarships to potentially every graduate of the Kalamazoo Public School District. The scholarship program provides up to four years of tuition and mandatory fees for postsecondary education at any Michigan public state university or community college, with the tuition benefit linked to length of attendance in the Kalamazoo Public School system. Students must attend college full-time.

The scholarship fund was established by a group of anonymous donors who see this as a means of promoting economic development. The group has the financial resources to make the multimillion-dollar commitment indefinitely. Superintendent Janice Brown estimated the cost of the program at about \$3 million for 2007 and about \$12 million a year by the time four graduating classes are in college.

The W.E. Upjohn Institute assists with research, evaluation, and community mobilization efforts.



Pittsburgh Promise

(www.pittsburghpromise.org/about.html) and
<http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/14311021813202277/site/default.asp?1431Nav=|&NodeID=3079>

Announced in December 2007, the fund was established with a \$100 million commitment from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, including an initial \$10 million to mobilize The Pittsburgh Promise; the remaining \$90 million is a challenge grant intended to catalyze a community-wide campaign to raise \$135 million over the following nine years and create a permanent endowment which will fund future generations of graduates from the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The program is designed to help students graduating from the Pittsburgh Public Schools pursue higher education and to enhance the growth, stability, and economic development of the region.

Designed as a "last dollar" award, an annual \$5,000 scholarship from the Pittsburgh Promise provides recipients with financial assistance for tuition, mandatory fees, books, dorm, and meal plan. Students must have been in the district and a resident of Pittsburgh continuously since at least 9th grade, earn a minimum 2.5 GPA, maintain a minimum of 90% attendance record, and earn admission to one of the public or private postsecondary schools approved by the Promise program.

Wisconsin Covenant

(<http://wisconsin covenant.wi.gov/>)

In the fall of 2007, Wisconsin's Governor Jim Doyle announced the creation of the Wisconsin Covenant Foundation, a private, non-profit, tax-exempt 501.c (3) public charity created to raise and distribute money to support postsecondary access for Wisconsin students who participate in the program.

An initial endowment of \$40 million from the Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation is designed to "challenge Wisconsin businesses and philanthropists to make similar contributions to the Wisconsin Covenant and provide grants to Wisconsin Covenant Scholars."¹

Every Wisconsin 8th grader, regardless of income, can become a Wisconsin Covenant Scholar. By September 2007, over 17,000 students then in ninth grade and representing all Wisconsin counties, had signed the Covenant pledge.¹ Each student who fulfills the pledge will be recognized as a Wisconsin Covenant Scholar, receive a financial aid package based on the family's financial need, and be guaranteed a place at the University of Wisconsin campus, a Wisconsin Technical College, or a Wisconsin private college or university that is affiliated with the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Students from families in most need of financial aid will receive grants to pay the cost of education; other students will receive a mix of loans, grants, and work study opportunities.

Students participating in the program must sign a pledge in 8th grade affirming that they will earn a high school diploma, demonstrate good citizenship and engage in activities that support their community, take a college prep curriculum (there is not a list of mandatory classes), maintain a B average in high school, and apply in a timely manner for state and federal financial aid.

Washington's College Bound Scholarship

(<http://www.hecb.wa.gov/paying/waaidprgm/CollegeBoundScholarship.asp>)

The College Bound Scholarship offered by the state of **Washington** targets qualifying 7th and 8th graders the promise of tuition and books. The scholarship covers the amount of tuition at public college rates not covered by other state financial aid, plus \$500 for books. The program has an income eligibility requirement which is indexed to family income and number of people in the family. Foster youth are automatically eligible to apply. Family income is verified eligibility during the student's senior year in high school. Other eligibility requirements include submission of the application and pledge; graduation from a Washington high school or home school; a cumulative high school GPA of at least 2.0; stay crime free; submission of an application for admission to an eligible college in Washington; completion of the FASFA; and have Washington residency. The scholarship can be used for four years or until the student receives a bachelor's degree; the scholarship must be used within five years of high school graduation.



Endnotes

- ⁱ State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (2008). *Toward Affordability: Policy Recommendations for Virginia Higher Education*, p. 5. Accessed at <http://www.schev.edu/Reportstats/AffordabilityReport2009.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ *Oklahoma's Promise, 2007-08 Year-End Report*, page 1, available at <http://www.okhighered.org/okpromise/ohlap-report-07-08.pdf>
- ⁱⁱⁱ State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana (SSACI), *Annual Report 2007-08*, page 30, available at <http://www.in.gov/ssaci/files/AnnualReport07-08.pdf>
- ^{iv} Gary Miron and Anne Cullen, *Trends and Patterns in Student Enrollment for Kalamazoo Public Schools*. (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, October 2008) p.ii, available at <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/promise/>
- ^v El Dorado Promise, "Community Report Card," available at <http://www.eldoradopromise.com/pdf/PromiseImpact2008.pdf>
- ^{vi} See, for example, State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana (SSACI), *Annual Report 2007-08*, available at <http://www.in.gov/ssaci/files/AnnualReport07-08.pdf> and Edward P. St. John, et al, *A Step Toward College Success: Assessing Attainment among Indiana's Twenty-first Century Scholars* at <http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/CollegeSuccess.pdf>
- ^{vii} Lumina Foundation for Education, *Results and Reflections: An evaluation report*, available at http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/Results_and_Reflections-21st_Century_Scholars.pdf
- ^{viii} Oklahoma's Promise, *2007-08 Year-End Report*, available at <http://www.okhighered.org/okpromise/ohlap-report-07-08.pdf>
- ^{ix} Kalamazoo Promise, *Kalamazoo Promise Summary Data*, available at <http://www.upjohninstitute.org/promise/summdata.pdf>.
- ^x El Dorado Promise, *The El Dorado Promise Turns Two*, available at <http://www.eldoradopromise.com/pdf/PromiseImpact2009.pdf>
- ^{xi} Gary Miron, Jeffrey N. Jones, Allison J. Kelaher Young, *The Impact of the Kalamazoo Promise on Student Attitudes, Goals, and Aspirations*. (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, May 2009) p.iii. Available at <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/promise/>



Pathways to College Network is an alliance of prominent national organizations committed to advancing college access and success for underserved students, including those who are the first generation in their families to go to college, low-income students, underrepresented minorities, and students with disabilities.

For more information about Pathways, please contact pcn@ihep.org.