The Kalamazoo Promise and Perceived Changes in School Climate

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Abstract: The Kalamazoo Promise was announced in the fall of 2005, offering free college tuition at any public state college or university for graduates of the district who have gained acceptance to a postsecondary institution. This program was funded through the generous support of anonymous donors, and a federally-funded evaluation is underway to examine potential changes that result from its implementation. This paper situates perceptions of school climate in this moment of punctuated equilibrium of school reform, and in the context of this universal postsecondary scholarship program. This evaluation research draws from multiple data sources including interviews with educators, and surveys and interviews with students in the school district. Findings indicate that school climate has improved since the announcement of the program. We discuss the implications of research findings and the potential of the Kalamazoo Promise as a catalyst for systemic change in the district.
Keywords: Comprehensive program; college planning; program evaluation; organizational climate.

La promesa de Kalamazoo y su interpretación: los cambios en el ambiente escolar
Resumen: La promesa de Kalamazoo se anunció en el otoño 2005, ofreciendo educación universitaria gratuita en cualquier universidad pública del estado a graduados del distrito que fueran

aceptados en una universidad. Este programa fue financiado a través de la apoyo de donantes anónimos. Una evaluación de los fondos federales está en marcha con el objetivo para verificar los posibles cambios que resulten de su implementación. Este artículo presenta las percepciones del ambiente escolar en este particular punto de equilibrio de la reforma escolar, y en el contexto de este programa universal de becas universitarias. Esta investigación de evaluación utilizó múltiples fuentes de datos, incluyendo entrevistas con docentes, así como cuestionarios y entrevistas con estudiantes en distritos escolares. Los resultados indican que el clima escolar ha mejorado desde el inicio de la ejecución del programa. Discutimos las implicaciones potenciales de los resultados de la Promesa Kalamazoo como un catalizador para el cambio sistémico en el distrito.
Palabras clave: Clima escolar; el acceso a la universidad; programa de becas universales.

A promessa de Kalamazoo e sua interpretação: mudanças no clima escolar
Abstract: A Promessa de Kalamazoo foi anunciada no outono de 2005, oferecendo educação universitária gratuita em qualquer faculdade pública do estado para graduados da região que haviam recebido aceitação de uma instituição universitária. Tal programa foi financiado através do apoio de doadores anônimos. Uma avaliação de financiamento federal está em andamento com o objetivo de verificar mudanças potenciais que resultam de sua implementação. O artigo apresenta percepções de clima escolar neste momento específico de equilíbrio da reforma escolar, bem como no contexto deste programa universal de bolsa universitária. Esta pesquisa de avaliação parte de múltiplas fontes de dados, incluindo entrevista com professores, além de questionários e entrevistas com alunos nas escolas distritais. Resultados indicam que o clima escolar melhorou desde o início/implementação do programa. Discutimos as implicações dos resultados e o potencial da Promessa Kalamazoo como catalisador para mudanças sistêmicas na região.
Palavras-Chave: clima escolar; acesso à universidade; programa de bolsa universal.

Introduction

The Kalamazoo Promise has garnered national attention as a potentially powerful model for systemic school and community transformation. In the fall of 2005, it was announced that a group of anonymous donors had "leveled the playing field" for students in the local school district. All students that graduate from a district high school and gain acceptance at a public state postsecondary institution are now eligible for a full collegiate scholarship. This universal scholarship is unique and far-reaching. It has created a moment of punctuated equilibrium and thus may serve as a catalyst for systemic change in the Kalamazoo Public School (KPS) district. This is a powerful incentive for administrators, teachers, parents, and students to work toward preparing all students for post-secondary options. Many school reforms seek to alter specific structures or programs. However, one key component of this evaluation is to examine the potentially positive impact of the Promise on deep-seated belief systems among key stakeholders, namely students, faculty, and administrators.

This paper centers on student and teacher perceptions of the school climate, such as teacher-student relationships, student-peer relationships, academic orientation, and student behavior. The announcement of the Promise and subsequent changes in the district represent a disruption in an otherwise stable, conservative system (Bidwell, 2001; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Murphy, 2009). A federally-funded evaluation is underway to determine the effects of this program on student and teacher beliefs, behaviors, and other important outcomes. There is preliminary evidence of increased community support, improved teacher expectations for students, improved student aspirations,

increased enrollments and retention, and improved postsecondary enrollment and attendance rates.[1] Long-term outcomes may take five years or more before we can expect change resulting from the Promise. The purpose of this paper is to detail the perceived effects of this initiative on school climate.

An outcomes logic model (see Figure 1), reflective of existing research on education and evaluation, was built around anticipated outcomes to systemic change (Miron & Evergreen, 2008). This model provides a conceptual framework that allows an examination of short-term and intermediate outcomes in relation to the long-term outcomes. Descriptive rather than prescriptive, the logic model is used to illustrate how systemic change can be promoted around the unifying goal of improving student readiness for post-secondary options. The model also suggests the practical importance of the Kalamazoo Promise and its potential to create change throughout the school system as well as within the larger Kalamazoo community. In this way, it is expected that the Promise will have a catalytic effect on the students, faculty, and administrators in the schools, supporting solutions and improvements that are unique to each school and to the district.

Figure 1 presents the logic model that has guided the conceptualization of data collection and analysis. Data include student surveys, student interviews, as well as interviews with district principals, guidance counselors, and teachers. The design allows us to understand school climate from the perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators. In addition, there is an extensive body of research on school climate that informs this investigation.

The analysis for this paper is guided by the following questions: How do students in the school district rate aspects of school climate? Are there differences in ratings of school climate across student background characteristics and various groups of students? How do students and educators describe school climate in context of the implementation of the Promise scholarship program?

Research on School Reform and Climate

Comprehensive School Reform

Schools and school districts are among the many institutions that encounter institutional isomorphism (Bidwell, 2001; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to DiMaggio & Powell (1983), institutional isomorphism is the idea that as a set of similar organizations tries to make a change, the more they become homogenous. In other words, the more things try to change, the more they stay the same. Institutional change is then difficult to leverage, particularly in complex and multidimensional social contexts. Education and schooling are an example of institutional isomorphism.

More specifically, Bidwell (2001) argues that because teaching and learning occur in an environment characterized by immediacy, complexity, and constant change, reform efforts need to be based on both neo-institutional and organic systems approaches, where change occurs both from the top-down as well as from the bottom-up. However, since reform efforts are often targeted at the macro-level of action with little regard to the extant variables and conditions that define the need for reform, the outcome of many reform efforts ultimately serves to further reinforce the stability of the existing system (Murphy, 2009). In an analysis of turnaround programs, Murphy (2009) found that the literature was characterized by three policy dimensions – leadership, efficiency, and focus. Focus is about identifying the essentials as well as the tools required to produce results.

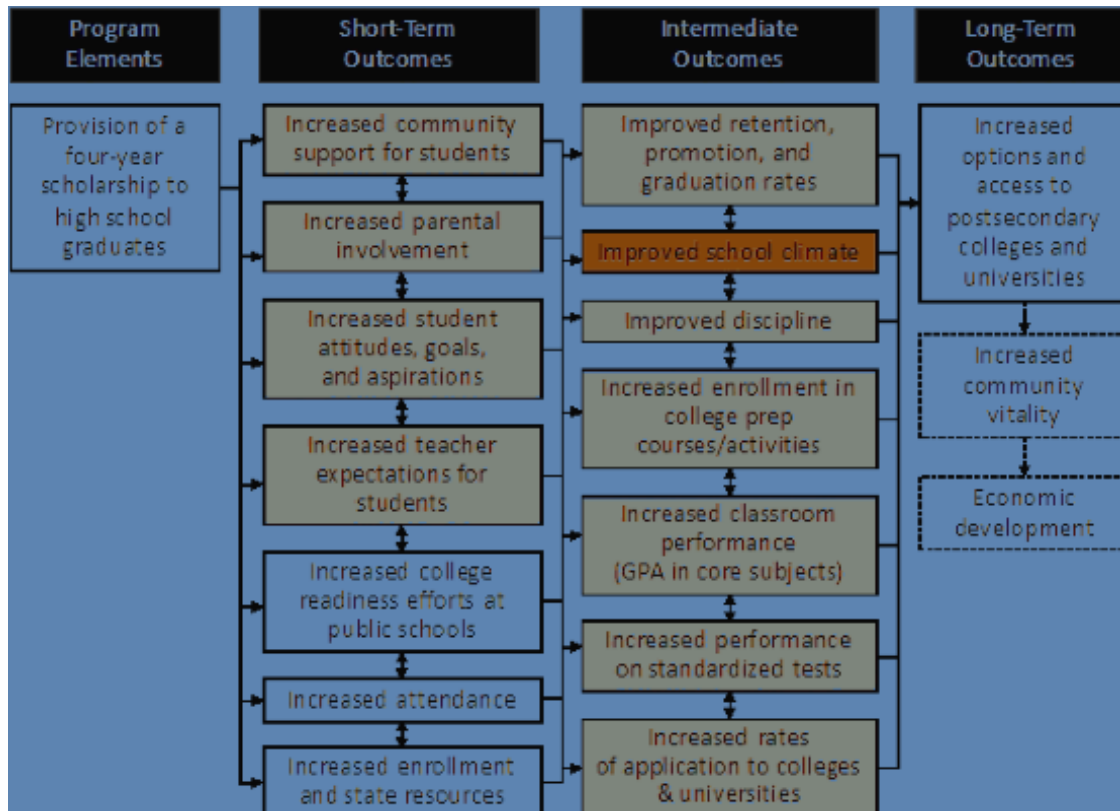[1] Released working papers are available at: http://www.wmich.edu/kpromise.

Figure 1. Logic Model for the Evaluation of the Kalamazoo Promise.

The Kalamazoo Promise initiative was not initially designed as a school reform effort, but for regional economic development. However, this universal incentive program has served to provide a focus to the organization of the school district and subsequently to the individual schools. It has punctuated the existent equilibrium in the system and as such, has offered administrators, teachers, and students the latitude to craft the strategies and tools—in the form of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors—that are needed to support systemic change within different levels of the system. Thus, we would expect to see changes in short-term and intermediate levels in the logic model. A significant intermediate level outcome in the logic model is school climate.

School Climate

As an intermediate outcome, school climate allows for an important view of the influence of the Kalamazoo Promise. The concept of "climate" is an instrumental variable in schools, and as such has benefited from much theoretical and empirical attention in the research literature. School climate has been studied from various perspectives including leadership and organizational theory, social capital, and developmental psychology. Ostensibly, school climate involves relatively enduring patterns of behavior and interaction in the school environment that are influenced by shared beliefs, values, and attitudes (Brown, Anfara, & Roney, 2004; Keefe, Kelley, & Miller, 1985; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997). The American Educational Research Association's special interest group for School Community, Climate, and Culture (2011) describes school climate as:

> Social-psychological attributes of the school (such as school members' shared ideologies, values, norms, beliefs, feelings, and expectations for school members' behaviors and for the school's structure and operation), and how these attributes are organized in formal and informal school groups, with particular interest in their

relation to student learning and achievement and to effectively functioning classroom and schools.

Climate is usually conceptualized as related to relationships among students and teachers, as well as academic orientation, guidance, and behavioral values, a definition that we apply in the current study. Climate then is related to both interpersonal and organizational elements of the school environment. In terms of the strongest predictors of climate, individual-level factors account for the greatest variance in perceived school climate, followed by school-level, and classroom-level factors (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008).

Perceptions and Outcomes

The research literature on school climate is extensive because of its influential role in promoting positive student outcomes (Marshall, 2009). Perceptions of school connectedness are related to school climate (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006), and student perceptions of both school belonging and school climate are related to measures of student engagement and academic achievement (Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008). The Search Institute found that positive school climate is associated with attendance, engagement, expectations, competence, esteem, and self-concept (Scales & Leffert, 1999). It can also mitigate against anxiety, depression, substance abuse, antisocial behavior, and grade retention (LeBlanc, Swisher, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2008; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Battistich & Horn, 1997). It appears that a pro-social and pro-academic school climate is particularly important for high-need youth, or those youth that have not had access to influential social advantages (Haynes & Comer, 1993; Kuperminc et al. 1997). Indeed, positive school climate has been empirically linked to increased student achievement in numerous studies (Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008; Brown, Anfara, & Roney, 2004; Griffith, 1999; Bossert, 1998; Hoy, Hannum, & Tschannon-Moran, 1998; McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). As an ecological context, the climate of a school can affect the collective behaviors of students and teachers as well as the process whereby students engage in the learning process.

Perceptions of school climate may vary based on the individuals reporting (Preble & Taylor, 2008). Administrators have a vested interest and may have certain "blind spots" with respect to issues of climate. Teachers play a crucial role in school climate as they experience more direct interactions with students, and affect peer interactions through classroom expectations and practices. Student perceptions are pivotal in understanding climate, as they spend their school days in the midst of it. As a student in the Preble and Taylor (2008) study argues, "School climate is what happens when the grown-ups are not around" (p. 36). Preble and Taylor (2008) also report gaps between student and teacher perceptions, and between college-bound students and the larger student body.

Given the associative beneficial outcomes, it is clear that school climate is important in organizational and school reform (Dellar, 1999). School climate encompasses the preconditions for positive student experience and achievement (BPB, 2004). Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff (2000) contend that perceptions of the school climate are essential in quality education and in the developmental progression of youth and adolescence. Schools with a positive relational climate, and that support students through constructive discipline models, promote a sense of connection to the school community; "It is where people want to live and work and where small and large businesses like to locate" (Rubin, 2004, p. 162). The present paper focuses on perceptions of teacher-student relationships, student-peer relationships, guidance, academic orientation, and behavioral values, and the shift in these perceptions over time.

Research Methodology

The logic model presents an overview of changes that may result from the implementation of the Promise. We elicited responses from various stakeholders through surveys with students and interviews with students and educators, so that we can consider these responses from multiple perspectives. Since this is an evaluation in a school setting, we take a pragmatic approach (see Pietarinen, 2006), marshaling available data to provide sufficient evidence on the questions of interest. We also take an interpretive approach to this research, assuming that the influences of the Promise are determined by the ways in which individual participants interact with, and interpret, such programming (Blumer 1969; Denzin, 1989).

Sample and Data Collection for Student Survey

Within our high school survey, which was administered at all three high schools in the school district in May 2008, we embedded a sufficient number of items from a nationally-normed school climate survey that allowed us to create five subscales or factors related to school climate (NASSP). The School Climate Survey (SCS) was originally developed at Western Michigan University in the 1980's and was later copyrighted and distributed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The School Climate Survey contains a total of 10 subscales, although for the purpose of our research on the Kalamazoo Promise we utilize the five factors that are most relevant to this investigation. Table 1 below lists all 10 school climate subscales and includes a description of each subscale. The five subscales that we used in our survey are highlighted with asterisks.

In addition to the questions related to the nationally-normed SCS, we also included a number of questions that relate either directly or indirectly to school climate. Surveys contained Likert-type items related to students' educational experiences and other questions related to anticipated short-term and intermediate outcomes. There were also several open-ended questions that allowed students to provide an explanation of their ratings. Surveys generally took 12-15 minutes to complete. A total of 1,893 students participated in the survey in 2008, providing a sample that is large and representative of students in the district.

Sample and Data Collection for Interviews

To further explore trends identified in the survey responses, the evaluation team conducted interviews with 42 students. Working with neighborhood associations, researchers were able to obtain a sample with greater ethnic and socioeconomic diversity because these associations are distributed geographically throughout the city. Neighborhood associations facilitated interviews by hosting events or through staff nominations. Students were provided with soft drinks and pizza, and received a free university t-shirt for participating in the summer interviews. The median duration of interviews with students was 35 minutes. Seventy-five percent of the students were in district high schools, and 25% attended middle schools. The student interview sample was 57% female and 83% were students of color. Almost 80% of students interviewed reported that they qualified for free or reduced lunch. In total, 90% of the students we interviewed reported that they plan on using the Promise in the future.

Table 1. Descriptions of Subscales on the School Climate Survey

Subscale	*Description*
Teacher-student relationships*	The quality of the interpersonal and professional relationships between teachers and students
Security and maintenance	The quality of maintenance and the degree of security people feel at the school
Administration	The degree to which school administrators are effective in communicating with different role groups and in setting high performance expectations for teachers and students
Student academic orientation*	Student attention to tasks and concern for achievement at school
Student behavioral values*	Student self-discipline and tolerance for others
Guidance*	The quality of academic and career guidance and academic counseling services available to students
Student-peer relationships*	Students' care and respect for one another and their mutual cooperation
Parent and community-school relationships	The amount and quality of involvement of parents and other community members in the school
Instructional management	The efficiency and effectiveness of teacher classroom organization and use of classroom time
Student activities	Opportunities for and actual participation of students in school-sponsored activities

Source: Examiner's Manual, School Climate Survey

In addition, 12 principals, 9 guidance counselors, and 20 teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of the impact of the Promise. Interviews were conducted at the schools and lasted approximately 40 minutes, though several lasted over an hour. All high school and middle school principals, and 6 of the 16 elementary principals, participated in the interviews. They were then asked to nominate potential counselors and teachers to be invited to participate in an interview. While this facilitated the efficient collection of data, it created a non-random sample. Two counselors were interviewed from each of the three district high schools, and one from each of the three middle schools. Two to three teachers were interviewed from each high school, two from each of the three middle schools, and one from each elementary school. Twenty-nine out of the 41 educators were female (71%), and approximately 25% reported ethnic backgrounds other than European-American.

Data Analysis

From surveys with high school students to interviews with students and educators, the data collected provides a multidimensional view of school climate. We use student survey data to describe trends in the district related to school climate. The qualitative records are used to explicate these patterns, and to provide insight into the experience of the statistical findings. This approach can yield rich findings, and is consistent with recent efforts to incorporate mixed methodologies in research and evaluation to further understandings of programs and social settings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

Quantitative data. Using instructions from the technical manual for the School Climate Survey, we summed items for each SCS subscale and then calculated mean ratings across students. These raw scores were then converted to percentiles based on the national norms for each of the five SCS subscales. We also created our own factors that were more appropriate for the analyses that followed. After descriptive statistics were calculated, these factors were examined for reliability. The factors were used to explore group differences, and using one-way analysis of variance techniques, we consider the factors in relation to student background and demographic variables.

Qualitative data. Focused codes, based on pre-existing constructs such as those identified in the School Climate Survey, were used to organize the interview data. Interviews were coded for the following themes: general feelings of and attitudes toward climate; teacher-student and student-peer relations; climate and behavior; academic orientation; and college guidance. The focused codes were applied to all interview transcripts. Further, open codes were used to collect information on emergent themes, or persistent patterns, that were identified in analysis.

Limitations

We rely on new and available data to amass sufficient evidence in response to the research questions. This is important because the initial announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise was a surprise to the entire community. Thus, there was no opportunity to obtain benchmark (or pre-Promise) data on the school climate constructs. Additionally, administering the surveys to a comparison group of students outside of KPS was not possible within the scope of this project. We were able to partially address this limitation by drawing comparisons with national norms drawn from the School Climate Survey (SCS).

Another limitation of the current study is in terms of research design. This is a mixed methods study that capitalizes on multiple forms of data to study constructs of interest. However, the lack of experimental control and randomization precludes statements of causation. Rather, we rely on stakeholder perceptions to understand district and school change.

Research Findings

Student Ratings of School Climate Factors

The results of the School Climate Survey are presented in Figure 2. Based on the national norms for the SCS, the graph depicts aggregate student responses in relation to national trends. The five subscales are identified on the horizontal axis, while the scores for the district are shown on the vertical axis. For each subscale, the national norm is 50. Hence, points above the horizontal line at 50 indicate subscales on which the schools exceeded national norms, while points below the horizontal line indicate subscales on which the schools performed below national norms.

The national norms for the SCS are based on all types of secondary schools (small and large, rural, suburban, and urban), and not solely on large urban schools such as Loy Norrix and Kalamazoo Central. Although most of the district results fall within the 40th to 45th percentile or below the national average, this finding is rather typical of large urban schools. What is important to note in Figure 2 is that student perceptions of school climate improved noticeably between 2007 and 2008 on four of the five subscales. There was no improvement in Student-Peer Relationships.
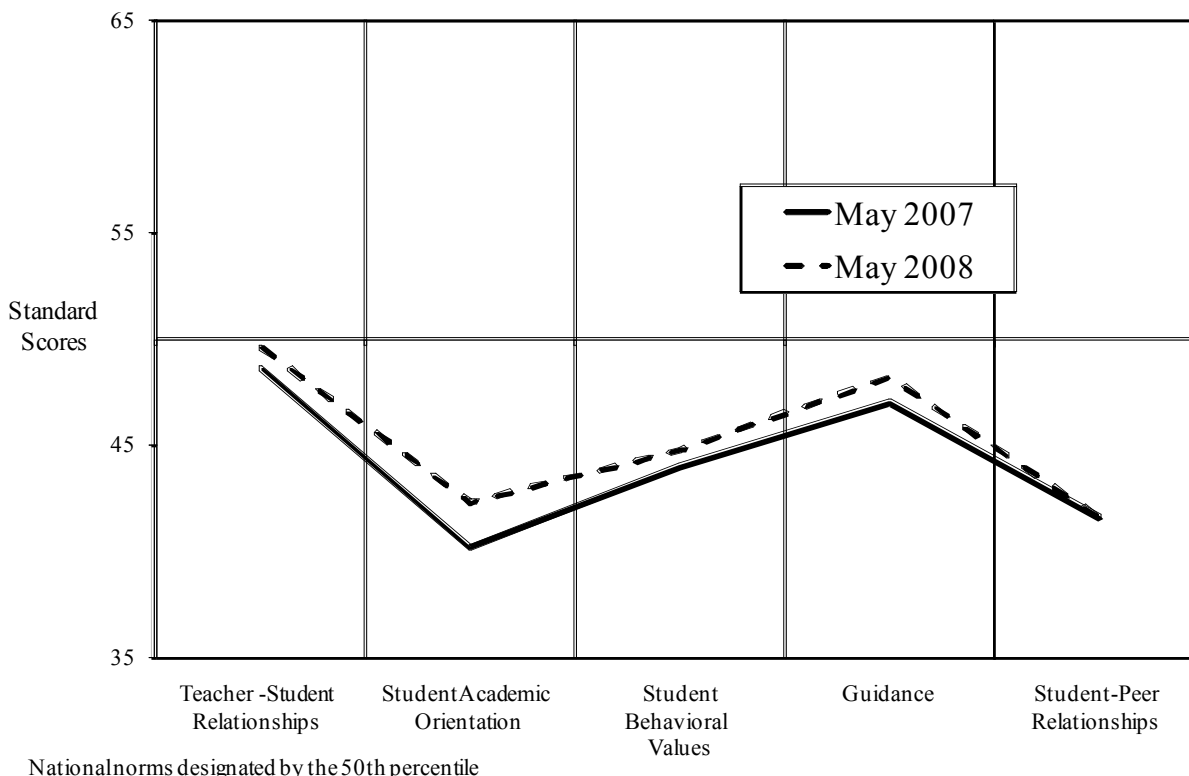
Figure 2. School Climate Results Relative to National Norms, 2007 and 2008

Differences in School Climate across Student Subgroups

Statistical analyses revealed significant between-group differences. Males were more likely than females to see teacher-student relationships, student-peer relationships, and behavioral values as positive. Similarly, students who participated in the free and reduced-priced lunch (FRL) programs reported having a more positive experience with guidance, and higher levels of academic orientation and behavioral values.

Interestingly, the findings with respect to race/ethnicity were mixed. Students who identified as white or Asian were statistically more likely than were students who identified as Black to report higher perceptions of teacher-student relationships. In contrast, students who identified as Black, Hispanic, or Native American were more likely to report higher levels for student-peer relationships, guidance, academic orientation, and behavioral values (see Appendix A for statistical detail).

Student Perceptions of School Climate

High School students were not directly asked about school climate in the interviews, though many of their comments address different aspects of this construct. Students were asked about their attitudes toward school, the quality of their relationships, and behavior. Here, we report on several themes that emerged in the analysis of interview data and open-ended survey responses. Students report on changes that they see their teachers making in response to this scholarship program. They report observed changes in their peers and fellow students. They also share information on the state of behavior at the high school level. Some student comments also note existing misconceptions that exists in the district. These analytical categories aided in the process of data reduction, and provide an additional resource for understanding how the presence of universal scholarship may be affecting the climate of the schools.

Students perceive changes in their teachers, and link these adjustments to the Kalamazoo Promise. Many students report that their teachers are stricter in their interactions, and are pushing students harder to prepare academically.

> The teachers are more strict. Instead of letting us just get away with stuff they are all on us. Yes, they want us to go to college.

> Well they were not happy with the grading system either, but other than pushing harder to get more people to succeed, not much else. Yeah, they keep on going to the point that if you don't succeed here you won't be able to go for the Promise.

Students also see their teachers using the incentive of the Promise to inspire changes in school performance, behavior, and in terms of college guidance:

> The way they talk about it makes me believe that they're very confident that it is for real, so that makes me want to do harder and try harder. That way if it is for real, I can take my place in getting it.

> They have encouraged us to work harder on the assignments we're already getting. They'll pull them out in the hall but we'll still be able to hear them, and they'll ask them why they're acting up this way. Now they have the Promise, they have a chance to use the thing with their lives and maybe otherwise they wouldn't be able to.

> Yeah, they bring it up a lot, like in my individual classes we go over stuff like qualifications and things you need to do to get there. Sometimes we bring it up like somebody is joking off. I know the teacher knows it's just messing around, but some of them just be like you're not gonna be able to use the Promise if you keep on joking around like this.

These comments indicate that the incentive of the Promise is being applied by teachers in an intentional attempt to promote positive student outcomes. In another paper from this study, we describe perceptions of change in teacher expectations (Jones, Miron, & Kelaher-Young, in press). The previous comments suggest that students are feeling the bar been raised academically through increased expectations, but also through additional instructional support. Teachers and students now have a common vocabulary of college access and preparation—teachers are using this discourse to affect classroom behaviors and future educational goals.

Students also note a change in their fellow students. Students report that they are exerting their influence on peers to "stay on the right track":

> Yeah, like if we get in trouble we try to keep each other out of trouble so that we can go to college.

> It's me and my cousin. She's like in the group with us. We are the more mature people in our group so normally we'll get them in control, "Come on you guys, we gotta be done with this. We need to get out of high school." Sometimes she has to put me in check too, because I'll start acting goofy and stuff and I'll get suspended and in a lot of trouble, and I do not need that. Yeah, we help each other out. Our friends help us out too sometimes.

Yeah. We're mostly serious most of the time. There's a couple that might slip up a little bit and then we just push him to do better.

Many students are also making sure that their friends and peers are positioning themselves to take advantage of this opportunity.

Yeah, I kinda notice that. I know the younger kids…I used to try to push them to get good grades so their GPA can be high so they can use the money, the Promise, and go to school to further their education. A lot of kids just think you graduate from high school. It's a big deal, but now it's not really.

I have to tell my friend, "You get the Promise, why not try?" Yeah, because sometimes she has the attitude of why try. I say you should—you have the Promise, so you should try.

Another theme that emerged in analysis is perceived changes in school behavior. A salient behavior to student experience is class attendance. Here, students note how the Promise may be changing attendance (and skipping) behavioral patterns:

More people they want the education, want to finish college. They don't skip school anymore.

Yes, more people don't want to get kicked out of school for doing stupid things, so they try to stay in school so they can get the Promise and they can go to college and they can better their self.

I think so. I mean I've heard a lot less talk about dropping out and skipping school, so I guess you can say people are changing.

Students are also noticing changes in the academic behaviors of their peers. They share examples of the use of help-seeking and self-regulatory strategies:

Like kids focus more in class and ask for more help. Like some people afraid to ask questions when they don't understand. They ask more questions now.

I think [school climate] has gotten better, like maybe a 4/5. Yeah like I said, they focus more in school. They don't come into class loud and throwing paper and stuff like that.

I'm not sure. I don't know if I've noticed an exact change in the behavior since the Promise came out but I feel like everyone is probably more determined and there's a lot more people that are going to college, I know that. It's opened a lot of options for a lot of people. I'm not sure if it's directly affected how they do as far as high school goes.

Behavior, an important component of school climate, can be difficult to change. Patterns of behavior are entrenched in local history and culture. But here, students are reporting that students are making important adjustments to their conduct—less skipping is great, but these comments may articulate larger changes—such as academic persistence. Students further relate the application of

effective strategies with increased focus and determination. A small number of student comments reflect existing misconceptions about college access and the Kalamazoo Promise:

> I would like them to know who I'm working with and who said that. The Promise—they say it pays for your whole tuition or whatever and you end up paying half of it. I don't know. They were saying some of the stuff and I really don't understand.
>
> All the money for the dorm and food and tuition, how much it would actually cost—like a list of programs that the colleges have or whatever, like some colleges that have programs. How does it work exactly, financial or whatever. Do we have to get the money from somewhere and then pay it?

This represents a challenge, but also an opportunity, for educators in the district to disseminate information to all students in the district to promote the goal of increased collegiate access and participation.

Educator Perceptions of School Climate

In sharing views on school climate, educators blur descriptions of the general feeling of school climate with ideas about changes in climate. Many educators portrayed the school climate in a positive light. Consistent with the quantitative findings though, reports were also often mixed, with many reservations about the prospect for quick changes in the district due to the Promise. This section reports these positive, mixed, and negative views of school climate.

Many of the educators that were interviewed (e.g., teachers, counselors, and principals) shared positive perceptions of school climate:

> Part of it is in fact in supporting the school. Working with the school I think is huge because I think just philosophically and just by the idea that word of mouth is that feeling—that spirit of the school, feeling good about your school, feeling invested in your school, being positive about your school. That in itself is a huge thing. Once again, the community that includes the parents and the school are all on the same page. We're all working towards the same thing. That's the first piece. (Principal)
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> [*Q: What kinds of changes have taken place in your school since the Promise was announced?*] A: I think that we're inoculating the culture about what it takes and what we have to do, education so you can actually stay in school and pass and be eligible for the Promise; not only with the school but the parents. I think as teachers we need to know what to do to inoculate and to reach and teach students and the community about yes, it's a really great gift, but there are things that you have to be doing. There has to be reciprocity. There has to be things every year that you have to be working towards. (Middle school teacher)
>
> School climate—the Promise is not the only change. I think overall there's a pride. I think there's more increased pride in being a student because I think the kids see it as much more of an equal status perception. They're getting a high school diploma also and they get the Promise also. They get to go to college also. (Guidance counselor)

Educators link these positive perceptions of climate with the Promise, or a shared purpose toward the common goal of postsecondary preparation and access. They note that this program is

an intentional investment in the schools, and refer to the need to educate the broader community on the reciprocal efforts needed to maximize this investment.

Educators also shared mixed feelings about perceived school climate. They note that there remains "room for improvement," and articulate remaining challenges.

> Our school climate—I'd say we've got great points and then we've got some room to improve. But you know what? I got to tell you in 20 years, we had room to improve 20 years ago, too, so it's just—I think right now we've iPod troubles, we've got cell phone problems. The technology has changed. I remember we didn't have those things to contend with before. Most kids are just great kids. (High school teacher)

> [*Q: What kind of changes have you experienced in your school, since the Promise was announced?*] A: I think there is focus on accountability, and the urgency of insuring that students are well prepared to take advantage of the Promise. So, it has raised our level of awareness, as educators. I think we have a lot of work to do, and especially in the high poverty schools. That we have—our work is more than just preparing them academically, but also socially. To give them hope. To understand that there is a world beyond their current circumstance. So there is still a lot of work to be done. (Principal)

> It fits really well with the structure of trying to move ahead, with excellent learning happening and excellent behavior and climate here. It's not perfect, we have our challenges. But we have means to address those challenges and that's what's wonderful. Does the Promise impact that? It kind of does because we're so intent on making sure kids are ready for success, that it makes you pay attention more to the current research and the current strategies and it helps you to collaborate more because that's built-in too. You don't shut your door and do your thing. You work with your grade-level partners. You work with your literacy coach. You work with your behavior specialist. There's lots of collaboration happening. (Principal)

A smaller number of educators reported negative perceptions of school climate. These comments acknowledged the pervasive influence of media on student experience, and the historic patterns of achievement and postsecondary educational pursuit.

> …Then we have kids here that don't get it at all. They're so clueless about college; it is not on their radar, in their world. They don't, and even though you're trying to create that for them, and in this school we struggle with a group of kids that don't have any value for learning. They're more controlled by their peer culture and the street culture and the mass media culture than they are about the learning culture. (Principal)

> No, not at all. It's not seen. I have to say that most of my colleagues share my joy about the Promise and what it means for our kids. The day to day is that we have not been inculcated here in our culture. There isn't—I've got some little cards on my door about how to get hold of [the Promise administrator]. It sort of lurks in the shadows. It's funny. It's like the thing that KPS brings out and dusts off when it wants to put a happy face on everything and yet we still have kids who are killing each other, kids who are literally killing each other…The school is just what it is and the Promise hasn't really made a change for us and it isn't intended to. I'm not bitter.

It isn't intended to. It isn't talked about at all. (High school teacher)

I'm sure there will be some other changes but as I've said, overall I think the school atmosphere and everything has been declining. I don't connect that to the Promise but perhaps that's not a coincidence… I'm not confident right now if we can overcome the culture of the city of Kalamazoo in some of its areas as well as just modern culture and the distractions and the self-centeredness that occurs. I'm sure that's everywhere. (High school teacher)

As noted, there were mixed comments on school climate and perceptions of change in educator interviews. This design does not allow for causal declarations, though these comments help us to understand the influence of this program on the lived experience of participants. The following graph gives a visual representation of educator ratings of change in school climate. Just over 62% of the educators perceived a Slightly Positive or Strongly Positive change in school climate since the Promise was introduced. Thirty-two percent did not perceive and change in school climate and only five percent perceived that overall school climate had worsened. Here, it is clear that while responses vary, there is support for the inference that there is a trend in the positive direction:
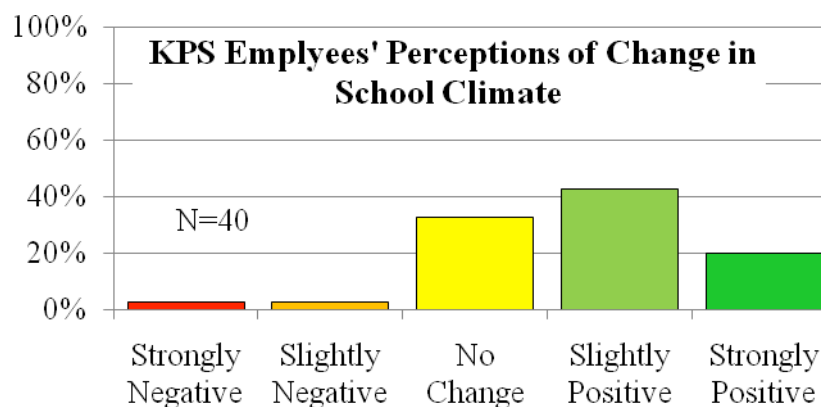
Figure 3. Educator Perceptions of Change in School Climate.

There were several emergent themes that presented in the analysis of evaluation data. Many spoke directly to aspects of school climate, including academic orientation and student behavior.
Students do have an optimism that they can succeed, that they can have a future academically, that college is available—particularly in the low socio-economic students. They are not writing off their future. I think it is has had a positive impact. It is hard to isolate the impacts but definitely an overall positive impact. They have confidence, pleasure, pride. The entire school is moving intact down the street. (Principal)

Oh yeah, and again it happened faster than I expected it to. It didn't really take them that long to embrace it and say yeah, this is a possibility. I mean, kids that maybe wanted to go to college or had a small part of them that thought maybe that's something I want to do but just overwhelmed either academically, economically, their own perceptions that they weren't good enough to go to college, facing all those hurdles and now we have kids all over the place talking about where they're going to college…That was our major concern initially that the kids wouldn't be able

to wrap themselves around the possibility that they could go to school for free. (Guidance counselor)

Some of these kids have a lot of failure behind them, academic failure and unfortunately a lot of issues that have created that feeling of it's not for me and I can't do the work, I can't do this, I can't do that. I think there are probably kids out there who still feel that way but we certainly don't hear it like we used to. (Guidance counselor)

A higher level of academic support. Expectations in this district have over the last 20 years or so decreased. With the Promise the expectations as a whole increased. We used to tolerate to a certain degree a certain level of achievement. I think as a whole the expectations have increased and with those expectations teachable expectations for our students have increased. So I think increased academic support. (Principal)

These notions of increased academic support are noteworthy. A teacher quoted above notes a new sense of optimism. Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy (2006) have linked this kind of perceived collective academic optimism with student academic performance. This construct links beliefs with behaviors, and suggest a mechanism whereby small changes may be directing larger transformations. Indeed, educators connect initial changes in the academic domain with changes in student behavior:

So, as we're working on keeping kids in class, raising the standards on their literacy and their writing skills, their reading skills and math, we're hoping that that has a direct correlation, direct effect, on the overall discipline situation in the building. I think that as a staff the expectations obviously of the Promise that we are going to continue to prepare kids, not just for high school, but, also for college. It doesn't do us any good and it doesn't do the students any good if they were to get this wonderful gift and not be able to use it. So obviously our standards are high, and are gaining strength as we move through this process. (Principal)

…It's not just the money. It's the academia. It's the social skills. It's the behavioral skills. All of those things as a package that the Promise helps restore, I think. (Principal)

Educators also speak of changing dynamics in the district through shifting demographic patterns. Several educators note that school climate has been affected by the influx of new families and students. These comments are mixed, as educators note both positive and negative trends in this area. Many of the comments suggest optimism that families that came to Kalamazoo specifically for the Promise may have strong pro-educational tendencies that may positively affect the climate of the schools.

We've had people come from six or seven other states. And then eleven cities in Michigan, and then within the city of Kalamazoo, we've had people come from charter schools, private schools…What has been wonderful is the way that the new families and the families who are here have come together and it's really interesting that last year we had over 100 more students, lots of growth, and nobody missed a beat. The kids were happy, they were learning, our achievement is going quite well. We have some pockets of concern but we're doing well and keep after it. (Principal)

For sure discipline is way better than last year and as I understand it, it's ten times better than it was two years ago. So I think it's on a steady upward and I think there are multiple factors that are all impacting that. I think again the side benefits from the Promise that perhaps don't seem to directly impact things like discipline and attitude but they do because we're getting kids in here who might be more motivated and they are raising the overall level of the student body to a certain extent. So I think there are these side impacts to the Promise that are actually are also helping to improve things if that makes sense. (Middle school teacher)

Lastly, educators repeatedly brought attention to the fact that the "novelty has worn off," and provide suggestions for keeping a focus on the objectives of the program and the mission of the school district.

I just think we need to just keep bringing it up. I think it's fallen by the wayside in the past year. You don't hear about it in the news anymore. Of course, all you hear now are the dropout rates. Dropout rates haven't changed because of the Promise, they're still ridiculously high. I think we need to do something to change that. We have to keep talking about it and I need to do that more—keep reminding these kids about the Promise. (Middle school teacher)

At first when the Promise was announced it seemed like there were more parents gung ho and interested in that kind of thing. I think the newness has worn off a little bit more now. I think we need to get those reflectors back out and have parents realize this is important to keep talking about it because I don't hear as much talk about it from people now as I did when it was first announced. (Elementary teacher)

At first the Promise was a catalyst in them wanting to get good grades, wanting to apply themselves, wanting to be successful in their academics but after a while that honeymoon period kind of left and you saw them falling back into the same routine they were in before, not turning in their work, not preparing for tests or quizzes, and I see that's where we're at right now. (Middle school teacher)

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the Kalamazoo Promise program, which provides graduating seniors with tuition for public universities in Michigan, has had a modest, but positive impact on the perceptions of school climate throughout the secondary schools. Evidence from interviews with students, teachers, and administrators indicates that perceptions of teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, academic orientation, behavioral values, and guidance, have improved in the first few years of the Promise.

In the student survey, student perceptions of school climate show general positive gains in these five subscales. While the student perceptions reported for the KPS high schools are slightly below the national norms for school climate, they are moving in the direction we would expect based on the initiatives and opportunities created in response to the Promise. In particular, males were more likely than females to report improvements in relational aspects of school climate. This may be due to biases favoring girls in teacher-student aspects of secondary school climate (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004), making female students less likely to perceive changes than males. Likewise, students on Free or Reduced Lunch may have held more negative perceptions of school climate as compared to non-FRL students (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Thus, students on FRL

would be more likely to perceive improvements in school climate.

The Kalamazoo Promise is a non-prescriptive reform; students were afforded incentives and the schools responded to capitalize on these resources and prepare student for success in post-secondary education. As such, it should be viewed as a systemic initiative that has helped develop a district-wide focus on a common goal while allowing the schools and educators some choice and flexibility in implementation. This model of reform is consistent with the models of systemic change offered by Bidwell (2001), and Murphy (2009), which argue for the need of a "common language of change" while allowing the various constituents the autonomy to develop strategies for achieving that goal.

There are several advantages to postsecondary scholarship programs like the Kalamazoo Promise. It is universal and benefits all students, regardless of income or achievement. The opportunity cost of this organization is the potential to target intervention for the neediest students in the district. The Promise promotes a common purpose toward a common goal. It could be argued that this imposes the value of college attendance on all students, and privileges a single outcome over multiple educational aims and objectives. Lastly, the district has benefited from increased per pupil finding from the state due to increased student enrollment, a phenomenon that has been linked to the implementation of the Promise (Bartik, Eberts, & Huang, 2010). A reality though, brought into clear relief in trying economic times, is that not all communities have the resources (or generous donors) to mount such an ambitious reform effort.

The Kalamazoo Promise is an innovative program that is changing the landscape of college preparation and postsecondary education. This initiative is place-based and universal. This makes statements of generalizibility problematic; it would difficult to apply these contextualized findings to other settings and districts. Postsecondary scholarship as a reform model though is attracting attention from communities across the country. There is an emerging literature that describes these related school reform efforts (see Stransky Vaade, Connery, & McCready, 2010; Stransky Vaade, 2009; Miller-Adams, 2009). These results may be of interest to school administrators, educators, and business leaders that are seeking effective practices to promote college access in their own communities.

This universal scholarship program has affected the perceptions of students, teachers, administrators and community members. This has started to affect important aspects of school climate. Future research should continue to track students' and teachers' perceptions of school climate as students who have had an awareness of the Promise since middle school make their way through high school. The values and beliefs held by these students, along with the directed efforts of school personnel, may enhance changes in school climate.

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APPENDIX: Quantitative Analyses of Student Surveys

In this appendix, we include data on mean differences in the School Climate factors across sub-groups in the school district. The following tables contain ANOVA test results using factor scores.

Gender X School Climate Variables

	Females	*Males*	*F*
Teacher-Student Relationships	N=1447 3.19 (.72)	N=1259 3.27 (.74)	F=6.41 (1, 2704), p=.011*
Student-Peer Relationships	N=1415 2.65(.83)	N=1211 2.81 (.85)	F=22.93 (1, 2624), p=.000***
Guidance	N=1427 3.52 (.86)	N=1227 3.54 (.87)	F=0.68 (1,2652),p=.411
Academic Orientation	N=1424 2.69 (.88)	N=1232 2.74 (.93)	F=2.13 (1, 2654), p=.144
Behavioral Values	N=1432 2.03 (.83)	N=1234 2.10 (.91)	F=5.47 (1, 2655), p=.019*

Free/Reduced Lunch X School Climate Variables

	No	*Yes*	*F*
Teacher-Student Relationships	N=1325 3.24 (.70)	N=1343 3.21 (.76)	F=1.09 (1, 1266), p=.297
Student-Peer Relationships	N=1301 2.69(.82)	N=1288 2.74 (.87)	F=2.34 (1, 2587), p=.127
Guidance	N=1308 3.47 (.84)	N=1308 3.58 (.89)	F=7.51 (1, 214), p=.002**
Academic Orientation	N=1311 2.57 (.85)	N=1307 2.86 (.94)	F=71.68 (1,2616), p=.000***
Behavioral Values	N=1308 1.98 (83)	N=1311 2.14 (.91)	F=21.27 (1, 2617), p=.000***

Minority X School Climate Variables

	White/Asian	*Other*	*F*
Teacher-Student Relationships	N=1,144 3.30 (.68)	N=1,502 3.17 (.76)	F=17.84 (1, 2644), p=.000***
Student-Peer Relationships	N=1131 2.69(.83)	N=1437 2.76 (.86)	F=4.19 (1, 2566), p=.041*
Guidance	N=1132 3.49 (.82)	N=1463 3.56 (90)	F=4.50 (1, 2593), p=.034*
Academic Orientation	N=1134 2.54 (.85)	N=1,463 2.86 (.91)	F=84.33 (1,2595), p=.000***
Behavioral Values	N=1,136 1.93 (.79)	N=1,461 2.17 (.91)	F=47.90 (1, 2595), p=.000***

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