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Fulfilling The Pittsburgh Promise®

Early Progress of Pittsburgh's Postsecondary Scholarship Program

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Summary

In December 2006, the mayor of Pittsburgh and the superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) partnered to announce The Pittsburgh Promise® (The Promise) as part of a citywide commitment to economic, intellectual, and social revitalization of the region. The Promise provides funds for graduates of Pittsburgh traditional public and charter schools to help defray tuition costs at accredited postsecondary education institutions in Pennsylvania. Scholarship funds are provided by donations from local private funders, nonprofit foundations, and businesses. The Promise founders expected that offering a cash incentive for students who met minimum eligibility criteria would motivate students to perform better in school, attend college, and attract residents to Pittsburgh to send their children to PPS district schools. Over time, it was hoped, The Promise could serve as a key driver in the region's resurgence.

The Promise has three long-term goals (The Pittsburgh Promise, 2009):

1. To mitigate and reverse the population declines in the city of Pittsburgh and the enrollment declines in Pittsburgh public schools
2. To grow the high school completion rates, college readiness, and post–high school success of all students in Pittsburgh public schools
3. To deploy a well-prepared and energized workforce and an eager core of community volunteers.

The first funding for The Promise arrived in January 2007, when the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers contributed $10,000. Then, in December 2007, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) announced that it would pledge $1 for every $1.50 the Pittsburgh community raised for the initiative, up to $10 million a year, for the next ten years—a potential grant of $100 million. A board of directors was formed in March 2008, and the program's executive director was hired in June 2008. Members of the high school class of 2008 were the first recipients of Promise funds.

The study reported in this monograph assesses early efforts and outcomes of the program's first three years and provides various policy options that may help ensure the program's success in the future.

Purposes of This Study and Research Questions

In 2010, the executive director and members of the Board of Trustees of The Pittsburgh Promise asked RAND to conduct a study that would assess the progress the program has made in its first three years (2007–2008 through 2009–2010). The study had the following objectives:

1. To describe the efforts put in place by PPS to ensure that students are interested in and able to pursue postsecondary education
2. To assess the progress The Promise has made to date in reaching the first two of its strategic goals[1]
3. To provide The Promise administrators with feedback on how to improve the program.

To meet these study objectives, RAND researchers asked the following six research questions:

• What policies and efforts are under way in the PPS district to support The Promise?

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[1]   Given the short time in which The Promise has been in existence, the extent to which the program has achieved its third goal cannot be evaluated at this time.

- Has enrollment in PPS's traditional and charter schools changed since The Promise's inception? In what ways?
- To what extent are newly arriving families choosing to send their children to traditional public and charter schools within the district because of The Promise?
- To what extent is The Promise a factor in students' attitudes toward completing high school or attending postsecondary education institutions?
- Have rates of enrollment and persistence in postsecondary education institutions of graduates from Pittsburgh's traditional public high schools changed since The Promise's inception?
- What can be learned about The Promise's progress to date to inform future improvements?

Data and Analytic Approach

We employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods to help answer these questions. We spoke with officials at the PPS district central office and reviewed public documentation to catalog PPS education initiatives that the district implemented from 2005–2006 through 2009–2010. We analyzed data from PPS district enrollment records for students in five consecutive school years: 2005–2006, 2006–2007, 2007–2008, 2008–2009, and 2009–2010. We developed and administered a survey in December 2010 to parents of middle-school students who were new to PPS traditional and charter schools in 2007–2008, 2008–2009, and 2009–2010. We analyzed these data as well as data we collected from focus groups we conducted in December 2010 and January 2011 with students in grades 8 through 10 who were on the cusp of meeting The Promise's 2.5 grade point average (GPA) eligibility requirement and with students in grades 11 and 12 who met the GPA requirement. In addition, we analyzed data on postsecondary institution enrollment and persistence rates of students who graduated

from PPS traditional public high schools in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010.[2]

We synthesized the results of our analyses to develop a conceptual model that The Promise administrators can use to ensure continual improvements and to evaluate the extent to which the program is meeting its goals in the coming years.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that are important to consider when interpreting the results. First, as is the case with other education initiatives that have broad goals and impacts that take many years to materialize, it will take some years to definitively measure the impact of The Promise, and such measurement is beyond the capacity of a study conducted in the first years of The Promise's existence. Furthermore, a different kind of study will be needed to make that assessment: either a true experiment where eligible students are randomly chosen to receive or not receive The Promise scholarships, or a study that includes a comparison group of students who would meet eligibility requirements but do not have access to The Promise funds. The present study should therefore be treated as an evaluation of certain aspects of the initial implementation of the scholarship program. It was designed to explore what was feasible given the early stage of the program's implementation and available data: early signs of progress and emerging trends.

Second, although the program has been in existence for three years (for the graduating classes of 2008, 2009, and 2010), funding amounts, student eligibility criteria, and the types of schools for which the funds could be used transitioned over time by design. (For example, in 2008, the minimum GPA requirement was 2.0; it was gradually increased over three years to 2.5.) Evaluators advise that to measure the cumulative effects of exposure to a program, services need to be consis-

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[2]   These data were from the student-tracker system of the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). We were able to analyze data only on graduates from the traditional public schools in Pittsburgh and not on those from the district's charter schools.

tently applied over the time frame of the evaluation (Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman, 2004). Our findings can therefore serve as a baseline against which future research data can be compared as the program grows and evolves.

Third, the student selection criteria for focus groups differed, depending on grade and whether the student was Promise-ready at the time of the discussion sessions. We were therefore not able to compare responses across groups or attribute any differences in responses across the grade groups to the grade or to where the students stood in terms of being Promise-ready.

Finally, a number of research questions were outside the scope of this study given the program's short time in existence. For example, we could not examine changes in high school graduation rates, because students who were in the 8th or 9th grade in spring 2008 will be graduating from high school in 2011 and 2012. Furthermore, there are potential inadequacies in PPS student data to differentiate students who leave the district (transfers) from those who drop out of school altogether.

Progress to Date of the Promise Initiative

Overall, we found that The Promise is off to a solid start, and in its initial stages the program is showing positive results in a number of indicators.

Student enrollment in PPS traditional public and charter schools has been stabilizing, rather than continuing to decline, since the inception of The Promise. A comparison of enrollments in the years immediately before The Promise was made available (2005–2006, 2006–2007) with the years since it was made available (2007–2008, 2008–2009, and 2009–2010) shows that the percentage of school-age youth in grades 5 through 12 living in Pittsburgh and enrolled in PPS traditional public or charter schools remained constant, as did the percentage of students remaining in PPS traditional public or charter schools from one year to the next, rather than continuing to decline.

There was no consistent pattern of new transfers into PPS traditional or charter schools.

The Promise is reported to be a very important factor in parents' decisions to enroll their children in public or charter schools within the district. Responses to our survey of parents of 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students who were new to PPS traditional or charter schools in the 2007–2009 school years indicate that The Promise was a factor motivating parents to move their children into PPS traditional public or charter schools. On a scale of 1 to 5, parents on average rated The Promise highest in importance (3.9) of 11 possible factors that influenced their decision to move their children. This was particularly the case for parents of African-American students and parents with lower levels of education.

Results from focus group discussions suggest that The Promise motivates students to achieve. Focus group students consistently reported that Promise funds motivated them to strive for a 2.5 GPA, attend school regularly, and seek postsecondary education. In addition, they reported that their parents pushed them to attend school and meet the 2.5 GPA requirement that would make them Promise-ready. Although these findings cannot be generalized to the broader student population, they indicate that The Promise motivates students to achieve.

Since The Promise began, an increasing number of PPS students meeting Promise eligibility requirements are enrolling in postsecondary education. From 2006 through 2010, the enrollment of PPS traditional public high school graduates who would be eligible for The Promise in postsecondary education institutions increased steadily. This is true for both white and non-white students, as well as for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and regular-price-lunch students. Although we cannot attribute this increase specifically to The Promise, it does suggest that in the early years of the program, more and more students who meet The Promise's eligibility requirements are deciding to continue their education after high school.

For PPS district graduates enrolled in postsecondary education, The Promise may have helped students eligible for funds stay in school. Persistence rates for PPS traditional high school students

(graduating in 2006–2010) declined slightly from the fall of freshman year in college to the fall of sophomore year, while persistence rates of PPS traditional public high school graduates who would be eligible for The Promise remained constant over this time frame. This suggests that The Promise may be providing support to students at a time when a number of their peers are withdrawing from college. This was the case primarily for eligible white and regular-price-lunch students; persistence rates for non-white students and those eligible for free or reduced-price lunches declined slightly through the years. Additional support may be needed for the latter groups, because they appear to be most at risk for leaving college early.

Some focus group students do not fully understand program eligibility and benefits. Focus group students lacked clarity on the program's eligibility requirements, the funding amounts available, and the postsecondary education institutions where Promise funds could be used. This suggests that the program's communication and outreach could be improved.

Recommendations to Improve The Promise Program

The recommendations presented below are intended to assist The Promise program in meeting its intended goals. Given the limited scope of the study, the recommendations focus on specific areas in which The Promise can help motivate change in the community's and students' attitudes and behaviors.

Use multiple methods to provide information to students about the college and federal financial-aid application process, particularly younger students.
Promise funding can provide financial support to students who intend to go to college, but this funding alone cannot erase skills gaps or ensure that students know how to navigate the college and financial-aid application system. Focus group students reported relying on a variety of sources for information on how to apply to college or for financial aid, including peers, family members, and guidance counselors in the

schools, and had varied results. Research suggests that communication with students about how to prepare for college should start in 9th grade or earlier (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). We recommend that the district provide information to students about the college and federal financial-aid application processes early and often in their education to ensure that they are preparing themselves adequately to attend postsecondary education institutions.

Coordinate district attendance policies to align with The Promise eligibility requirements.

Our focus group participants noted that one way to get personalized attendance records was through an excessive absences (EA) notification. However, the guidelines for allowable numbers of absences in the district are not as stringent as The Promise eligibility requirements. Nevertheless, the EA notice was reportedly the only non-solicited notice of attendance status that could potentially assist with mid-period corrections. If EA policy were aligned with The Promise attendance requirement, there might be less confusion among students. Furthermore, EA notifications could be used to alert students of the status of their Promise eligibility.

Improve students' knowledge about The Promise scholarship system's characteristics.

Student focus group participants were unclear about Promise eligibility requirements and funding amounts. One possible reason for this was that The Promise program's characteristics and eligibility requirements changed by design so that more rigorous requirements were phased in over time. This may have made it difficult for teachers, school leaders, and students to understand eligibility and benefits of the program and to sort out which requirements apply to each cohort of students. This lack of clarity may negatively impact students' motivation to make the effort to be Promise-ready. Thus, we suggest that The Promise disseminate information about its scholarship system's characteristics in small venues and in personal letters to students. Alternatively, school counselors can carry out small-group information sessions or meet with individual students to provide clear instructions on how to apply

for Promise scholarships and what they need to achieve in order to be eligible.

Regularly provide students and parents with personalized information about whether students are Promise-ready.
While holding large-scale assemblies would appear to be an efficient way to provide information about The Promise, our focus group analyses suggested that these efforts were not effective in disseminating information. To encourage students to maintain specified GPAs or attendance records to be eligible for a Promise scholarship, students and their parents or guardians could be given access to individualized reports on whether they are Promise-ready through a portal on the PPS website. This portal could be accessed to check on students' status at regular points in time, such as monthly or at the end of each semester. This type of information could encourage students to become more responsible for their grades and attendance and might clear up any misunderstandings about whether they are Promise-ready.

Continue to leverage parents' knowledge of and support for The Promise.
Responses from the surveys of parents indicated that The Promise is an important factor in their decision to send their children to a PPS traditional public or charter school. It is therefore important to continue holding sessions with parents that impart information about The Promise. We recommend that large-scale information sessions be complemented with individualized tactics. For example, PPS and charter school principals could send letters home to parents that include personalized information about their children's eligibility for scholarships and individualized, detailed instructions on how a student can become Promise-ready if he or she is not yet at that stage.

Institute a mentoring system in which Promise scholars mentor high school students.
To help Promise scholars persist in postsecondary education institutions, a mentoring system could be implemented that matches Promise scholars with high school students who are working toward becom-

ing Promise-eligible or are preparing college applications. A mentoring system could have a number of benefits for both the program and the scholars. It could help disseminate information on the college application process and what mentees might expect once in college, and it could encourage Promise scholars to become engaged citizens. The mentoring system could take the form of online mentoring (much like PAmentor.com does), which is a cost-effective and time-efficient way to connect mentors and mentees.

Looking to the Future

The extent to which The Promise is able to meet its goals and ultimately contribute to Pittsburgh's economic development is contingent on how well program officials and the district promote changes in the community's and students' behaviors and attitudes. To ensure that The Promise continues on a road to success, future evaluations must take into consideration the dynamic flow of the relationships among these different actors. Understanding the connections among them and the program processes will strengthen the program, allow for rigorous evaluations, and ensure its continued success.