

Fulfilling the Promise of an Urban School District

Early Progress of The Pittsburgh Promise® College Scholarship Program

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A number of U.S. cities face the combined challenges of struggling public schools, declining populations, and diminishing quality in the local workforce. Over time, these factors can lead to a decline in a city's economic, social, and cultural vitality. To address these challenges in the city of Pittsburgh, the city's mayor and the superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) announced in December 2006 a new college scholarship program called The Pittsburgh Promise® (The Promise). The Promise is designed to provide funds for eligible graduates of Pittsburgh traditional public and charter schools who continue their education at any accredited postsecondary educational institution in Pennsylvania. The program's premise is that offering students a cash incentive will motivate them to do better in school and attend college and that the scholarship opportunity will attract new residents to Pittsburgh and increase the enrollment in PPS district schools. Then, over time, the city will grow a more highly educated workforce, which will ultimately foster the city's economic development. The Promise offered its first scholarships to students graduating in 2008.

The Promise asked the RAND Corporation to conduct a study to describe the program's early progress and to suggest ways to improve it in the coming years. The study examined the program's progress over its first three years (2007 through 2009), focusing on two of the program's strategic goals: (1) mitigate and reverse the population declines in the city of Pittsburgh and the enrollment declines in Pittsburgh Public Schools and (2) increase the high school completion rates, college readiness, and post-high school success of all students in Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Using public school and college enrollment data, along with data from surveys and focus groups, the RAND team examined a number of indicators, such as enrollment in PPS traditional

Abstract

RAND examined the early progress of The Pittsburgh Promise®, a postsecondary scholarship program for high school graduates, and found that the program appears to be making progress toward its goals. Although it is not possible to ascertain causality, researchers found that district enrollments have been stabilizing rather than continuing to fall since the program's inception. Parents and students reported being positively influenced by the program. However, more time is needed before researchers can fully assess its effect.

public and charter schools, college enrollment, and persistence in college. It could take minimally ten years before researchers can fully assess the program's effect—time is needed for a full cohort of students to attend and graduate high school, complete college, and enter the workforce to fully gauge its effects. Although it is too early in the program's implementation to reach definitive conclusions, the preliminary analysis suggests that The Promise is making progress toward its strategic goals. This brief highlights key findings from the study.

PPS Enrollment Has Begun to Stabilize Since the Program's Inception

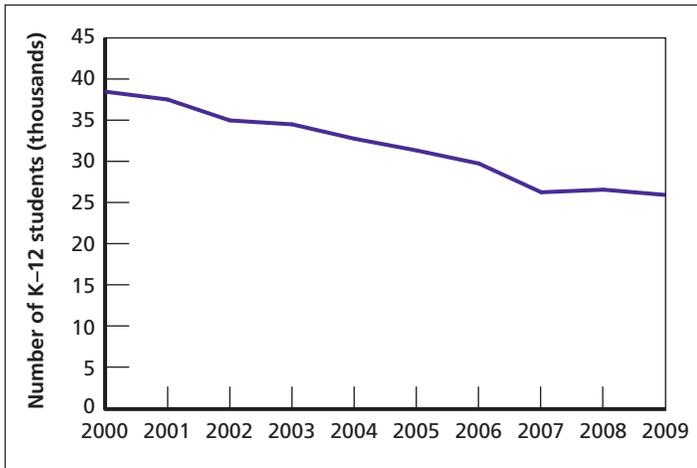
Although it is not possible to conclude that there is a direct causal relationship, the RAND team's examination of PPS enrollment data revealed some positive trends, shown in Figure 1. The eight-year period before and including the first year of the program's inception—2000–2001 through 2007–2008—saw a 32 percent drop in the enrollment of K–12 students in PPS traditional and charter schools; however, since

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Figure 1
Number of Students Enrolled in Public and Charter Schools in PPS



2007–2008, enrollments have been stabilizing in the district rather than continuing to fall.

A second positive trend was 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.

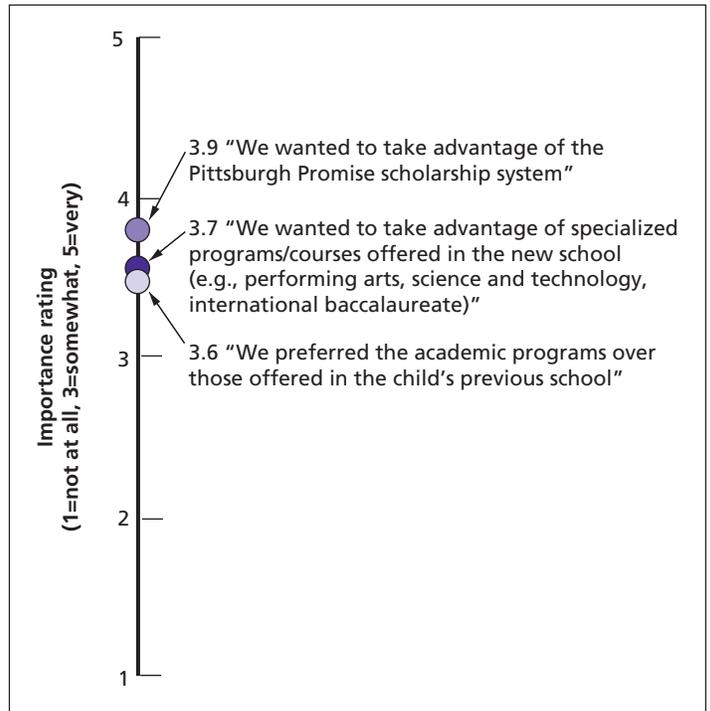
During this period, there was no consistent pattern of new transfers into PPS traditional or charter schools. This suggests that, although the program is not yet drawing new students to PPS, it may be influencing families to keep their children in PPS when they otherwise might have left.

Parents and Students Report Being Positively Influenced by the Program

Feedback from parents provides supporting insight to the enrollment trends. In surveys, parents of 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students who were new to PPS traditional or charter schools in the 2007 through 2009 school years indicated that The Promise helped motivate them to enroll their children into PPS traditional public or charter schools. In fact, those parents rated the program the highest in importance among the 11 factors in the survey that might have influenced their enrollment decision. This was particularly the case for parents of African-American students and parents with lower levels of education. Figure 2 shows the variation in average parent responses to three of the top-rated factors in the survey.

Students also reported being motivated by the program. In focus groups, they consistently reported that the opportunity to gain college funds motivated them to strive for a 2.5 GPA, attend school, and seek postsecondary education.

Figure 2
Factors That Most Influenced Parents' Enrollment Decisions



In addition, they reported that their parents pushed them to attend school and meet the GPA requirement so that they would be scholarship-eligible. Although these findings cannot be generalized to the broader student population, they suggest that the program has motivated some students to achieve.

College Attendance of PPS High School Graduates Also Appears to Be Rising

Although the study cannot attribute trends specifically to the program, the researchers found some positive patterns in college enrollment and attendance. From 2006 through 2010, there was a steady increase in the enrollment of PPS traditional public high school graduates who would be eligible for The Promise scholarships in postsecondary educational institutions. This was true for all students, regardless of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Although the researchers cannot attribute the increase specifically to The Promise, this suggests that in the early years of the program, more and more students who meet the eligibility requirements are deciding to continue their education after high school.

Some Aspects of the Program Could Be Improved

After examining the program practices and the feedback from parents and students, the researchers recommend changes in the following areas.

Dissemination. Up to the time of the study, the methods of communicating program information to students were limited to large-scale assemblies and brochures, or schools were left to decide individually how to disseminate information to their students. However, many students in our sample reported not fully understanding the program's eligibility requirements and funding amounts. Because a lack of understanding could negatively affect students' motivation to make the effort to become scholarship-eligible, RAND recommended that the program broaden its communication strategy to include additional methods, such as small-group information sessions and personal letters, and to require individual meetings between guidance counselors and students.

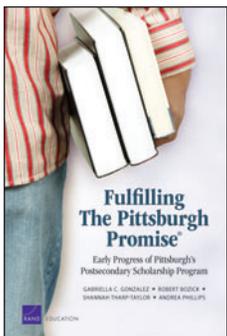
Access to individualized eligibility reports. To encourage students to maintain GPAs or attendance records that will make them scholarship-eligible, students and their parents or guardians should be given access to individualized eligibility reports through an electronic portal on the PPS website. Students and parents could then access their reports regularly, and such information may encourage students to become more responsible for their grades and attendance and may clear up any misunderstandings about whether they are scholarship-eligible. Such a portal would leverage the existing PPS web infrastructure and would involve only modest costs for design, implementation, and maintenance.

Looking Ahead

Although it is too early to tell whether The Promise is affecting high school or college graduation rates, the study found that the sharp decline in enrollment in PPS traditional public and charter schools has stopped and enrollment into college has steadily increased. This suggests that The Promise has the potential to fulfill its stated goals. But further research will be needed to determine its long-term success in motivating parents to choose PPS schools and in motivating students to achieve.

Policy Implications

The findings from this study suggest that a well-funded college scholarship program with tailored eligibility requirements may be a promising strategy for districts facing challenges similar to those in Pittsburgh. Eligibility requirements, such as a minimum GPA and an attendance threshold, may help motivate students and parents to work together to help students achieve those performance targets, and they may have a positive effect on overall attendance and student achievement. However, effective communication and broad dissemination of program information are critical for success. Finally, because it takes years to see results—long enough for students to go through high school and college—those considering implementing similar programs should plan to allow ample time to gauge the program's effectiveness. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Fulfilling The Pittsburgh Promise*[®]: *Early Progress of Pittsburgh's Postsecondary Scholarship Program*, by Gabriella C. Gonzalez, Robert Bozick, Shannah Tharp-Taylor, Andrea Phillips, MG-1139-TPP (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1139.html>), 2011, 182 pp., \$29.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-5832-4. This research brief was written by Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**[®] is a registered trademark.

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