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Can Universal, Place-Based Scholarships Reduce Inequality? Lessons from Kalamazoo, Michigan



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Abstract: The Kalamazoo Promise, announced in 2005, is an innovative college-scholarship program available to every graduate of the Kalamazoo (Michigan) Public Schools. Programs such as the Kalamazoo Promise, which is being emulated in cities across the United States, open new avenues for the acquisition of human capital regardless of income level or academic achievement, while facilitating the creation of new economic and social assets for the community. Following a brief explanation of the program itself, this paper examines the Kalamazoo Promise as a human capital-investment strategy and its potential as a mechanism for reducing inequality. I find that the Kalamazoo Promise and programs modeled on it can reduce inequality, although not necessarily in expected ways. While full college scholarships in and of themselves open the path to free higher education for all youth in a community, the barriers to success remain high for economically disadvantaged and lower-achieving students. The more powerful influence of such programs on inequality comes from their role as a catalyst for change in the culture of the school district and for the alignment of a community's resources around the broader goals of the program.

Introduction to the Kalamazoo Promise

In November 2005, the mid-sized city of Kalamazoo, Michigan, became home to an unprecedented experiment in education-based economic renewal when it was announced that a group of anonymous donors had created the Kalamazoo Promise – a scholarship program that guarantees full college scholarships to every student who graduates from the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS). Embedded in the scholarship program is an economic development agenda that seeks to revitalize the city and the region through a substantial investment in the community's public school district and its students.

The Kalamazoo Promise differs from most other scholarship programs in that the allocation of funds is based not on merit or need, but on place. Beginning with the class of 2006 and continuing in perpetuity, every KPS graduate who has been enrolled in and resided in the district since Kindergarten receives a scholarship covering 100 percent of tuition and mandatory fees at any of Michigan's 44 public colleges or universities. Graduates who have attended a KPS school

and lived in the district for four years receive a scholarship covering 65 percent of these costs, with a sliding scale for those in between. There are almost no strings attached apart from the four-year minimum residency and enrollment requirement: once enrolled, scholarship recipients must make regular progress toward a degree or certification as defined by Satisfactory Academic Standards of the school they attend, must maintain a 2.0 grade point average at the post-secondary institution, and must be enrolled as a full time student, typically 12 credit hours a semester.¹ The program embodies a great deal of flexibility; students have ten years after graduation to utilize their 130 credits of scholarship funding, and both traditional academic degrees and shorter term career and technical programs are covered. If a student loses his or her scholarship due to poor academic performance, it will be reinstated prospectively if a student returns to the post-secondary institution and demonstrates the ability to meet its academic standards.²

Since its announcement, 1,516 KPS graduates have utilized some portion of their scholarship, with over 1,000 recipients currently enrolled at 23 institutions across the state. As of spring 2010, the donors had spent \$17 million on tuition, 48 percent of which had gone to local (Kalamazoo-based) post-secondary institutions. The public school district has seen an enrollment gain of 16 percent following decades of decline, with the new students bringing with them millions of dollars of per-pupil funding from the state.³ The program has also set in motion or reinforced a series of positive cultural changes within the school district focusing on pre-K education, early elementary literacy, and college readiness.

¹ An exception has been made for the local community college where part-time enrollment is now permitted.

² Program details are available at <https://www.kalamazoopromise.com/>

³ Data on the Kalamazoo Promise is available through the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research at <http://www.upjohn.org/promise>.

The program's initial results also included surprises, some positive (approximately two-thirds of scholarship recipients have chosen to attend a local college or university, maximizing the local economic development impact), others less so (the program has had no discernible effect on the housing market). But there is no bigger surprise than what has happened outside Kalamazoo. Spurred in part by extensive national media coverage, scores of communities around the nation have created their own universal, place-based scholarship programs inspired by and modeled on the Kalamazoo Promise (Miller-Adams 2009b). This ongoing replication begs the question why. The answer can be found in a set of challenges shared by many different kinds of communities and the unique tool for addressing them offered by Promise-type programs.

On the Kalamazoo Promise web site, the motivation for the program is phrased simply but touches on both education and the economy:

1. Education is an important key to financial well being.
2. It allows Kalamazoo Public Schools to differentiate itself from other public and private school systems.
3. It provides a real meaningful and tangible opportunity for all students.
4. The Kalamazoo Promise will create opportunities for individuals who attend Kalamazoo Public Schools and their current and future families. It follows – and studies have shown – that there is a strong correlation between overall academic achievement and a community's economic vitality and quality of life.⁴

The program is designed to provide maximum benefit to long-term attendees of the district: “A desired outcome of the program will be to encourage families to make early decisions to enroll their students in Kalamazoo Public Schools, and to maintain that enrollment through graduation (ibid).”

⁴ Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), Kalamazoo Promise web site: <https://www.kalamazoopromise.com/>

The emphasis on long-term enrollment and a strictly enforced residency requirement support the idea that there is more to the Kalamazoo Promise than simply increasing educational opportunities for local students. Since the 1970s, Kalamazoo has experienced the same powerful trends witnessed in much larger urban areas, especially those of the upper Midwest and Northeast: deindustrialization, suburbanization, middle-class flight, and business consolidation. The result is growing inequality on a number of dimensions: between a high-poverty urban core ringed by more middle-income suburbs; between the school districts serving these areas, with the inner-city district serving the vast majority of the region's minority and low-income students; and even within individual school districts, where neighborhoods segregated by income can generate large disparities in the concentration of low-income students from school to school. (For example, the percentage of students qualifying for federally subsidized lunches ranges from a low of 33 percent at one of KPS's 17 elementary schools to a high of 99 percent at another.) A climate such as this requires a powerful intervention to reverse negative trends long under way. The Kalamazoo Promise is clearly meant as such a transformative investment – one that changes the incentives for diverse actors with attendant benefits for both the educational attainment of individuals and the vitality of the broader community.

In retrospect, the Kalamazoo Promise arrived on the scene at an opportune moment. For decades, policymakers at all levels of government have been experimenting with how to increase access to higher education and stimulate local economic development. Today, both challenges are more pressing than ever. The changing nature of employment in the United States and increased global competition has deepened public understanding that higher education is essential for individual success in today's economy (Friedman 2002, Goldin & Katz 2008). At the same time, cities, especially those in the industrial regions of the Northeast and Midwest,

have struggled to maintain their economic vitality in the face of job loss, population decline, and the hollowing out of the urban core. Yet education and economic development are almost always presented as tradeoffs, with taxpayers, private donors, and philanthropic organizations asked to allocate scarce resources either to making a community more competitive economically or to investing more resources in education.

The Kalamazoo Promise represents an unprecedented joining of these two agendas and suggests that the best strategies for increasing educational attainment and promoting economic development are one and the same. By supporting and encouraging higher education for local youth, communities not only increase the human capital of their residents but also position themselves for greater economic competitiveness. Other cities see their own challenges reflected in Kalamazoo, and their leaders grasp intuitively the value of a bold intervention linking a community's economic future to investments in its youth. This explains the ongoing interest in replicating key elements of the Kalamazoo Promise.⁵

The debate over universal versus targeted social programs

What differentiates the Kalamazoo Promise from other scholarship programs is its place-based focus (only students graduating from a given public school district are eligible) coupled with universal coverage (*all* students graduating from that district are eligible provided enrollment and residency requirements are met). It is this structure that points to the economic development implications of the program. It also raises the interesting question of whether and to what extent

⁵ This interest is embodied in PromiseNet, “a network of communities investing in education and economic development through place-based scholarship programs.” In June, PromiseNet will hold its third annual conference, which is designed to bring together individuals that are pursuing these strategies in their own communities, as well as others in the planning stages, for learning, reflection, and interaction. For details, see <http://promisenet.us>.

the Kalamazoo Promise and programs like it can serve as engines to reduce both inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcomes for the populations they are designed to serve.

Most college scholarships are awarded according either to financial need or to academic merit. The largest public and private college aid programs -- Federal Pell grants and the Gates Millennium Scholarships -- both adhere to the former model, while statewide merit aid programs, such as the Georgia Hope Scholarships, follow the latter. The Kalamazoo Promise is pioneering a new approach, one that provides scholarships to potentially every graduate of the public school district regardless of family income or GPA. The emergence of this place-based model for expanding access to post-secondary education has reopened a longstanding intellectual and policy debate over the relative merits of universal versus targeted programs in reducing social inequality -- a debate addressed by leading social scientists such as Theda Skocpol and William Julius Wilson (Skocpol 1991; Wilson 1996) and recently in the public eye in relation to universal health care and universal preschool (Barnett et al. 2004). Non-targeted college aid programs raise questions about the efficient use of funds; however, they bring with them other benefits that may offset efficiency losses, including an absence of the stigma sometimes associated with social programs for the poor and the potential for political support across the income spectrum. Much of the debate over the Kalamazoo Promise model concerns this issue, with critics arguing that universal scholarships fail to target those students most in need and hence have the effect of exacerbating rather than reducing inequality (Dowd 2006, 2008).

A related critique of the Promise model centers on the distinction between inequality of opportunities and inequality of outcomes. While it is difficult to deny that universal college scholarships expand opportunity, it is also widely recognized that non-financial barriers to higher education are formidable for many economically disadvantaged students and that these barriers

can lead to highly unequal outcomes even in the face of greater opportunity. These barriers include a lack of knowledge about the college application and financial aid process, a lack of role models for navigating this process, and insufficient academic and social preparation for success in a post-secondary environment. I hypothesize that, while these barriers are real, universal, place-based scholarships have the potential to reduce them in ways that more targeted programs do not. As a result, the impact of such programs on inequality may stem not primarily from their financial value, but from their role as catalysts for change in the culture of the school district and for the alignment of a community's resources in support of educational access for all.

It is interesting to note that the United States has a long history of expanding access to education through universal rather than needs-based approaches (Goldin and Katz 1997). The common school movement in the 19th century and the spread of compulsory high school in the early 20th century suggest that changing societal needs historically have been met by the provision of additional years of schooling available at no cost to students. If it is indeed the case that a high-school diploma is no longer sufficient for success in the 21st-century economy, the spread of Promise-type programs may indicate a broader consensus over the need for universal post-secondary education.

The impact of Promise-type programs on inequality

It should be stated at the outset that there is limited quantitative data available regarding the inequality-related outcomes of the Kalamazoo Promise. The reason is the short time frame during which the program has been in effect with only four graduating classes having received the scholarship to date (other programs modeled on the Promise are even newer). But even with

limited hard data, it is possible to identify the key mechanisms through which inequality may be reduced by the Kalamazoo Promise and to judge the early impact of these developments.

Universal college access

By making full college scholarships available to every graduate of the school district, the Kalamazoo Promise reduces the most obvious barrier to higher education for low- and even moderate-income youth. Immediately following the announcement of the program, skeptics spoke out with concern over who would benefit most from the program. Some advocates for low-income youth suggested that the greatest benefits would go to middle-income students who were already college bound, rather than lower-achieving students (many of them low-income and minority) who were less prepared for post-secondary education. Conversely, other observers interpreted the choice of the Kalamazoo Public Schools (a district where 70 percent of students qualify for lunch assistance programs and fewer than half are white) as the target of the program as evidence that it was designed to serve mainly low-income, minority youth (Miller-Adams 2009a, Chapter 1). It turns out that the Kalamazoo Promise is serving students of all races in roughly equal proportion to their representation in the district (see Table 1). In other words, students of color are using their scholarships at approximately the same rate as Caucasian students. Similarly, low-income students are using the scholarship at a similar rate as middle-income students (see Table 2). These usage rates may have something to do with the ease of accessing the Kalamazoo Promise – a “first-dollar” scholarship that does not require families to fill out their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and that requires only a one-page form. The simplicity of the application process is in itself a reduction in the barrier to college aid for many families.

Table 1. Kalamazoo Promise Usage by Race/Ethnicity*

Percentage of eligible graduates who have used Promise	2006	2007	2008	2009
All graduates	83	83	85	73
African-American graduates	83	81	85	72
Hispanic graduates (small- <i>n</i>)	71	90	82	66
Caucasian graduates	86	85	85	77

- Percentages refer to students who have used any portion of their scholarship funding. Declining year-to-year rates reflect the fact that students graduating in earlier years have had greater opportunity to access their funds than students who graduated more recently.

Table 2. Kalamazoo Promise Usage by Socioeconomic Status*

Percentage of eligible graduates who have used Promise	2006	2007	2008	2009
% of KPS graduates with Free & Reduced Meal status	48	50	59	59
% of Kalamazoo Promise-eligible graduates with Free & Reduced Meal status	46	49	58	58

- Free & Reduced meal status is underreported for all categories because only most recent five years of data is available.

A more nuanced concern voiced about inequality was that lower-achieving students, who tend to come from lower-income families, would be more likely to attend two-year community colleges, whereas higher-achieving students, who tend to be from higher-income families, would be more likely to attend more expensive four-year universities – thus, the higher-income students would be receiving a larger financial benefit than those from poorer families (Dowd 2006). While this is

likely the case to date, there appear to be many exceptions to the rule. (The data showing scholarship funding by individual student correlated with Free & Reduced Meal status is currently being evaluated by myself and colleagues at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research). Moreover, the expectation is that the structural and cultural changes discussed below will make it possible over time for all students – even those of lower incomes – to attend a four-year university if they so choose.

The equitable trends in usage of the Kalamazoo Promise presented above should not be allowed to obscure an important, although unsurprising, element of inequality among scholarship recipients. As mentioned above, it is widely known that cost is only one of the factors that deters low-income and minority students from pursuing higher education. Other barriers include the achievement gap by income and race that persists throughout the K-12 system, social and behavioral issues that impede college readiness, and the absence of role models and support for first-generation college-goers in navigating the college application and financial aid system. One indicator of the severity of these barriers is the discrepancy in academic performance between economically disadvantaged and more middle-income recipients of the Kalamazoo Promise once they arrive at college. As Table 3 shows, low-income students account for the lion's share of those scholarship recipients who are on probation or who have lost their funding (a loss triggered by two semesters of below-standard performance).

Table 3. Academic Performance by Socioeconomic Status

Percentage of Kalamazoo Promise Users	Not eligible for Free & Reduced Meals	Free & Reduced Meal-eligible
In good standing	65	35
On probation	30	70
Scholarship suspended	33	67

It should come as no surprise that many of those losing their scholarships are students of color. In the current academic year, more than two-thirds of African-American students in KPS qualified as economically disadvantaged, as compared to fewer than one-third of Caucasian students.

But critical to understanding the potentially equalizing effect of the Kalamazoo Promise is a grasp of its long-term nature. The program is intended to run in perpetuity, and the rules governing scholarship usage are extremely generous. Students have ten years in which to access their 130 credits of Kalamazoo Promise funding, and the suspension of a scholarship is not the end of the story. A simple mechanism is available to regain a scholarship once it has been lost due to poor academic performance – return to college and meet academic standards for one semester and the scholarship will be reinstated. The opportunity for a second chance and the ample time frame for attempting it mitigate to some extent the disadvantages of low-income status when it comes to academic success.

The time frame over which the Kalamazoo Promise will unfold is critical in a broader sense to assessing its potential impact on inequality. Students who were juniors or seniors in high

school when the scholarships became available in November of 2005 had very few degrees of freedom to adapt their K-12 education and aspirations to the opportunities now available to them. Some attempted college with the funding suddenly made available to them, and many of these students found themselves inadequately prepared. Younger students have more time and more degrees of freedom. If a child from a poor family spends five, ten, or thirteen years in a school setting where she hears every day that she can attend the same college as her middle-income peer, this is virtually certain to change her expectations, goals, and attitude toward school. It is also likely to change her families' expectations (although reaching families is a more challenging proposition than reaching students). Equally important is the positive impact on teachers' expectations for their students, as demonstrated in a recent survey of teachers' attitudes following the introduction of the Promise (Jones). If that child goes on to receive the same college degree as her middle-class peer, she will have access to the better employment opportunities and higher incomes associated with a college degree, and the Kalamazoo Promise would indeed have served an equalizing role, but this will not be apparent for many years. For students who are less academically inclined, the Kalamazoo Promise also offers important opportunities. If a student with weak academic skills or little interest in a traditional course of study can persist until high school graduation, he or she now has the option to attend a broad range of trade and technical training programs at no cost. These include even very short- or medium-term programs (such as weeks-long skills-based training in fields such as welding, automotive repair, or health care), some of which yield secure, relatively high-wage employment. For students who complete this training and go on to find gainful employment the Kalamazoo Promise will again have made a tremendous difference in their income and employment outcomes.

Cultural change

As noted above, the universal availability of college scholarships reduces one of the most obvious barriers to college attendance for low-income individuals: the cost of tuition. The Kalamazoo Promise has also set in motion dynamics that may reduce the less obvious barriers as well. KPS has responded to the introduction of the scholarship program with a publicly expressed and oft-reiterated commitment to making every child college ready by the time of graduation. This has involved the continuation of longstanding efforts aimed at early literacy, more rigorous curriculum standards, and new testing requirements. But additional efforts have been put in place, including a college readiness course for all 10th graders, more opportunities for credit recovery to make possible on-time graduation and reduce the incentive to drop out because of missing credits, and greater attention to career awareness. One component of this effort was the creation of a strategic plan for the district embodying year-by-year expectations not just for students and teachers, but also parents, school staff, and the broader community. These expectations were the product of an extensive community consultation process and are being used to provide a common set of reference points around what it takes to produce college-ready high-school graduates.⁶

The spring of 2010 marked the introduction of an integrated approach to college and career awareness at the middle-school level – a long-overdue but critical element in preparing students for the high-school experience they will need to succeed in college. As part of this initiative, every 6th grader in the school district visited Western Michigan University, located in Kalamazoo, visiting classrooms, dorm rooms, the cafeteria, and the recreation center, and hearing from current Kalamazoo Promise recipients about the freedom and responsibilities that come with college attendance. Seventh graders heard career talks by community members and

⁶ The strategic plan can be accessed at <http://www.kalamazoopublicschools.com/strategic-planning-expectations-0>

others representing a variety of professions, while 8th-graders worked individually with advisers to analyze their pre-ACT scores and determine what academic goals they should focus on in high school.

An important quantitative indicator of cultural change is the increase in the availability of and enrollment in Advanced Placement courses in KPS high schools (see Table 4).

Table 4. Advanced Placement Trends, Annual Data 2007-09

	Number	Two year change
Students enrolled in AP courses	526	+71%
Economically disadvantaged students enrolled in AP courses	156	+148%
African-American students enrolled in AP courses	141	+166%
Hispanic students enrolled in AP courses	40	+400%
AP courses taken	643	+79%
AP tests taken	514	+102%
AP tests passed with a score of 3 or better	254	+65%

Several measures have been implemented to support increased AP participation, including a requirement that any student taking an AP course also take the test (KPS covers the testing fee), and the introduction of weighted grades for AP courses to eliminate any incentive for students to take easier courses in order to achieve a higher GPA.

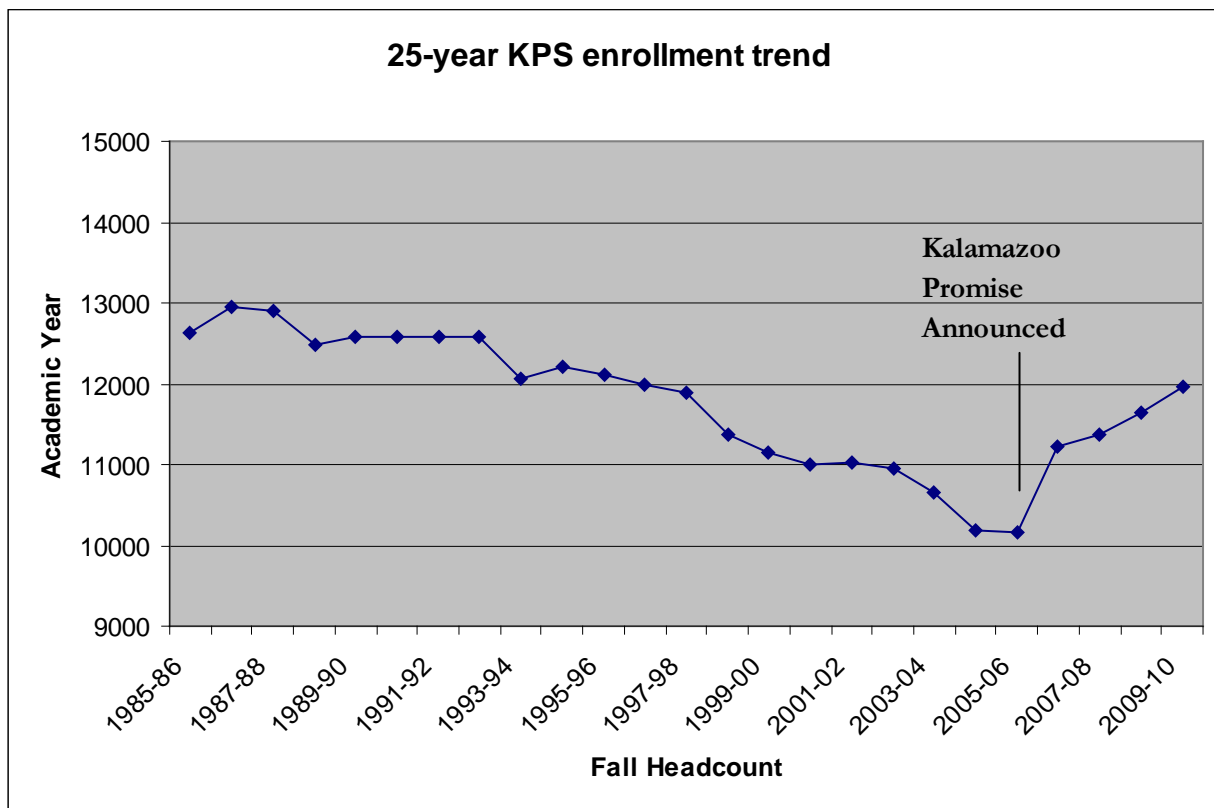
High expectations and new college-readiness and curriculum offerings are important elements in creating a college-going culture, but equally important is a structural change under

way in the school district that supports the creation of a more productive learning environment and that is directly attributable to the Kalamazoo Promise.

Structural change

Since the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise, enrollment in KPS has risen by 16 percent, reversing a decades-long slide in enrollment (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Kalamazoo Public Schools Enrollment



This enrollment increase, along with voter support for a large bond issue in the immediate aftermath of the Kalamazoo Promise, generated both the need and the resources for the construction of two new school buildings, the first in the district in almost 40 years. The opening

of a new middle school, in turn, required a redistricting exercise, as students now needed to be shared among four rather than three middle schools. The administration and school board seized the opportunity provided by the redistricting effort to reallocate the high-school as well as middle-school population with the goal of achieving greater socioeconomic balance within individual schools. The expected change in the composition of the middle and high schools in terms of percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch is shown in Table 5. The second column shows the expected distribution of economically disadvantaged students once those currently in middle and high school have progressed through the system (grandfathering provisions were included in the redistricting plan), while the first and third columns show the actual percentages in the academic years before and after redistricting.

**Table 5. Impact of Redistricting on Socioeconomic School Integration
(% of students qualifying for federal lunch subsidies)**

	2008-09	Projected	2009-10 Actual
<i>Middle Schools</i>			
- Hillside	52	65	67
- Linden Grove	n.a.	72	69
- Maple Street	72	68	68
- Milwood	84	71	79
<i>High Schools</i>			
- Central	53	58	55
- Loy Norrix	64	60	65

Why the attention to balancing by socioeconomic status? Considerable research shows that socioeconomic integration is among the most powerful tools for raising student achievement (see Kahlenberg 2006 and 2007; Miller-Adams 2009a, pp. 88-90).⁷ The Kalamazoo Promise is expected to make KPS more diverse in terms of the socioeconomic status of its students, but it is less certain whether the influx of middle-class families will be robust enough to create a truly mixed-income school district. (For KPS to achieve a federally subsidized lunch rate of 50 percent or lower would have required, at the time the Promise was announced, the entry of more than 3,000 non-economically disadvantaged students. Since then, the district's enrollment has risen by 1,657; however, the proportion of low-income students has risen as well, from 62 percent to 70 percent.)⁸ Most of the research on socioeconomic school integration has focused on the elementary school level where students are in a single classroom over the course of the day. It is less clear that socioeconomic integration has the beneficial effects on learning suggested by the literature in a middle- or high-school setting where students move from class to class and begin to be grouped by academic ability and interest. Another important question is whether an influx of middle-income families, even if one were to materialize, would change the composition of individual elementary schools. KPS has a system of in-district school choice, and middle-class students are currently concentrated in just a few elementary schools (four schools remain at or above 90 percent economically disadvantaged). As these lower-poverty schools reach capacity, parents will be forced to consider other schools, but as with much about the Kalamazoo Promise, this is a long-term proposition. The administration has suggested that it may at some point undertake redistricting at the elementary school level. Such a process would undoubtedly be

⁷ Additional information about socioeconomic school integration can be found at <http://www.equaleducation.org>.

⁸ Some of the increase in the proportion of students qualifying for federal lunch assistance programs almost certainly is related to the extremely challenging economic climate of recent years.

controversial and would require a high degree of political will to be implemented; it could, however, have a major impact on equalizing the learning environment across schools.

The alignment of community resources

The benefits of a human capital investment strategy such as the Kalamazoo Promise do not adhere solely to the individual, but also affect the community in which he or she lives.

Communities benefit in several ways. As KPS students graduate, go to college, and remain in or return to the region, a pool of highly educated workers is created. This pool can serve to attract new business and strengthen the ties of existing firms to the region. At the same time, new businesses may be drawn to a region even before these workers materialize because of its higher national profile and tangible commitment to investing in a stronger educational system. If new business investment underpins an economic expansion, existing workers (including those now under- or unemployed) will have access to better jobs, which will in turn strengthen their economic self-sufficiency and contribution to the local economy, while easing the strain on social services and the nonprofit sector. One could even forecast the possibility of a population influx that leads to greater socioeconomic integration of low-income neighborhoods.

In acknowledgment of this potential for long-term improvement, the broader community has stepped up with a range of actions and supports to help KPS students succeed, both in the K-12 setting and in college. These include dramatically expanded tutoring and mentoring programs, and a higher rate of volunteerism in the public schools. They also include the development of support systems at the local community college and university, as well as the creation of new internship and employment programs aimed at retaining graduates from these institutions. An exodus of young, educated workers is a critical concern both for the Kalamazoo region and the

state as a whole. Between 2000 and 2005, Michigan lost 22,000, or 2.2 percent, of its population of young adults ages 18 to 24. The *Kalamazoo Gazette* spoke for many when it commented in an editorial, “It makes us wonder what will become of all the promising young people graduating from Kalamazoo Public Schools with The Kalamazoo Promise college guarantee in their hands. If KPS grads are unable to find jobs here when they finish college, then the ultimate benefit of The Promise will go to the economies of other states (Kalamazoo Gazette 2006).”

Other efforts, these carried out by local economic development officials, have focused on positioning the community as one that is especially hospitable to knowledge workers and entrepreneurs. Much of this work has focused on retaining scientists who lost their jobs when the Kalamazoo-based pharmaceuticals giant, the Upjohn Company, merged with Pfizer and relocated its headquarters and research division. A business incubator, start-up services, and venture capital have supported a number of successful spinoff enterprises headed by former Upjohn and Pfizer researchers. Some observers have called for similar strategies to support younger entrepreneurs, including recent college graduates.

Yet another community effort involves marketing Kalamazoo to young people who were raised in or attended college in the region then departed for bigger cities (Chicago is a prime destination for area graduates). Many of these individuals have since started families and, confronted with high housing prices and challenging public schools in the nation’s major metropolitan areas, might consider a return to their home community. The message for this demographic group is that Kalamazoo has changed since they lived here. “Our goal is to attract and retain our 20- and 30-somethings in a community dedicated to improvement and quality of life. We expect to create momentum, and help create new jobs, as we build on our community’s most appropriate focus on education as the key to our future,” wrote Blaine Lam in introducing

the web-based campaign, “Share Kalamazoo.”⁹ The school improvement efforts discussed above are critical to such a campaign; while cities have shown that they are able to attract young people regardless of the problems that plague many urban school districts, good public schools are a must if they are to retain these residents once they become the parents of school-age children. And what of Kalamazoo’s less-educated residents? Does the Kalamazoo Promise offer something for minimum-wage workers, the unemployed or underemployed, or does its value lie mainly in expanding the educational opportunities available to their children? Mattie Jordan-Woods, an advocate for economic growth in Kalamazoo’s low-income neighborhoods, stresses that there is nothing automatic about the scholarship program’s impact on either parents or children: “The Kalamazoo Promise does one thing and one thing only. It provides scholarship dollars for any kid who is academically able to graduate [from high school] and go on to college. This creates new opportunities for low- and moderate-income people whose kids are doing well in school, but it does nothing by itself to bring up the academic competitiveness of kids who are struggling (Miller-Adams 2009, pp. 193-94).” Like others, Jordan-Woods believes that one-on-one tutoring and mentoring programs, as well as strategies to address the social problems found in many households, are essential for this group of students. She also stresses the importance of the physical environment in which low-income children grow up. “If you change ... a neighborhood through better housing, nicer buildings, and more playgrounds, businesses will invest because they want to be there,” says Jordan-Wood. And with businesses come jobs for the parents who live in that neighborhood. “When a majority of people [in a neighborhood] are working, it creates an expectation of what the neighborhood should look like.” It also raises children’s expectations about their own future. “When children see their parents and neighbors go to work every day,” continues Jordan-Woods, “it increases their appetite for education.

⁹ For more on Share Kalamazoo, see <http://www.sharekalamazoo.com>

Watching your mama get up and go to work, even if she earns only \$9.00 an hour, and not wait on the check every two weeks is going to make them want to go to college,” says Jordan-Woods. “They’ll want \$13.00 an hour; they’ll want something better.” The multiple strategies mentioned by Jordan-Woods – traditional neighborhood development, social service provision, tutoring and mentoring, and above all the necessity of jobs for a community’s adults – underscore the challenges facing Kalamazoo even with the substantial investment of the Kalamazoo Promise and the community action it has stimulated. And it points to one of the key lessons of the Promise. Janice Brown is the former school superintendent who helped design the program and now heads the Kalamazoo Promise organization. As she puts it, “Forty-nine percent of the work is the funding and 51 percent is the community engagement and alignment,” and, as she and others who have observed Kalamazoo respond to the scholarship program’s announcement four-and-a-half years ago agree, “That’s the hard part.” Kalamazoo has been characterized as a community rich in resources but poor in coordination, making it no surprise that a coordinated process of community engagement with the Kalamazoo Promise is just emerging. Yet the effective alignment of individuals and organizations around the broader goals of the Kalamazoo Promise – increased educational attainment, support for student success, vitality of the urban core, and a regional economic development strategy with education as its centerpiece – is essential if the program is truly to serve as an instrument for reducing inequality. This is a challenge that goes well beyond the confines of the school district and one that will require the community’s attention for years to come.

Concluding thoughts

When considering the initial experience of Kalamazoo and other communities with programs modeled on the Kalamazoo Promise, three lessons come to the fore:

- It is the universal reach of Promise-type programs, in contrast to other scholarship models, that has generated strong support for it among diverse populations and made it a catalyst for comprehensive community transformation and the potential reduction of inequality. More targeted approaches, such as needs-based scholarships or academic/social interventions for low-income or low-achieving students might have a more immediate impact on improving opportunities for economically disadvantaged youth. These approaches would not, however, yield the same positive changes in school culture and better alignment of community resources in support of student success.
- For Promise-type programs to serve as effective strategies for reducing inequality, they must be accompanied by cultural change in the schools and community, and public enthusiasm or “buy-in” that extends across income groups. A scholarship program alone, no matter how generous, is not sufficient. Financial resources must go hand in hand with the engagement and alignment of community stakeholders if a Promise-type program is to achieve its broader transformative potential.
- There are important intangible gains to be realized from Promise-type programs. These gains, however, are not an immediate outgrowth of the scholarship program, but depend on the longer term alignment of the community around the linked goals of educational excellence, access to higher education, and greater economic competitiveness. Especially in light of the current economic climate, expectations of gains from the program must be squarely focused on the medium and long term.

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