

Good schools get better when they have high expectations for ALL students. Students in Pittsburgh (where Focus works with 18 elementary schools and 5 high schools) who have at least a 2.0 grade point average in high school, have attended public schools for a period of time and choose to attend an in-state postsecondary schools are eligible for financial support to help them attend college.

## Pittsburgh Promise gives students real hope

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Brashear High School junior D'Avery Shaw is college shopping.

He's taken bus trips hosted by the Pittsburgh Promise to the main campus of Penn State University, the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, Point Park University, Carlow University and Chatham University and once went on a school field trip to Duquesne University.

The Pittsburgh Promise, which provides college scholarships to city public school graduates who meet certain requirements, is helping D'Avery be sure he isn't just window shopping.

"The Promise helps me do better. I can afford college. Without it, I don't think I'd be able to go to college," he said.

On a recent stop at Point Park University, he was encouraged to hear about the options for psychology majors and he thought a comedy club activity that was mentioned might help him fit in.

When he does make his decision, he and his classmates in the Class of 2012 will be the first to be eligible for up to \$40,000 over four years to help pay for college.

The Pittsburgh Promise began with the Class of 2008, offering up to \$20,000 for full-time postsecondary education for those who had at least a 2.0 grade point average in high school, had attended public schools for a certain period of time and chose from a sampling of in-state postsecondary schools.

The program later was expanded to include city charter school students and postsecondary programs throughout the state. Attendance requirements were set, and the academic requirements raised.

The Class of 2011 will have to have at least a 2.5 grade point average in high school to be eligible for up to \$20,000.

The Class of 2012 will have to meet the same requirements as the current class for the first \$20,000. For the next \$20,000, they will have to be proficient or advanced on certain standardized tests, the requirements to be spelled out in the coming months.

But it's one thing to get into college; it's another to stay there.

Of the 481 members of the Class of 2008 who started classes that fall at 46 campuses, 351 or 73 percent were still enrolled in postsecondary education -- including ones who had transferred to other schools -- the following fall.

"You put before them the aspirations of pursuing higher education. You remove from them the burden of figuring out how to pay for it. The question is: Do they make it?" said Saleem Ghubril, executive director of the Pittsburgh Promise.

"So far, the early analysis says the answer is yes."

More than half of the 1,800 members of the class of 2008 received Promise scholarships, but some did not start their postsecondary education in a Promise-eligible school in fall 2008.

Currently, about 2,200 Promise students are enrolled in colleges, universities and trade schools. Up to this fall, the Promise had awarded \$7.9 million in scholarships, a number that is expected to grow by about \$6.5 million this fall.

One sign of whether the students will succeed is their high school grade point average. As the Promise's required grade point average went up, it offered students with grade point averages above 2.0 and below the standard a chance to start at Community College of Allegheny County. If successful for two semesters, they could use their Promise money at any school.

Of about 70 such students enrolling at CCAC, more than half in the group with lower GPAs are struggling. It is undecided whether the option will be offered next year.

"I do believe that high school GPA tells us something. It does not tell us everything, but it is an important indicator," Mr. Ghubril said.

The No. 1 college choice for Promise students is CCAC. More than 200 started at CCAC campuses in fall 2008.

Because CCAC is so popular and some of the Promise's most vulnerable students go there, the Promise gave the college \$352,000 over the first two years to build extra supports, including hiring three full-time staff members just for Promise students and offering classes aimed at helping the students adjust to college. Those supports now are funded by CCAC.

Yvonne Burns, dean of student development at the Allegheny campus of CCAC, said the courses have been "very advantageous in helping in the retention of a lot of our students."

She said the team of a facilitator and two success coaches also develops workshops, helps students get tutoring and other services they need, helps them form connections with one another and mentors them.

In the first three weeks and at midterm, the team reaches out if students are doing poorly.

"We don't wait for the students to come to us," Ms. Burns said.

Promise students also get an additional orientation where they meet their coaches.

She said the fact that the Promise pays for books also helps with retention because students don't try to wing it because they can't afford the books.

CCAC tracked 184 Promise students who began in fall 2008. It found their grades were lower than those of other first-time, full-time students, but they were more likely to return than other students.

The Promise students graduated at about the same rate as other students.

The 198 Promise students who entered in fall 2009 -- when a 2.25 grade point average in high school was required for Class of 2009 graduates -- did better than the first group at CCAC. They kept pace with or did better than other new first-time, full-time entrants.

The Promise hasn't provided any other direct support to schools, but some others have their own programs to help Promise and other students succeed.

According to the Promise, one of the highest retention rates is at California University of Pennsylvania, where 21 of 22 students who enrolled in fall 2008 are still enrolled in postsecondary education.

This fall, Cal U began a program called Cal U Men United, aimed at increasing the success of men of color, many of whom are Pittsburgh grads.

In the face of national statistics showing a relatively low graduation rate for black males, the program includes pairing each student with an adult mentor, group meetings and community service to help them capitalize on their opportunities.

Lisa McBride, special assistant to the Cal U president, said the Promise "provides hope and opportunity for students who may not ever had thought about college."

Students receiving Promise money are grateful.

"There's nothing better than going to school for free," said John Conley, of Stanton Heights, a 2009 Pittsburgh Schenley grad enrolled at CCAC.

Mr. Conley said he already was doing "pretty well" in high school but word of the Promise spurred him to work "even harder."

On the college tours this fall, high school students got a glimpse of what college life could be like for them. Many are low-income and will become the first in their families to go to college.

The Promise college tours typically cover three schools a day.

Mr. Ghubril has accompanied students when they went to Allegheny College, Gannon University and Edinboro University; another day when they went to Washington & Jefferson College, Waynesburg University and Cal U and a third day when they went to Chatham University, Point Park and Carlow University.

"This is essentially a test drive for our kids," he said. "You'd never buy a car without driving it."

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