

November 6, 2010

<http://detnews.com/article/20101106/SCHOOLS/11060347>

Detroit Public Schools' scholarship secrets

2 little-known programs give college money to graduates

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The Detroit News

Detroit — Two scholarship programs give Detroit Public Schools students greater opportunity to get money for college, but the challenge for organizers is to get the word out to students and donors.

With the expansion of the Detroit College Promise program all Detroit Public Schools students are eligible for scholarships regardless of their GPA or test scores. The Detroit program is similar to one in Kalamazoo. Students also can tap the longstanding, but little-known, Detroit Compact that covers full tuition at Michigan colleges for district grads.

In a district where slightly more than half of the students graduate and which has lost roughly half its enrollment in the past decade, the challenge is whether scholarships are enough to boost the graduation rate and attract more families to the public schools, as opposed to charter, private and suburban school options.

"We anticipate that this program will restore DPS to its past era of greatness," said Dr. Nat Pernick, who founded the Detroit College Promise in hopes it will attract new students and families to the city.

One hurdle, though, is making students and parents aware of the scholarships. Talking recently to several DPS junior high students with college aspirations, none had heard of the Promise scholarships.

"The College Promise is one of the best marketing tools for the city of Detroit right now," said Leslie Holsey, the Detroit Compact scholarship coordinator at Marcus Garvey Academy. "In Kalamazoo, the community, the mayor, the city, everyone bought in. They advertised it. ... It's just a plus for the community. We haven't yet seen our city leaders accept it and market (it) the way it should. There are so many parents that just don't realize that their child can go to school."

She and the district's other dozen Compact coordinators have been spreading information about the Compact and ensure students are on track academically to qualify. They now are promoting the Promise. District officials handed out Promise applications this summer during the enrollment drive throughout neighborhoods.

Student Treasure Isreal, a seventh-rader at Marcus Garvey, who is counting on the Compact scholarship but hadn't heard of the Detroit Promise yet, believes if more parents knew about both programs they would choose to send their children to Detroit Public Schools and the kids might be more motivated.

"I think it would give the people that receive lower grades a chance to look up to something," said Treasure, who will participate in a Wayne State University summer program as part of Compact preparation. "It's not only the people that are doing good, when they know they are going to college they have something to look forward to and be better."

Kalamazoo gained national attention in 2005 when anonymous donors started the Kalamazoo Promise that covers up to 100 percent of tuition for public school graduates. Since then, enrollment has grown more than 20 percent, bucking a statewide trend of declining enrollment in urban schools, said Michelle Miller-Adams, visiting scholar at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

"We have seen three years of rising test scores (in Kalamazoo Public Schools), a huge jump in the number of

students taking AP courses, an influx of volunteers and mentors, and the deepening of a college-going culture in both the schools and the surrounding community," said Miller-Adams, who published a book last year about the Promise.

A different Promise

The Detroit Promise differs from Kalamazoo's in that it does not cover the full cost of tuition for students — last year's award was \$500.

Miller-Adams says that's not enough to have the same impact.

"Until funding exists for a full, four-year tuition guarantee it is not likely to have the same kind of transformative impact that the Kalamazoo Promise has," she said.

Mayor Dave Bing supports the program and encourages corporate and community groups to do so, too, though he hasn't been invited to formally promote the scholarships, said his spokeswoman, Karen Dumas.

Pernick has raised more than \$100,000, but the goal is to raise \$10 million to offer each DPS graduate a scholarship of \$10,000 over four years. Pernick is kicking off the annual drive to raise money and is signing up more students in high schools. He acknowledges the challenges for the community to rally behind this effort compared to the enthusiasm generated by secret donors with deep pockets in Kalamazoo.

"Our program is one of the few that has the potential to actually turn around DPS and the city of Detroit. However, it was started by a rather dull pathologist/attorney/small businessman — myself — with a small budget. As we raise more money, more people will get interested."

Better college preparation

The expansion of the Detroit College Promise comes as the district is implementing programs to better prepare students for college, including opening college counseling suites in high schools, starting a pilot PSAT test for freshmen and a College Readiness Day this month that included a visit from Pernick.

"The new rigorous academic plan, newer private initiatives and the longstanding Detroit Compact program put soon-to-be DPS graduates in a better position than ever before to be armed with the knowledge, skills, and scholarship and financial assistance needed to gain entry into and succeed in postsecondary education," district spokesman Steven Wasko said.

The Detroit Compact program has been around for two decades to help students from largely neighborhood high schools, though it remains little known in the city, organizers say. The program, administered by the Detroit Regional Chamber, offers \$500. Private and public colleges and universities in Michigan have committed to cover tuition. It's helped more than 3,000 students since its inception, and organizers say the college graduation rate for these students is significantly higher than the Michigan average for African-American students: 59 percent compared to about 36 percent.

Michigan universities have also sponsored for more than two decades the Wade McCree Incentive Scholarship Program that offers full tuition as well to students who meet high academic standards. High-achieving DPS students are identified as potential recipients as early as junior high, and unlike the Compact program most participants graduate exam high schools, like Cass Tech and Renaissance, organizers say.

"There is a strong and clear realization on the part of the higher education community how important it is to support our state's largest city and its educational system," said Sandy K. Baruah, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber. "The state won't recover until the city of Detroit recovers. And one of the keys to recovery is producing well-educated young people from this area."

3.0 GPA required

Compact students seeking a scholarship must have a 3.0 GPA, 95 percent average attendance and an ACT score of 21 or better, which tends to be a limiting factor in a district where the average is about 16. While the program has had a positive impact on recipients, it has yet to have a wider and transformative effect on Detroit Public Schools because of the challenges of kids living in poverty and attending large high schools, said Greg Handel, from the Detroit Regional Chamber.

Shanara Burke, valedictorian of Mumford High School in 2010 who scored an 25 on her ACT, is one of the 113 Compact recipients this year. At Mumford, the Compact was well known to her and her classmates as freshmen and many were determined to receive it — even if it meant taking the ACT test repeatedly until reaching the qualifying score, she said. (Those who score an 18 or better and have 2.0 GPA are still eligible for community college scholarships.) Burke was thrilled when she earned admission to the University of Michigan and the Compact which played a role in her choice to stay in Michigan, she said. She also earned the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, one of 1,000 nationwide, that covers all of her college costs.

"I don't take gifts lightly," said Burke, who has been studying hard at U-M. "Because I've been given this opportunity I have to do well in school and I have to give back to my community."

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Additional Facts

The programs

Detroit College Promise

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