

Growing College Enrollment and Persistence with the Pittsburgh Promise

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Introduction

Like other cities looking to reinvigorate their local community and labor force, Pittsburgh has turned to a place-based scholarship (or “Promise” program) as a means to encourage enrollment in its city schools, support college going for district graduates, and bolster the strength of its labor force. As with many other Promise programs across the country, the Pittsburgh Promise sought to revitalize the urban core by increasing the appeal of city living, encouraging investment in education, and making post-secondary education more accessible to high school graduates. Now in operation for just over 10 years, this brief provides a summary of the structure of the program and the data on outcomes to date. A unique quality of the Pittsburgh Promise is the strong evidence-based culture it has established with the Pittsburgh Public Schools and research partners (Iriti & Page) at the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research and Development Center. This continuous research and evaluation function guides the ongoing management and adaptation of both the program and the district as each continues to strive for improved outcomes. In particular, this work helps to focus on policies, structures, and practices that support or impede the attainment of desired outcomes for students and systems alike.

Background

Pittsburgh is the second largest city in Pennsylvania with a population of approximately 302,000 [1]. Pittsburgh’s economic history is rife with both tragedy and renewal exemplified in the fact that the “Steel City” no longer makes steel within the city proper but has recently been identified by several news outlets as a “most livable city” [2]. Since the city’s painful economic downfall, it has slowly rebuilt through targeted investment in industries such as higher education and healthcare, both of which are stable and comparatively robust to economic fluctuation.

With the collapse of the domestic steel industry, Pittsburgh’s population declined dramatically, as did its public-school enrollments. In 1968, the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) served approximately 68,000 students, whereas today just over 23,500 are enrolled [3]. In response to the decades long exodus, PPS shuttered nearly one-third of its school buildings between 2000 and 2011 [4], a painful process that involved closing many neighborhood schools and reassigning students to remaining buildings.

[1] U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Pittsburgh city, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from [census.gov/quickfacts/pittsburghcitypennsylvania](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/pittsburghcitypennsylvania)

[2] Sharon Ebersson. (2018, August 20). Pittsburgh is the No. 2 most livable city in America. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Retrieved from [post-gazette.com/local/neighborhood/2018/08/20/Pittsburgh-No-2-most-livable-city-America-32-global-liveability-index-Economist/stories/201808200090](https://www.post-gazette.com/local/neighborhood/2018/08/20/Pittsburgh-No-2-most-livable-city-America-32-global-liveability-index-Economist/stories/201808200090)

[3] Facts at a Glance. (n.d.). Pittsburgh Public School. Retrieved from <https://www.pghschools.org/domain/17>

The racial makeup of PPS students inversely reflects Pittsburgh's overall population. Fifty-three percent of PPS students are black, about double the representation of black residents in the city's population overall. White students comprise 32% of PPS's population, only about half of the proportion of white Pittsburgh residents. With approximately 32,000 school-aged children living within Pittsburgh, nearly 30 percent of children within the city attend non-PPS private, parochial or other charter schools [5]. Although overall performance rates have improved in the last several years, the academic performance of PPS continues to lag behind the state as whole and the racial achievement gap between black students and white students is large and has remained relatively stable [6].

The Pittsburgh Promise

Origins and Scholarship Structure

Within this context, the Pittsburgh Promise is one of the city's signature education reform efforts. The Pittsburgh Promise ("The Promise") is a place-based scholarship program that supports postsecondary education for students that graduate from PPS (and city-based charter) high schools [7]. With significant private sector support, including a \$100 million grant from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the program went into operation with the graduating class of 2008 seeking ambitious long-term goals to: (a) motivate PPS student achievement; (b) reform educational systems; (c) contribute to the stabilization of city and school populations; and, (d) act as an engine for an invigorated workforce and volunteer corps.

Currently, the Promise's signature feature is a scholarship of up to \$5,000 per year for up to four years (meaning a total benefit of up to \$20,000) to attend any Pennsylvania postsecondary institution (public or private) that awards a degree, license, or diploma for PPS graduates who meet specific academic, attendance and residency requirements. Both the eligibility criteria and Promise generosity were phased in over the first five cohorts of students and then adjusted in 2017 for equity and sustainability purposes, as outlined in Figure 1. The program now includes two award types. Core Scholars are those who have met all eligibility criteria (GPA of 2.5 or greater, attendance of 90% or better, city residency and continuous enrollment in a PPS or city charter school since 9th grade) and are able to use their award as described. Extension Scholars are those with a GPA between 2.0 and 2.49 and can use funds to attend the local community college for one year. Upon maintaining a 9-credit per semester course load and a minimum 2.0 GPA for a year, Extension Scholars can subsequently attend any other eligible institution. Promise funds are a last dollar resource – students must first

[4] <http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org/rightsizing-the-pittsburgh-school-district/>

[5] U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Pittsburgh city, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from [census.gov/quickfacts/pittsburghcitypennsylvania](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/pittsburghcitypennsylvania)

[6] Accountability. (n.d.). Pittsburgh Public School. Retrieved from pghschools.org/Page/5174

[7] Accountability. (n.d.). Pittsburgh Public School. Retrieved from pghschools.org/Page/5174

apply for any federal, state, and institutional aid for which they are eligible. Students receiving Promise dollars must maintain a 2.0 GPA in the eligible postsecondary placement of their choice and maintain a full-time course load as defined by the institution.

Grant-based support of \$5,000 annually is significant, particularly given that Pittsburgh Promise funds may be used for room and board, educational fees and other expenses beyond tuition. During the 2017-18 academic year, the Pennsylvania State Grant program awarded a maximum need-based grant of \$4,054 [8], while the maximum federal Pell award was \$5,920 [9]. Thus, the lowest-income students from Pittsburgh who meet the Promise eligibility criteria can access need-based grant support to pursue higher education of nearly \$15,000 annually and can attend a PA state-owned, four-year institution for about \$5,000 per year after these sources of aid have been applied [10]. For some, out of pocket expenses are lower still due to institutional aid or other grants.

Figure 1. Pittsburgh Promise eligibility criteria and scholarship benefits by PPS graduating cohort

Cohort	Phase I No Extension Scholars		Phase II Extension Scholars		Phase III \$10,000 award	Phase IV \$5,000 award
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012 to 2016	2017+
Qualifying institutions	Public and private institutions in Allegheny County offering 2 or 4-year degree programs		All degree, license, diploma-granting public and private institutions in PA (300+)			
GPA minimum	2.0	2.25	Core scholars: 2.5 Extension scholars: 2.0			
Attendance minimum	none	85 percent	90 percent			
Residence requirement	75 percent of full scholarship for continuous enrollment since 9 th grade, increasing to: 100 percent for continuous enrollment since kindergarten					Continuous residency and enrollment since 9 th grade
Maximum award amount	\$5,000 / year for up to 4 years and used within 6 years of HS graduation				\$10,000 / year for up to 4 years and used within 5 years of HS graduation	\$5,000/ year for up to 4 years and used within 4 years of HS graduation
Use of award	Tuition, fees, room, board, and books after all other grants and scholarships (e.g. Pell, PHEAA, FSEOG and institutional grants) have been deducted. Higher education institutions invoice the Pittsburgh Promise directly and funds are sent directly to the schools.					

Source: The Pittsburgh Promise

[8] PA State Grant Program: Prepare to Apply. (n.d.). PHEAA. Retrieved from pheaa.org/funding-opportunities/state-grant-program/prepare.shtml

[9] Federal Student Aid at a Glance. (2016, May). U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/aid-glance-2017-18.pdf>

[10] Although the maximum Promise benefit was \$10,000 in several program years.

Additional Promise Opportunities

In addition to the scholarship, the Pittsburgh Promise has developed a portfolio of additional opportunities that bolster the reach and/or efficacy of the award. First is a **dual enrollment** opportunity for PPS juniors and seniors to earn college credits from the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) using their anticipated Promise scholarship to cover tuition and/or books. Promise funds used to pay for dual enrollment credits are subtracted from the maximum Promise scholarship.

The Promise also involves PPS high school seniors as **Promise Ambassadors**. The Promise trains ambassadors in areas of mentoring, communication, public speaking, financial aid, and college planning processes and tools. Ambassadors are then paid as interns to promote the Promise scholarship and postsecondary enrollment in their schools and communities.

To connect Scholars to area employers to retain postsecondary graduates in the region, the Promise hosts an annual **Career Launch** event for Scholars, alumni and regional employers to network. The Promise also connects Scholars and employers who are Promise donors through an **Program Executive Scholars**. Donor companies that contribute \$1 million or more can select five Executive Scholars who will build professional relationships and connections with the company during their college years. The Executive Scholars receive additional professional development opportunities through both the Promise and the partnering companies.

Finally, to further leverage the scholarship, the Promise has sought commitments from eligible higher education institutions to provide proactive, tailored supports for Promise Scholars and \$2,000 or more in additional financial support for room and board. In exchange the Promise promotes those institutions to Promise applicants. To date, 26 higher education institutions have become such **Preferred College Partners**

Pittsburgh Promise Implementation & Outcomes

To date, 8,711 students across 10 cohorts of PPS graduates have attended 136 postsecondary institutions throughout Pennsylvania with over \$125 million in Promise support [11]. The majority of Scholars attend one of 21 higher education institutions, many located geographically close to Pittsburgh. Nearly three-quarters of Promise Scholars come from economically disadvantaged families. Scholarship recipients by race and gender are 28% white females, 26% black females, 23% white males, and 16% black males with small shares of other racial groups.

[11] The Impact Dashboard. (2019, February 8). The Pittsburgh Promise. Retrieved from pittsburghpromise.org/about-us/our-impact/

[8] PA State Grant Program: Prepare to Apply. (n.d.). PHEAA. Retrieved from pheaa.org/funding-opportunities/state-grant-program/prepare.shtml

[9] Federal Student Aid at a Glance. (2016, May). U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/aid-glance-2017-18.pdf>

[10] Although the maximum Promise benefit was \$10,000 in several program years.

Promise usage rates range from 40-47% of graduating classes. Since the Promise's inception, the percentage of high school graduates who met the Promise's minimum GPA and attendance eligibility criteria grew by 16 percentage points (from 46% in 2008 to 62% in 2016), and black graduate eligibility for the Core scholarship increased by 15 percentage points from 21% to 36%.

Secondary Education Outcomes

In 2011 (the earliest year for which a consistent metric is available) Pittsburgh Public Schools had a 4-year cohort graduation rate of 68%. Five years later, the graduation rate had improved to 80% with a reduction in the black-white graduation gap from 15 percentage points to 8 percentage points over this same period [12].

Post-Secondary Outcomes

To date, research has revealed consistent and positive impacts of the Promise on students' immediate postsecondary enrollment and early college persistence within the first five cohorts of eligible PPS graduates [13]. More specifically, these findings include:

- 1. In the Promise's first five years, 71 percent of PPS graduates were eligible for either the Core or Extension Scholarship. Of eligible students, 64 percent used Promise funds to enroll in a PA postsecondary institution in the year after high school graduation.** In the years where both the Core and Extension opportunities were available, students eligible for the Core Promise opportunity were much more likely to use Promise funds, compared to those eligible for the extension scholarship.
- 2. The Promise improves rates of postsecondary enrollment and early postsecondary persistence for PPS graduates.** The Promise's introduction improved postsecondary enrollment from 74 to 79% among consistently Core-eligible students, and postsecondary persistence into the second year to improve by a similar margin. This enrollment increase is driven by Core-eligible students attending four-year colleges and universities.
- 3. Promise impacts are similar for students regardless of race or socioeconomic status (SES).** Estimated impacts are similar for black students and for white students and are similar for students from high-SES neighborhoods and those from low-SES neighborhoods. The one exception pertains to the Promise's impact on continuing to postsecondary institutions within PA. Here, impacts are essentially twice as large for students from high-SES neighborhoods compared to those residing in lower-income areas of the city. For students from high-SES neighborhoods, the Promise has a much larger impact on the decision of where – as opposed to

[12] Stronger Than Ever: Promise Scholar Stories. (n.d.). The Pittsburgh Promise. Retrieved from pittsburghpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2017-AnnualWEB_spreads.pdf

[13] The Impact Dashboard. (2019, February 8). The Pittsburgh Promise. Retrieved from pittsburghpromise.org/about-us/our-impact/

just whether – to pursue postsecondary education with more high-SES students shifting from out-of-state to in-state institutions.

4. The Promise is keeping more PPS graduates in-state for postsecondary education. Students consistently eligible for the full Promise are especially more likely to remain in state for postsecondary education. Before the Promise’s inception, approximately 58 percent of these students attended postsecondary institutions in state. With the Promise’s introduction, this rate increased to 68 percent.

Nearly 3000 of the scholarship recipients have earned a postsecondary credential [14]. The rates of completion vary by institutional and student characteristics. For example, 78.4% of white female Scholars have earned or are still working toward a degree, compared to 69.8% of white males, 63.7% of black females, and 54.1% of black males. These patterns reflect the reality that financial barriers are significant but likely are not the only challenges to college degree attainment. Promise Scholars who have completed their postsecondary education are contributing to the region’s workforce at over 200 companies [15]. Although no studies of impact on the workforce or student loan debt have been completed at this time, analyses exploring employment patterns and loan debt are underway.

Ecosystem Changes

The Promise sought to spark changes throughout the educational pipeline and across stakeholder sectors including employers and non-profit organizations. Although no study has fully documented the ecosystem effects of the Pittsburgh Promise, several changes are important to note. Once the Promise was instituted, PPS launched a marketing campaign, “Dream Big, Work Hard”, to promote the Promise, encourage a college-going culture, and distribute college-related resources. Later, the district launched efforts to provide students with ongoing career exposure and exploration opportunities, increase access to Advanced Placement classes, and increase access to college entrance exams through a school-day SAT administration. In addition, the district created dedicated central office positions for liaising with the Promise and overseeing high school counseling.

Higher education institutions, particularly those enrolling larger numbers of Promise Scholars, implemented specific practices for supporting Promise Scholars. These included implementing culture-building structures and activities, hiring of student support personnel, aligning foci of staff with incoming student needs, and conducting proactive monitoring and outreach to help keep students on track [16].

[14] The Impact Dashboard. (2019, February 8). The Pittsburgh Promise. Retrieved from pittsburghpromise.org/about-us/our-impact/

[15] Stronger Than Ever: Promise Scholar Stories. (n.d.). The Pittsburgh Promise. Retrieved from pittsburghpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2017-AnnualWEB_spreads.pdf

[16] Iriti, J., Page, L., & Bickel, W. (2017, March). Place-based scholarships: Catalysts for systems reform to improve postsecondary attainment. *International Journal of Educational Development*. Retrieved from [researchgate.net/publication/314302063_Place-based_scholarships_Catalysts_for_systems_reform_to_improve_postsecondary_attainment](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314302063_Place-based_scholarships_Catalysts_for_systems_reform_to_improve_postsecondary_attainment)

Once the Promise instituted the Preferred College Partner program, two colleges followed on by also offering additional financial supports for Promise Scholars to attend graduate school [17].

Conclusion

The implementation of the Pittsburgh Promise has led to significant improvements in college access and early college success for eligible PPS graduates. One obvious channel through which the Promise is operating is by making postsecondary education more **affordable for PPS students**. Pennsylvania is among the most expensive higher education markets in the United States. Even though the Promise is a last-dollar award, students generally received scholarships that were close to the maximum amounts for which they were eligible. This implies that other sources of financial aid were not close to covering students' full cost of postsecondary attendance.

The financial investment in the Promise has a positive rate of return. Based on a conservative, back-of-the-envelope calculation of the impact of the Promise on recipients' lifetime earnings (that assumes only impacts through the second year of postsecondary education), we judge the Promise to have a positive rate of return. Specifically, we estimate a \$1.35 return for each dollar invested in students through their second year after high school [18]. Given other individual and societal benefits of higher education, we reason this to be a lower bound estimate.

Some **indicators suggest that the Promise has made some gains regarding racial and economic equity** with the observed reduction in the racial gap in high school graduation and increased rates of Promise eligibility for black students. However, racial gaps persist in Promise uptake and in postsecondary completion, and these patterns may call for additional or different interventions in addition to the financial support the Promise provides.

While the Pittsburgh Promise still has many challenges ahead of it, such as securing continued funding beyond the initial large dollar investments and continued research into the long-term impacts on the economic benefits of the program, the short-term changes spurred by the Promise have been highly encouraging. Through the use of thoughtful program design, close research partnerships, and continual adaptive management, the Pittsburgh Promise has been able to reach a substantial segment of the students it aims to help and positively impact the local Pittsburgh community.

[17] Shackner, B. (2019, February 27). CMU, Duquesne add graduate programs to its offerings for Pittsburgh Promise alumni. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Retrieved from post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/11/14/Carnegie-Mellon-Duquesne-university-scholarship-Pittsburgh-Promise-college-financial-aid-graduate-masters/stories/201811140109

[18] Page, L., Iriti, J., Lowry, D., & Anthony, A. (2018, January 18). The Promise of Place-Based Investment in Postsecondary Access and Success: Investigating the Impact of the Pittsburgh Promise. MIT Press Journals. Retrieved from mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/edfp_a_00257?journalCode=edfp

About the Authors

Jennifer Iriti is a Research Scientist and Director of the Evaluation for Learning Group at the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research & Development Center, designs, manages, and implements evaluations of education programs and organizations in PK-20 settings. Methodologically eclectic, she focuses on providing rigorous research and evaluation to support educational policy- and decision-makers about persistent problems of policy and practice.

Most recently, she has focused on programs that support postsecondary access and success, such as evaluation of the Pittsburgh Promise and in her role as Co-PI for an NSF INCLUDES grant intended to increase access for underrepresented minoritized populations in undergraduate STEM programs. In addition, she has focused recent work on conducting developmental evaluations of networked improvement communities in education, including the Better Math Teaching Network and the Student-Centered Assessment Network, among others.

Her publications include articles in the American Journal of Evaluation, Educational Technology Research and Development, Education Finance and Policy and the International Journal of Educational Development as well as two book chapters and many technical reports. She holds a doctoral degree in Developmental and Educational Psychology and a certificate in Interdisciplinary Policy and Evaluation from the University of Pittsburgh. Jennifer also holds appointments to the graduate faculty, is a Faculty Fellow with the Center for Urban Education, and is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Learning Sciences and Policy program. She was an invited Scholar to the White House Domestic Policy Council's convening on postsecondary access in 2016 where she shared key learnings about her study of place-based scholarship programs. Finally, she is serving her second 4-year term as an elected public school board member for South Fayette Township School District and sits on the Comprehensive Guidance Plan committees for the Pittsburgh Public Schools and South Fayette Township School District.



Lindsay C. Page is an assistant professor of research methodology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, a research scientist at Pitt's Learning Research and Development Center, and a faculty research fellow of the National Bureau of Economic Research. Her work focuses on quantitative methods and their application to questions regarding the effectiveness of educational policies and programs across the pre-school to postsecondary spectrum.

Much of her recent work has involved the implementation of large-scale randomized trials to investigate innovative strategies for improving students' transition to and through college. Lindsay's research has been published in a variety of academic journals, and she is the co-author of a book on "summer melt," the phenomenon that college-intending students fail to transition successfully from high school to college.

Her publications include articles in the *Annals of Applied Statistics*, *Journal of Human Resources*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *Education Finance and Policy*, and *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, among others. Her work has been covered in numerous media outlets, including *Morning Edition* and *Marketplace* on National Public Radio and in the *L.A. Times* and *New York Times*. She holds a doctorate in quantitative policy analysis and masters degrees in statistics and in education policy from Harvard University. She earned her bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College.

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