

# A 'promise' for our high school grads?

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About 200 people from 75 communities across the country, including Portland, recently traveled to Kalamazoo, Mich., for something called the PromiseNet Conference, to learn about that city's newest economic development initiative, scholarships for all of its high school graduates.

The premise is simple: Live in the school district for at least four years, graduate from high school, and receive four years of scholarships to attend any state university or community college. Funded by anonymous donors to boost economic development and community vitality, the program is in its infancy. But it has some early positive indicators - an initial bump in real estate sales, a significant increase in school enrollment (after decades of decline) and hints that more students are graduating.

Some of the most interesting information from local officials suggests that the Kalamazoo Promise, as the effort is known locally, has achieved what other reform efforts have failed to do: the creation of a unified, focused vision among community residents and leaders.

At the center of the conference were discussions about the growing gaps in the U.S. labor market, with many employers unable to fill certain skilled jobs. Communities with a well-educated work force will be the ones to thrive in the knowledge-based economy. By creating incentives for current residents to remain in the community and new residents -- especially those with children -- to move in, the scholarship program makes the community more attractive for businesses seeking to invest, expand or relocate. Not only will their employees' children have access to free college tuition, but the businesses themselves will be able to tap an increasingly well-trained work force.

Could a Promise-like program succeed here in Oregon -- or even just in Portland? There's no question that it's expensive. But the potential return in human and economic terms is high: higher lifetime earnings for the community's young people, a better-trained work force for area businesses and schools that have more resources and are more diverse in terms of both race and socioeconomic status.

What better incentive for the entire community to rise to the challenge of educating our youth to meet Oregon's new, more rigorous high school graduation requirements? Schools would be challenged to turn out better-prepared students. Students would be challenged to work harder because they could see a future. The community would be challenged to step up and provide the needed support so that all students could succeed. Efforts designed to close the achievement gap between students of different races and income levels would also be challenged to show better results, and post-secondary institutions would be challenged to address their abysmal retention rates.

The "promise" is the most promising education reform initiative I've seen in decades. But really, it's an education reform initiative in disguise . . . as economic development. Maybe it's time to think about something like this for our community.

Maxine Thompson is coordinator of the Leaders' Roundtable for the Portland Business Alliance.