Michigan’s Promise Zones
Are They the DIY Promise?

Chuck Wilbur
November 11, 2015
Promise Zone Basics

- Up to 10 Promise Zones authorized by a 2008 statute, revised in 2013
- Limited to communities with an above average rate of poverty for families with children
- Can be formed by school districts, cities, townships, and counties
Ten Promise Zones were designated in April 2009

- Baldwin
- Battle Creek
- Benton Harbor
- Detroit
- Hazel Park
- Jackson
- Lansing
- Muskegon ISD
- Pontiac
- Saginaw
Promise Zone Governance

- Promise Zones are governed by 11 member Promise Zone Authorities (PZA)
  - Nine members appointed by the CEO of the establishing entity with advice and consent
  - Two members appointed by the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader
- Once appointed, PZAs are self-perpetuating, they select their members as vacancies occur
Before awarding scholarships, a PZ must have its Promise plan approved by the State Treasurer’s office.

The plan defines the scholarship—who gets it, where it can be used, how much it is for.

The plan also includes an actuarial analysis that projects future costs.
Promise Zones must provide a scholarship that, at minimum, gives all students who live in the zone and graduate from a high school located in the zone a tuition-free path to an associate degree from at least one institution.
Paying for the Promise

Promise Zones have a three-part funding formula:

- Students must apply for and use federal Pell grants and Michigan TIP grants
- Tax increment financing may be available as early as year three
- Private fundraising
Tax Increment Financing

- How tax increment financing works
  - After two years of operating through private funding, Promise Zone’s can capture half the growth in the State Education Tax (SET) within their boundaries
    - The SET is levied on all property not abated or captured for other purposes
  - Each Promise Zone calculates capture from a base year that is the year before it begins awarding its scholarships
An example of how tax increment financing works

- A Promise Zone begins awarding scholarships in 2015, making its base year 2014 when its SET yield was $3 million.
- Its SET yield grows at 2% a year for the next seven years.
- It gets its first tax capture payment in 2017, just over $90,000 for two years worth of growth.
- It will get a payment of roughly the same size in 2018.
- By 2022, its eighth year of operation, its capture would grow to over $210,000.
Promise Zones have recognized that scholarships alone cannot achieve their goals
Some work closely with their Local College Access Networks (LCAN)
Some have decided to become LCANs themselves
Promise Zone Takeaways

- Finding an “angel donor” is not essential to getting started, a lot of the money needed for a Promise is already on the table.
- A Pell grant and other need based aid is greatly enhanced when it is wrapped in a Promise.
- Scholarships are critical to creating a culture of education in a Promise community, but they alone can not create student success.
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The Lansing Promise

Educating our way to a better future
Lansing Promise!
Do It Yourself
No Two are Alike
Educating our way to a better future
History & Background

- Legislation was passed in 2009 that created ten Michigan Promise Zone Authorities, including Lansing.
- Selected based on percentage of children under age 18 living at or below the federal poverty level.
- Promise Zone Goals – transform communities by providing higher educational opportunities at no or low cost.
- Michigan Department of Treasury provides oversight.
Michigan Promises were given broad options:

- Pay full ride to 2 year or 4 year college or university.
- Amended to pay for technical or career training.
- Establish eligibility criteria that applies to all students.
- Pay first dollar or last dollar.
- Spend some on college readiness.
- Determine when to start tax capture.
11 Angry Men Scenario
The Lansing Promise is not need based & No strings!

Graduate from ANY PUBLIC or PRIVATE, Homeschool, Alternative, or Virtual High School, or GED before age 20, with 4 or more consecutive years

Be accepted at LCC or MSU, complete FAFSA, and apply for scholarship within 1 year of graduation (July 1st)

Up to 4 years after graduation to attain 65 credits toward Associates Degree, Certification, Prof. License.
Maintaining Your Lansing Promise Scholarship

★ Must be admitted to LCC or MSU and able to take classes.

★ Life happens! If you need to take time off, we will pick up where you left off - up to four years from graduation or 2016 for the 2012 graduating class or 2019 for 2015 graduating class.

★ Having challenges? The Lansing Promise Scholarship will be there even if you are on academic probation

★ Stay in college!!
Congrats Graduates!

Kortnee Richardson, Graduate of Lansing Community College & ow attends Western Michigan University! A Lansing Promise Scholar! She is one of more than 400 students since the graduating class of 2012 receiving the Lansing Promise.
The Town That Decided to Send All Its Kids to College

Residents of Baldwin, Michigan, pooled together their money to provide scholarships for everyone, and it changed the town profoundly.

ALANA SEMUELS  •  AUG 18, 2015

Baldwin, Mich.—College was never much of an option for most students in this tiny town of 1,200 located in the woods of the Manistee National Forest. Only 12 of the 32 kids who graduated high school in 2005 enrolled in college. Only two of those have gotten their bachelor’s degree.

That was just a decade ago. Now, nearly everybody who graduated from the high school here in June is off to a four-year college, a community college, or a technical school. Kindergarten students talk about going to college. High schoolers take trips to campuses around the state and, at a raucous assembly each spring, reveal to the school which colleges they’re going to attend.

So what changed? How did one of the poorest counties in Michigan, a state that’s struggling, accomplish such a turnaround?

What changed was the introduction of the Baldwin Promise, a fund which in 2009 offered to pay up to $5,000 a year for any student from the Baldwin public schools to attend a public or private college in Michigan. Now $5,000 might sound like a pittance when compared to the $31,000 private college now costs annually. And it’s not much when compared to the Kalamazoo Promise, unveiled in 2005, which was funded by anonymous donors and, as a “first-dollar” scholarship, pays for 100 percent of tuition and fees at public colleges and universities in Michigan and can be added on top of Pell Grants. The Baldwin Promise is a middle-dollar scholarship, which means it comes after the student has applied for Pell Grants and institutional scholarships.

But the Baldwin Promise came with a change in the way the community talked about education, something that may have been more valuable than cash. From the day students start kindergarten, they’re coached to excel so they can go to college. In elementary school and middle school and high school, students, their parents, and the community, think about college and life after Baldwin schools. If nothing else, the Baldwin Promise effectively marketed college to a town that seemed fairly ambivalent about it before.

It’s unclear if the Baldwin Promise will have long-lasting results—students may yet drop out—but its successes and failures are important as states such as Tennessee and Oregon launch programs that try to market college to their residents by making two years of community college free. President Obama proposed a similar plan in January, saying in his speech
that “in America, a quality education cannot be a privilege that is reserved for a few.” On the campaign trail, too, candidates say that every American deserves the opportunity to have a college education, and that the nation needs to educate its young people to stay competitive. The story of Baldwin begins to answer the question: What does it look like if everyone in a community goes to college?

* * *

Baldwin is a town that swells in population during fishing season, when tourists come and catch trout, salmon, and bass. For the rest of the year, it’s a small place where everyone can’t help but know everyone else, since they run into one another at the town’s ice-cream shop or the baseball fields, where teams play on long summer nights. The school system is tiny, with the elementary, middle, and high schools located on one campus, the type of place where a kid on the football team can change clothes during halftime to take up his place playing drums in the marching band. (The then-president of the National Honor Society, Alec Wroblewski, did just that until he graduated in June.)

Passing through Baldwin on the way to a fishing trip, one might not think it’s the type of place that would dream big. The houses are small and some are in disrepair, and the busiest spots in town, at first glance, seem to be the gas stations. Baldwin is the county seat of Lake County, where 27.9 percent of residents live below the poverty level, according to census data. That’s the second-highest poverty level in the state of Michigan. Just 8 percent of people living in Lake County have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 25 percent of the state of Michigan.

But Baldwin did dream big. The Baldwin Promise was the brainchild of a resident named Rich Simonson, a Baldwin native who left the area for his career in politics, during which time he ran Gerald Ford’s campaign in Michigan. He returned to Baldwin to retire, and one day while having breakfast with friends at a local restaurant, Simonson came up with a proposal: Why not ask everyone they knew to give some money to the community so that every local student could go to college? His friends were skeptical, said Ellen Kerans, who was at the breakfast, but he was dogged, and went about asking everybody he knew for $500. The Kalamazoo Promise had wealthy anonymous donors, he said, but Baldwin had its community, and they cared about their town and wanted to invest in it.

He convinced school employees to donate and summer residents too. People who couldn’t give $500 up front could enroll in a payment plan. The group set a goal of $140,000, and they surprised even themselves when they raised $160,000, Kerans told me.

“We thought this was the most important initiative we’d ever have, and we had to support it big,” she said. “It would revitalize the students. It would make them feel like they have a promise, they really could go to college.”

(Simonson passed away in 2012 and left an endowment that supports the Promise Fund.)*

The effort came around the same time that the Michigan legislature and Governor Jennifer Granholm passed a bill creating 10 Promise Zone designations, low-income communities, in Michigan. Being designated a Promise Zone by the state allowed districts a unique tax-capture mechanism that enabled the districts to keep revenue that otherwise would have gone to the state and instead give it to students in the form of college scholarships. Simonson successfully lobbied to have Baldwin designated as one of the 10 districts.

“I think the kids are more aware of their opportunities now. Before, they didn’t know what to expect after high school. Now they know.”
Taxes slumped during the recession, and by law a district was required to show it could fund the first two years of the Promise without state money. Few of the 10 designated districts could pay out money to students.

Not Baldwin. By 2010—the first year that Baldwin high-school graduates received the promise—14 students of the graduating class of 23 enrolled in college. The previous year, eight had enrolled out of a graduating class of the same size. Baldwin was the first district of the 10 to start giving out scholarships.

The Baldwin Promise is more than just $5,000 a year for four years of college. It brought with it a complete change in how the town viewed education. Just as elementary school and middle school were in Baldwin, college was a right for everyone.

Stiles Simmons came in as superintendent in 2011, and embarked on a huge curriculum overhaul. There was no coherent aligned curriculum, and no written curriculum at all when Stiles came in. So he hired a consulting company to come in, audit the curriculum, and work with teachers to create a new one. The new plan makes sure that students leave one grade level prepared for what comes next, in every subject, he said.

Then, Stiles focused on the discipline issues that teachers and parents said were distracting students during class time. He hired a “behavior-implementation specialist” and says that disciplinary incidents are down 60 percent.

Baldwin Senior High, as it’s called, recently added an AP class, in environmental science. It encouraged students to “dual enroll” in West Shore Community College, 30 miles away, and ran a bus from Baldwin to the community college. This year, it is offering a class affiliated with Ferris State University, which will take place on Baldwin’s high-school campus.

Wroblewski, the football-playing drummer and National Honor Society president, took a math, history, English, and psychology class at West Shore Community College, and says he’s less worried about starting school in the fall since he’s had community-college experience.

“Things did change in school. Kids started to want to go to college and the teachers knew that and then the kids started to realize, ‘We have to learn that to be ready for the harder classes in college,’” Wroblewski told me. “That’s the biggest change here.” Wroblewski was the first Baldwin student to be accepted to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in more than 10 years. He decided to go to Eastern Michigan University and enroll in the honors program there.

Stiles also overhauled the school calendar to reduce learning loss over the summer; now students have a six-week summer break, a two-week fall break, and a mid-winter break.

The changes go down to the kindergarten level. Now, when 5-year-olds enter Baldwin Schools, they’re tasked with creating an image of themselves, wearing a mortarboard, made out of construction paper. Those faces, black, white, and brown, are pasted onto a giant banner, “College begins with Kindergarten,” in the elementary school’s main hallway.

Sue Moore was a second-grade teacher at Baldwin’s elementary schools for 43 years, before retiring in June. I ran into her at a baseball field in town, where a bunch of Baldwin residents were watching their team battle a neighboring town for a softball championship.
In the past, elementary-school teachers wouldn't really speak about college, Moore told me. But now, students learn about opportunities outside Baldwin from the time they start elementary school all through middle school and high school, she said.

“I think the kids are more aware of their opportunities now,” she said. “Before, they didn’t know what to expect after high school. Now they know.”

Part of the reason they know is Ayana Richardson, an effusive, put-together woman with two master’s degrees who runs the high school’s College Access Center. Richardson runs college tours for Baldwin’s middle- and high-school students—day trips to close-by schools for the younger kids, and overnight visits to Detroit or other far-off campuses for ambitious students who had applied. She invites representatives from different Michigan colleges to speak at the high school on Tuesdays, and next year Eastern Michigan University is offering on-site admission at Baldwin Senior High, meaning a representative will come to the school, let the students apply, and inform them whether they’ve been accepted the same day. She created college events on almost every day of the week, including College Culture Wednesdays, at which people come in and advise students on budgeting and living on their own and College Rep Tuesdays, when representatives from universities come and visit the school. And she also instituted Decision Day, a big assembly where seniors walk out into an auditorium and announce where they’re attending, to cheers.

The College Access Center, the room where Richardson works with students on their applications, was just white walls when she arrived, she told me. Now, its walls and ceiling are decorated with Michigan college mascots and its drawers are jammed with pamphlets about scholarships and brochures from universities all over the state. In the hallway, just below the photos of graduating classes dating back more than 50 years, a bulletin board features pictures of members of the graduating class and a list of the colleges that accepted them.

All of this support and coaching can have a profound effect. As Daekwon Fisher, a 19-year-old who graduated from Baldwin Senior High in 2014 put it, the Promise “put less fear in people’s hearts about going to college.”

“It took a lot of stress off me,” he told me. “Stress off my momma too—she didn’t have to worry about it as much.”

Once students leave and head off to college, Richardson stays in touch, sending them follow-up emails and letters to make sure they’ve met with their academic advisor and that they utilize the resources available to them on campus. If students start college and drop out, the community’s investment is wasted, she said, so it’s in their best interest to make sure their students succeed.

“We want to make sure that our investment is actually working,” she told me. “I think it’s a whole pipeline.”

And this has been something of a challenge for the Baldwin Promise. It’s a lot easier to enroll in college than it is to finish it.

Students miss home, or decide they want to take a break from school and earn some money. They find that living away from home is expensive, as are books, and that it can be difficult to focus on schoolwork. Students must have a 2.0 GPA in their classes to continue to receive the scholarship. Only two of the 14 students who enrolled in the fall of 2010 have received bachelor’s degrees, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse.
But though that number may seem low, data shows that Promise scholarships have very real results on college completion. In Kalamazoo, for instance, students who received the Promise were one-third more likely to graduate college within six years of finishing high school compared to their pre-Promise peers, according to a study released in June by the Upjohn Institute.

Middle-dollar college scholarships also have a big effect, said Michelle Miller-Adams, an associate professor at Grand Valley State University and a research fellow at the Upjohn Institute who has studied the promise movement. She calls it the “trading-up” phenomenon: Students who once would have gone to community college now try out a four-year college, those who might have thought college isn’t for them will try out a community college or technical school.

“A bunch of students who would not have gone previously are giving it a try. Those who used to go to community college and transfer now go straight to four-year,” Miller-Adams said. “All along the range of academic ability, there’s this trading-up phenomenon.”

That was the case for Jheresa Lewis, a quiet student who is the eldest of five children, who breaks into a smile when she talks about her college plans. Her father was incarcerated for much of her life, and money was always tight—she’s working a construction job this summer to earn money. Lewis applied to and was accepted at a number of schools, including West Shore Community College. She was leaning towards going there, since she could still live at home and because her father had said it seemed like a good deal when they visited there on a college tour. But during one of Baldwin Senior High’s college visits, Lewis also visited Oakland University, near Detroit, and loved the campus, the school, and the graphic design program there.

So Richardson pushed her to apply to scholarships and keep Oakland in her sights. With the Promise and other scholarships, Richardson argued, Oakland was within her reach. She could follow her heart and not worry so much about money.

“But not to say that going to a two-year is beneath someone who has a high GPA, because everyone goes to a two-year for different reasons,” Richardson told me. “But I think, and always thought, that she would do well at a four-year institution.”

Lewis is attending Oakland in the fall.

Some of the changes haven’t been popular with all Baldwin residents. Lynn Murtland lives across the street from the school, and has a daughter and two granddaughters in the Baldwin school system. She says the school district has started to kick kids with disciplinary problems out of school, forcing them to go to another town. Her daughter, who is about to enter ninth grade, says the school only cares about students who get good grades or have money or excel at sports. The college trips, she says, are only for the kids without any disciplinary problems.

“They don’t try—they just kick them out and send them somewhere else when they’re a problem,” Murtland told me.
And there is some controversy about Promise-type programs, and even about programs like Tennessee’s that pledge free community college tuition. Most low-income students can already get mostly-free community college, after all, since they can get tuition breaks and Pell Grants to cover the cost of tuition. It's living expenses and books that are expensive, and many students end up dropping out because they can’t afford the books, said Debbie Cochrane, research director for The Institute for College Access and Success.

To some, the promise is just a “wrapper,” a way to simply market the idea of college. But in Baldwin, that wrapper is a big deal. That’s because it comes with the knowledge that the community is pulling for you.

This is important for students as well as parents. After Richardson started working in the College Access Center, parents would come in with their kids and tell her they didn’t know how to fill out a financial-aid application form, because they hadn’t been to college and didn’t know the procedure. They thank her for her help and say they want their kids to go to college.

“I think what has happened is that everyone is talking about this college thing, saying, ‘Mom I want to go on this trip to XYZ, we’re going to visit this college’,” she said. “Just the pure communication change of the things going on makes the parent want to know and understand.”

The difference is easy to see in Baldwin. I met with a parade of students who are in Baldwin public schools or just graduated, and their ambitions seemed boundless.

Nicole Mooney just started her senior year in school, and is looking at schools in Florida and Tennessee. She wouldn’t be allowed to use the Promise at those schools, because they are out of state, and both of her parents work at a grocery store, but she’s hoping to get scholarships based on her grades and test scores. She’s already looking forward to the opportunity to study abroad, maybe in Brazil, and thinks she may want to eventually be a doctor or a nurse and work for Doctors without Borders.

Reese Drilling is a hyperactive sophomore whose mother is a teacher in the school system. He’s already signed up for dozens of college brochures and emails, and has decided he’s going to get a free ride to whatever university he chooses. He attends school board meetings religiously and already spends much of his day at the College Access Center. He remembers watching the local news when the Promise was announced, and hearing a student interviewed who wanted to be a video-game designer, and now could go to college to pursue that ambition, thanks to the Promise.

“I’ve never forgotten that. Here’s somebody who never thought they could go out and do what they wanted to do,” he told me. “In that moment, to see somebody say, ‘Hey, I can do it, and there’s nothing that’s going to stop me.’ It was amazing.”

Drilling says if he doesn’t go in-state to the University of Michigan, he might want to go to Harvard or UCLA.

For a school where no one had been accepted into the University of Michigan in years, those sound like big ambitions. But with the changes since the Promise, they just might be attainable.

That’s the other thing that Miller-Adams’s research indicates. Promise scholarships can bring together a community and make it pull together in ways it never has before.
“The pool of money serves as a catalyst for a lot of other things,” she told me. “At least as important is that messaging: ‘We believe in education, we’re going to support our youth.’ That’s just as important as the money itself.”

That message made all the difference for Shavonne Copeland, who was raised by a single mother and, though she always wanted to go to college, struggled in high school to believe that it was possible. She nearly dropped out of high school, and “was ready to give up on myself,” she told me. Then Ayana Richardson told Copeland that she saw potential in her, and that she wanted her to go to college, and coached her to apply.

“She made me cry. She made me realize how much my potential was, and I couldn’t see it,” Copeland told me.

Copeland applied to community college, and then, when her mother got sick, decided to stay in Baldwin and work for Richardson and the College Access Center for a year. She started Muskegon Community College in 2013 and is about to finish up there and transfer to Michigan State, where she plans to major in political science and minor in photojournalism. She’ll be the first person in her family to attend a four-year college. She works two jobs, one for a counseling center at the school, another on the night shift at a group home.

She hopes to become a Supreme Court justice someday.

* This article has been updated to clarify that Simonson's bequest supports the Promise Fund along with other initiatives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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WHAT IS THE BALDWIN PROMISE?

The Baldwin Promise is an exceptional opportunity for the students at Baldwin Community Schools. In 2009, Baldwin was designated a Michigan Promise Zone. Of the 10 zones (inspired by The Kalamazoo Promise), Baldwin is the only rural zone. Baldwin's Promise goes beyond what the state statute's minimum requires and provides a "middle-dollar" scholarship up to $5,000 per year for 4 years to every single graduate of Baldwin High School regardless of merit or need, for a maximum total of up to $20,000 per student. The scholarship makes up the difference between tuition/fees and federal/state grants up to $5,000. To qualify for the full promise, students only need to have been a Baldwin Schools student since 9th grade, reside in the district boundaries, graduate from high school, and complete the FAFSA. The scholarship can be used at any public university, community college, or private college in the state of Michigan.

WHAT IS THE COLLEGE ACCESS CENTER?

The Richard Simonson College Access Center, part of the Baldwin Promise program, has been operating since March 2011. This center provides services to current and former students (specifically for Baldwin HS students, but is also open to students throughout Lake County), parents/guardians and other community members.

The impact of the Center, combined with the financial guarantee of the Baldwin Promise encourages high school graduates to attend post-secondary institutions. After graduation, the College Access Center continues to provide services to individuals and their families when requested.

As a member of MCAN (Michigan College Access Network), programs, events, and initiatives are developed and created for the Baldwin Community school district's population focusing on the goal of increasing the proportion of Michigan residents with college degrees or high-quality credentials to 60% by the year 2025. Implementing a college going culture includes but not limited to, promoting the KnowHow2Go initiatives, organizing trips to Michigan colleges and universities, having job fairs with actual employers present to answer questions, hosting college fairs with higher education institutions' representatives, and presenting seminars about college, college life, and expectations therein.
College Access Center Sponsored Programs

**ACT Test Preparation**
Students are provided free ACT Test preparation during after school hours weeks prior to the test retake date.

**ACT Test Ride Bus**
Students are provided free transportation to ACT test sites on ACT testing dates throughout the school year. Additionally, students are provided fee waivers for test registration and assistance in completing test registration.

**Ask an Expert Series**
Individuals in various aspects of college life, such as financial aid, college athletics, and college students, will be a part of presentations and panels that help to increase awareness and knowledge about college. These programs are open to all parents, students and community members of the school district.

**Career Fair Day**
During the spring semester of the school year, careers from near and far are invited to participate in the Career Fair Day held for Baldwin's Middle and High School students. A wide variety of careers are represented.

**Career Rotation Day**
During the spring semester of the school year, careers from near and far are invited to participate in the Career Rotation Day held for Baldwin’s Elementary School students. Professionals rotate from class to class presenting to the upper elementary school students.

**College Admissions Rep Visits**
Various higher education institutions admissions representatives within Michigan visit Baldwin High School during the school day. These visits are designed for 10th, 11th and 12th graders.

**College Fair Day**
During the fall or spring semester of the school year, colleges from near and far are invited to participate in the College Fair Day held for Baldwin's Middle and High School students. Both public and private higher education institutions are represented from across the state of Michigan.

**College Culture Days**
“College Culture” Days are programs, events, and sessions that focus on college knowledge. These programs are grade level specific and cover a variety of topics including financial aid and college planning.

**College Campus Visits**
Students have the opportunity to visit various college campuses during the school year. These visits are for 5th – 10th grade students. College visits have included Muskegon Community College, Northwestern Michigan College, Ferris State University, Saginaw Valley State University, Grand Valley State University, Central Michigan University, Western Michigan University, and Northwood University.

**College Spirit Days**
Staff and students are asked to show their college pride by wearing college apparel throughout the Baldwin Community Schools district.

**Decision Day**
The goal of College Decision Day is to recognize high school seniors for their postsecondary plans and encourage younger students and families to prepare early for postsecondary education. College Decision Day is held annually on or around May 1 and is designed to coincide with the date that most seniors must inform a college of their plans to enroll.

**FAFSA Completion**
Students are provided assistance in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

**Michigan College Application Week**
Michigan College Application Week is geared toward first-generation college students, low-income students, and other students who face barriers while applying to college. All students, including freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors who have already applied to college, to participate in events to help them explore and prepare for postsecondary education, including certificate programs, two-year degrees, and four-year degrees.
Southeastern Michigan College Tour

Students 9th-12th grade have the opportunity to travel to higher education institutions southeast of Baldwin. This college tour also includes a cultural activity. Colleges visited on past tours have included the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Michigan State University, Wayne State University, Oakland University, Eastern Michigan University, Madonna University, University of Michigan-Dearborn, University of Detroit-Mercy, Schoolcraft College, Washtenaw Community College, Oakland Community College, and Lansing Community College.

College Access Center Co-Sponsored Programs

West Shore Community College's College for Kids

This is a summer experience for students who have completed the 4th-8th grades. Experiences are designed to challenge students by discovering and developing their talents. Some courses foster creativity while others foster academic development.

Grand Valley State University's Growing Educators in Math and Science Program (GVSU GEMS)

The GEMS program supports the development of future teachers in preparing them to be successful. Participants learn about the college application process and will receive tips for a successful college experience, take classes in the summer at Grand Valley State University that will prepare them for a college preparatory curriculum when they return to school in September, and experience college life by staying in a residential hall, exploring campus, and meeting other college-bound students. This program is for students who have completed the 9th-11th grade. Program selection and sponsorship is competitive.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities Tour Experience (HBCUTE)

This HBCU Tour Experience consists of a bus trip normally taken during Grand Rapids, Michigan Public Schools and surrounding areas spring break for students to visit, orient, and tour several Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In addition to visiting the colleges and universities, the tour includes visits to locations that offer a rich educational and cultural tour experience for the students. Each year 40-80 students with 10-20 chaperones experience college settings and are exposed to a variety of academic opportunities; as well as learning the many benefits of attending institutions of higher learning. This tour is for students in the 9th-12th grade. Tour sponsorship and selection is competitive.

4-H Exploration Days-MSU Pre-College Program

This is a summer experience offered to students who have completed the 8th-10th grades. Michigan State University's Pre-College program offers over 200 action-packed learning sessions in a variety of interest areas. Students will have many opportunities presented during this program, opportunities include but not limited to developing leadership abilities, enhancing individual growth, developing and expanding career and personal interests, as well as increasing college exploration and accessing to the Michigan State University campus and its resources.

College Access Center Liaison Programs

Ferris State University’s Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)

The Ferris State University GEAR UP Program offer students the academic skills, information and encouragement they need to not only graduate from high school, but apply and attend an institution of higher education. Students being in the program their 7th grade year and continue through high school graduation. Through this program's goals, students will not only succeed in and outside the classroom, but will gain the skills necessary to be a graduate from an institution of higher education. The program provides an opportunity for students to discover first hand, the potential of a college education and to expose students to the information, knowledge, and skills needed to complete high school and be prepared adequately for college entry and success.
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Tiny NW Michigan town sends nearly all to college

Kim Kozlowski, The Detroit News 11:32 p.m. EDT October 22, 2015

Baldwin — Unlike many of his peers before him, David Simmons is determined to go to college.

The high school senior has spent his life in Baldwin, a village in rural northwestern Michigan with a close-knit feel that could lure him into sticking around. But he is heeding the push to leave his roots near Ludington and get a higher education — especially since both of his parents are unemployed.

At one time, this town of 1,600 people, among the state’s poorest, sent hardly any of its kids off for a higher education. But the community has rallied, creating a college-going culture in the local school district. Now, nearly all of its students plan to go to college.

The town has been able to do this with the Baldwin Promise (http://www.baldwinpromise.org/content/baldwin-promise), a four-year, $20,000 college scholarship for every high school graduate, that was modeled on a seminal program in Kalamazoo.

Students say it makes the difference between going to college or not. Advocates say it transforms lives.

“You gotta go to college, especially in this economy,” Simmons said. “You got to get a job to support yourself. It’s tough out there.”

It’s especially tough in Baldwin, where students face numerous hurdles, such as the state’s worst poverty rate. In the Baldwin school district, which has about 540 students, 94 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch, compared with 76 percent in Detroit.

But now there’s hope for a better future. The seismic shift occurred six years ago after Baldwin created a program that echoes the Kalamazoo Promise (https://www.kalamazoopromise.com/) — a pioneering initiative that pays for college for every graduating senior, thanks to a wealthy benefactor.

Promise zones

The zones are in nine communities that meet or exceed the state’s average poverty level for families with children younger than 18. Students get college scholarships upon graduation.

1. Baldwin Community Schools
2. Battle Creek Public Schools
3. Benton Harbor Area Schools
4. Detroit Public Schools
5. Hazel Park Schools
6. Lansing School District
7. Muskegon Area Intermediate School District
8. Pontiac School District
9. Saginaw School District

Source: Michigan Department of Treasury

Kalamazoo’s program was groundbreaking when it was created 10 years ago, and has since inspired dozens of similar programs across the nation.

Among them was an initiative created by Michigan government leaders in 2008 to catapult high school students in up to 10 impoverished communities into college.

Lacking big donors, communities such as Benton Harbor and Saginaw funded the "promise zones (http://www.promisezones.org/)" by raising enough money for two years of scholarship payments. Under the law authorizing the program, as many as 10 high-poverty districts can capture and use for scholarships half of the growth in state property taxes for education that are generated in their zones.

Baldwin is the only rural community with a promise zone. But that could change; legislation recently was introduced to expand the number of permitted promise zones from 10 to 15.
“We were trying to make this concept work without billionaire resources,” said Chuck Wilbur, a Lansing-based public policy consultant who helped develop the legislation under the administration of then-Gov. Jennifer Granholm. “You can do a tremendous amount with limited resources. You can have some of the cultural impact on a community like Baldwin has.”

Advocates say the initiative was critical for Baldwin, where about 30 students graduate from high school each year, and could be for other rural communities. Typically, programs aimed at getting students into college tend to target kids in urban or suburban communities.

“There aren’t a lot of initiatives geared toward rural students,” said Ayana Richardson, executive director of the Baldwin College Access Center and Baldwin Promise. “A lot of organizations are all about the big numbers, to show impact. But it’s important here to provide a different perspective, different opportunities. It’s amazing how it impacts so many lives here.”

Today, Baldwin students have access to a variety of options to help them get ready for college, including test preparation programs, career days, college campus visits and more.

From 2004-09 — before the Baldwin Promise — an average of 35 percent of the graduating students enrolled in college in the first year after finishing high school. This past year, 26 out of 30 seniors, or 87 percent, were accepted to a higher education institution, continuing a trend that goes back several years.

Those on the path to college include senior Christina McCarthy. Her parents both dropped out of high school in 10th grade, and her sister, who has Down syndrome, has influenced her planned course of study in special education.

What’s making it most possible for her to even consider going to college is the Baldwin scholarship, which McCarthy said would be an enormous help in paying for tuition.

“I want to have a huge impact on lives,” she said. “I want to become a role model like my teachers were for me.”

Baldwin is nestled on the edge of the Manistee National Forest, nearly a four-hour drive northwest of Detroit. The downtown is a few city blocks with a homemade ice cream parlor, barber shop, library and a few shops. Nearby are the Lake County Courthouse and the sheriff’s department.

The nearest large urban area is Grand Rapids, about 90 minutes away. It takes about a half hour to get to the nearest hospital or to buy a Big Mac and fries.

Baldwin is in an area rich in natural resources, with dozens of lakes, and outdoor activities such as snowmobiling, fly fishing and biking are popular.

But it’s also impoverished. Many high school students hail from homes where their parents are unemployed or underemployed. Baldwin is the county seat of Lake County, which has the highest child poverty rate in the state at 52.2 percent, according to the most recent Michigan Kids Count Data Report, which tracks and compares trends in child well-being.

But poverty isn’t the only area where Lake County ranks at the bottom in the state. It has Michigan’s highest rate of teen pregnancies and the lowest rate of students graduating from high school on time.

Baldwin residents wanted more for their students, especially the late Rick Simonson, who envisioned the Baldwin Promise long before the promise zones were offered, said Ellen Kerans, a resident and close friend.

Simonson had his own life-changing experience while he was a junior in high school: He was supported by the community and the Rotary Club to be a page in the Michigan House of Representatives. He later went to Albion College and went on to a career in politics, including running President Gerald Ford’s 1976 election campaign in Michigan.

When Simonson retired, he came home to Michigan and spearheaded a plan to create a Baldwin Promise for students with private funds. A committee was formed and proposals were sent.

But a stock market crash left funders unable to finance it, Kerans said. They were crushed. But soon after, the Legislature approved the promise zone legislation and Baldwin was ready. It was the first to apply and first to be designated a promise zone.
“Something sad happened and then the rainbow came out,” Kerans said. “It was amazing.”

Dozens of students have since taken advantage of the opportunity.

Among them is Elizabeth Wilcox, a junior studying accounting at Oakland University. While in high school at Baldwin, she toured the Rochester school and felt like she was home.

The daughter of parents who are employed by a grocery store and a factory, Wilcox wasn’t sure she could afford to go to Oakland U, since costs for room and board exceed $20,000 a year.

But the Baldwin Promise “made college affordable, it made it a possibility,” said Wilcox, 21. “Before the Baldwin Promise, I wasn’t exactly sure I was going to be able to go to college because it costs a lot of money. But I made it.”

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Promise programs are an emerging trend in college access that provide exposure to college resources for students in a particular place while also promising tuition help when they eventually get to college. These can be extremely useful in early awareness efforts because guaranteed money shows young students that they can finance their education. In Baldwin, Michigan, the Baldwin Promise was introduced in 2010 and has already helped create a stronger culture of college-going in Baldwin County. They were recently featured in The Atlantic and are a great organization that we were eager to profile.

The Baldwin Promise is universal to every student who graduates from a Baldwin High School and attends one of the federally accredited schools in Michigan. There are a few simple conditions. First, you have to apply. Ayana Richardson, Executive Director, explained it best: “We can’t just write out checks without knowing where they’re going.” The application simply informs the Promise about the student’s needs, school information, and how long they attended Baldwin High School. Different amounts are awarded based on how many years were attended in the school, and the full $5,000 is reserved for students who attended for four years. Every student who attended for at least one year and applies for the Promise receives an award. It’s a “middle-dollar” award, so students are encouraged to accept their financial aid packages from their universities and use the Promise to fill in the gap.

Knowing the Promise money is available, but only after the FAFSA has been completed, has led to a big spike in the number of students who complete the FAFSA and pursue other methods of funding as well.

Baldwin is a small town that, because of the Promise, is reaching for big goals. Each year’s graduating class ranges between 15 and 30 students, which means that Richardson and her staff get to know each student well. The school has a host of college-preparation activities that happen in the College Access Center. Some of the programming starts as early as fifth grade, when the students begin annual college visits across the state. College representatives visit Richardson’s college access center once a week to discuss their schools with students. Richardson began “College Culture Wednesdays” which uses current college students and staff to help with resumes, cover letters, interview skills, and more to help the Baldwin students succeed in college. Each summer, they lead a trip to the southeastern Michigan schools because most students haven’t left their northern town. The center also co-sponsor a program called Growing Educators in Math and Science (GEMS) at Grand Valley State University, which allows the students to take their necessary high school courses in a college environment and prepare them for a future career in education. These programs work in tandem with the Promise by helping Richardson and her staff to see the students frequently and purposefully. The programming and the Promise give them the skills and confidence they need to succeed in college, which is just as important as scholarships.

Richardson, who is not native to Baldwin but feels deeply tied to the community, explained that she has seen real improvements from her students and the community at large. The college access center is open to students and their families, and was established as a response to the increased ability to attend college. This center stands as an example of how the Baldwin Promise flipped the typical early-awareness model on its head. Early awareness programs can often focus on increasing academic and leadership skills to enroll in college, and then hopes to help you find funding later. Baldwin did the opposite: they told families first that funding is guaranteed, and the families gravitated towards the Promise for assistance in improving skills.

Since the Promise’s establishment, the percent of graduating seniors completing the FAFSA has increased from 43% in 2012 to 94% in 2013 and has continuously been positive. Their annual “Decision Day,” which is going on its fourth year, last boasted 26 students out of 30 graduating who announced that they were planning to go to college. Of that 26, 21 turned in applications for the Promise. This year’s Baldwin graduating class will be the seventh cohort of Promise students, and while enrollment rates are available and have shown an increase, graduation rates of cohorts are not yet available. Parents and students alike have more conversations around college and make more choices that make college completion a reality, and Richardson thinks that the comfort of knowing the Promise money is available to them is a huge factor in contributing the changing culture.
Richardson is enormously proud of her program and students. She told me a story of a girl who was at risk of not graduating in 2012, who came to the college access center and got credit recovery, worked with the Promise, and eventually utilized the Promise to attend community college. She recently updated Richardson that she’d be transferring to Michigan State and was extremely thankful for the effort and care provided by Richardson and her team. Richardson finished by telling me that she’s loves to highlight the success of this student because its such a great story of perseverance. However, her favorite thing about the Promise is that she has the resources and ability to help all of the students in Baldwin, and that has made all the difference.