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Officials hold high hopes for Promise

By Bill Zlatos
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The Pittsburgh Promise -- a plan to give scholarships to students in Pittsburgh Public Schools -- in 10 years will double the number of graduates who attend college, district officials predict.

"I have faith, given the implementation of The Pittsburgh Promise and given the changes we want to make in our high school delivery model, that we'll stem the decline of students," city schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt said.

Roosevelt plans to implement four schools serving grades 6 through 12 and partner with the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education at the former Milliones school in the Hill District.

Spurred by the promise of a \$10 million gift in 2008 from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in addition to \$90 million in matching funds from the organization during the next 10 years, The Promise will provide up to \$5,000 a year to eligible students, beginning with the Class of 2008. If the district enacts a graduation exam for the Class of 2012, eligible students could get as much as \$10,000 a year.

About 1,350 students who graduated from Pittsburgh Public Schools last year attend colleges, universities or trade schools, said Edward Jones, the district's project manager of The Promise.

The district's enrollment this year is 28,013. It is projected to decline to 22,435 in the 2016-17 academic year, when the number of seniors pursuing higher education would drop to 792 without The Promise, according to a model developed by McKinsey & Co., a Downtown consulting firm.

Because of The Promise, the model predicts the number of college-bound seniors in the district will climb to 1,643 over 10 years because more students will attend city schools, more students will graduate and more graduates will continue their education.

Tuarone Washington, 45, of Stanton Heights and her 17-year-old daughter, Tasheanna, attended a meeting Monday night at Peabody High School to learn more about The Promise.

"It's a wonderful thing to give kids an opportunity to go to college without having to pay back a student loan and start off being in debt like I did," Tuarone Washington said.

Tasheanna, a senior at Peabody, said she and her classmates are excited about the Promise scholarships.

"I do believe my fellow students will work hard to keep their grades up and to know that they will succeed and do something with their life," she said.

The Promise might not only stop the drain of students from the district but also boost enrollment at the 96 colleges, universities and trade schools where district graduates may use the Promise scholarships. Eligible schools include private schools in Allegheny County and 65 public schools in Pennsylvania.

The program comes at a time when the population decline of the region is reducing the number of high school graduates -- a source of concern among local colleges. In Allegheny County alone, the Pennsylvania Department of Education predicts the number of high school seniors will drop from 13,156 in the 2006-07 school year to 10,739 in the 2016-17 year.

"We think we're going to be able to get more students" because of The Promise, said Charles Blocksidge, vice president of organizational development at Community College of Allegheny County.

With 372 freshmen from city high schools, CCAC is the most popular choice for district graduates.

"Anything that increases the number coming to us -- especially at a time of projected decline in the number of students out there -- is a good thing," said Carlow University Provost Gary Smith. "If students go to college here, there's a tendency for them to stay here, and they contribute back to the region."

With 35 freshmen from city schools, Carlow is the seventh-most popular choice among graduates of the city school district and the most popular private school.

The Carlow and CCAC data are from 2005, the last year for which the city school district has such data.

As The Promise encourages more city students to go to college or a trade school, it will spend more money. The McKinsey model indicates that \$4 million will be needed in 2008, the first year of operation, rising to \$16 million by 2017.

The model takes into account the additional graduating classes that will receive the aid for four years; increases in the number of students attending colleges; annual tuition increases; and a return of 6 percent a year on The Promise's investments.

Jones said the model assumes 1,100 of about 1,900 graduating seniors will be eligible for the scholarships. About 550 students will not seek education after high school, and another 250 will not meet the scholarship requirement of a C grade average in the first year.

In subsequent years, students must have a C-plus average to receive the

maximum award. They also must meet attendance standards based on unexcused absences and days suspended.

The Pittsburgh Foundation, which is managing and running The Promise, aims to have a plan in the next two weeks for raising the matching funds. Grantmakers of Western Pennsylvania, a group of local foundations, is sponsoring a meeting of foundation officials next month to discuss the plan, said Richard W. Reed, executive vice president of The Pittsburgh Foundation.

"I am hopeful we can get the contributions and commitments to make a significant dent in the challenge within the first two years," Reed said.

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