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**HEADLINE:** **Kalamazoo Promise** boosts economy

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**BODY:**

About six months ago, anonymous donors in **Kalamazoo** set up the **Kalamazoo Promise**, a fund open exclusively to **Kalamazoo** students who've been in the public school system since at least 9th grade. The **Promise** will cover 65 to 100 percent of each student's tuition costs at any public state of Michigan university or community college, depending on how long the student's been in the system.

It's slated to run for at least 13 years. This year's graduating class will be the first eligible for funds. While there must be a certain level of bitterness for those who've already graduated from **Kalamazoo** Public Schools, the hopes for the future are astounding. The requirements for the program are simple. Students don't need to meet any GPA, extracurricular or financial need requirements -- all graduating seniors will be awarded funds equally, depending on how long they've been in KPS. Once in college, they only to need maintain a 2.0 GPA.

On a number of levels, the **Promise** is, well, promising. At bare minimum, it comes as much-needed support for the public school system. The **Promise** also seems like an economic boon for **Kalamazoo** -- so much so, in fact, that The Wall Street Journal actually covered the story on its front page on March 10. Closings of major manufacturing plants like Upjohn Co. and General Motors have left **Kalamazoo** with a poverty rate of 25 percent. As housing markets downstate (and elsewhere) begin to flounder, **Kalamazoo's** growth since the announcement of the **Promise** has actually begun to move from the suburbs into the city, rather than from the city into the suburbs.

Allen Edwin Homes, which built 189 homes in the suburbs but not a single one in the city proper in 2005, plans to put up 70 houses in **Kalamazoo** this year. In the next five years, they're hoping to build around 500. It isn't just **Kalamazoo** suburbanites moving into the city. People from states other than Michigan have found the plan to be a powerful incentive to move. Marie Buccilli, a single mother of three, has moved her entire family

from Tucson, Arizona to **Kalamazoo**. Buccilli had been considering attending Western Michigan University but was uncertain if the move was right for her kids. With the **promise** of 80-95 percent free college tuition for all three, her uncertainty vanished.

Although no companies have officially transplanted to the area yet, regional development agency Southwest Michigan First recently reported the number of inquiries from small businesses has quadrupled to 20-25 calls per week. The boost will help **Kalamazoo** students contribute to Michigan's economy, as the funds are only good for tuition within the state. WMU has even offered an extra discount to students receiving **Promise** funds: housing at 50 percent off. The true wonder to the program is that it's one of the first basically non-discriminatory scholarship programs.

Students and their families do not need to meet any specific level of financial need, minority status, extracurricular involvement, GPA requirement or testing level to be eligible. Since only students in the public school system are eligible, the **Promise** eliminates the classism of private and public school students competing for the same scholarships. Perhaps most promising is the growing interest across the country. Philadelphia officials came to examine the program in February and Newton, Iowa, another expiring manufacturing city, is trying to pass a sales tax to fund a Newton **Promise** program modeled after the K-Zoo **Promise**.

Much-needed changes in public school K-12 education and higher education funding are starting to seem not quite as impossible as they've been since No Child Left Behind's emphasis on standardized testing. As officials continue to hammer and haw about funding the war in Iraq, Social Security and the behemoth of the U.S. education system, it's comforting that a group of individuals -- in **Kalamazoo**, of all places -- cares enough about local students and economy to put up funds to keep the city alive. If only every city -- and student -- were so lucky.

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