



PROJECT MUSE®

The Power of a Promise

Miller-Adams, Michelle

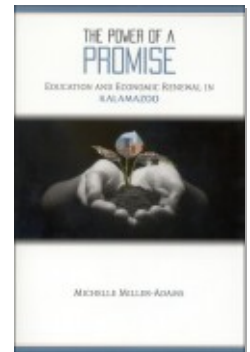
Published by W.E. Upjohn Institute

Miller-Adams, Michelle.

The Power of a Promise: Education and Economic Renewal in Kalamazoo.

Kalamazoo: W.E. Upjohn Institute, 2009.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/17383>

Preface

This story began for me at 7:59 a.m. on November 11, 2005, minutes after taking my daughter to preschool in our hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Tuning in to the local public radio station at the top of the hour, I was surprised and a bit puzzled to hear that the superintendent of the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) had announced a new scholarship program that would send all graduates of the school district to college for free. After spending 25 years in higher education, first as a student and then a professor, I knew a fair amount about financial aid, including these two basic facts: almost all scholarships are awarded on the basis of academic merit or financial need, and few cover the entire cost of college. The news seemed too simple and sweeping to be true.

Later that day, the local newspaper offered these specifics: The Kalamazoo Promise would provide scholarships to every KPS graduate who had resided in the district for at least four years. The scholarships could be used at any public college or university in the state, and, depending on how long one had attended KPS, would cover between 65 percent and 100 percent of tuition and mandatory fees. For students who had lived in the district and attended its schools since kindergarten, the full cost of college tuition and fees would be paid by the anonymous donors who had bestowed the Kalamazoo Promise on my community.

It was immediately clear that this program held the potential to transform not just the college-going patterns of Kalamazoo's young people and the personal finances of their parents, but the entire community—indeed, even the region. As an investment in the human capital of every high school graduate of an urban school district, it was unprecedented. As a catalyst for other investments—well, who could tell?

My years in Kalamazoo had been marked by alternating bouts of hope and anxiety as I watched the city and its urban school district struggle against a tide of corporate downsizing and persistent unemployment. Every step forward—a new hospital building or the renovation of the downtown mall—seemed to be followed by a step backward—another plant closing or the next in a series of corporate mergers. As high-paying jobs evaporated, middle-class families left the region, which decreased overall enrollment and led to a growing concentration of poor and minority children in the public schools. As perceptions of the school district deteriorated, many of the middle-class families still living in the city opted to send their children to private or parochial schools, or to move a short distance to a neighboring school district. The cycle fed on itself, with negative perceptions translating into a harsher reality, and the increasing challenges faced by the school district in turn worsening public perceptions of it.

Now this simple gift holds the promise of reversing the cycle. Not only will the scholarships ease the debt burden of middle-income college students and open new doors for low-income youth, they also may help reverse the decline of both the school district and the city of Kalamazoo, a midsized community located halfway between Chicago and Detroit. The Kalamazoo Promise could even become a model of education-based economic renewal for the many other cities across the nation struggling with similar challenges.

A few years ago, I wrote a book about asset-based strategies for fighting poverty. Through my research, I encountered communities and organizations that worked with low-income people in many different settings to help them acquire new human, economic, and social assets and enhance the value of those they already possessed. The Kalamazoo Promise struck me as an asset-building opportunity of unparalleled proportions, opening up avenues for Kalamazoo's young people to increase their human capital; raising the value of residents' economic assets, especially their homes; and strengthening the social fabric. Best of all, it was happening in my own backyard. As a social scientist interested in community asset building, a citizen concerned about the deepening divide between rich and poor in my hometown and beyond, a resident of the KPS district, and the mother of a four-year-old, I could not imagine a more satisfying research topic. And so I embarked on the path that led to this book.

Along the way, I have had exceptional access to and support from individuals throughout the community. Above all, I am grateful for the sponsorship of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, which funded this research, and in particular for the ongoing support of its president, Dr. Randall W. Eberts. The Institute's staff of economists, analysts, and librarians has enriched my research and this book. Special thanks to my colleagues Tim Bartik, George Erickcek, Kevin Hollenbeck, Sarah Klerk, and Bridget Timmeney for their gracious assistance with this project and their invaluable contributions. I would also like to thank my former student and friend Elizabeth Garlow for her research assistance and the publications staff of the Upjohn Institute for their superb editorial and production effort. The insights of urban expert David Rusk and two anonymous reviewers further strengthened this work.

I am also indebted to those individuals throughout Kalamazoo who shared their opinions with me in interviews, and to those who read and commented on portions of this manuscript, including Dr. Janice Brown, Phillip Carra, Pam Kingery, Lee Kirk, and Dr. Michael Rice. The *Kalamazoo Gazette's* publisher James Stephanek, editor-in-chief Rebecca Pierce, and education reporter Julie Mack deserve extra accolades for the space and energy they have devoted to covering all aspects of the Kalamazoo Promise for their readers. Among the friends who offered personal support for this project and engaged in endless

conversation about it, Paula Eckert played a special role. I am grateful once again to have the opportunity to thank my parents, Rachel Galperin and Gerald Miller, for their confidence in me from my earliest years to the present. I have been inspired throughout this research by the growth and development of my daughter, Eliana Adams, who has already benefited from the wonderful array of educational opportunities available in Kalamazoo, and whose life will continue to be enriched by this community's many assets.

Author's note: Updated data and information about the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise is available through the Web site of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research at <http://www.upjohninstitute.org/promise/index.htm>.

