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The Power of a Promise

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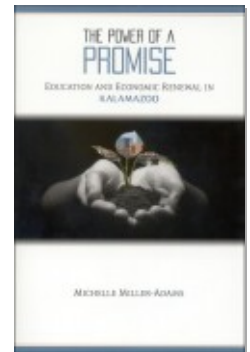
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The Challenge of Community Alignment

When the Kalamazoo Promise was announced, the community's initial response of "Wow!" soon gave way to a collective "What now?" As it became clear that the anonymous donors were genuinely intent on remaining anonymous, this question took on added urgency. It was widely understood that the scholarship program was only a part of what it would take to achieve the full economic development potential of the Kalamazoo Promise, but there was quite literally no one at the helm to guide the communal effort that would be needed to advance the program's broader goals.

In this respect, the announcement came at an especially challenging time for Kalamazoo. Until the mid-1990s, most major community initiatives had depended heavily for both leadership and financial resources on the area's largest employer, the Upjohn Company. However, with the 1995 merger, downsizing of the local workforce, and the relocation of its corporate headquarters away from Kalamazoo, the company could no longer be relied upon to fulfill this role. Unlike in neighboring Battle Creek, where there are few contenders to assume the mantle of leadership from the Kellogg Company should it leave town, Kalamazoo is home to other large employers, such as Western Michigan University and two large hospitals. But no single entity is in the position to exercise the kind of influence the Upjohn Company once had. And even though this change had been under way for some time, the community had not yet fully adapted to it.

The anonymity of the Kalamazoo Promise donors is particularly important in light of this shift in the leadership paradigm. The donors' motivations for remaining anonymous have never been stated, but there are several plausible reasons. One is simply to avoid having to respond to any criticism of the program or concerns about conflicts of interest. (Negative publicity along these lines has indeed been an issue in several communities, including Denver and Pittsburgh.)¹ Another is to keep from being drawn into the day-to-day administrative or decision-

making tasks surrounding the program. Also relevant is a long tradition of anonymous philanthropy in Kalamazoo suggestive of a genuine desire to avoid the spotlight. (The Kalamazoo Promise is only one, albeit the largest, of a number of sizeable gifts to community institutions given anonymously.) The donors' decision may also have been a strategic one made to maximize the catalytic impact of their gift—in other words, to prompt others in the community to step up and assume responsibility for implementing the Kalamazoo Promise and ensuring its success.

Whether or not this was their intention, the donors' anonymity indeed strengthened the program's catalytic impact by effectively creating a power vacuum at the center of the Kalamazoo Promise. And into this vacuum the community rushed with a myriad of initiatives and ideas (see the profiles highlighted in this chapter). Those prompted to act by the donors' investment responded in many productive ways. Parents volunteered in the schools, some for the first time. Churches introduced mentoring programs. New opportunities were created for students to recover credits and graduate on time. The local community college and university strengthened their services for first-generation college attendees. Businesses developed programs to support the economic goals of the Kalamazoo Promise. Yet even three years later, these efforts remained diffuse and uncoordinated.

It is easy to get excited about the Kalamazoo Promise. The scholarship program is inclusive (within the KPS district); generous; politically neutral, as it involves no use of public funds; and intended to last in perpetuity. But the Kalamazoo Promise was still a shock to the system, and the most pressing question to emerge since its announcement is how the community can best deploy its assets to make the most of such an unprecedented gift.

The response to the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise is as complex as the issues raised by the program. The Promise has spurred some organizations to take on new tasks or conduct their business in different ways. It has brought some new entities into existence. And it has certainly increased civic pride and raised the spirits of longtime advocates for the urban core and the school district that serves it. But for many residents, the Kalamazoo Promise has had little impact and does not seem relevant to their work or lives.

There are several reasons why a strong and cohesive community response has not materialized. The first is that the potential of the donors'

investment to transform the larger region is not well understood. In particular, the multiple linkages discussed in the previous chapter among an improved educational system, a healthy core city, and a stronger regional economy are not easy to grasp. It is much simpler to treat the Kalamazoo Promise as a scholarship program for KPS residents with school-age children. (Not surprisingly, the most vigorous responses to the Kalamazoo Promise have come from those segments of the community that are most directly affected by it, including not only the schools but also community organizations that support students, parents who have become more involved in their children's education, and real estate agents who expect the program to help them sell houses.)

A second explanation centers on the coordination problems posed by the Kalamazoo Promise. Even if the potential transformative effects of the program were well understood, the challenge of organizing and aligning a complex system, even in a community the size of Kalamazoo, is formidable. The transition to a new leadership paradigm and the lack of a clear coordinating structure compounds this challenge. It may just be a matter of allowing enough time for everyone to absorb the implications of the program. After all, according to Janice Brown, it took several years of conversation for the idea of the Kalamazoo Promise to take shape, and any expectation that the community would rapidly recognize and adapt to the new reality is probably unrealistic. It is more likely, however, that the very complexity of the program's impact is the reason for the lack of a unified response. The potential for widespread change in the educational, economic, and social spheres, coupled with the presence of multiple, overlapping organizations and leaders with longstanding vested interests, means that the Promise actually could exacerbate fragmentation and competition rather than generate greater unity.

The second half of this book examines the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise thus far.² This chapter traces the process through which the local community has organized itself since the announcement of the scholarship program; lessons for other communities are summarized at the end of the chapter. Chapter 5 looks at the impact of the program on students and the schools, and Chapter 6 examines its potential economic impact. Taken together, these chapters provide an account of the changes in social, human, and economic assets that have occurred thus far as a result of the Kalamazoo Promise.

Adams Outdoor Advertising: “It’s What We Can Do”

When Mike Cannon, then the manager of Adams Outdoor’s Kalamazoo office, first heard about the Kalamazoo Promise, he asked him-



self how the company could help. With 500 “faces,” or billboards, in the Kalamazoo region, the answer was easy. Mike talked about his idea with the staff and they agreed that a positive gesture was called for. “The reason we picked the Promise is that more people were tearing it down than were building it up, and that bothered us,” says Cannon.³ Adams Outdoor worked with KPS to develop the message, then designed and produced a billboard and donated the labor, materials, and space to display it in three rotating locales on major thoroughfares in town. The message was simple and powerful: the phrase “Who Benefits From the Promise?” coupled with the raised hands of 15 diverse individuals.

“Based on the business we’re in, we want a thriving community,” says Cannon. “We need commerce, we need transactions happening. If the Kalamazoo Promise brings in more people, more jobs, if the school system improves, then if people had a little bit of money saved for college but they don’t need it anymore, maybe they’ll spend it in town—maybe they’ll eat at that restaurant over there, maybe someone buys a new car over there. I’m not the smartest guy in the world, but what you’re telling me is someone’s going to pay for my kids’ college—that could be \$20,000–\$30,000 apiece. So many people work their tails off

saving that money just to give their kids that opportunity. And all of a sudden, someone's going to give that to my kids—and then to hear 'Oh, it's all just media hype.' We said, 'It's going to benefit everybody—potentially.' All we want is for people to think about that. That's why we have all different kinds of hands, all ages, all colors, working people.”

Adams Outdoors' design was also featured on the cover of the AT&T White & Yellow Pages, published in August 2006 and distributed to 360,000 customers nationwide. AT&T donated the space in support of the Kalamazoo Promise, and Adams Outdoor followed up with a second set of billboards in the fall of 2006 with the message, “I Promise to Get Involved” and the address for the Promise of Greater Kalamazoo Web site.

“We have a vehicle that most companies don't have,” explains Cannon. “I can pretty much reach the entire population of Kalamazoo over a certain period of time. That's a very powerful medium. We can put up any type of message and people are going to drive by and think 'What does that mean?' Then two days later they may see it again and think, 'Hmmm,' then business people will drive by and say, 'Maybe that affects me.' And suddenly they're thinking 'Maybe I should look into this.' There aren't a lot of other companies that can do this—it's what we can do.”

Any account of the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise will require continual updating as the program unfolds, but a realistic ongoing appraisal is essential not only for Kalamazoo but for other communities developing similar programs. As city after city announces plans for a Promise-type plan, it has become clear that there are two equally important components to a successful program: the financial resources to pay for it, and effective community support or alignment. For Kalamazoo, the money was the easy part, arriving as a sudden and unexpected gift, while an aligned and organized community response has proven more elusive. And as time goes by it becomes increasingly clear that the provision of scholarship funds alone, no matter how generous, will fall short of yielding the kind of transformation the donors almost certainly envisioned for their community.

THE TRIUMPHS AND TRAVAILS OF THE SATURDAY MORNING GROUP

The announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise on November 10, 2005, came just three days after local elections in the city of Kalamazoo. Hannah McKinney, an economics professor at Kalamazoo College and a member of the City Commission, would serve as mayor for the next two years by virtue of having won the most votes in the election.⁴ On November 15, the same day that the community gathered in celebration of the Promise, Mayor McKinney announced plans to create a task force to study the institutional changes Kalamazoo should consider if it hoped to leverage the full benefits of the Kalamazoo Promise. “We face a much brighter future with greater options than we faced on election day,” she told the *Kalamazoo Gazette* (Jessup 2005). Pointing out that the Promise has the potential to affect everything from economic development and housing to city budgeting, she stressed that city officials would need to move quickly to get ahead of the issues. “We’re going to have more budget cuts next year, but now we have to cut in a way that still plans for future growth . . . now the budgeting process has to look at parks and recreation, different kinds of policing, and things like sidewalks. We want to be the right city for all of these new people.” In a nod to the fact that the borders of the KPS district extend well beyond city limits, McKinney said the task force would include members of the broader community: “I’m not thinking the work stops with our city.”

The first meeting of what came to be known as the Saturday Morning Group took place a month later, on December 17, 2005. The meeting was convened by three longtime community leaders: Randall W. Eberts, executive director of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research; Jack Hopkins, the then president of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation; and Mayor McKinney. Fourteen other individuals representing the community’s educational, governmental, business, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations were invited to the opening session. The original intention of those guiding the process was that a relatively small group would meet to plan a convening process for the broader community. The emphasis would be on leveraging the economic development potential of the Kalamazoo Promise, with the conveners asking the group “to consider a process to engage the broader

Huntington National Bank: Helping Prospective Homeowners

As a lifelong Kalamazoo resident and community president for Huntington National Bank's regional operations, Jerry Blaisdell thought he would enjoy attending the November 15, 2005, celebration of the Kalamazoo Promise. At the meeting, Janice Brown "conveyed the message that all of us in the community had a responsibility to make the Kalamazoo Promise come true, and that started my thinking about how Huntington could get involved," says Blaisdell (Mack 2006h).

Having secured corporate approval for his idea, Blaisdell announced in March 2006 that Huntington National Bank had created a \$5 million loan fund for home buyers purchasing a residence within the KPS district. The program, aimed at buyers with little or no money for a down payment and/or credit scores that fall below the usual cutoff, offers a lower interest rate than other zero-down mortgages and waives the costly private mortgage insurance requirement.

The mortgages, which are available to anyone buying a home within the district whether or not they have children, are kept in the bank's own portfolio, which means they do not have to conform to the rules of the secondary mortgage market (for example, if a buyer has a credit score below the minimum cutoff of 620, he or she would need to turn to a subprime lender; Huntington can offer this customer a mortgage at the rate that those with credit scores above the cutoff would receive). The mortgage fund supports mortgages for up to 50 home buyers. By March 2008, \$3.5 million in mortgages had been funded, the majority of which could not have been done conventionally. The program has been authorized through 2008, and may continue beyond that date.

If a customer's credit problems are too severe to qualify for the Huntington program, its loan officials refer them to the credit repair and home ownership program offered by Kalamazoo Neighborhood Housing Services (KNHS). "Some people can graduate out of KNHS and come back here. Because of the Kalamazoo Promise, if people start thinking early enough, and their children are young enough, they can do the rehabilitation, they can do the financial literacy to get ready and get into a home. I would be absolutely thrilled as an individual and as part of the community if we somehow were able to approve a deal and get a family or an individual into a household that they may not have otherwise been able to do. And I feel like we've done that."²⁵

community in an inclusive discussion of the long-term economic issues presented by this unprecedented initiative.”⁶ The organizers hoped that this would be a short-term task, with both the narrow and broader convening processes occurring within a three-month period.

With the help of a facilitator, this group, along with some additional members, met again in January and February 2006 for lengthy discussions that focused on the potential of the Kalamazoo Promise as a transformative investment for the region. Among the positive economic development contributions identified were the possibility of reduced expenses for the criminal justice system, freeing up funds that could be more productively spent on economic development; the possibility of intergovernmental cooperation around issues like zoning and public services; and the likely enhancement of the image of Kalamazoo through efforts to position itself as the “Education City”—a community that has come together around the mission of education for all.

Some of the thorniest issues related to the Kalamazoo Promise also surfaced in these early discussions. Participants stressed that if children in the public schools aren’t prepared to make use of the Promise, the community won’t realize the long-term economic development opportunities the program presents. Cultural change in homes, schools, and neighborhoods would be required, with a higher value placed on academic achievement. Leaders would need to look honestly at issues of racism and economic disparity in Kalamazoo, as well as the lack of trust in the schools and city government harbored by some members of the community.

As the agenda grew beyond the initial question of leveraging the scholarship program for economic development purposes, it became clear that understanding the implications of the Promise, let alone aligning the community around it, would be a far more complex endeavor than first anticipated. (For example, at one of its early meetings the group generated a list of possible investments the community could make to leverage the Promise; there were 19 in all, ranging from helping students complete college and strengthening the area’s infrastructure, to marketing the region and providing early childhood education.) To accommodate the expanding agenda, the group identified four strategic priorities, each to be explored by a subset of the larger committee

and all embedded in the mission of making education the catalyst for regional vitality. The priorities were

- 1) to provide outstanding education to all students,
- 2) to engage the community to ensure every student succeeds,
- 3) to continue to revitalize the urban core, and
- 4) to create a “region of choice” for economic development.

On April 20, 2006, the full committee reconvened to hear reports on each subgroup’s activities. Craig Misner, then head of the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency (KRESA), the region’s intermediate school district, and Marilyn Schlack, the president of KVCC, had assumed responsibility for the “outstanding education” subgroup (Priority 1). They told the gathering about a meeting that had taken place among the area’s three college presidents and 10 school superintendents. The conveners had made the case to their colleagues that the Kalamazoo Promise could serve to promote excellence in school systems across the region, rather than increasing competition among them. Embracing the idea of education as a catalyst for community transformation, the 10 superintendents had agreed to work together to use the Kalamazoo Promise as a positive tool for regional excellence in education, rather than allowing a competition for resources to erupt among them.

Pam Kingery, the head of Kalamazoo Communities In Schools (KCIS), David Gardiner, vice president for community investment at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, and Pastor J. Louis Felton, president of the Northside Ministerial Alliance, were the conveners of the subgroup on student success (Priority 2). They reported on a March 22 meeting of 27 community organizations committed to thinking and acting cohesively to support students in light of the Kalamazoo Promise. This group became one of the most important drivers of community change in the months ahead.

Mayor McKinney and Mayor Peter Strazdas of the city of Portage had taken charge of the urban revitalization subgroup (Priority 3). Their initial endeavor was a town hall meeting to elicit public comment and allow residents to air their hopes and concerns about the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise. The message delivered by the mayors was that the urban core is not just the city of Kalamazoo, but includes much

of Portage and neighboring townships and villages. Mayor McKinney was well acquainted with the economic development challenges posed by Michigan's little-box jurisdictional system, having firsthand experience of the tensions that surface from time to time between Kalamazoo and its neighbors over business subsidies, tax incentives, and the cost of services. One of her concerns was that the primary development impact of the Kalamazoo Promise might occur outside city boundaries (in the townships that are part of KPS) and contribute to greater competition among municipalities. The mayor encouraged government officials throughout the region to "buy in" to the Kalamazoo Promise and use it as a catalyst for collaboration among public sector entities. While not all the municipalities in the region are direct beneficiaries of the scholarship program, they all stand to benefit from any population growth, income growth, or business investment that might materialize in the wake of the Promise.

The regional economic development subgroup (Priority 4) was convened by the W.E. Upjohn Institute's Randall Eberts and David Sanford, acting president of the Chamber of Commerce. They reported on their conversations with business leaders and what they saw as their number one job: to make sure that businesses throughout the county understand the importance of education and its link to economic development and growth. The need for an effective communication strategy, including media outreach, the development of an integrated Web site, and the use of the Kalamazoo Promise as a "branding" tool for the community, would form an important focus of the work of this subgroup going forward.

At the conclusion of the Saturday Morning Group's April meeting, members expressed their intention to "move beyond process" and reconvene two months later with action plans in hand. Momentum at this point shifted to the four subgroups, some of which moved more decisively than others to advance their work. In August 2006, the conveners of the subgroups met for a planning session, although the larger group did not reconvene until September 2007.

How successful was this early steering process, and what did participants have to show for their effort? Much of the energy of the Saturday Morning Group was spent articulating a vision, identifying priorities, and exploring the connections among them. In retrospect, this conceptual work was tremendously valuable and continues to provide

The Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra “Harmony in Community”

The Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra (KSO) was the first of the community’s arts organizations to recognize the potential of the Kalamazoo Promise to provide a conceptual framework for its work. In 2007, the orchestra’s marketing director, Thom Andrews, proposed to the staff and board a new way of thinking about KSO—as an organization whose goals and activities align with and support the educational and economic goals of the Kalamazoo Promise.

To remain vital, arts organizations continually seek to remain relevant to their communities. “In Kalamazoo, we are extremely fortunate to have a clearly articulated priority and confidence in the unwavering commitment of the community to this priority,” says Andrews. “It is *The Promise of a Greater Kalamazoo*—an initiative built on the belief that education is the key to community building . . . The Promise is a long-term effort to convert Kalamazoo’s economy from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based economy and to attract people to move to or return to Kalamazoo.”⁷

To support this effort, Andrews proposed that the orchestra think about its activities in terms of the four subgoals of the Promise introduced during Promise Week in December 2006:

- 1) **Educational excellence**, encompassing the organization’s arts-integrated curriculum, musical study opportunities, and youth concerts.
- 2) **Student success**, encompassing programs that award or honor exceptional musical achievement, provide performance experiences, and encourage musical exploration.
- 3) **Community vitality**, encompassing performances in Kalamazoo and surrounding communities, including free summer park concerts and collaboration with other arts organizations.
- 4) **Economic development**, encompassing KSO’s economic impact on the region through the employment of staff and musicians, national recruiting efforts, and attraction of people from surrounding counties to the core city for KSO concerts.

Andrews recognized that this four-part framework reflects priorities that will be central to the community for the next generation. “There’s

really little risk in aligning yourself with this and probably greater risk in not . . . It means that we can dream with confidence.”

Among the specific activities undertaken by KSO are using the symphony’s opening night concert to promote and facilitate the recruitment of volunteers for community organizations, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and Kalamazoo Communities In Schools; providing information about the scholarship program at KSO events; devoting the orchestra’s January concerts (which often coincide with Martin Luther King Jr. Day) to an annual celebration of the Promise; and honoring school music programs during the symphony’s observance of Music in Our Schools Month in March.

“Organizations wishing to be relevant in this community must be engaged in these efforts,” says Andrews. “Those who engage strongly now will make the greatest impact in the long term and be in the best position to gain from the growth yet to come.”

a robust framework for understanding the multiple challenges involved in a program such as the Kalamazoo Promise. The group’s ongoing discussions helped clarify two distinct arenas for change—education (encompassing the first pair of strategic priorities, educational excellence and student support) and economic development (covering the second pair, the urban core and the broader region)—and identify the actors involved in each area. The loose coordinating structure also succeeded in setting in motion more intensive work by two of the four subgroups that had important implications for the community.

Yet as a central organizing structure for community efforts around the Kalamazoo Promise, the Saturday Morning Group had some serious shortcomings. First, and perhaps ironically, was the senior status of the people involved. While many of the community’s most respected leaders participated in the process and gave generously of their time and knowledge, the group was made up of individuals who have demanding, full-time jobs, such as running school districts or heading colleges and foundations. The coconvener structure, with eight individuals guiding the process, suffered from the same problem, and without tangible and agreed upon milestones or other mechanisms for holding each other accountable, collective leadership was extremely difficult to sustain. In an effort to circumvent this problem, the coconvener at their August

2006 meeting discussed the idea of appointing a single person to serve as convener and spokesperson for the ongoing organizing process. The group's top pick for the role turned down the invitation because of other commitments, but the idea of finding an individual to act as a guiding hand—a sort of “Promise Czar”—has surfaced periodically since then.

A second shortcoming is that the group was never intended to be either responsive to or representative of the broader community, and this led some to question its legitimacy. In the absence of a designated leadership structure for the Kalamazoo Promise, it was up to the community to organize itself, and the group that assembled on that Saturday morning in December 2005 was largely self-appointed. Initially convened to discuss the regional economic potential of the Kalamazoo Promise, a number of key players were not present, and as the group's mission broadened to address virtually all aspects of economic and community development, their absence became increasingly problematic. Because the group brought together the usual roster of community elites, and because its conversations were carried out in closed sessions, unsure of what, if anything, they might yield, the process also intensified feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement on the part of some of the community's grassroots leaders.

Perhaps most important, the effectiveness of the Saturday Morning Group was constrained simply by the fact that the real work of organizational alignment and system change cannot be done by a handful of senior leaders meeting every few months. It takes place through a deeper and more intensive process, when organizations and individuals recognize the need for change and implement it from within. Similarly, the idea of appointing a single leader or small steering committee to guide the course of community alignment does not sit well with many who believe that it would be a poor substitute for top-to-bottom (or bottom-to-top) community transformation.

THE COMMUNITY STEPS UP

At the same time that the Saturday Morning Group was working to create an overall framework for achieving the broader goals of the Kalamazoo Promise, grassroots organizations were developing lo-

cal programs to transform their communities from within. Many of these were centered on Kalamazoo's Northside, a low-income, African American neighborhood adjacent to downtown. Within a few days of the announcement of the Promise, a group of retired educators and other concerned citizens began meeting at one of the area's large Baptist churches to discuss how children from their community could benefit from the Promise. Mentoring programs for area youth were initiated at several neighborhood churches. The Northside Ministerial Alliance's weekly meetings of religious and community leaders became a venue for information sharing about the Promise. Rallies and information sessions were held to mobilize families, assist with college loan applications, and provide information about the requirements for the program.

Because of the timing of the announcement, there was an intense focus on helping the current cohort of high school seniors, already half-way through their final year: "Since the announcement, we've been rushing, literally scrambling, to get them ready for college—get them to fill out college applications and so forth," said the Rev. J. Louis Felton, pastor of Galilee Baptist Church. "Some of these students never considered going to college until now" (Mack 2006f). Dr. Charles Warfield, a professor of education at WMU and one of the community's most respected African American leaders, pointed out some of the challenges these graduates and their parents would face: "Many will be first generation students at schools, which says many of them do not have a clue about what goes on in higher education, how it operates, and how to make its systems work for you." The high cost of textbooks and the meaning of standardized test scores are just two items of concern: "If I'm your professor and I tell you to get these books, and one book costs \$100, you walk away saying 'I've got to have \$500 here just for books.' Where's that money coming from? And again, just because educators know what the MEAP [Michigan's former standardized test] is does not mean the general public knows what it is. They know their kids take a test every year, but when you say, 'Well you got this MEAP score,' people just look at each other and say 'What's that?'"⁸ By bringing together potential first-generation college students and church members with experience in higher education, Northside leaders hoped to arm students in advance with the knowledge they would need to manage the transition to college.

Another dimension of the grassroots response was an outpouring of support from KPS parents, many of whom called their child's school principal directly to ask how they could help. (One parent described the immediate emotional impact of the Kalamazoo Promise as "unimaginable," recounting the "looks of sympathy, pity, and shock" she had received in the past when telling friends or colleagues that her children attended a KPS school.)⁹ It was clear immediately that individual schools would not have the capacity to channel the work of volunteers effectively, so KCIS was asked by the school district to coordinate volunteer efforts. (A link on the Kalamazoo Promise Web site under "Get Involved" takes users directly to the KCIS volunteer information form.) "It's extremely critical that volunteers experience success, and that's the specialty of Kalamazoo Communities In Schools," said Superintendent Brown. Timothy Bartik, the then president of the KPS board, concurred: "It's one thing to sign up volunteers. It's another to give them an experience that makes them want to continue to sign up, and still another to give them a project that will do students some good" (Mack 2006g).

To capitalize on the surge in volunteers and begin the process of coordinating the work of multiple community organizations, KCIS announced that a Community Partners Meeting would be held on February 8, 2006. For many, this would be their first opportunity to discuss student needs in the context of the Kalamazoo Promise, and the response was overwhelming. Organizers, who had initially expected 50 people to attend, changed the meeting's location three times to find a space large enough to accommodate all those who were interested. Ultimately, over 150 people were present for a morning-long session devoted to identifying priority needs and developing strategies for getting resources into the schools.

The Community Partners meeting set the agenda for much of the work on student support that would take place over the following year and provided a venue for a diverse set of speakers who crystallized both the opportunities and challenges inherent in the Promise, as the following sampling of comments reveals:¹⁰

- Superintendent Janice Brown spoke of how the Promise had changed the rules by making every KPS student "college material." The question is no longer "*Are* you going to college? It's

Where are you going to college?” Given the potential of this opportunity to alter students’ life prospects, failure is not an option.

- Pastor Louis Felton stressed the need to address not just the ideal vision of Kalamazoo, but also the reality, including the fact that “we live in one of the most segregated communities in Michigan.” Another painful reality is that the current educational system has tacitly acknowledged that not every student will succeed. He called on community members to find something in every child that can be awakened and transformed: “Every Kalamazooan should be a donor to the Promise, a partner with, an investor in, a stakeholder in the Promise.”
- Von Washington, Jr., at the time principal of the alternative high school, called school a “daily drudgery” for many students. “The kids don’t know what this means,” he said. “They don’t believe it is something for them. Their dreams are very few and very minimal at this point.”
- Lauren Daniels-Davies, a junior at Kalamazoo Central High School, shared a list of needs that had been identified in a survey of 120 high school students. Among the priorities mentioned were undisturbed sleep, mentors, a library card, YMCA memberships, alarm clocks, health care, college visits, bus tokens to attend after-school programs, tickets to plays, and help getting an e-mail address—basic needs that many of those in attendance had not thought of.
- Kevin Campbell, the principal of Milwood Middle School, decried the unofficial “tracking” of children as early as kindergarten. “By second or third grade,” he told the audience, “some kids are identifying themselves as nonachieving, and they’ve essentially abandoned literacy by the time they’re in middle school. We’re trying to convince kids to get on a path that they don’t believe they’re on.” A change in the mindset of both students and teachers is needed if the potential of the Promise is to be realized. “WMU could be in Canada for many kids,” said Campbell, speaking of the lack of familiarity many residents have with the higher education resources in their midst. “Their world is their neighborhood.”

As attendees discussed student needs in the areas of academic and life skills, mental health and substance abuse, college admission and retention, physical health and basic needs, and parental and family support, the breadth of the issues facing the community began to take shape. Participants recognized that the school district cannot and should not be responsible for meeting all of these needs and that the support of churches and community organizations was essential. Parents, especially, would need to change their mindsets, and if they can't support their children's aspirations, another positive adult relationship must be forged. At the meeting's conclusion, everyone present was asked to submit a Promise Commitment Card asking what resources or services their organization could contribute to the daunting task ahead.

The issues that surfaced at the Community Partners meeting were taken up by the community engagement task force that coalesced a month later as a result of the Saturday Morning Group process. Charged by its conveners with "helping us think and act as one community to help all of our children succeed," this group of two dozen individuals from educational, nonprofit, and social service organizations met regularly from March through August 2006. In its work, the task force relied on consultants funded by the Kalamazoo Community Foundation and the Greater Kalamazoo United Way, who identified high-impact strategies to improve outcomes for students at all developmental levels and undertook a landscape assessment of local organizations in the community already using these strategies. Ultimately, four high-impact areas—parental involvement, in-school health care (including mental health), out-of-school time programming, and mentoring—were identified as key strategies for focusing KCIS resources most effectively.

A second community engagement process was launched in November 2006 under the leadership of Joseph Kretovics, head of the GEAR UP program based at Western Michigan University's College of Education.¹¹ Those close to the process saw this initiative as a reflection of dissatisfaction with the engagement efforts already under way, particularly the degree of minority representation. Indeed, the group's first meeting drew 40 attendees, many of whom had not taken part in other efforts, and the discussion centered on leadership and whether the current engagement process, including the Saturday Morning Group and the community engagement task force, was sufficiently inclusive. There was general agreement on the need to avoid duplication and build on

Pathways to the Promise: Supporting Children and Families

With professional backgrounds as school psychologists and counselors, Ruby Sledge and Cassandra Bridges can recognize a struggling child when they see one, and their church, Mt. Zion Baptist in Kalamazoo's Northside neighborhood, is a place where the families of many such children worship. In 2001, with financial support from the church, they founded the After School Homework Center to provide local elementary school children with homework assistance, tutoring, and leadership training. The program, which operates four afternoons a week during the school year, draws an average of 40 elementary school children daily. A year later, the church added a Summer Youth Program that offers six weeks of full-day programming that combines a focus on academic skills with the kind of camp experience many of these children have never had, such as tennis instruction, swimming, photography, and arts activities. When the Kalamazoo Promise was announced, the staff and volunteers involved in Mt. Zion's youth ministry activities found a new focus, structure, and energy for their work: they added a teen homework program, as well as a component for parents. The entire set of family support efforts was given a new name: Pathways to the Promise.

Sledge and Bridges drew on their own life experiences in creating Pathways to the Promise. Both women have lived through times of racial, geographic, and socioeconomic tensions. While their parents were not highly educated, they understood that education was critical to the success of their children. The message they passed along is that "success is not based only on whether you have the financial means to further yourself. Children can be successful based on what their parents believe, what they believe, what they do and what they say."¹² The Parent Program seeks to instill this conviction in church families regardless of their income or educational standing. At meetings, parents are asked to create mission and vision statements for their families to help them internalize the message that they are also responsible for their children's outcomes. These statements are used to identify short- and long-term goals and define the respective roles of the parent and child. Discussion of the importance of family structure and rules, as well as the idea that learning is something that goes on in the home every day, has helped parents find ways to be-

come more supportive, consistent, and positive in their interactions with their children.

Retired and current educators who are members of the church support Pathways to the Promise on a volunteer basis as teachers, mentors, aides, program evaluators, and counselors. Several small local grants have also enabled the program to hire local teens as teacher aides and tutors and provide gift certificates for school supplies and clothing to families that have participated successfully in the parent program.

Long before the Kalamazoo Promise was created, Ruby Sledge and Cassandra Bridges acted on their belief that “all children have the opportunity to graduate and go to college. You are smart enough, you have everything you need. You are going to succeed. There are no excuses.” By using the resources of their church and fellow congregants to connect families with the support they need, they are making this belief real.

existing infrastructure but a lower degree of consensus over the role of KCIS. (Some observers point out that WMU faculty and staff were overrepresented in this group, perhaps indicating the university’s desire to become more involved with the Promise, as well as the need for closer integration between WMU and the broader community.) The debate shifted when Janice Brown joined the conversation, which was taking place in a meeting room at the KPS administration building, and forcefully enjoined the group to embrace KCIS’s leadership: “KCIS has been identified as the lead group for organizing community resources around students.” In her characteristically direct style, Dr. Brown asked those present, “Are you willing to be led?” And while perhaps not the most tactful language in a roomful of leaders who had invested years in building their own organizations, those present seemed willing to consider the idea. Pastor Milton Wells, leader of the Eastside neighborhood’s Open Door Ministries, spoke on behalf of many when he replied, “We already have a structure; now we have to decide if we’re going to work together.”¹³

There were two impediments to KCIS successfully fulfilling this lead role. First, the organization is funded through private contributions and grants, and lacks sufficient resources to respond to the new demands being placed on it. The presence of a site coordinator in fewer

than half of the district's school buildings has created a two-tiered system through which services are accessed, as well as varying degrees of resentment by other area school districts whose students are not served by KCIS. Second, some community members distrust KCIS, a few because of negative personal experiences, others because they view the organization as allied with a school district and its leadership that, in their view, had failed to address the needs of low-income, minority children. If stronger leadership were to be placed in the hands of KCIS, it was widely recognized within and outside the organization that these concerns would need to be addressed.

With parallel community-wide engagement processes under way, a coordinated response seemed further out of reach than ever. But subsequent meetings of the GEAR-UP-initiated group led to a general acceptance of the premise that the most effective route to providing young people with support is to have a single organization coordinate services. Two suggestions for addressing community concerns included a broadening of the KCIS board to involve parents and leaders of youth-serving organizations (the organization's board consists mainly of well-connected representatives of business and government agencies), and to ensure that KCIS is able to link children with services delivered through churches and neighborhood organizations, not just the schools.

Ultimately, a document expressing these views was presented to and endorsed by the boards of KPS, KCIS, and the Kalamazoo Regional Chamber of Commerce, and KCIS launched a process of organizing its activities around the four high-impact strategies identified by the community engagement task force. Recommendations were developed for implementing each of the strategies, and advisory groups were formed to guide the implementation process. Kalamazoo Communities In Schools staff members charged with facilitating the groups cast their nets widely, inviting grassroots leaders and practitioners to participate. Each of the advisory group's membership includes a cross-section of human service representatives who meet regularly to coordinate service delivery. The KCIS board also announced an ambitious capital campaign to raise \$2.7 million in operating funds for the organization for 2008–2010 in order to support an expansion of its capacity.

While these community engagement processes were unfolding, another effort got under way—this one aimed at a constituency outside of Kalamazoo. In spring 2006, a self-appointed group that included

school, government, and community leaders began meeting to explore whether the funding from a major national foundation might be secured to create a systemwide approach to investing in children. Operating on the assumption that Kalamazoo is an ideal laboratory for observing the effects of system change, the group explored the idea of integrating schools and the community into a seamless web of support for children from birth to adulthood. The group did this through

- a customized learning approach that actively engages parents during the first years of school, identifies children who need a designated educational coach to provide continuity for school success, and assists parents in advocating for their children;
- a comprehensive menu of options (e.g., early childhood education, mentoring, health and mental health services, summer study opportunities, tutoring) for parents/guardians to select based on an individual child's educational needs;
- an information system to facilitate the creation and monitoring of a personalized success plan for every KPS child; and
- extended learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day and year for all students who need them.¹⁴

Working with Jack Hopkins of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, the group crafted a letter that would be used to contact national foundations interested in youth development and community change in order to assess their interest in the concept. One of the notable features of this exploratory process is that the letter to foundations was signed by leaders of virtually every major educational, governmental, and business organization in the community, suggesting that at least when it came to presenting itself to the outside world, Kalamazoo was able to speak with one voice.¹⁵

EVOLUTION OF THE KALAMAZOO PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP

While the community was engaging with the implications of the Kalamazoo Promise, the scholarship program itself was evolving. Ear-

ly on, there was considerable speculation about how the Kalamazoo Promise would be organized: if it was set up as an endowment or made up of annual contributions from the donors, what guarantees were in place that funds would be provided indefinitely, and where the program would be housed? In the first months after the November announcement, the Kalamazoo Promise was run temporarily from the superintendent's office with no dedicated staff. Kalamazoo Public Schools executive director for communications Alex Lee handled press inquiries, and information about program requirements was accessed through the KPS Web site. It is no surprise that there was some confusion about the fact that the Kalamazoo Promise is organizationally distinct from KPS. (The slogan, "The Kalamazoo Promise, kept exclusively at Kalamazoo Public Schools," probably didn't help.)

It was not until March 2006 that the program hired its first dedicated employee, Kalamazoo Promise administrator Robert Jorth. (As of June 2008, Jorth remained the only employee of the organization.) Jorth's official role is to determine eligibility, maintain a database of students eligible for and receiving the scholarship, and paying scholarship funds to colleges and universities. (Like most scholarship programs, funds are paid directly to the schools.) With no precedents available, Jorth had to create his own procedures for carrying out this work. Moreover, the system would need to be flexible enough to accommodate the terms of the scholarship program, especially students' ability to access funds any time within 10 years of high school graduation.

Jorth's background, including 20 years of corporate experience in quality assurance and database programming, as well as a master's degree in public administration, had prepared him well for such a task. The administrative systems he devised have successfully accommodated the complex data needs of the program while keeping the administrative processes streamlined enough to be carried out by one individual. (The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship application form, for example, fits on a single page.) Jorth also took on responsibilities that go well beyond program administration. "I got my bachelor's degree in English and religion, with the intent of going to seminary," says Jorth, "so I've always had this social ministry thing. All this came together with this job—it just seemed to fit my skill set."¹⁶ Along with Janice Brown, Jorth has served as the public face of the Promise, visiting schools, churches, businesses, and community organizations to talk about the

program and answer questions. He has called students at home to ask why they haven't filled out their application forms or when they plan to register for classes. He has initiated a mentoring program in which current Kalamazoo Promise recipients support incoming freshmen at their colleges and universities. And he spent part of the summer of 2007 meeting with students who had lost their scholarships due to poor academic performance in order to learn what had gone wrong and how it might be addressed.

Jorth does not know who the donors are, and he interacts with them primarily through Janice Brown. But he is clearly inspired by their gift and fulfilled by his role in implementing it. "I have been just stunned by their generosity," says Jorth, "because every time we've gone back to ask them, it is that they want to give this money out, they want people to take advantage of this. This isn't about trying to narrow it down, which I think was the natural inclination of everyone. You'd go to meetings and people would say, 'Do you have to do community service to qualify? Do you have to do this? Do you have to do that?' No, no, and no. I think [the donors] understand that if this is really going to be an economic development initiative, and they really want to address the core city, then they have to be fairly liberal in their interpretation in order to make it possible for people to qualify and take advantage of it."¹⁷

In fall 2006, Jorth moved out of the school district building and into an office at KCIS's new downtown facility (a space donated by one of the city's real estate developers). A new Web site was established with its own domain name—<https://www.kalamazoopromise.com>—and the Kalamazoo Promise was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization. With these changes, the Kalamazoo Promise is more clearly positioned as an entity independent of KPS. The program Jorth runs remains a model of efficiency, with a single person tracking the eligibility of more than 11,000 students and disbursing \$3 million in scholarships to 20 schools. Administrative costs in the first three years of the program were under 5 percent of annual scholarship dollars. Jorth remained the sole employee of the Kalamazoo Promise organization until September 2008, when Janice Brown joined as executive director. Her role is to help align the community and leverage the broader potential of the scholarship program.

The First Day Shoe Fund: Meeting Children's Most Basic Needs

While the Kalamazoo Promise generated a wave of new volunteers in the public schools, for some it simply added new urgency to ongoing work. One example is The First Day Shoe Fund, an initiative to provide low-income KPS children in grades K-2 with a pair of new shoes at the beginning of each school year.¹⁸

The organization was founded by Valerie Denghel, a longtime community resident who initially became involved with KPS as a tutor. "I've always loved to read," says Denghel, "and I figured that I could impart my love of that particular subject to those children who were just starting out. What I found out is that many children were coming to school in shoes that were too big, too small, torn, or worn. Some of them didn't even have shoes, and were kept home because of that fact. So I started to bring a few pairs in at the beginning of the school year and each semester that number grew until I realized I needed help."¹⁹

With a grant from Bread for the Journey and working through Kalamazoo Communities In Schools (KCIS), Denghel bought and distributed 160 pairs of shoes for low-income students attending summer school in 2005. With shoes left over, she donated the extras to two elementary schools where they would be distributed to kids in need. "I realized we were just scratching the surface," says Denghel.

Inspired by a Community Partners meeting in February 2006 where "a young woman got up and said how wonderful the Promise is, but in order for students to take advantage of it they needed to be ensured basic needs like transportation, food, and clothing," Denghel assembled a board and incorporated The First Day Shoe Fund as a 501(c)(3) organization. In 2006, her organization distributed 307 pairs of shoes; in 2007, the number grew to 691, and in 2008, Denghel expected to give away 950 pairs to children attending summer school. "This allows kids to start the semester on an equal footing with their peers, to participate in gym and play outdoors. We want to expand to the whole county, but we have to start somewhere. We decided to start with KPS not just because of the Promise but also because of the need."

Denghel tells the story of an elementary school student who asked the KCIS site coordinator at her school in January 2007 for a single shoe for her younger brother—over the winter break he had lost one and was being kept home because it was his only pair. The site coordinator had some of

Denghel's shoes left over from the summer and sent a pair home with his sister. After missing almost a week of school the boy was back in class the next day.

"I had this idea and it's no big deal," says Denghel, "but what's important is everyone else who's picked up on it—KPS, KCIS, board members of the First Day Shoe Fund, and all the generous people in the community who have helped us. Not everyone needs to start their own 501(c)(3), and not everyone needs to have a million dollars. You can have a few dollars, you can have time. Time is sometimes more valuable than money. Anyone who's interested in children can become a part of the Promise."

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Just as KCIS came to play the central role in coordinating student support services, another institution with deep local roots assumed responsibility for coordinating data collection, research, and evaluation efforts around the Kalamazoo Promise. The W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, founded in 1945 with an endowment from the founder of the Upjohn Company, is an internationally known think tank that focuses on employment issues. As a nonprofit organization with a respected record of nonpartisan research, the Upjohn Institute was the logical place for the school district to turn for assistance with its data needs. A \$303,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in nearby Battle Creek, one of the nation's largest philanthropies, played an important role early on, enabling the Upjohn Institute to assist KPS in purchasing a data warehousing system that would allow the district's multiple databases to be accessed through a single interface. (The grant has also supported a variety of research and convening activities around the linkages between education and economic development.) An agreement with the Greater Kalamazoo Association of Realtors that gave the institute access to housing market data, along with its ongoing economic analysis and forecasting role, positioned the Upjohn Institute as the chief conduit for research and data related to the Kalamazoo Promise. But, as with many entities involved in the Kalamazoo Promise, the Institute's role has expanded to meet new needs and opportunities.

One of the Upjohn Institute's first Kalamazoo Promise-related activities was to convene researchers with a shared interest in the program.²⁰ At three meetings in the spring of 2006, employees of the institute, WMU's Evaluation Center, WMU's School of Education, and other local and visiting academics met to exchange information and discuss data needs and evaluation efforts. (Representatives of KPS were also present at these meetings.) Among the projects to emerge from this ad hoc collaboration was a survey of KPS high school students carried out at the end of the 2005–2006 academic year to assess the initial impact of the Kalamazoo Promise on their plans, and a successful application to the U.S. Department of Education for a grant to evaluate the Kalamazoo Promise. The grant, which provides \$348,000 over three years for research carried out by the WMU Evaluation Center, the Upjohn Institute, and the Midwest Educational Reform Consortium based at WMU's School of Education, was made in a category where only 1 in 70 applications was funded, suggesting strong federal policy interest in this local experiment.

The Upjohn Institute also worked closely with an Ann Arbor-based think tank, the Center for Michigan, and local partners to organize a town hall meeting on education and Michigan's economic future held in Kalamazoo in January 2007. The event, which attracted more than 200 local and state business leaders, educators, legislators, and individuals, was convened to explore the importance of education to the state's ongoing economic transformation and consider whether a statewide program modeled on the Kalamazoo Promise should be pursued. In a survey completed at the end of the day-long meeting, conference participants overwhelmingly supported a scaling up of the Kalamazoo Promise (70 percent said it should be offered statewide), although opinions varied on how such a program should be funded and who should pay, with some participants arguing that a statewide initiative would undermine the local economic development impact of a Promise-type program.²¹

A major and unanticipated responsibility of institute staff has been to provide information to other communities that are developing initiatives modeled on the Kalamazoo Promise. The intense national interest generated by the program was one of its least-expected consequences, and no one was quite prepared for the barrage of queries about the scholarship's structure and impact. Along with Janice Brown and Alex

Lee from KPS and Bob Jorth from the Kalamazoo Promise, it was Institute staff that handled most of these inquiries, serving as an ongoing resource for representatives of other communities and local and national press. In line with this effort, the Upjohn Institute created a section of its Web site for Kalamazoo Promise–related information in order to support researchers and other communities seeking a central source of data. In its first year, the Web site had well over 13,000 downloads; by mid-2008, the rate of downloads reached 2,000–3,000 per month.²²

As the second anniversary of the Kalamazoo Promise approached, the impact of the program had spread far beyond Michigan. With the launch of Promise-type scholarship programs in Denver, El Dorado, Arkansas, and Pittsburgh, and new initiatives being announced almost weekly, the Upjohn Institute initiated discussions about the value of linking these communities into some kind of learning network. A planning meeting in December 2007 brought together community leaders from Kalamazoo with representatives of Promise-type programs in other locales, and in June 2008, more than 200 individuals from more than 80 communities converged in Kalamazoo for PromiseNet 2008—a networking conference designed to bring together and share knowledge among communities that are putting education at the heart of their economic development efforts. The Kalamazoo Promise has continued to attract national, even international, interest. Kalamazoo no longer has a monopoly as a model (PromiseNet 2009 will be held in Denver), but observers still look to the Kalamazoo area as the place where any positive effects of such a program will be the first to materialize.

PROMISE WEEK

To return to the local scene, in the summer of 2006 the members of the Saturday Morning Group working on regional economic development began planning a community-wide event to mark the first anniversary of the Promise. The goals of what became known as “Promise Week” were to celebrate the creation of the scholarship program, to inform community members about the broader vision of education as a catalyst for regional vitality and achievements to date, and to engage the community in future work around this vision. With a short planning

window, responsibility for organizing the week's activities was delegated to Blaine Lam of Lam and Associates, a local public relations firm specializing in community development. Lam created several working groups to move the process forward, including teams devoted to community outreach and creative work in support of upcoming events. A special effort was made to reach the city's low-income and minority population through churches and community organizations.

The first annual celebration of Promise Week took place December 6–10, 2006. Events included a town hall meeting attended by approximately 300 people and preceded by an information fair that drew close to 50 nonprofit exhibitors. Smaller sessions included a forum of area economists and a panel of educators. A Web site was created to provide a unified point of entry to the community—<http://www.greaterkalamazoo.com>—and a community report card, an annual tracking mechanism designed to increase accountability, was distributed. The *Kalamazoo Gazette* published a special supplement about the Kalamazoo Promise's first-year achievements, and area media gave extensive coverage to the events of the week.

One of the few disappointments of the first Promise Week was the small number of minority and low-income parents who attended the town hall meeting and information fair. To explore whether a different model of community convening might be more effective in reaching these groups, the Upjohn Institute contracted with Lam & Associates to organize two neighborhood forums in low-income neighborhoods. Two events focusing on the needs of children were held in the first half of 2007, and both were attended by large contingents of parents and residents. Organizers attribute the showing to the fact that these events took place at public schools within neighborhoods and at a convenient time for parents and families, as well as to the involvement of neighborhood associations and trusted community organizations as sponsors.

The second annual celebration of Promise Week took place from November 10–16, 2007. The planning process began earlier this time, with several groups meeting regularly to move things forward again under the leadership of Blaine Lam. One of the concerns voiced by organizers is that the first Promise Week had been heavier on celebration than on information and engagement. A second concern is that events had highlighted issues related to the core city and school district rather than the broader region. Thus, there was a strong effort from the begin-

ning of the planning process to engage diverse elements of the community in conversation about the benefits of alignment, and to focus on the broader vision of education as a catalyst for regional vitality rather than the scholarship per se. Those involved in the planning also worked to ensure that the community's racial and economic diversity was reflected as fully as possible in the speakers invited to participate and that events were conveniently located, scheduled at appropriate times, and included incentives, such as child care, prizes, and food, to ensure maximum participation.

In retrospect, organizers, who this time included two energetic KPS trustees, along with Blaine Lam and Upjohn Institute staff members, felt that these goals were largely met. The week was billed as an opportunity to "join the conversation," with community events focusing on arts and education, the connection between business and education, and the ways in which the community markets itself to the outside world. In addition, Promise Week included a parent appreciation night sponsored by the Northside Ministerial Alliance, as well as a Promise School and Community Celebration at one of the district's high schools, where books created by students from each KPS school were presented to Dr. Brown on the occasion of her retirement. This event also featured performances by student ensembles and informational tables set up by about 40 youth-serving organizations.

Among the main achievements of the second Promise Week were its regional focus, the substantive nature of most of the discussions, and the involvement of a broad range of community organizations. The Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo hosted the arts and education conversation, which included panelists from a dozen arts organizations. The business event was sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, Southwest Michigan First, and KRESA, and featured a productive exchange between educators and representatives of both small and large firms. The external marketing event was hosted by the Greater Kalamazoo Association of Realtors and included presentations by the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, Southwest Michigan First, WMU, and Downtown Kalamazoo Inc. For the third annual Promise Week, scheduled for November 10–14, 2008, planning responsibility was decentralized even further, and events around the theme of "leading by example," highlighting organizations that have already focused on the vision of Kalamazoo as the education community.

While Promise Week has served as a welcome opportunity to reflect on the work that goes on day in and day out by organizations and individuals throughout the region, its substantive contribution to community alignment should not be overstated. Thus far, Promise Week's utility has been mainly to allow the community to pause and take stock of where it stands in relation to the broader vision of the Kalamazoo Promise. As more community organizations become involved, it is likely that Promise Week will continue to serve this purpose.

As the second anniversary of the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise approached, the Saturday Morning Group reconvened for two meetings. One motivation was for participants to hear from each other about any progress related to the strategic priorities set forth the previous year. Another was to bring new players into the process in recognition of the leadership changes under way during the previous year, including new school superintendents in Kalamazoo and Portage, a new president at Western Michigan University, and new leadership on the horizon at KRESA and the Kalamazoo Community Foundation.

The meetings, held in September and October of 2007, underscored once again the challenge of community alignment in a decentralized leadership environment. The agenda summarized several principles centering on the idea of education as the cornerstone of quality of life and economic development in the region. The group was asked to consider ways to

- expand the community's focus from the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship program to the principle of educational excellence for everyone,
- find a common purpose for and benefits from collaboration,
- align and leverage community resources, and
- create partnerships organization by organization.

These principles, which had grown out of earlier discussions, could be summed up with the slogan "think regionally but act locally": while unified action on the part of such a diverse community may be unrealistic, the community response to the Kalamazoo Promise will be amplified if organizations do their work with a common goal and direction in mind. Although no one objected to these ideas, the absence of a clear task for the group and a lack of professional facilitation meant that the

discussion once again got bogged down in process. Several members expressed frustration at having what they felt was the same conversation that had taken place two years earlier, and some said that they were no longer interested in attending such meetings.

Even so, the meetings gave rise to some honest, even heated, conversation reflecting the reality of the Kalamazoo Promise. Much of this related to what had been revealed by the program's first year of operation, especially a lack of preparedness of many high school graduates for success in college. This problem is most pressing for the local community college, which bears the burden of remediation not just for Kalamazoo Promise recipients but for other underprepared students from throughout the region.

Another point of contention was whether the resources for student support, coordinated through KCIS, should remain focused on KPS or be extended to other districts in the county. On the one hand, KPS is where the largest number of minority, low-income, and underachieving students are found. The district's success is also essential to the vitality of the urban core. On the other hand, if education is to be the cornerstone of the region, the focus cannot be only on KPS; indeed, some of the county's rural districts are in worse shape than Kalamazoo when it comes to graduation rates and test scores. Without tangible incentives for improvement, other districts will be marginalized and the spotlight will remain focused on KPS and the Kalamazoo Promise. In response to this predicament, Craig Misner, the outgoing head of KRESA, presented his idea of assembling a pool of foundation funds that could be used to reward innovative pilot projects in all the county's districts. Yet this proposal was met with skepticism by some who wondered whether philanthropic resources would be spread too thinly and whether such an initiative was duplicative of earlier community efforts.

There was also little consensus over the ongoing role of the group itself. Some members proposed that there be no more meetings, while others suggested the group meet only once or twice a year as a way of "checking in" on the state of community alignment. Still others drew an analogy with previous community organizing efforts, such as assembling the funding needed to build the downtown festival site, and suggested that a small task force be charged with a specific responsibility and meet weekly until it is accomplished. Perennial concerns about representation resurfaced, with an overwhelmingly white, middle-class

body once again attempting to steer the response of a community fragmented by race and class. But the question of whether the organizing process should be more inclusive fell victim to the question of what that process should look like and what its overarching purpose should be. Overall, the powerful sense among many that “something” needed to happen was trumped by a lack of consensus over what that should be.

The meetings did yield some important achievements. First, they served as an opportunity to address the reality that many students entering the local community college are woefully unprepared to succeed there—something that has long been the case but that the Kalamazoo Promise has brought to greater light. Every high school graduate or holder of a GED is indeed entitled to *enroll* at the community college, but they are not entitled to stay if they cannot pass their classes. Some students with Kalamazoo Promise scholarships have argued that their scholarships entitle them to remain at KVCC, with the responsibility for remediation falling on the college. KVCC president, Marilyn Schlack, spoke about being caught in a double bind, with the failings of the K-12 system being laid at the doorstep of KVCC, and community-based efforts to support students focusing on the K-12 years rather than a successful transition to higher education. One outcome of this discussion was agreement that the strategic priorities of educational excellence and student support need not only to be coordinated closely with each other, but must extend across the span of students’ pre-K–16 education.

The group’s members also expressed a belief that if educational excellence is given top priority, the vitality of the urban core and regional economic development will follow. Although this point is debatable, it was striking to hear the region’s leading economic development official Ron Kitchens say at the meeting, “We don’t have an economic development problem; we have an education problem.”²³ (Others might contend that we have a jobs problem that will not be resolved simply through investments in education and student support.)

A third area of consensus was the need to set realistic, measurable, and attainable goals and hold each other accountable for meeting them. Kalamazoo College President Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran asked her fellow members to think about what they would like the community to look like in five years. Should the minority and income achievement gap be cut in half? Should businesses be giving employees time off to attend parent-teacher conferences? What would an “acceptable” college reten-

tion rate look like? Should the community expect to see a drop in the school-to-prison pipeline? Rather than promoting lofty and unattainable goals or circling around the same issues over and over, agreement on a limited number of specific goals would be the best avenue for achieving tangible results. While several members agreed to meet to consider some of these indicators and then report back, as of this writing more than one year later, this effort had not yet gotten off the ground.

By the end of the second meeting in the fall of 2007, there was a sense among members that the larger group had played itself out and that a new approach was needed. In retrospect, and not to diminish the value of its work in framing the challenges ahead and facilitating discussion across sectors, the Saturday Morning Group was both too large and too small for effective action—too large to undertake or complete any concrete tasks, and too small to represent or speak for the broader community. As one participant put it,

Their organizational bias is to find a way to simplify things: ‘If only we had one voice. If only we had one vision. If only we had one leader. If only we had one goal. If only we could find one model.’ Our community leaders use this approach in their organizations, and it is successful. But education is the most fractured, most political, most difficult to measure and most complex of community issues, so this approach only intensifies the frustrations of unappointed leaders attempting to exert more and more control in a setting in which they have precious little. I’m reminded of the ant on the log floating down the river, proclaiming he’s driving it. It’s just not possible.²⁴

Aligning a community, even a relatively small one, around education as a cornerstone for regional vitality is a vastly more complex undertaking than building a festival site, as hard as that may be. The very complexity of the undertaking is reflected in the four strategic priorities identified by the group early on, which remain a powerful organizing device. Alignment does not require that community members decide whether to focus on KPS to the exclusion of other school districts, or whether helping high school students is a more or less pressing goal than providing college students with support. It does not even mean that education should take precedence over economic development. Rather, if every organization can begin to think regionally and act locally—that is, determine where its interests and priorities lie and, if appropriate,

orient its activities with the broader vision in mind—the community will be transformed naturally from within. The challenge of alignment will then shift from resolving turf battles and allocating resources to one of identifying where various actors in the community compete or overlap, and where collaboration is necessary.

As of the summer of 2008, a new process was in place that bodes well for precisely this kind of organic and productive change. With guidance from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and initial funding from the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, Boston-based consultant Steve Greeley began working to engage individuals and organizations in the Greater Kalamazoo area around the cause of education-based economic development. Greeley's firm, DCA, was founded in 1991 and helps communities build support for large-scale social change.

The process pursued by DCA in Kalamazoo began with conversations with a wide range of leaders (both formal and informal) asking what they would like to see as major areas of collaboration if Kalamazoo is to become a premier educational community. Discussions were held with close to 60 individuals representing parents, students, teachers, workforce development professionals, and community members from the private, public, and philanthropic sectors. From these conversations DCA drew out common themes and aspirations. Chief among these were

- agreement across all sectors with the fundamental premise of the Kalamazoo Promise—that education should be at the center of the region's economic development strategy;
- consensus around the need to do much more to provide educational support to community youth;
- awareness that the community has an abundance of services, but they are largely supported independently and have not been required to collaborate; and
- a hunger to move from process to action.

In a presentation to community leaders in July 2008, the consultants reported that the Promise had accelerated change in Kalamazoo and raised educational advancement to the top of the civic agenda, while drawing increased attention to barriers to progress and work to be done. The engagement process had revealed a shared vision of the community

as one in which all students have a love of learning, a solid foundation of school readiness, literacy and learning skills, opportunity to explore their interests and develop their talents, a sense of purpose about their futures and pathways to their goals, positive peer relationships and consistent adult support, and abundant choices for future learning and careers.

They proposed that community members and organizations align their work by “doing what they do best” so that students

- develop the skills that form the foundation for academic achievement and lifelong learning;
- have ready access to high-quality academic reinforcement, opportunities to explore interests and develop talents, and social/emotional support;
- connect learning to earning, develop career objectives, and understand the pathways to realize them; and
- receive help when faced with serious challenges that undermine their ability to learn.

Going forward, DCA recommended the formation of a set of working groups around critical issues related to these goals, such as early childhood development or the education-workforce connection, as well as a defined leadership and advocacy group responsible for promoting the overall agenda, encouraging resources to flow where they are needed, and influencing policy.

Going forward, Greeley anticipates activity on two levels: The first is a set of working groups to be formed around the issues of early childhood development, including an emphasis on parenting skills; the physical and mental health of school-age youth; out-of-school support, including social, cultural, and academic enrichment; and tightening the connection between educational institutions and the workplace. These groups may build on existing networks, such as the Great Start Collaborative, which already connects organizations interested in early childhood, or they may represent new partnerships established by participating organizations. The second level will consist of a defined leadership and advocacy group made up of community leaders responsible for promoting the overall agenda, encouraging resources to flow where they are needed, and influencing policy. Unlike the Saturday Morning

Group, this coordinating body will have some kind of staff to serve as a liaison between the working groups and the leadership body.

Despite the reluctance of some leaders to commit to yet another consultant-led process (a common structure for Kalamazoo's repeated forays into community change), the lack of concerted action to mobilize collective assets on behalf of the Promise during its first two and a half years generated considerable enthusiasm for DCA's efforts. Especially encouraging was the close alignment of the themes emerging from DCA's work with the priorities of KPS under Dr. Rice's leadership (see Chapter 5). Moreover, Greeley and Rice both recognize that they are engaged in a process with ramifications that extend beyond Kalamazoo. The biggest social challenges facing much of the nation—economic dislocation, rising wealth disparity, continued racial segregation—are all present in Kalamazoo, along with a rich array of institutional assets. With the scholarship program as a catalyst, the greater Kalamazoo region has the potential to deploy those assets decisively and together, and in doing so to serve as a laboratory for other communities. "If we can figure it out here, it can be a model elsewhere," says Greeley, adding that, "The country is watching. If you want to convey that you're happy with the status quo, that's one answer, but if you aspire to something better there are some questions that need to be answered." Change may be complex, but the questions are simple: What do we as a community want every child to have? How can we ensure that every child has the resources needed from birth on to ensure that he or she is a successful learner? How can we ensure that all children are educated in their choices? The responsibility for answering these questions, then implementing the solutions, belongs not just to educational institutions but to churches, community centers, social service organizations, businesses, arts groups, and others, making the challenge of alignment all the more complex but critically important.

Notes

1. In the case of the Denver Scholarship Program, early negative publicity focused on how the program's chief donor became so wealthy; see Raabe (2007). In Pittsburgh, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center—the main donor to the Pittsburgh Promise—was charged with holding its gift hostage to tax breaks requested from the Pittsburgh City Council; see Boren (2007).
2. This account is current as of September 2008. For updates, see the W.E. Upjohn Institute Web site at <http://www.upjohninstitute.org/promise/index.htm>.
3. This and other quotes in this section are from the author's interview with Jerry Blaisdell, Huntington National Bank, May 10, 2006.
4. In the November 2007 election, Bobby Hopewell, an African American businessman and longtime commission member, was elected mayor, and Hannah McKinney returned to her previous position on the commission as vice-mayor.
5. Author's interview with Jerry Blaisdell, Huntington National Bank, May 10, 2006.
6. Kalamazoo Promise Planning Session, December 17, 2005, Meeting Review (author's files).
7. This and other quotes in this section from the author's interview with Thom Andrews, March 1, 2007.
8. Author's interview with Dr. Charles Warfield, January 25, 2006.
9. Author's conversation with a KPS parent.
10. This section draws on the author's notes from the Community Partners meeting on February 8, 2006, as well as KCIS's subsequent summary of that meeting.
11. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a federally funded, competitive grant program designed to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. The Midwest Educational Reform Consortium, housed within WMU's College of Education, operates a GEAR UP program in several school districts in southwest Michigan, including Kalamazoo Public Schools.
12. This and other quotes in this section from author's interview with Ruby Sledge and Cassandra Bridges, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, August 9, 2007. Thanks to Bridget Timmeney for her assistance with this section.
13. Reverend Milton Wells of Open Door Ministries, comment at a meeting of community organizations, November 8, 2006.
14. From final national foundation letter template, March 29, 2007.
15. The letter's signatories represented the city of Kalamazoo, KPS administration and trustees, Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo Community Foundation, Kalamazoo Communities In Schools, Kalamazoo Regional Chamber of Commerce, KVCC, Northside Ministerial Alliance, Southwest Michigan First, W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, and Western Michigan University.
16. Author's interview with Robert Jorth, July 18, 2006.
17. Ibid.
18. See <http://www.firstdayshoefund.org>.

19. This and other quotes in this section from the author's interview with Valerie Dengehl, founder of The First Day Shoe Fund, June 6, 2007.
20. The Upjohn Institute also made a grant to the author of this book in January 2006 to follow the community's progress in responding to the Kalamazoo Promise.
21. For more information, see material posted on the Web site of the Center for Michigan: <http://www.thecenterformichigan.net/blog/education-michigans-economic-future>.
22. As of December 31, 2007 (first 11 months), 21,192 page views and 13,011 downloads were recorded.
23. Ron Kitchens, chief executive officer of Southwest Michigan First, comment at Saturday Morning Group meeting, September 29, 2007.
24. Private e-mail to author.