



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Power of a Promise

Miller-Adams, Michelle

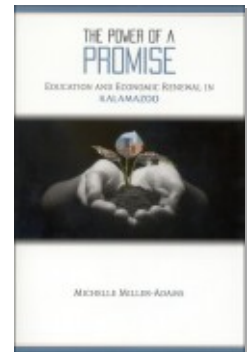
Published by W.E. Upjohn Institute

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>

## 7

# Assessing the Impact of the Kalamazoo Promise

It was a “perfect storm” of reasons that brought Gary and Katie Swartz to Kalamazoo in August 2006. Gary, a southwest Michigan native, and Katie, originally from the Chicago area, met at Michigan State University in the 1990s. Their jobs took them to Portland, Oregon, where Katie headed a nonprofit mentoring program and Gary taught special education in the public schools. Eight years later, when their twin girls were a year old, the couple started looking for a new house. “We lived in an 800-square foot house with one bathroom and there were now four of us,” says Katie. But finding adequate, affordable housing was a daunting endeavor. As Katie bluntly puts it, “The housing market in Portland was outrageous.”

Gary’s parents came to visit in December 2005, and his mother mentioned the Kalamazoo Promise, which had been announced just a month earlier. “We looked it up online and thought it sounded interesting,” recounts Katie, “then a couple of weeks later we started pulling up real estate ads just for fun, and we found these beautiful old homes for sale at really reasonable prices. It was when we started looking at houses that we made the decision to come.” Gary flew to Michigan during his spring break in April 2006 to look for a job and a house, and found both. “It happened so fast,” says Gary. “Free college tuition, reasonably priced housing, and our parents nearby. How could we not do it? If you took any one of those reasons out of the equation, we probably would have stayed in Portland.”<sup>1</sup>

The Swartzes were fortunate in two respects—they were able to secure employment with relative ease, and they were moving from a high-priced to a lower-priced housing market. Gary had teaching experience and credentials, and readily found a position with KPS. In 2008, he began teaching at the district’s new alternative middle school program, an ideal fit for someone who enjoys working with troubled teens. Katie brought her job with her, having worked for several years for an association management company based in Chicago. All of the firm’s em-

ployees work remotely, so the move from Portland to Kalamazoo was of little consequence. The couple opted to live in the city of Kalamazoo despite its high property taxes because they value its unique housing stock, tight-knit neighborhoods, and proximity to downtown. With the proceeds from the sale of their West Coast home, Gary and Katie were able to buy a new house more than three times its size. “If we had stayed in Portland,” says Katie, “we would have had to pay much more for something much smaller.”

The twins will start kindergarten in fall 2009. Like other young children whose families moved to the community for the Kalamazoo Promise, they are part of the Promise-driven enrollment increase at KPS even though they may not be counted as such. It is impossible to estimate the size of the pipeline of families with children younger than school age who have already relocated to the area, but the existence of such a pipeline suggests that the enrollment impact of the scholarship program is stronger than current numbers suggest. Katie and Gary were drawn to KPS not just because of the Promise, but also because they want their children to be part of a school district that is diverse in terms of income, race, and ethnicity. Katie had attended a Catholic school system that sheltered her from such diversity (to her regret), but that also instilled in her high expectations about her educational goals. “I grew up with the understanding that going to college is what you do,” she says, speaking of her prestigious high school that sends virtually every one of its graduates to higher education. “I wasn’t a straight-A student, but being in those AP classes, I had a good GPA—it was an environment of high expectations, and I had to rise to them.” Both parents plan to be deeply involved in their children’s schools to make sure similar expectations are in place for the twins and their classmates.

Beyond the economic and educational implications of their move to Kalamazoo, Gary and Katie have enriched the social fabric of their neighborhood and the broader area. “It’s important for us to feel part of our community. When we were in Portland, we did the same thing,” says Katie, who was invited to join the board of the Volunteer Center of Greater Kalamazoo shortly after she relocated. “I was drawn to the Volunteer Center because it represents over 200 organizations in the community. It’s a great chance to get the big picture about what’s going on with nonprofits here.” In 2008, as chair of the organization’s largest

annual fundraising event, she helped raise \$20,000 for Volunteer Center programs and services.

Like the multiple reasons that drew them to Kalamazoo, the Swartzes' story illustrates the multiple avenues through which new residents can contribute to the health of the community. The purchase of a home, choice of employment, children's schooling, and volunteer activities affect not only the lives of those relocating, but also the community's stock of human, economic, and social assets. These contributions are especially strong and enduring when it is a young family moving to the region and putting down roots. Gary and Katie are emblematic of that thirty-something constituency at which the "Share Kalamazoo" campaign is aimed—the so-called "boomerang" generation that left the area for the big city, but now may be ready to return (see Chapter 6).

The Kalamazoo Promise sparked the Swartzes' decision to return, but it was not the sole reason. Similarly, the scholarship program alone is not a powerful enough tool to set the region on a trajectory of growth and renewal. But the Kalamazoo Promise is critically important as an organizing device for how the community sees itself and presents itself to others. By anchoring the region's economic development strategy in educational opportunity, the Kalamazoo Promise draws together the community's most valuable assets into a coherent framework and connects them to each other in a way that resonates with many different audiences. Yet none of this is automatic. It is easy to overlook the fact that Kalamazoo did not earn the donors' attention by virtue of some exceptional achievement or trait. To a large degree, the choice of Kalamazoo as the site of the donors' investment is a matter of geographic happenstance—this is where the donors live, and this is where they have chosen to invest. "We happen to be the community that received this gift," says Mayor Bobby Hopewell, "but we need to do the work so we can demonstrate success in areas where many communities struggle."<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 1, I outlined three types of assets that could be affected positively by the Kalamazoo Promise: human capital, economic assets, and social capital. With three classes of Promise-eligible students now in college and three years of community alignment efforts around the broader goals of the Kalamazoo Promise, it is an opportune moment to assess the progress that has been made and the work that remains to be done.

## HUMAN CAPITAL

Just as technological change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sparked an economic shift in the United States from agriculture to manufacturing and gave rise to a new set of educational needs, so has it brought about a subsequent shift to more knowledge-intensive production and the higher level of skills and training associated with it. As this shift has taken place, awareness has grown about the importance of investing in human capital—not only for individuals seeking gainful employment and a decent income, but also for cities, regions, and states eager to create or maintain a competitive edge in the global economy. Many of the most recent innovations in educational and economic policy seek to build human capital, and the Kalamazoo Promise is no exception.

Even in its first few years, the Kalamazoo Promise contributed to the region's stock of human capital through several avenues. First, more than a thousand scholarships have been awarded, covering the tuition costs of students who might not otherwise have gone on to higher education and enabling those already on a college path to attend more selective (and sometimes more expensive) institutions. Second, the program generated strong community awareness and engagement around the goals of educational quality and student success for all. Third, almost four decades of enrollment decline within KPS was reversed, with new students coming not just from surrounding school districts but from outside the county and state. Economic trends may work against the powerful pull of the Kalamazoo Promise—those without jobs cannot move to the region for the scholarship program alone—but the Promise has undoubtedly minimized the ongoing contraction that would have occurred in its absence. It has also generated the first construction of new school buildings in 35 years, the first budget surpluses in decades, and a larger pool of talent from which KPS can select its teachers and administrators—all important factors in strengthening what had been an urban school district in decline.

The longer-term potential for KPS is even more significant. Goals that predated the announcement of the Promise—the fostering of a college-going culture within the schools, strategies to reduce the achievement gap between higher- and lower-achieving students, and greater

student awareness of career opportunities and the training and education they require—have now been accelerated and made more urgent. The creation of a clear set of expectations for students, parents, teachers, and community members as the centerpiece of the school district's strategic plan moves these goals even further along. For lower-achieving students and those with behavioral issues, KPS has enhanced its alternative education offerings and in-school supports, while community organizations have stepped up with new mentoring, academic, and social support programs. Over the medium term, these developments should help lower dropout rates, increase graduation rates, and better prepare students for success in a postsecondary setting. At the same time, expanded opportunities for accelerated learning and dual enrollment, as well as efforts to curtail disruptive student behavior, make the district more attractive to the parents of higher-achieving students.

One of the critical factors needed to bring about these longer-term benefits is strong leadership of key educational institutions. From the beginning, the superintendents of school districts surrounding KPS, led by Craig Misner and later Ron Fuller at the intermediate school district, resisted the temptation to see the Kalamazoo Promise as a zero-sum game and promoted the program as something that could help strengthen educational offerings throughout the region. Marilyn Schlack, the president of KVCC and a key leader in economic development circles, has worked to ensure that the community college is responsive to the needs of its students as well as the regional economy. Western Michigan University President John Dunn, who took office in 2007, committed to reversing the school's enrollment decline and deepening its ties to the surrounding community. At KPS, Superintendent Michael Rice began his tenure in 2007 with a series of honest conversations about the district's strengths and weaknesses, and engaged the broader community in setting expectations for students and the adults who support them, as well as improving child and adult literacy.

A second critical factor already in place is a high level of community mobilization around the goal of student success. An upsurge in volunteering in the schools, the emergence of new tutoring and mentoring programs, ongoing communication among youth-serving organizations, foundation-funded initiatives addressing literacy and the prevention of youth violence, and support for school bond issues not only by KPS voters but by those in most of the surrounding districts are all evidence

of a region that is willing to invest in its young people. Parents, too, have responded, with teachers reporting record attendance at parent-teacher conferences and greater parental interest in children's college options and preparedness.

The business community has been slower to engage with the schools, but this is beginning to change. Both educational and business leaders acknowledge that they need each other and are exploring avenues for closer collaboration through career awareness activities, job shadowing, mentoring, and adopt-a-school programs. Efforts to align the region's existing workforce development resources to connect them more closely with its educational system and business needs are also under way. Although it is a tall order, there is a new understanding that job creation and economic vitality in the region depend on the quality and interconnectedness of community institutions spanning the fields of early childhood development, K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce development, and economic development.

One area of critical need is a stronger system of early childhood development and education. The growing recognition that the twenty-first century workforce requires some kind of postsecondary education or training has been paralleled by an emerging consensus around the need for improved coverage and quality of early childhood interventions, including preschool. Ample research substantiating the relative cost-effectiveness of investing in children at an early age has led some states to implement universal preschool for their residents. Michigan's ongoing fiscal difficulties mean that it lags its neighbors in this area, but local actors are engaged in coordinating more closely the work of the region's early childhood health and education providers. Cooperative efforts include work through the countywide Great Start Collaborative (part of a statewide initiative), closer alignment of KPS programs with the county's federal Head Start preschool program for three- and four-year-olds, improvement in the district's state-funded Prekindergarten Early Education Program, and the implementation of full-day kindergarten at almost every KPS elementary school in fall 2008.

Another key factor in the accumulation of human capital is beyond the control of local actors. Without an upturn in the state economy, Michigan will continue to be a net exporter of jobs and people. Even if southwest Michigan outperforms the state, as it has in recent years, the level of economic dynamism needed to attract hundreds of new jobs

and families may still remain out of reach. Continued corporate downsizing and slow economic growth resulting from the ongoing financial crisis also limit the net inflow of workers. The Kalamazoo Promise may enable the district to hold its own in terms of enrollment during any prolonged economic downturn, but without a large influx of working families from outside the region, KPS is unlikely to achieve the powerful boost to academic achievement that comes from greater socioeconomic integration of schools. In the first few years following the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise, enrollment grew most quickly at those schools with the smallest proportion of low-income students, which also tend to be those with the lowest minority enrollment. Several of these schools are now at capacity, and families moving to the district will of necessity be looking at schools with more low-income and minority students. The investment of additional resources in the district's magnet schools, which are located in high-poverty areas, may also encourage some new families to choose these educational settings. But if, as research suggests, socioeconomic integration within individual schools is one of the strongest mechanisms for improving the academic performance of all students, limited enrollment growth with gains concentrated in the district's middle-income schools will slow progress toward better educational outcomes.

## **ECONOMIC ASSETS**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the economic assets likely to be catalyzed by the Kalamazoo Promise will take years to materialize, and certainly, much depends on broader economic trends. For example, one of the most widely anticipated effects of the scholarship program was a rise in housing values within the public school district where median home prices lag the county average, but a slack real estate market has thus far outweighed any positive impact from the scholarship program, and without strong job growth, housing appreciation is not likely to occur in the short term.

On the brighter side, the Kalamazoo Promise has helped align the community around a plausible vision of its economic future as an "Education Community," where all parts of the whole are working together



to invest in the success of the region's young people. For several years now, economic development entities such as Southwest Michigan First and the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center have sought to position Kalamazoo County as a home for high value-added, knowledge-intensive industry, primarily to capture spin-offs from the pharmaceuticals sector as well as businesses and entrepreneurs from outside the region. This strategy builds on some of the area's most important assets, including its life-science industries, research university, and hospitals, but it also brings Kalamazoo into direct competition with other regions seeking the same outcomes, including Greater Grand Rapids, and risks putting too many eggs in a single, life-sciences basket.<sup>3</sup> Even when the Upjohn Company played the key leadership role, the region's economy rested on a diverse mix of industries; since the economic shocks of the 1990s, when Kalamazoo lost its largest employer, it has become even clearer that today's regional economy must rest on a similarly diverse base—although, as is true everywhere, there will be little room for those lacking any postsecondary training or skills.<sup>4</sup>

The Kalamazoo Promise supports the current knowledge-intensive economic development strategy in several respects. Most directly, it puts skill-based training in reach of even the poorest residents of the community. Second, it raises the region's national profile more effectively than could any public relations campaign, no matter how well funded. Third, in an era in which investment decisions are often based on the availability of a skilled workforce and high-quality schools, the Kalamazoo Promise is a critical asset. Assuming it is leveraged effectively, in the medium term it will strengthen the public school system and over the longer term contribute to the creation of a better-educated workforce. And from day one, its very existence has signaled to outsiders that Kalamazoo is a community that values education. As the nation's older cities of the Northeast and Midwest seek to transform their identities from rust belt to new economy, the Kalamazoo Promise is already serving as an engine for this transformation, as well as a priceless marketing device.

Once again, leadership is a crucial variable in accomplishing this transformation. Mayor Bobby Hopewell, himself a business leader, points out the limitations of business leadership. "CEOs are wrestling with the worst economy we've had in years," says Hopewell, "so I think that they are not concentrating on this as much. But they should. Busi-

nesspeople have come together to work with Southwest Michigan First, downtown development, the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center, but not the Kalamazoo Promise. This is the biggest economic development tool we have, so why aren't we engaging?" Hopewell especially wants business leaders to engage with their own workers by providing employees' families and children with the support they need to benefit from the Kalamazoo Promise. "We have the folks who need us sitting right in our offices," he says. "It's a grand opportunity to have some sustained impact on your employees." City officials, too, are thinking creatively to ensure that the economic development benefits generated by the Kalamazoo Promise (in terms of new housing, population, or commercial development) do not accrue only to that part of the district that lies outside city boundaries. Intergovernmental cooperation among the region's municipalities in upgrading infrastructure and coordinating incentive packages for business is also crucial. Beyond their educational role, WMU and KVCC are valuable economic assets, and their activities must be integrated more fully with the economic development efforts of government and the private sector. The community college's career programs and training facility fill an important business need in tightening the workforce-employer connection. WMU's Business Technology and Research Park and many of the university's faculty members and programs are potential partners for private-sector development efforts in engineering, life sciences, and alternative fuels. Much greater effort needs to be exerted to entice college graduates, especially those with entrepreneurial skills, to remain in the region after graduation. Comprehensive support for start-up ventures in the form of financing, subsidized facilities, and business networks is available to those with high skills through the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center, but no one has yet developed a strategy to provide a similar system of support to younger entrepreneurs.

In terms of downtown development, the main impact of the Kalamazoo Promise may be psychological more than anything else. Downtown revitalization efforts have been under way for many years, but a new momentum is evident since the announcement of the scholarship program. The preservation of historic buildings and key renovations, such as that of the Radisson Plaza Hotel, were positive developments, but the progress of the commercial district had been intermittent, and there was a sense that improvement efforts were merely slowing an

inevitable decline. By placing a bet on the improvement of the urban core through a scholarship program for graduates of the city's public school district, the donors signaled to others in the community that they believe in the city's future. In the afterglow that surrounded the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, many residents began to hope that the tipping point of urban decay had been avoided, with the urban core now set on a more promising trajectory. With new restaurants and entertainment options and the activities of a remarkably healthy arts and cultural scene (most of it located downtown), the central district is attracting younger residents and seeing the construction of new housing units. A rise in population density, albeit on a small scale, should lead to the creation of even more amenities and set in motion the virtuous circle described by urban experts as the best possible outcome for the nation's older cities.

A healthy downtown district also strengthens one of the more promising avenues for population growth: the anticipated return of that "boomerang" generation—young adults like Katie and Gary Swartz, who attended college or were raised in the area but left to pursue careers elsewhere. Now, with children in tow, these educated workers, some of them self-employed, are in the market for communities with reasonable housing prices and a high quality of life, including a vibrant urban core. With the added enticement of full college scholarships for their children, and grandparents nearby for child care purposes, this is a population ripe for recruitment.

The impact of the Kalamazoo Promise on the low-income neighborhoods that surround downtown is, as Mattie Jordan-Woods has recognized, a long way off (see p. 193). If, however, jobs for less-skilled workers materialize and the city and community organizations continue their focus on neighborhood safety and quality of life improvements, these areas could become more attractive to current and future residents. Low housing prices and proximity to downtown are enticements for those interested in urban neighborhoods. The gentrification scenario feared by some is unlikely—there is simply too much empty space and too many rental units to create the kind of demand accompanied by rapidly escalating prices. Instead, neighborhoods like Vine, Edison, and the Northside could see the renovation of existing properties, conversion of rentals into owner-occupied homes, construction of new homes on vacant lots, and more commercial activity. Over the long term and

under the most optimistic conditions, the poverty rate in the city of Kalamazoo could fall, not just because of an influx of middle-class residents but also because poor residents, through the engine of education set in motion by the Kalamazoo Promise and ongoing neighborhood efforts, are becoming less poor.

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Kalamazoo's social fabric is a paradox. The community's exceptionally strong philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, as well as a high level of resident engagement in civic life, coexist with pronounced divisions along racial and income lines, an urban-suburban divide, and a lack of integration of the large student population into the life of the city. While the Kalamazoo Promise has already helped increase the community's stock of social capital, it is less certain if and when these longstanding divisions will be overcome.

The scholarship program has undoubtedly contributed to a heightened level of social and civic engagement. An outpouring of volunteer energy, the creation and expansion of community-based student support programs, and the approval of school bond issues demonstrate a growing understanding of education as pivotal to the region's health as well as a willingness to become personally involved. Diverse organizations, ranging from the symphony orchestra to local banks, have examined their missions in light of the Promise and begun to align their work with its goals. New avenues of communication have been created through a number of school-community task forces and meetings of organizational leaders convened in response to the Promise. Community-wide celebrations, such as Promise Week, as well as neighborhood events have united parents, teachers, grassroots leaders, and residents in new partnerships centered on supporting youth.

In all these efforts, the community has expanded upon a base of preexisting networks. Coordinating bodies such as Kalamazoo Communities In Schools, the Greater Kalamazoo United Way, KYDNET, and the Northside Ministerial Alliance provide centralized locales for people seeking to disseminate information or find partners. The uncertainty is, first, whether these partners can move beyond improved com-

munication to forge a collaborative response to the challenges raised by the Kalamazoo Promise, and, second, whether such networks can be broadened to connect disparate populations and create the “bridging” of social networks necessary for transformative change. While these remain open questions, in contrast to the constraints on the creation of new economic assets imposed by the broader environment, the extent to which the Kalamazoo Promise strengthens the social fabric is well within local control.

Kalamazoo is often described as a community rich in resources but poor in coordination. In a world of limited resources, however, coordination is essential to direct resources where they are most needed and ensure maximum coverage and minimum overlap. Better communication among the community’s many institutional actors is helpful, but true collaboration requires much more. One model from Kalamazoo’s recent past is a joint initiative of the Department of Human Services, Goodwill Industries, and Housing Resources, Inc. that provides wrap-around services to some of the area’s poorest families. The “Making It Work” program addresses these families’ housing and employment needs through a long-term case-management approach that has required new modes of operation on the part of all three agencies as well as supportive policy changes at the state level. The program is remarkable not only for the gains in self-sufficiency experienced by its clients, but for the extent of collaboration, described by one of its partners as, “Everyone puts their money on the table and removes their hands.”<sup>5</sup> This degree of collective leadership is unusual, but strong partnerships are increasingly evident.

Two collaborations that have emerged since the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise demonstrate a new attitude toward partnership and the benefits it can bring. One of these involves the Douglass Community Association, which has served the Northside since 1919, and the Boys and Girls Club of Kalamazoo, based in the Edison neighborhood since 1953. Historically, the two organizations worked independently, offering somewhat similar programs to young people in different neighborhoods while at the same time competing for funding from local foundations and the Greater Kalamazoo United Way. In 2007, the leadership of the two organizations, supported by the United Way, recognized that a more cooperative approach made sense and began discussing how best to fill the gaps in service to their constituents. The result was the open-

ing of a unit of the Boys and Girls Club at the Douglass Community Association—the first collaboration of its kind for either organization. The partnership is significant in that it provides expanded programming for youth without the creation of a new organization or program. It also constitutes a bridge between two of the city’s lowest income neighborhoods, opening up lines of communication that may help lessen the tension between Northside and Eastside youth that is at the center of some of the community’s nascent gang activities. When asked what made the collaboration possible, the heads of the two organizations give strikingly similar answers. Tim Terrentine, executive director of the Douglass Community Association, says the most important element was selfless leadership. Rather than the usual response of nonprofit leaders and boards—“What are we going to lose and how much is it going to cost?”—management and boards of the Douglass Community Association and the Boys and Girls Club acknowledged that they had a better chance of positively affecting community youth through a partnership. “Kids are out in the street, and one organization can’t bring them all in,” says Terrentine.<sup>6</sup> “We did it by people leaving their egos at home and not feeling as though we had all the answers,” says Bob Ezelle, executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Kalamazoo.<sup>7</sup>

A second promising collaboration is a partnership between Big Brothers Big Sisters and area churches. A national trendsetter in partnering with religious institutions, the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization has doubled the number of children it serves (to approximately 1,000) through partnerships being developed with close to a dozen area churches. The most extensive of these is a relationship with the Northside megachurch, Christian Life Center, and its outreach center, New Genesis. The church’s preexisting mentoring efforts have been encompassed within an array of programs supported by Big Brothers Big Sisters, including matches between church members and local youth for community-based mentoring as well as matches between the church’s high school students and local elementary school children for site-based work on academic, behavioral, and social skills. Big Brothers Big Sisters director Peter Tripp gives credit to Pastor Ervin Armstrong for his willingness to partner with an existing mentoring program rather than needing to “reinvent the wheel” at his own institution. The church now serves as a recruitment arm to identify mentors and a provider of space and materials. Big Brothers Big Sisters supports the church’s programs

through high-quality, proven mentoring models, the outcomes of which can be readily measured.

Both collaborations speak to the creation of bridging social capital—the first across neighborhoods and the second across generational and income lines. They also both reflect a growing understanding that Kalamazoo is not well served by the ongoing duplication of organizations and services, some of dubious quality. Better to build on best practices that have been refined and evaluated, and invest resources in spreading these more fully throughout the community.

Social capital has improved in other respects as well. While generally positive, the initial response to the Kalamazoo Promise also included some posturing around the issue of race and advocacy efforts designed mainly to score points with constituencies who felt marginalized or disenfranchised by existing decision-making structures. These negative reactions have for the most part abated and been replaced by painful but honest discussions of the racial and economic inequalities that hinder the success of the Kalamazoo Promise. “The Kalamazoo Promise dredged up a lot of issues that people didn’t want to talk about,” says Ezelle, “issues like race and economic self-sufficiency. What was under the surface is now out on the table. The idea that the program was not for everyone had to be attacked on a number of different fronts—teachers, kids, parents, media, businesses—they all had to buy in.” Terrentine calls it a great dichotomy: a philanthropic community with poverty rates far in excess of the national average. “I see the Promise as this great lighthouse. It flashed on the light, and now everyone has to talk about the issues. The African American dropout rate, the child poverty rate—these are nothing new, but now everyone has to talk about them.” A persistent minority achievement gap in the schools and the concentration of violent crime in the urban core interfere with the ability of the city’s low-income, minority residents to benefit from the scholarship program. “At the end of the day,” continues Terrentine, “when you’re talking about the success of the Kalamazoo Promise, you’re talking about opportunities for poor, disenfranchised children in the urban areas. If they’re not successful, the Promise is not successful.” Much of the initiative in addressing these issues is coming from these communities themselves, with an especially active role played by the churches, but progress will be hindered if the broader community cannot provide effective support for and participation in these efforts. Ezelle is hopeful:



“I’ve seen this community rise to the occasion in many different ways. Some of the people who are at the poverty level may not understand that the community has stepped forward through the United Way to get services to the people who need them. People do want to help even though they may not know how to do it.”

Social gains will be maximized if community members set realistic goals and hold themselves and each other accountable for progress toward them. If leaders overpromise and underdeliver, the result will be an inevitable loss of momentum and disillusionment with the Promise. Clear performance measures that are reported publicly and at regular intervals can help the community confront and address unpleasant truths, rather than patting itself on the back for gains not actually made. In moving this goal-setting and alignment process forward, it is unlikely that a single leadership structure will emerge. A more plausible vision is one in which diverse sectors of the community coordinate their efforts with a common goal in mind. The multiple strategic priorities developed to guide community progress—educational excellence, student support, vitality of the urban core, and regional economic development—offer a rich agenda for engagement and plenty of work to go around. The breadth of this agenda virtually requires an alignment process and accountability mechanism that is horizontal and decentralized, rather than one that is engineered from the top down along command-and-control lines.

Ultimately, the critical question is whether the Kalamazoo Promise remains something marginal to the community, or whether it serves as a catalyst for deeper, transformative change. It is difficult to imagine how the program might affect the community negatively, and there are already signs that the net impact has been positive. The decline in enrollment within the region’s largest school district has been halted, the growing concentration of poor students within that district has slowed, and funding is available to enable more students to attend college with lower levels of family hardship. In the absence of the Kalamazoo Promise, existing trends would most likely have worsened, especially given the increasingly negative economic climate, with continued enrollment decline in KPS, the stigmatization of the district as it is serves an even higher concentration of low-income students while receiving fewer state resources, and a weak school system exerting an economic and social drag on the core city. In this scenario, the divisions that exist within the



region might have been exacerbated, with the urban core confronting the fate of declining relevance that already plagues many of the nation's older cities. But the Kalamazoo Promise has changed these dynamics. A negative outcome in this light means something quite different—a failure to achieve the full potential of the program and an inability to realize the transformative vision of the donors. As suggested throughout the pages of this book, the realization of the donors' vision is not in the least bit automatic. Their gift was a catalyst; the ongoing process of community change is the responsibility of everyone else.

One of the most powerful and least anticipated effects of the Kalamazoo Promise has been its emergence as a nationally recognized model for community transformation. Reportedly, the donors never considered what impact their gift might have outside their hometown, and the intense level of media scrutiny and emulation by other communities has taken many in Kalamazoo by surprise. But this effect should not be unexpected. The connection between investing in education and supporting economic development embodied in the Kalamazoo Promise makes immediate and intuitive sense to people in many different kinds of communities. Perhaps without intending to do so, the donors have created a new path for community transformation that speaks to two of the most pressing needs of the twenty-first century: higher educational attainment and greater economic competitiveness. Their generous and open-ended investment in the education of potentially every graduate of the Kalamazoo Public Schools, whether or not those students earn good grades and regardless of their family income, was designed to change the incentives of a broad range of actors in ways that would ultimately improve not just educational outcomes but also the economy. As other communities work to develop models that fit their needs and resources, it is essential that they keep the power and simplicity of this vision at the forefront of their planning (see “Lessons for Other Communities”).

The anonymity of Kalamazoo's donors gave them the opportunity to do something in private that in a more public context is controversial; invest in the education of young people without regard to need or merit. The universality of this approach is critical to its potential success. Some of the communities that are developing programs under a public spotlight face pressure to limit scholarship recipients to those who are “deserving,” or those whose success in college is foreordained; for example, the Pittsburgh Promise, the largest initiative to date, will increase

### **Lessons for Other Communities**

- 1) To maximize a scholarship program's power as a catalyst for broader change, scholarships should not be limited by academic merit or financial need. It is the universality of the Kalamazoo Promise (in contrast to many other targeted scholarship programs) that has generated strong support for its goals among diverse populations and made it a tool for community transformation.
- 2) Scholarship funding alone, no matter how generous, will be insufficient to bring about the economic or social transformation of a community. It is through the process of engagement and alignment that scholarship resources can be leveraged for deeper change. The financial resources necessary for a universal, place-based scholarship program, and community alignment around the program's goals are both essential elements of a potentially transformative investment of this type.
- 3) Donor anonymity has had some important benefits for Kalamazoo in terms of putting power for implementing the program into the community's hands. While similar arrangements are unlikely, a scholarship program's effectiveness as a catalyst for change will be heightened if its donors and organizers create a leadership structure that is inclusive and represents "buy-in" by the broader community.
- 4) A community's response to scholarship funding will be maximized if it is able to build on existing institutional capacity to handle the challenges that will arise. While new resources will likely be needed, resources can be deployed most effectively if best practices piloted in other communities are adopted and existing organizations and networks relied upon for implementation.
- 5) Establishing a streamlined administrative process and minimal requirements for a scholarship program will have substantial benefits. In Kalamazoo, simple requirements, an easy application process, and strong database management have resulted in a program with low overhead that maximizes the funds available to students. Other communities with programs that initially had a more complex structure have already found the need to simplify it for administrative purposes.
- 6) Donors and organizers should consider including resources for evaluation in their program planning. Accurate and ongoing research-based assessments of a program's impact are essential both as feedback for the community and as an accountability measure for those charged with implementing change.

its high-school GPA requirement from 2.0 to 2.5 for the class of 2009 and impose high school attendance requirements for subsequent classes. If the goal of a Promise-type program is community transformation, high-school performance requirements may be a mistake. The purpose of the Kalamazoo Promise is not to reward achievement. If anything, it is most critical that such a program opens doors for those who run the greatest risk of receiving no post-secondary training. If a student who barely survived high school is able to acquire a marketable skill free of charge at the local community college, he or she is likely to become a productive, tax-paying member of society rather than a minimum-wage worker or someone who ultimately requires public resources in the form of public assistance or the criminal justice system. However, scholarship programs that focus on low-achieving and/or low-income students can be stigmatizing, as the early experience of Battle Creek's Legacy Scholars program suggests, and rarely enjoy broad-based support from other members of the community. A critical element of the Kalamazoo Promise is its ability to draw middle-class families into an urban school district, so it must offer something to the children of these families as well.

If a community's main concern is with the cost of a universal program, there are other, better ways to devise a program that is less expensive than the Kalamazoo Promise. The most obvious is to make scholarships last-dollar rather than first-dollar, building on the widespread availability of financial aid for low- and middle-income students (in Muskegon, Michigan, even in the absence of new funding, community groups came together to ensure that every student receives every dollar of financial aid to which he or she is entitled). Other options are to pay only for the first year or two of college (like the College for Everyone program in Greene County, North Carolina) or limit the range of schools that recipients can attend (as community college-based programs such as the Jackson Legacy and the Ventura Promise do). Innovative financing structures, such as the Michigan Promise Zone legislation, can also help. If the concern is with a student's personal values, then by all means institute a community service or work requirement (although from a purely logistical standpoint, the fewer criteria that need to be monitored in the implementation of the program, the better). Programs should also be guaranteed for a long enough period to provide predict-

ability and a lasting framework within which students, families, and the broader community can make decisions.

The power of the Kalamazoo Promise rests in its place-based focus, universal coverage, flexibility, and commitment of funding in perpetuity. While the outcome is far from guaranteed, the dynamics set in motion by this simple gift may fundamentally change not just the lives of Kalamazoo's young people and the future of their community. It may also provide a new model by which communities throughout the nation choose to put educational opportunity at the heart of their economic development endeavors.

## Notes

1. This and all subsequent quotes from Gary and Katie Swartz are from an interview with the author, July 31, 2008.
2. This and all subsequent quotes from Mayor Bobby Hopewell are from an interview with the author, August 8, 2008.
3. Battle Creek Unlimited, the economic development arm of neighboring Battle Creek, reports informally that 300 communities in 42 states tout themselves as centers for life sciences research.
4. The recruitment of and creation of support services for call centers is one area where Southwest Michigan First is working to support job-creation for workers with lower skills.
5. Sherry Thomas-Cloud, Kalamazoo director of the State of Michigan's Department of Human Services, as quoted by Ellen Kissinger Rothi in conversation with the author.
6. This and all subsequent quotes from Tim Terrentine, executive director of the Douglass Community Association, are from an interview with the author, July 31, 2008.
7. This and all subsequent quotes from Bob Ezelle, executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Kalamazoo, are from an interview with the author, August 4, 2008.

