

Since the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program began almost 10 years ago, it has faced some challenges in helping more city students pursue postsecondary education. But the Promise has continued and so have the opportunities that it provides. By Eleanor Chute

# KEEPING THE PROMISE

**P**ittsburgh Promise Executive Director Saleem Ghubril still has the Dec. 14, 2006, newspaper clipping that reported the school district superintendent

and mayor had unveiled a higher education scholarship program for city public high school graduates. The two officials made the announcement without any money behind the vision they called the Pittsburgh Promise.

Even so, Mr. Ghubril, who in 2006 was head of The Pittsburgh Project, a nonprofit community development organization, saw the scholarship program's potential. He described how, in a coffee shop that morning, he melodramatically lifted the newspaper showing the photograph of then-Superintendent Mark Roosevelt and then-Mayor Luke Ravenstahl over his head and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most important article we have seen in the Post-Gazette in a very long time.'

Today, approaching a decade later, the Promise has raised \$185.4 million and has given \$85 million in scholarships to 6,574 students at 119 schools—trade and career schools as well as colleges and universities—since it awarded its first scholarships to members of the Class of 2008. The funds can be used only at postsecondary institutions within Pennsylvania. As of late August, the Promise tallied 1,539 graduates of higher education.

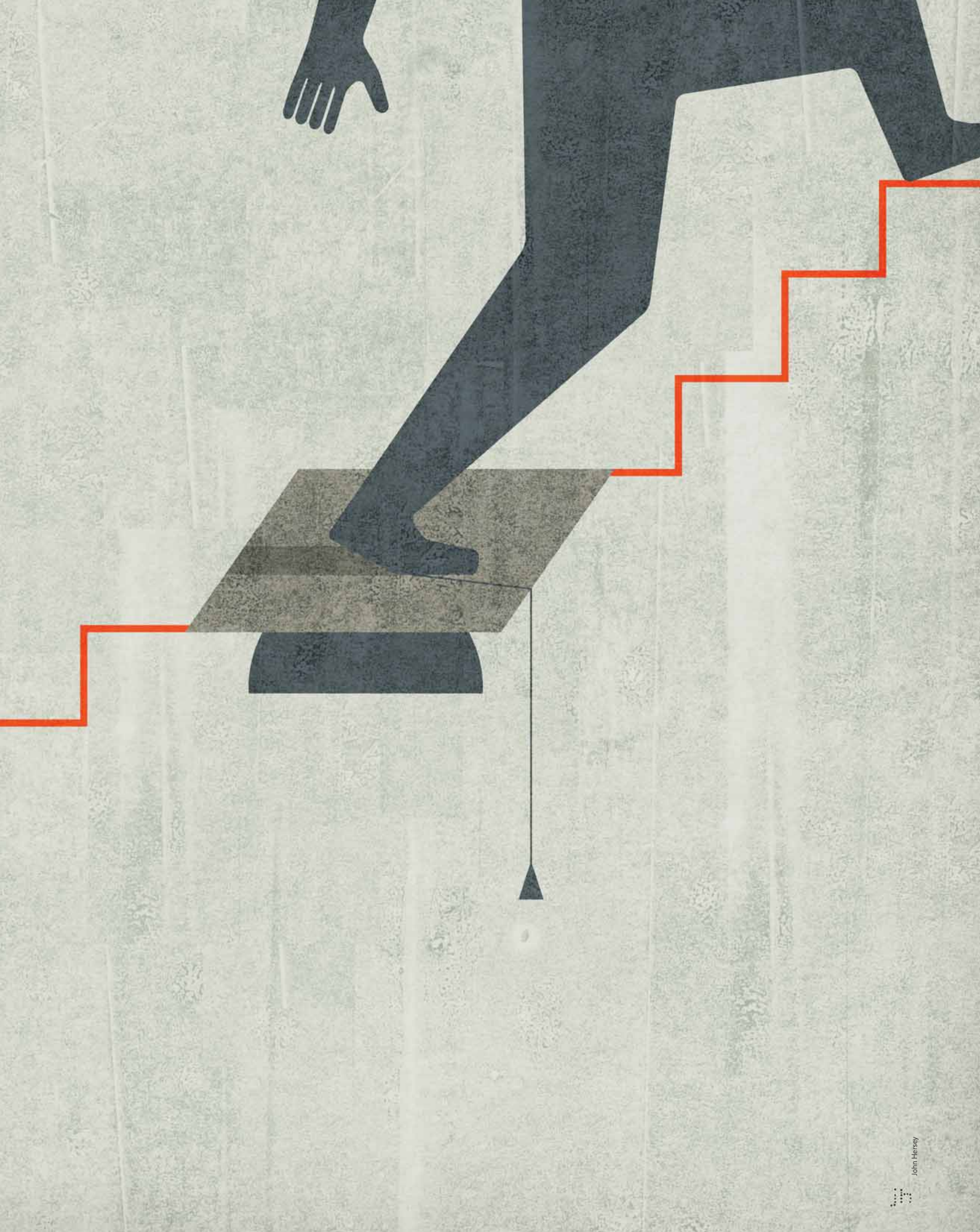
And since the Promise started, the district's high school graduation rate rose from 63 percent in 2007 to 70 percent in 2015—with higher rates in some intervening years—an increase some attribute at least in part to the Promise.

Mayor Bill Peduto, a city councilman in 2006, was among those who questioned whether the Promise would ever be funded. Now he thinks the Promise has had a "positive impact" on the city. Mr. Peduto said the Promise "helps to create that bridge to post-secondary education," addressing access to equitable education, which he called a critical area "to break the cycle of poverty within our city."

Linda Lane, superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools from January 2011 through June of this year, considers the scholarship program "the best gift the community ever gave its children."

The Pittsburgh Promise took some time to gain traction. Only the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers contributed at first, with a \$10,000 donation. Nearly a year passed after the initial announcement before a game-changing gift was made.

Pittsburgh Foundation President and CEO Maxwell King, who was president of The Heinz Endowments from 1999 to 2008, said that



the big break came when he and Mr. Roosevelt met with Jeffrey Romoff, UPMC president and CEO. The health care giant pledged \$100 million over 10 years, with a match of \$150 million to come from other donors. The Promise reached its fundraising match only the first year, but UPMC remained committed to contributing \$10 million a year regardless of whether the matching amount was met. The final installment is due July 2017. Susan Manko, the organization's senior director of media relations, said UPMC is not ready to speculate about any donations beyond that.

Mr. King explained that Mr. Roosevelt was inspired by the Kalamazoo Promise, a scholarship program that began in 2006 in Michigan. Today, there are about 80 place-based scholarship programs across the country with varying criteria, according to the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Kalamazoo.

After the UPMC donation, Mr. King said, foundations and others came on board. The three foundations that contributed the most are the Endowments, \$18 million; The Grable Foundation, \$10 million; and The Pittsburgh Foundation, which is the Promise's fiscal agent, \$10 million.

The Promise has received other gifts large and small. It counts 18 donors who gave \$1 million or more each and 4,538 donors who gave less than \$1,000 each. Mr. Ghubril hopes the Promise's first gala in November can raise \$1.5 million.

Mark Laskow, an investment adviser on both the UPMC and the Promise boards, said the UPMC gift has served the community and organization's "institutional interests," noting the importance of strong public schools to attract employees and the need for an educated workforce.

"There are significant gaps in opportunity for young people, and eliminating the financial challenge to college evens the playing field," said D'Ann Swanson, senior program officer for The Grable Foundation.

Among the first scholarship recipients was Vanessa Thompson of Swissvale, a borough east of Pittsburgh. She previously lived in the city's Lincoln neighborhood and graduated from Pittsburgh Westinghouse in Homewood. Ms. Thompson earned a bachelor's degree from Chatham University in 2012 and is the grant and community outreach manager for Girl Scouts Western Pennsylvania.

"The Pittsburgh Promise filled in the gap for us," she said. "They made it just and fair for anyone to go."

The Promise has become well-known throughout the district, with signs in schools encouraging students to follow the "Pathway to the Promise." The

## THE PROMISE TO DATE

The scholarship maximum total will drop this school year to \$30,000, with an annual contribution of \$7,500. Those funds can be spent only on tuition and fees not covered by other scholarships.

# 6,474

STUDENTS

# 119

SCHOOLS

# \$85

MILLION IN SCHOLARSHIPS

scholarships initially offered each recipient a total maximum of \$20,000 for tuition and fees, with an annual contribution of up to \$5,000. In the second year, the Promise began allowing the money to be spent on room, board and books. Then in 2012, the amount grew to a total maximum of \$40,000, with an annual allocation of up to \$10,000.

But the added benefits proved to be too costly. The scholarship maximum total will drop this school year to \$30,000, with an annual contribution of \$7,500. The latest change permits the scholarships to be spent only on tuition and fees not covered by other scholarships.

The most recent adjustments, while criticized by some in the community, were made to ensure that Promise money will be available for those in kindergarten last year—the future Class of 2028. The Promise still has \$64.6 million to raise to meet its \$250 million goal to pay for those scholarships. If there are scholarships beyond that class, it will take even more fundraising.

To qualify for the Promise, a student must have been a city resident continuously and attended a city district or charter school since at least ninth grade. The scholarship amount is prorated based on the number of years a student has been enrolled in public schools in Pittsburgh.

A student must have at least a 2.5 GPA and a 90 percent attendance rate in high school to receive the "core" Promise scholarship to any accredited college, university or trade and technical school in the state. If the student has a GPA between 2.0 and 2.49, the student can receive an "extension" scholarship to be used only at Community College of Allegheny County, effectively giving the student another chance to demonstrate readiness—or increase readiness—for a postsecondary institution. If the student earns at least a 2.0 GPA in the first year at CCAC, then

the student can receive up to three years of the “core” Promise scholarship at another school the student chooses.

Some have criticized the GPA and attendance requirements, arguing that such standards contribute to lower participation by African American male students. Through late September, 29 percent of the core and extension scholarships awarded went to African American/multiracial females, 17 percent to African American/multiracial males, 28 percent to white females and 23 percent to white males.

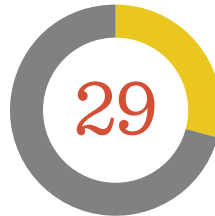
Mr. Ghubril maintains that the standards are important. “There’s a ton of research that verifies that there’s not a better indicator of college readiness and college success than GPA,” he said, noting that lowering the standard would be “setting the kid up for failure.”

Emmanuel “Manny” Walker agrees. Currently a Wilksburg resident, Mr. Walker previously lived in East Liberty, graduated last year from Pittsburgh Obama 6-12 and attended CCAC under the Promise extension. He transferred this fall to Point Park University with a core Promise scholarship.

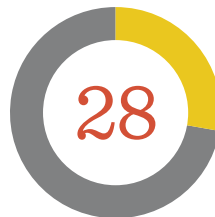
“If you have a goal you want to reach, you can’t just beat around the bush,” he said. “You actually have to commit to it. That’s what the Promise instills in us.”

While 42 percent of the 5,814 recipients of core Promise scholarships are African American or multiracial, 73 percent of the 760 recipients of extension funds are African American or multiracial.

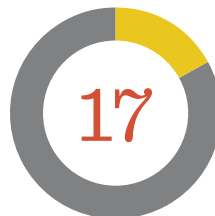
Mr. Ghubril considers the extension to be one of the ways the Promise tries to expand opportunities. To help students do well at CCAC, the Promise pays for extra assistance, including success coaches and a one-week program to help students acclimate to campus and get to know their counselors before each semester. Mr. Walker, who met regularly with a success coach, described the experience as particularly helpful.



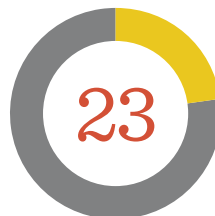
AFRICAN AMERICAN/  
MULTIRACIAL FEMALES



WHITE FEMALES



AFRICAN AMERICAN/  
MULTIRACIAL MALES



WHITE MALES

One effort to reduce racial disparity among scholarship recipients is the “We Promise” program for male African American high school students, which began in 2013 and has received \$450,000 from the Endowments. As part of the program, students who need to improve their GPAs to qualify for the core Promise are paired with African American male mentors and attend districtwide summits.

Since We Promise began, the percentage of African American males qualifying for the core Promise rose from 18 percent in 2012 to 39 percent in 2015, according to the school district.

“In the work I’ve done as an educator, there’s nothing I feel better about than [the We Promise] program,” said Dr. Lane.

At a We Promise luncheon in May honoring 75 graduates who participated in the program, Stanley Thompson, the Endowments’ Education Program director, was among those encouraging the young men. He said that in addition to providing access to higher education, the Pittsburgh Promise helps to keep families in the city and provide an educated workforce.

## PROMISE DEMOGRAPHICS

Young women, overall, have been the most frequent recipients of Pittsburgh Promise scholarships so far, with African American/multiracial females receiving the highest percentage.

“By creating an intentional pathway for students across the city, especially from distressed neighborhoods, the Promise is not only building its community’s intellectual and leadership capital but ensuring the region’s future economic growth,” Dr. Thompson said.

Since the Promise started in 2008, the city population has stabilized, fluctuating less than in the past, Mr. Ghubril said, attributing the trend at least in part to the Promise. He also noted a 2011 RAND study that reported district enrollment as being more stable since the inception of the Promise. Other findings included that parents of students in grades six, seven, eight and nine who were new to district or city charter schools in 2007 to 2009 listed the Promise as the top influence in their decision.

Promise officials continue to seek ways to heighten the scholarship program’s outreach and impact.

It already helps some students get internships and conducts “career launch” sessions for recipients to meet employers. A pilot program with about 70 students allows high schoolers to use Promise money for training in health careers, culinary arts and HVAC. An October seminar is aimed at encouraging colleges to improve their graduation rates.

Keshawn Brooks, of Homewood, a We Promise participant and a 2016 graduate of Pittsburgh Westinghouse, is using his Promise money this fall to attend Cheyney University of Pennsylvania.

“I probably wouldn’t have gone to college without the Promise,” he said. **h**