

**On Becoming
“The Education Community”:
The Kalamazoo Promise,
the Community and Its Schools**

**Working
Paper**

Timothy Ready
Joseph Johnson
Mark McBride

The Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and
Ethnic Relations
Western Michigan University

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Executive Summary

In this paper, we present statistical data and examine the perceptions and opinions of various stakeholders about schooling and the Kalamazoo Promise. In particular, we focus on the views of parents and others who work with and care for low income and minority children in Kalamazoo about what has and has not changed since the Promise was announced in November 2005.¹ This qualitative information is juxtaposed with information about the demographic characteristics of the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS), educational outcomes for the district over time and in relation to other districts, and outcome data for students from different backgrounds within KPS.

The paper begins with a brief demographic description of children enrolled in Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS), an overview of the district's educational outcome and achievement data in relation to other communities, and a comparison of outcomes among KPS students by race. These data provide a statistical snapshot of the challenges that need to be addressed to enable more students to take advantage of the Promise and provide context for the reader to interpret the views and opinions expressed by interviewed parents. Because less than three years have passed since the Promise was announced, it is too soon to assess the full impact it will have on students of color and low income students in KPS. The views of the 11 parents presented here provide only a preliminary glimpse of the range of parental opinion about the Promise and the schooling of children of color and low income children. More research on how the Promise is affecting students of different racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds is needed, and is currently being conducted by researchers affiliated with the Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations at Western Michigan University. However, the statistical data presented here, combined with information from interviews and extensive discussions with community leaders and stakeholders over a five month period, largely complement each other and are the basis for the concluding discussion of the need for both community building and continued educational reforms if the Kalamazoo Promise is to become a reality for more than the one-half of ninth graders who currently are on track to finish high school and graduate from KPS.

¹ Additional interviews will be conducted in the summer and fall of 2008 for future publications of this work in progress.

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The paper is based primarily on four sources of information:

1. Census data and data from the U.S. and Michigan Departments of Education.
2. Interviews with 11 parents of students enrolled in Kalamazoo Public Schools
3. Thirteen weekly 2-hour meetings about the problems and potential of enabling more black and Latino students to take advantage of the Kalamazoo Promise. These meetings were held at the Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations at Western Michigan University. Participants in these meetings at different times included leaders of various community-based organizations, parents of KPS students, Kalamazoo city officials, members of the clergy, and Western Michigan University faculty and students actively working to support K-12 education in Kalamazoo.
4. The authors' participation in approximately a dozen meetings with prominent civic leaders with a deep interest in education and youth development.

I. Poverty, Race, and Educational Attainment in Kalamazoo

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According to recent estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau,³ 36 percent of children under 18 residing within the boundaries of the Kalamazoo Public School District (KPS)⁴ were living in poverty. The child poverty rate in the city of Kalamazoo was even higher at 41 percent.⁵ These extremely high rates of poverty for children living within the school district boundaries and in the city of Kalamazoo place Kalamazoo on a par with a group of cities with the highest poverty rates in the country.⁶ The poverty rates for black and Latino children are higher than for the district and the city overall. More than half (51%) of black children within the district were in poverty in 2006. While current data are not available for Latino children, 58 percent were in poverty in 2000. The poverty rate for non-Latino white children (22%), although much lower than for blacks and Latinos, is still significantly above the national and state averages (18%).

It is highly likely that the 2006 child poverty data from the Census Bureau for children living within the boundaries of the Kalamazoo Public School District understate the rate of poverty for children who are actually enrolled in Kalamazoo Public Schools. This is evident based on comparisons of:

- KPS enrollment by race/ethnicity with the racial and ethnic composition of all children residing within district boundaries;
- KPS enrollment by race/ethnicity with the racial/ethnic make-up of students enrolled in the city's private, and religious schools; and
- Eligibility rates for free and reduced cost lunch in KPS and in Kalamazoo's private and religious schools.

Of the 10,662 students enrolled in Kalamazoo Public Schools in the 2005-2006 school year, 4,973 were black.⁷ The number of black students enrolled in KPS is equal to 73 percent of the number of black children between the ages of 5 and 17 living with KPS district boundaries (American Community Survey, 2006). In contrast, the 4,150 non-Latino white students enrolled in KPS, equaled only 58 percent of the number of white children living within district boundaries. Despite the fact that black students are far more likely to drop out of KPS schools prior to graduating than are whites (as will be discussed below), they comprise a higher percentage of students enrolled in KPS than of all children, 5-17 living within district boundaries. This is largely because white children in Kalamazoo are more likely to attend private and religious schools than are black children.

Religious and other private schools located in the city of Kalamazoo enrolled 3,600 students in the 2005-06 academic year,⁸ 23 percent of the 15,355 pre-K to 12 students who go to school in the city. An

³ Poverty figures are estimates produced by the U.S. Census Bureau from the 2006 American Community Survey. Although these estimates have a sizable margin of error, it is clear from these and corroborating data that child poverty rates in Kalamazoo are among the highest in the nation. For example, 60 percent of KPS students are eligible for free or reduced cost lunches—nearly double the figure for all Michigan students (32%) To compare Kalamazoo with other districts on this frequently used measure of poverty, see *The Graduation Project, 2007. Editorial Projects in Education*. Bethesda, MD. <http://mapsg.edweek.org/edweekv2/default.jsp>

⁴ The boundaries of the Kalamazoo Public School District extend beyond the city of Kalamazoo. A total of 19,668 children live within the boundaries of KPS, 45 percent more than within the city of Kalamazoo.

⁵ American Community Survey, 2006, Tables C17001 and GCT 1702.

⁶ Kids Count Data Center, 2006. www.kidscount.org/datacenter

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Common Core of Data <<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/index.asp>>

⁸ U.S. Department of Education. <<http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/privateschoolsearch/>>

additional 1,093 students attended public charter schools, 7 percent of the total. 83 percent of Kalamazoo’s private school students are non-Latino white, compared with 39 percent of students in KPS.⁹ Only 3 percent of private school students are black compared with 47 percent of students in KPS.⁹ Although some students enrolled in Kalamazoo private schools undoubtedly reside in Portage and other communities outside of the Kalamazoo district, it is clear that lower income students and students of color are much more likely to be concentrated in Kalamazoo’s public schools.

Poverty among students attending private and religious schools is much less prevalent than in KPS, as measured by eligibility for free and reduced cost lunch. Sixty percent of KPS students are eligible for free or reduced cost lunch because of their families’ low income. This compares to only 3 percent of students in Kalamazoo’s private and religious schools and 40 percent of students enrolled in public charter schools (Hussein, 2008).

Educational outcomes. For many years, researchers have found that that the characteristics of students’ families and communities are strongly related to educational outcomes (Coleman et al., 1966; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Lloyd, Tienda, & Zajacova, 2002). In particular, low socioeconomic status, as defined by parental education and income, are inversely related to student achievement and educational attainment. Educational outcomes typically are most problematic for students living in communities and attending schools where poverty is highly concentrated.

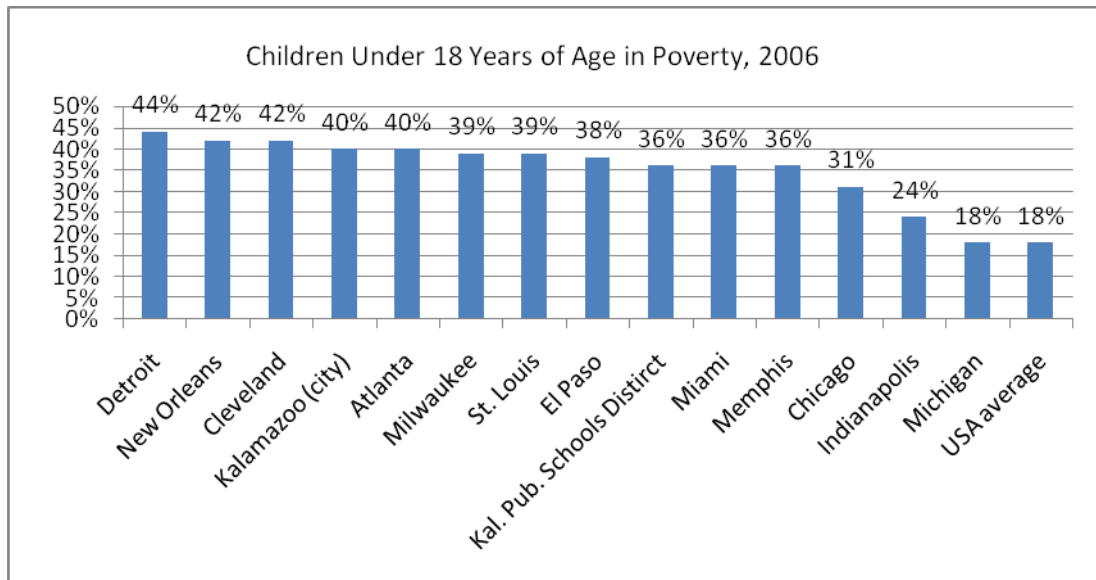
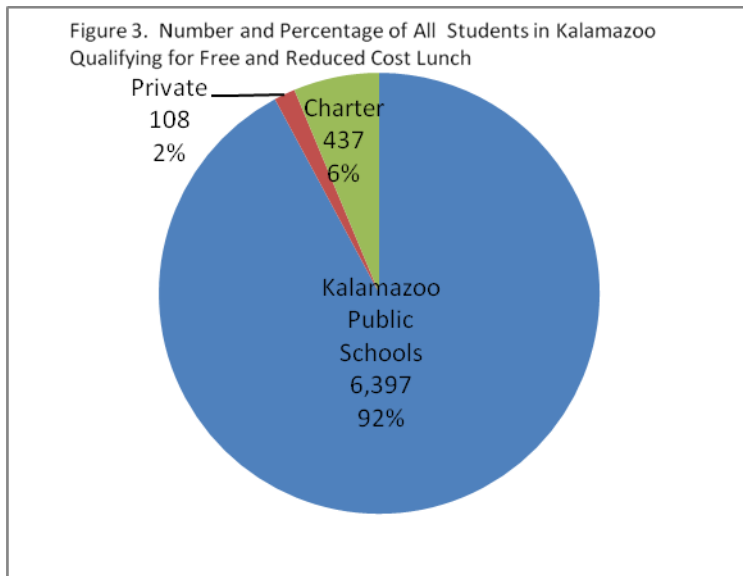


Figure 1. Children under 18 in Poverty (American Community Survey, 2006)

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2006

⁹ Latinos make up 10 percent of Kalamazoo’s private school enrollment compared with only 8 percent in KPS. Latinos’ higher private school enrollment is primarily due to one private school (Heritage Christian Academy), where 273 of the city’s 343 Latino private school students are enrolled.

Kalamazoo is no exception. Using the cumulative promotion index (CPI), the W.E. Upjohn Institute found that only about half of ninth graders enrolled in the Kalamazoo Public Schools go on to graduate. While this measure of high school completion can be affected by factors such as student mobility and by students being retained in grade, the CPI for KPS has been at approximately 50 percent for more than ten years.¹⁰



Minority status also is associated with the likelihood of poorer educational outcomes, independent of the effects of poverty and income. This is because minority status is related to the probability of other environmental influences adversely affecting school learning (Lloyd, Tienda, & Zajacova, 2002; Ferguson & Metha, 2002). Applying the CPI to the graduating cohort of 2006-07, only 49 percent of KPS ninth graders went on to receive a high school diploma from KPS. Outcomes varied substantially by the race and ethnicity of students. Using a slightly different methodology, we found that the number of black graduates was only 40 percent of black ninth graders. For Latinos, it was 48 percent, and for non-Latino whites the number of graduates equaled only 61 percent of white ninth graders.¹¹ The still low completion rate for non-Latino white KPS students is somewhat surprising in light of the much lower poverty rates for white children living in the KPS district. However, given that white Kalamazoo children are more likely to be enrolled in tuition-based private schools (40% of all white children are enrolled in private schools, compared with 25 percent of all Kalamazoo children), it is probable that white children

¹⁰ See W.E. UpJohn Institute Kalamazoo Promise Scorecard, at <http://www.upjohninstitute.org/promise/scorecard.html> for a description of how the CPI is calculated and for KPS graduation rates over a ten-year period as determined using this methodology.

¹¹ Because of limitations in publicly accessible race/ethnic specific graduation data, we calculated race/ethnic-specific completion rates by comparing the number of students from each racial/ethnic group enrolled in ninth grade, based on the U.S. Department of Education's *Common Core of Data*, with the number of KPS graduates from each racial/ethnic group. Graduation data are from the 2006 U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights database: <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd> and <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/data.html>

enrolled in KPS are more likely to be poor than all white children residing in the city.¹² Overall, we found that the number of 2006 graduates from KPS equaled 51 percent of the number of ninth graders in the district four years earlier.

While the quality of schools clearly can and does make a difference in student outcomes, completion rates for various communities in Michigan and nearby Midwestern cities generally reflect the socioeconomic circumstances of children in those communities, as illustrated in Table 1.

Kalamazoo mirrors another troubling national pattern with regard to racial and ethnic differences in standardized achievement test scores. The percentage of Kalamazoo Public School students who meet the achievement standards on the MEAP is substantially below the state average, with the biggest differences observed with districts serving a higher percentage of students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Disparities in pass rates worsen as students progress from third to eighth grade. For example, the gap in the MEAP reading exam pass rates between KPS and the Michigan average in 2007 increased from 10 percentage points in third grade to 21 percentage points in eighth grade. The disparity between KPS and more affluent districts such as neighboring Portage grows even wider.¹³ A similar troubling trend toward widening gaps is observed for the average reading pass rates of black, Latino, and non-Latino white students within KPS.

¹² Twenty-two percent of white children residing within KPS district boundaries are from families with income below the poverty line (American Community Survey, 2006).

¹³ *Kalamazoo Gazette*, April 10, 2008, p. A4.

Table 1. Graduation Rates* for Kalamazoo Public Schools, Other Districts in Kalamazoo County, West Michigan, Elsewhere in Michigan, and Nearby Out-of-State Districts, 2003-04

Michigan	69%	Other Michigan	
		Detroit	25%
Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency (KRESA) Districts		Grosse Pointe	94%
Kalamazoo	45%	Dearborn	61%
Portage	89%	Ann Arbor	85%
Parchment	42%	Ypsilanti	44%
Galesburg-Augusta	63%	Jackson	67%
Climax-Scotts	72%	Lansing	52%
Comstock	72%	Okemos	100%
Gull Lake	92%	Flint	37%
Schoolcraft	95%	Saginaw	50%
Vicksburg	93%	Traverse City	79%
West Michigan		Other Nearby Cities	
Plainwell	78%	Chicago	51%
Benton Harbor	40%	South Bend	35%
St. Joseph	89%	Fort Wayne	57%
Grand Rapids	53%	Gary	37%
Three Rivers	43%	Toledo	37%
Battle Creek	41%		
Mattawan	92%		

* Using Cumulative Promotion Index

Source: Editorial

Projects in

Education

Editorial Projects in Education, EPE Research Center Graduation Rate Maps.

<<http://mapsg.edweek.org/edweekv2/default.jsp>>

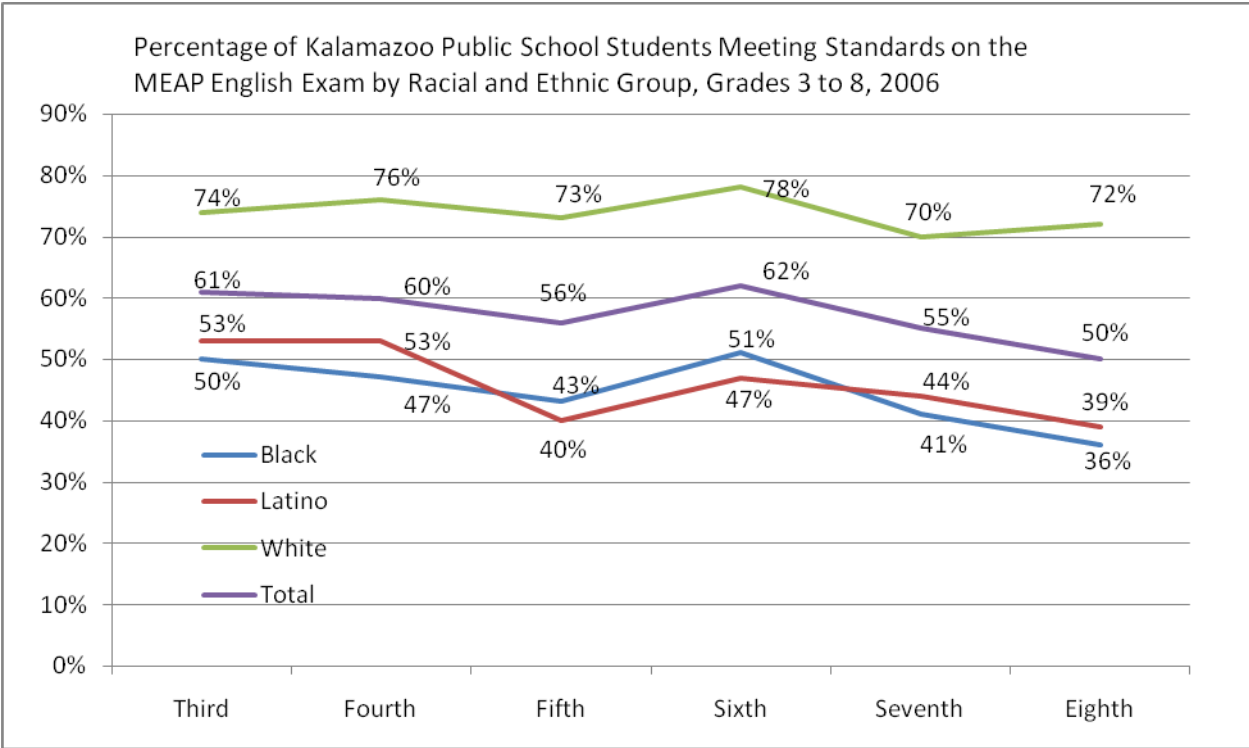


Figure 4. Percentage of Kalamazoo Public School Students Meeting Standards on the MEAP English Exam by Racial and Ethnic Group, Grades 3 to 8, 2006

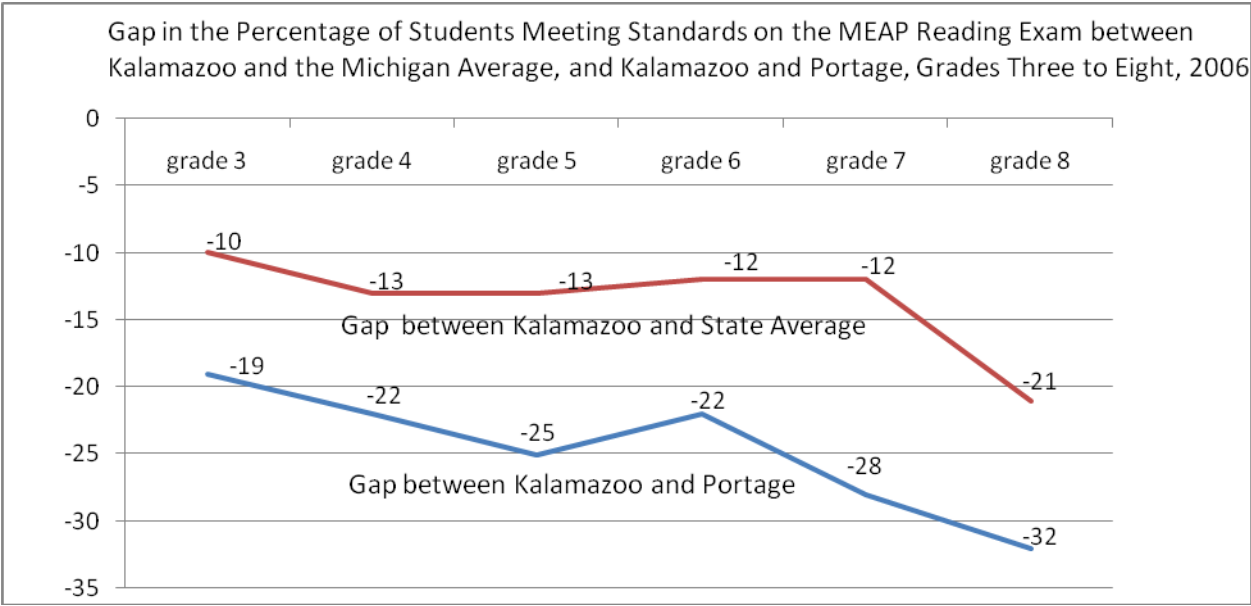


Figure 5. Gap in the Percentage of Students Meeting Standards on the MEAP Reading Exam Between Kalamazoo and the Michigan Average and Kalamazoo and Portage, Grades Three to Eight, 2006

II. Parents' Views and Opinions about the Achievability of the Kalamazoo Promise¹⁴

The above information is presented to provide an objective context in which to evaluate the views and opinions of 11 parents with children enrolled in the Kalamazoo Public Schools. In light of the low graduation rates and lagging achievement indicators, what do parents think about the Kalamazoo Promise? Do they expect that their children will be able to use it? Do they think it will benefit students from more disadvantaged backgrounds? Do they think KPS teachers and schools are doing a good job in preparing students to realize the Promise? Has the Kalamazoo Promise led to any changes in the attitudes and behavior of

Students?

Teachers?

Parents?

Community organizations?

City government?

The way that each interacts with and works with the others?

These are some of the questions that we posed to this group of parents. The parents who were interviewed provided rich insights into how the Kalamazoo Promise is working and affecting the community. A wide variety of opinions were expressed. Eight of the 11 interviews were conducted with the parent(s) of children of color. The interviewed parents included 8 women and 3 men. They are the parents of children of all ages—from elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. They are from a variety of occupations and neighborhoods across the city. Parents of children of color were oversampled, as were parents whose jobs involved working with Kalamazoo children and families in the helping professions—i.e., as social workers, counselors, and teachers. At the time they were interviewed, the jobs of two of the parents involved working with KPS students in different capacities, and a third formerly worked for the schools.

Because this portion of the paper is based on qualitative research methods, the views expressed below should not be assumed to be representative of KPS parents overall. However, it also should be noted that we did not seek out parents with specific views; nor did we know the views of the parents we spoke with prior to the interviews. Our goal was to interview a group of parents who had a deep understanding of the educational experiences of low income students, minority students, or both through their own experiences as parents and/or through their work with these children. Some white middle class parents were included. In most cases the white parents also had firsthand knowledge of low income and minority young people in Kalamazoo because of their work. In sum, the purpose of these interviews was not so much to learn how many parents held particular opinions, but rather to gain an understanding of the reasoning behind the views and opinions expressed. We believe that the rationales presented provide insight into the social processes affecting educational outcomes that are in play within families, in the community, and in schools.

Two Western Michigan University graduate students conducted the interviews. Joseph Johnson is pursuing a master's degree in counseling and is African American. Mark McBride was pursuing a

¹⁴ The following opinions and views expressed about the Kalamazoo Promise and the schools are those of the parents who express them, and not necessarily those of the authors. They should not be interpreted as objective facts, but rather as reflecting the subjective experience of these parents.

master’s degree in public policy and has since graduated. Mr. McBride is white. Both Mr. Johnson and Mr. McBride interviewed parents of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Table 2. Profile of Parents who Were Interviewed

Race of Child in KPS	Sex of Informant	Occupation of Informant
1. Black	Male	Assistant Store Manager
2. Black	Female	Social Worker
3. Black	Female	Disabled/Not in Workforce
4. Black	Female	Homemaker/Student
5. Biracial	Female	Bookkeeper
6. Biracial	Female	Administrative Assistant
7. Latino	Male	Designer
8. White	Male	Engineer
9. White	Female	Teacher
10. White	Female	Counselor
11. White	Female	Social Worker

We asked the parents their views about the Kalamazoo Promise:

- What did you think when the Promise was first announced in November 2005?
- What do you think about the Promise now?
- Is the Promise producing positive changes in the community?
- Is the Promise producing positive changes in the schools?
- How has the Promise affected you and your child/children, if at all?
- Do you think that the Promise is helping students from more disadvantaged backgrounds?
- How well are the schools doing in preparing students for college?
- What else is needed to help more kids take advantage of the Promise?

Initial reactions to the announcement. “Astounded,” “great for the community,” “elated and relieved,” happy,” “excited,” “thankful and in awe,” “surprised,” and “an example of God moving people to do good” were some of the words and phrases that parents used to describe their initial reactions to the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise. Following are a few examples of what this group of parents had to say.¹⁵

¹⁵ The quotes were produced from the field notes written by interviewers Joseph Johnson and Mark McBride during each interview. Information that might reveal the personal identities of the interviewed parents was removed to preserve their anonymity.

I could not believe it! I always thought that education should be given and that it should be like foreign countries because they get free education in some countries. But I was very thankful and in awe. I don't believe we should have to have money to get an education because it automatically excludes minorities. (black, father, assistant store manager)

We were very excited and relieved that my daughter would not have to worry about the full expenses of college. It also made my son think about going to college when he might not have thought about it before. Now he has actual plans to go. The Promise solidified his decision. (black, mother, administrative assistant).

It is especially noteworthy that in five of the ten interviews, without being specifically asked, parents mentioned that the Promise affected their decision to live in Kalamazoo. A white professional couple that were originally from Kalamazoo but had moved out of state decided to move back to Kalamazoo so their children could benefit from the Promise. The father stated,

I had always intended for my three kids to go to college. The cost of education is a big factor. Because of the Promise, saving money for college will not be such a big problem and our kids won't have to rely so much on getting academic scholarships, although they are gifted and probably will get scholarships. The Promise removes some of the pressure.

Four other parents stated that they had considered leaving Kalamazoo but decided to remain so their kids could benefit from the Promise.

Current impressions about the Promise. When asked what they think about the Promise now, parents' comments clustered on two themes: relieving financial worries and motivating their children.

The Promise affected my oldest boy most, since he already is using the Promise and going to college. The younger kids saw the oldest going to college, and now they want to go there too. (Latino, father, designer)

My children are a little more motivated than before. The Promise has inspired them to go to college. They are even thinking about getting scholarships to go to college out of state, even though the Promise only pays for in-state college tuition (biracial, mother, administrative assistant).

A black mother who works as a bookkeeper noted that the Promise is having more effect on her children now that she, herself, has started attending college:

I was concerned because my son used to see me struggle with finding funds for college because I didn't go to college right after high school. He saw the pressures I was facing when I was trying to get a degree. But now he is very excited and talking a lot about building things and going to the U of M. The Promise keeps college in the forefront, instead of doubts.

Is the Promise Producing Positive Changes in the Community?

Several parents saw a variety of positive changes in the community:

The Promise is bringing middle class students into KPS who might provide an example to poorer or at-risk kids. There is kind of a trickle-down effect. (white, professional couple)

The Promise caused excitement in the African-American community and reinforced the perception that education leads to opportunity. There is a lot more support from the community. I feel uplifted and excited about what the community can do. (black, mother, social worker)

Neighborhoods are being cleaned up to attract homebuyers. Community groups are encouraging kids to use the Promise. (black, father, assistant store manager)

There is more involvement and parents now are trying to push their kids. (Latino, father, designer)

Others expressed mixed views as to whether the Promise is producing positive changes in the community:

I don't see any change in the community, although the Promise has been positive for my children. A lot of kids are just hanging around the neighborhood and the police know them by name. Parents are not behind their kids. (black, mother, homemaker and college student)

Parents are happier, but there is no talk about the Promise in the community except for the kids who have parents who stick on the kids about college. At first a lot of people were excited because they had t-shirts, etc. The attitude now is, if the kids take it, that's good. If not, oh well . . . (black, mother, not in workforce)

I don't see any positive change. Students are being sent to alternative schools, and these schools are like prisons. KPS has a mind-set that if the students are not rehabilitated, they won't make it. A lot of children are walking around the neighborhoods during school hours. Students have no advocate and they feel like the Promise is not for them. Parents are not involved. The neighborhood is getting worse, even though I thought that the Promise would make it better. (black, mother, administrative assistant)

Is the Promise Producing Positive Changes in Kalamazoo Public Schools?

As with the previous question about change in the community, views were mixed about the effect of the Promise on Kalamazoo Public Schools. For example, one parent mentioned that since the Promise was announced, the Girl Scouts have become more involved with the schools. Another mentioned that the schools have started to hand out backpacks full of food to take home on weekends. Some saw changes in teachers' attitudes, but others did not.

The Promise is forcing teachers to pay more attention to the kids. (white, mother, counselor)

Teachers and principals talk it (the Promise) up. There is excitement among the educators (white, mother, teacher)

I see no positive impact on KPS. Teachers can be impatient and intolerant. They are under stress. Counselors are focused on academic tracking. They largely ignore students' nonschool problems and needs. (black, mother, social worker)

I don't see any effect of the Promise on teachers. It has not made the teachers more excited. They still don't care. They don't talk about the Promise at all. I see no difference in the administrators, either. There aren't even letters from school. My son (age 14) would have to bring information on the Promise home if there were any.¹⁶ (black, mother, not in workforce)

Is the Kalamazoo Promise Helping the Most Disadvantaged Students?

Four parents stated that the Promise is not helping disadvantaged students, and six expressed mixed views. Only one parent stated without reservation that the Promise is helping the more disadvantaged students:

The impact is positive because they know now that there is light at the end of the tunnel. The kids know that they can pick up a trade or go to the university. Churches are being more involved, and the schools are calling to get help from mentors. I have gone into the high school and have seen some of the kids I used to have when I taught there, and they are taking advantage of the Promise. Most of the kids have plans to go to college now. (Latino, father, designer)

Several parents expressed mixed views on how the Promise is working for the many disadvantaged students in the district. The interviews highlighted the difficulties of aligning the attitudes of students, peers, parents, and teachers in a positive and supportive way. Matters related to poverty and race were mentioned often as affecting attitudes, behavior, and access to essential resources—both human and material—that disadvantaged children need if they are to be able to realize the Promise.

The purpose of the Promise was not to help kids. It was intended to be a catalyst to revive the local economy. Maybe there will be an impact on lower income people down the road. Parents are largely preoccupied with keeping their families housed and fed. Their children's education falls down the list of priorities. It is hard to deal with events when they can't fit dealing with kids' problems into their schedules. School is considered by many parents as a sort of babysitter. (black mother, social worker)

The Promise made a lot of kids happy because of the financial issues, and they had nowhere else to turn. Many are working harder in school and have something to look forward to. But neither the schools nor the parents are pushing them hard enough. The

¹⁶ Not all messages sent by teachers from school to home reach parents.

schools do not talk about the Promise enough. Why not have classes on the Promise and push them harder? (black, mother, not in workforce)

It *should* be positive because they can go to college for free. But not having someone to push the kids is the problem. Some will not use the Promise because they don't go to high school. Some parents don't seem to care much about their kids' education, and these kids will not reach the Promise. (black, mother, homemaker/student)

It is great for the community, but better for the middle class than the poor. There needs to be more family support, especially for the poor kids to help them get prepared. The attitudes of parents need to change. When it comes to their kids' education, too many have the attitude that the school will take care of it and they don't need to get involved. (white, mother, counselor)

Several parents flatly stated that the Promise is not helping the more disadvantaged students in the district.

The Promise is not helping the neediest. College is not a priority when parents are lacking the necessities to survive and kids have to start working to help out the family. Parents are worried about their jobs. (biracial, mother, bookkeeper)

Attitude and motivation are big problems for the neediest kids. Just because it's offered doesn't mean they have to take it. There is no tradition of postsecondary education in many families. This results in a lack of understanding of the importance of education. But poor kids can still do well in college. (white, mother, teacher)

When those parents who stated that disadvantaged kids were unlikely to be able to use the Promise were asked to elaborate on what the obstacles are, they discussed the following:

Learning is not a priority for a lot of kids. They go because they are supposed to be there. The kids are not motivated. The teachers are frustrated because they have to be a teacher, security guard, and parent at the same time . . . Lots of kids don't have alarm clocks, and they show up late. Home problems get in the way, and lots of kids are taking care of themselves. More people in the schools need to advocate for kids, because too many parents aren't able to help or just aren't involved. Lots of people are talking about the lack of parental involvement, but it seems like no one is doing anything about it. We need some mentoring programs. (black, mother, administrative assistant)

Kids are not coming to school. The parents aren't involved, students have attitudes, and parents with little education find it hard to help their kids. Also, many poor kids are losing family members—the adults in the kids' lives disappear. They get sick, lose their jobs, can't pay their bills, or aren't consistently there for the kids. Counseling isn't available. Transportation is a problem, and too many kids face the threat of violence. (black, mother, homemaker/student)

There needs to be more talk about the Promise. The Promise is not on teachers' minds. The kids are not interested at all in what the teachers have to say. Teachers are scared of the students, and they don't feel like the parents will back them up. Too many

teachers are only there to get the students in and get them out. Some of the community groups have tutoring and mentoring, but parents worry about violence at these places. (black, mother, not in workforce)

Some of the obstacles include home life and parents not being able to help with homework. Community groups can help, like the ones that help with clothing and give the backpacks full of food for the kids to take home on weekends. (white, mother, social worker)

There are no obstacles that can't be overcome, but the schools need to be able to assess the needs of the students better: social, economic, and environmental. (black, mother, social worker)

Are Kalamazoo Public Schools doing a good job in preparing students to take advantage of the Promise?

When parents discussed how they felt about the Kalamazoo Promise, in general, their views were almost entirely positive. When they spoke about the implications of the Promise for their own families, they mostly described their hopes and dreams for their children, regardless of their own circumstances and their children's performance in school. When they discussed whether the Promise was producing positive changes in the community and in the schools, opinions were mixed. But when asked whether the Promise is helping the city's more disadvantaged students, more frank discussions of problems in the schools, the community, and in families emerged. When asked specifically about how well the Kalamazoo Public Schools are doing to enable children to take advantage of the Promise, sentiments expressed were predominantly negative, with a focus on attitudinal problems of both teachers and students, a lack of discipline and motivation among students, lack of parental involvement, and the lack of what might be described by the old-fashioned term "school spirit."

Only two parents stated unequivocally that they thought that KPS was doing a good job in preparing kids for college. An African-American father who works as an assistant store manager expressed faith in KPS to prepare his kids for college. An African-American mother (homemaker/student) also had a positive assessment of KPS.

I would give KPS a grade of 9 on a scale of 1 to 10. Compared to Detroit, KPS is better because they have fewer students and they always have a teacher and an intern in the classroom. Kids are working on computers in elementary school, but in Detroit they don't start with computers until middle school. Teachers and staff are helping students in KPS. Parents have an effect, but too many don't seem to care. I am trying to get my kids in as many programs as I can.

A Latino father had a mixed assessment of KPS:

It is hard to say if KPS is doing a good job preparing kids for college and to take advantage of the Promise. Kids who do not come from an educated background make it harder for teachers to teach them. That's why parents play a huge role in education. My daughter usually is the only one with a backpack (full of schoolwork) getting on the school bus in the morning.

I do not know of any teachers with negative attitudes about students. A lot of black teachers want kids to take advantage of the Promise because this is something that has never been done. After-school programs for kids are very useful. After the school day ends, churches and the community organizations should be there for students. There is a lot of negative peer pressure in the community. The churches and community groups can help with that, but transportation to these programs is a problem.

The kids are not dressing appropriately. Uniforms may be needed. Too often the schools don't follow up when kids are not coming to school. People see kids out during school hours, and nothing is happening. Some parents don't know that kids are skipping school because they have to sign a paper in order for the school to call them about their child missing school.

The views of the white professional couple who moved back to Kalamazoo so that their children could take advantage of the Promise were mixed. "They are doing the best they can with limited resources, but they are not challenging the kids enough. The students in my child's middle school have poor reading skills, and behavioral problems are not being adequately addressed."

Comments expressed in the remaining interviews were clearly critical of how well KPS is doing in preparing kids for college. Perhaps the most negative sentiments were expressed by the mother of a biracial child who works as a bookkeeper. She had a lot to say and expressed concerns about the following: the schools' ability to prepare students for college; the expansion of alternative education programs; and teachers' negative attitudes and poor communication. This parent also stated that she believed that some teachers were racist, and that the schools need to ask themselves why it is that more minority kids are failing. She began by responding directly to the question, "Are the schools doing a good job?"

No! If I were the anonymous donor (of the Promise) I would not be happy. The Promise has good intentions, but the schools are failing. It's like giving someone a brand new car who does not have a drivers license!... I am not impressed and sometimes I wish that they did not have the Promise because of the school system and the quality of learning. Often I think about taking my son out of KPS because of the quality. I do not want to sacrifice his quality of education for a chance of college. If it were not for the Promise, my son would not be in KPS...

The Promise is unattainable because the kids are not being prepared. There are programs for advanced students, but there is no help for borderline students. So the advanced students end up getting the Promise along with all of the other scholarships; and the borderline students continue to fail, drop out, and be left behind. Students are not even ready to go to high school, and the system is just too laid back about everything. Some teachers say parents don't care if the child fails, but I have not spoken with any parents who said they don't care if their child fails!

Teachers should not wait until the child is failing to contact parents. They need to be more proactive. If the teachers and counselors are that overworked, the state should

not be taking money away from the schools. KPS needs the tools to get the kids reaching these goals because we are headed toward a whole generation of dropouts!

This same parent went on to discuss how it is not only the schools that are responsible for poor educational outcomes. Kids and parents also share responsibility, and many of the problems are related to poverty.

Kids do believe that high school is important, but they are not motivated to do it. The kids that come from troubled homes don't have enough self-motivation. They know it's important, but they slip through the cracks so many times that it's impossible to get them back.

Teachers have negative attitudes toward the kids—and what they see students getting away with makes their attitudes worse. Teachers don't listen to the students enough. Kids go through a lot of bullying and when kids are called everything but their name, this affects them. Teachers should step in and understand the negative impact that it's having on students. Teachers seem like they are tired and have lost control . . .

Problems are not identified early (before kindergarten), and lack of parent involvement are also problems. There are too many absent parents, parents who don't know how to parent, teenage parents, and some parents are not even meeting children's basic needs. More outreach to families is needed. Parents do not have jobs; kids can't play sports because money for equipment is too expensive and they can't afford it. There are not enough resources and even if they did have resources, the parents would not know where they are and how to get them.

Another mother expressed similar views:

School systems that are a lot bigger than Kalamazoo and have more poor children are finding ways to reach their students. I am not impressed, and the Promise is the only thing keeping my kids in KPS. KPS has not found a way to reach all children. There are certain expectations for the children who attend certain schools, depending on the area of the school. For example, School A (mostly black) has fewer expectations for the students than children at School B¹⁷ (mostly white). I feel like KPS is setting children up for failure.

Kids are not being inspired and are not reaching their full potential because some of the teachers in the school system do not have their heart in teaching. All levels of KPS have racism. Some of the teachers are expecting certain behaviors from black children and not the white children. Some of the negative behavior is not stopped because it is expected.

The students who need it most are not being prepared to use the Promise. I can't see my son going into a community college English class and being able to write a decent

¹⁷ School names were omitted.

paper. My son's English teacher is no help. The guidance counselor won't return my calls. I finally got in to talk to the guidance counselor, and he told me that other children were doing worse than my son. I got the message that I should feel OK about my son getting "Cs."

Some teachers don't see the students as people or as the future of the world. They see the students as an inconvenience, another ID number, another paper to grade. They are not connecting enough with the kids. (biracial, mother, administrative assistant)

Other parents had the following comments:

No, KPS is not doing a good job preparing kids for college. The parents prepare the kids. Nobody in the school helps prepare the children for college. They wait until the last minute before telling kids about what they need to graduate. (black, mother, not in workforce)

KPS could do a lot better—better teachers, better facilities, improved curriculum. (black, father, assistant store manager)

There are a lot of behavior problems that are getting in the way. Teachers need to understand the root causes for students' negative behaviors. Teachers can be impatient and intolerant. Helping kids with lots of needs is inconvenient and time-consuming. Tardiness may be caused by factors outside a student's control, and teachers need to look a bit deeper into the issues. For example, some kids have to take care of their brothers and sisters. Parents get intimidated by bureaucracy, and education can be a low priority when there are lots of other problems that families are dealing with, like jobs and family issues. In the end, nobody is advocating to make sure the kids are getting a good education. (black, mother, social worker)

What Additional Services Are Needed to Help More Kids Take Advantage of the Kalamazoo Promise?

Most of the parents interviewed mentioned the need for more tutoring and mentoring, an expanded role for churches and community organizations, and the need for these to be accessible.

Mentoring, structured after-school programs for struggling students, and something for the students who seem like the parents do not care are some services that are needed. Also, teachers need mentors—some teachers get frustrated and can't handle their classes. (Latino, father, designer)

After-school programs at community organizations are important, but transportation is not available to these places. Kids need to keep busy with tutoring programs and develop social skills. All this is great, but what use is it if I can't get my child there? (biracial, mother, bookkeeper)

The neighborhood needs a recreation center for students. Individual tutoring is important, but we've got to find a way to get kids there. Once school is out for break,

the kids are not going to seek out places for extra help with their studies. We also need some programs that teach adults how to help their children. (biracial, mother, administrative assistant)

We need to get away from band-aid solutions. Government is taking a pass on opportunities to break the cycle of poverty. (white, mother, teacher)

III. On Becoming “The Education Community”

In the past, Kalamazoo has been known as “The Celery City,” “The Windmill City,” and “The Paper City.” Today, many civic leaders wish to market Kalamazoo as “The Education Community.”¹⁸ While Kalamazoo has many educational assets, staking a claim to the moniker, “The Education Community” could be interpreted as both unwarranted and insensitive in light of the collective failure of the city and its schools to enable more than half of KPS ninth graders to obtain a KPS diploma.

As discussed in the first section of this paper, the child poverty rate in Kalamazoo is among the highest in the country, and poverty is a major impediment to school success. Unresolved inequities related to race also affect chances for school success (Ferguson & Mehta, 2002; Vigdor & Ludwig, 2007; Orfield, 2004). With only 4 in 10 African Americans and about half of all KPS ninth graders graduating from district schools—and many of the graduates lacking the academic preparation needed to succeed in college—the Kalamazoo Promise at present is effectively irrelevant for a very broad segment of the community’s adolescents and young adults. While the importance of the Promise for Kalamazoo is appreciated by the parents, most expressed doubt that it will make a difference for the city’s neediest children and, in some cases, for the children of parents interviewed here. Some parents are frustrated and embittered, not by the Promise, but by the barriers that prevent so many from taking advantage of it. The parents of KPS students interviewed here want better for the city’s children and for their own children.

Absent dramatic changes to support the development and education of the city’s young people, the Promise is likely to remain more of a mirage than a reality for many, if not most children in Kalamazoo. For Kalamazoo to truly become “The Education Community,” it must work diligently both on building community and improving the quality of education. Neither goal is achievable separately (improved education or building a cohesive community) without accomplishing the other.

On building community: Countering economic and social marginalization in and out of school.

Completing high school and getting some form of postsecondary education has become nearly indispensable for earning a living in the 21st Century. Nowhere is this more true than in Kalamazoo, where the number of well-paying jobs available to people without advanced education has plummeted. Between 1998 and 2008, Kalamazoo County lost 9,300 manufacturing jobs that provided an average annual income of \$61,000. This is a loss of nearly one-third of all manufacturing jobs in the county over the past 10 years. Although the total number of jobs available in Kalamazoo County increased marginally during this period, the lost manufacturing jobs have been replaced mostly with low paying service jobs (e.g., food services and hospitality paying an average annual income of \$12,300) or with better paying jobs that require postsecondary education, especially in health care, education, and soon in medical research^{19,20}.

¹⁸ Becoming the “Education Community”: What’s the Formula? Julie Mack, *Kalamazoo Gazette*, January 24, 2008. p. A1.

¹⁹ Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov). The average annual income estimates for job categories are based on the assumption of full-time, year-round employment.

The resulting economic polarization of the educated and the uneducated is illustrated in Figure 6 and by the following statistics. The median annual earnings for Kalamazoo residents 25 and older with a college degree are 306 percent greater than those of persons who only completed high school or earned a GED and 372 percent greater than the median annual earnings of a high school dropout. The median earnings of Kalamazoo residents with a graduate or professional degree are nearly 4 times greater than those of a high school diploma or GED recipient and nearly 5 times greater than those of Kalamazoo residents who dropped out of school.²¹

These economic differences profoundly affect the quality of the environments in which Kalamazoo children of different backgrounds are growing up and trying to learn. Children whose parents earn very low wages, typical of high school dropouts and even of graduates who did not go on to receive at least some postsecondary education, are likely to experience poverty-related problems that interfere with school learning. This is especially true of children in families where there is only one adult responsible for sustaining the household.

More than half of all children in KPS and nearly two-thirds of African-American children in the school district are not on track for taking advantage of the Kalamazoo Promise or for accessing the higher paying jobs that require a college degree. They and their families are, however, at great risk for a wide variety of social, economic, health, and other problems that disproportionately affect the poor (Schulz & Mullings, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). A recent study of Kalamazoo residents in poverty (Kalamazoo County Health and Human Services, 2006) found that that a high percentage of respondents reported that they or someone in their household had experienced the following stressful events within the past year 2005:

- Needed food but couldn't afford to buy it (49%)
- Went hungry (22%)
- Could not pay the rent (40%)
- Had utilities turned off (29%)
- Could not pay mortgage or taxes (27%)
- Was evicted (18%)
- Needed to see a doctor but couldn't afford to (50%)
- Needed to buy medicine but couldn't afford to (55%)
- Needed to see a dentist but couldn't afford to (65%)
- Looked for work but could not get a job (52%)
- Lost a job (32%)

²⁰ In April 2008, MPI Corporation announced that it will be adding 3,300 new jobs in medical research in Kalamazoo County over the next 5 years.

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006. Median earnings data are calculated only for people who worked and had earnings and exclude those who were unemployed or otherwise not in the work force.

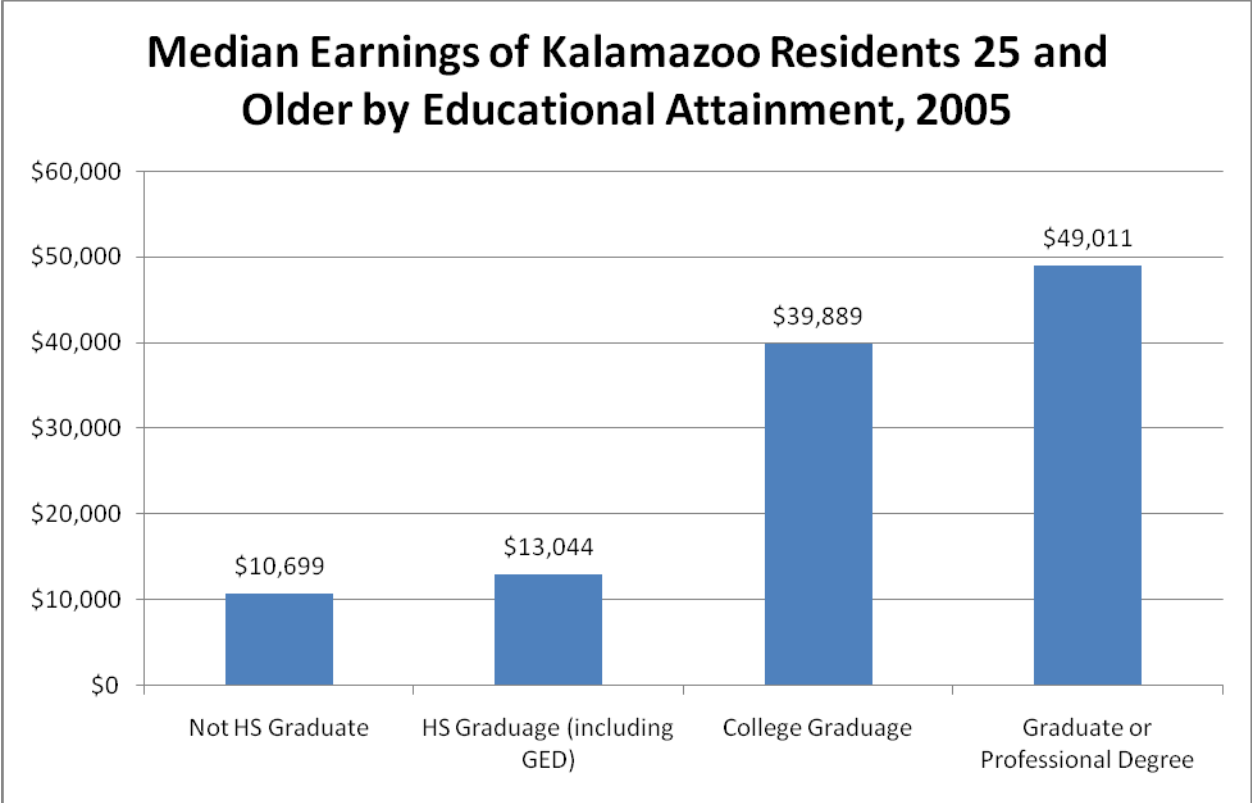


Figure 6. Median Earnings of Kalamazoo Residents 25 and Older by Educational Attainment, 2005

The same study also documented the gap between the resources needed to meet basic needs (e.g., food, housing, heat) and the resources made available to poor families in Michigan through programs like the Family Independence Program, State Emergency Relief, Energy Assistance, and Food Assistance). These social safety net programs were designed to prevent the marginalization of children and families in poverty but do not provide sufficient resources to meet basic needs, as evidenced by the tabulation of stressors and crises (above) faced by poor people in Kalamazoo²² (Kalamazoo County Health and Human Services, 2006). In light of the city’s dramatically changed economic opportunity structure, the attendant epidemic of poverty and gaping differences in life chances among Kalamazoo’s children of different races and economic backgrounds, it is clear that there is a need to reexamine the economic and social prerequisites for a cohesive, child-friendly community in postindustrial 21st century Kalamazoo.

According to recent census data, more than half (54%) of Kalamazoo residents with incomes below the poverty line moved from one residence to another within the past year, compared with only 15 percent of residents with income of at least 150 percent of the poverty line.²³ No matter how skilled the teacher,

²² The Kalamazoo County Poverty Reduction Initiative routinely sponsors poverty simulations in which participants are placed in circumstances that simulate those of Kalamazoo residents in poverty. The poverty simulation exercises provide participants with insight into how hard it is for families in poverty to create the necessary conditions for their children to do well in school. <www.haltpoverty.org>

²³ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006

it is difficult to help a child progress normally through school when the child's family has been evicted or faces some other destabilizing event (Rumberger, 2003; Smither & Clarke, 2008).

Evidence shows that poverty-related stress adversely affects early brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005). Children whose families frequently deal with crises are likely to be stressed and distracted and are less likely to have access to the kinds of resources and environments needed to help them learn. Falling behind academically, in turn, tends to make children feel inadequate in school and therefore less engaged in their schoolwork. They are likely to become more involved in activities that either are irrelevant to school success, disrespectful, disruptive, or delinquent (Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn, 2004). Teachers are likely to have lower expectations of students who are perceived to likely become disengaged from school because of poverty and/or their race—even when they may in fact be highly motivated to do well in school (Davidson, 1996). It is known that low expectations are likely to become self-fulfilling prophecies. All of these are different manifestations of how children are “falling through the cracks,” as one of the interviewed parents put it.

Education can be understood as the formal transmission of knowledge, attitudes, and values from the older generation to prepare the younger generation to become fully competent, respected adult members of their communities. Schools are the institutions where most of this formal transmission of knowledge takes place in our society. The inability of Kalamazoo schools to graduate more than half of all students who start ninth grade over many years²⁴ both reflects and perpetuates the economic and social marginalization of large segments of this community.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest specific changes in curriculum, instructional practices or the organization of schooling, it is clear that for a broad segment of the Kalamazoo's young people there is a serious “disconnect” between schooling and perceptions of what school can do for them. Poverty compounded by racial divisions adversely affects the life chances of many adults in postindustrial Kalamazoo, especially those who did not get an advanced education. It also greatly decreases the probability that their children's experiences in school will prepare them to become and be recognized as full participants in the “mainstream” community as adults. (Milliken, 2007). Developing an effective strategy to address this enormous and fundamental problem will require a serious community-wide commitment that includes school reforms that are closely coordinated with more forceful efforts to meet the needs of Kalamazoo's many vulnerable children and families.

Looking ahead. The *Strategic Planning Expectations* recently released by the Kalamazoo Public Schools²⁵ set goals and expectations for the community, educators, parents, students and KPS staff. Developed by committees composed of community members as well as school personnel, these measurable goals and expectations are helpful, but are not associated with specific strategies for their achievement.

For Kalamazoo to become “The Education Community,” much more must be done to improve the life chances of poor children and children of color. Important nonprofit community organizations like the

²⁴ See W.E. UpJohn Institute, Kalamazoo Promise Scorecard at <http://www.upjohninstitute.org/promise/scorecard.html>

²⁵ Access at: <http://www.kalamazoopublicschools.com/education/components/docmgr/default.php?sectiondetailid=20662>

Boys and Girls Club, Douglass Community Center, faith-based programs such as New Genesis, and innovative public-private collaboratives such as Kalamazoo Communities in Schools are doing good work to address the marginalizing effects of poverty on the city's most vulnerable children and families. Some of these organizations place volunteer tutors and mentors from Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo College, and other local institutions in settings where they work with children. The Kalamazoo Promise itself is a unique and important resource for those young who successfully navigate their way from kindergarten to high school graduation. For the most part, these organizations and programs work separately to address the needs of vulnerable children, both material and social. However, it is clear that despite the good work that each does, collectively their efforts are not close to meeting existing needs at current resource levels and as currently structured.

Transforming Kalamazoo into "The Education Community" will require a willingness to

- openly acknowledge the urgency of existing problems such as the low high school completion rate
- study the root causes of these problems
- prioritize the development and implementation of a comprehensive strategy to address the problems by involving all youth-serving organizations in coordination with the schools
- monitor indicators of healthy development and learning for children from throughout the city
- assess the effectiveness of social, health, and educational service providers, both individually and collectively, in moving the indicators of child learning and development in the right direction
- fully engage the community as partners in a purposeful, comprehensive effort to improve outcomes for Kalamazoo's children

These efforts must be based on solid information that is shared among all community stakeholders. This includes making sure that the voices of disadvantaged young people and their parents are heard, monitoring indicators of child well-being, and taking into account information on best practices employed in this and in other communities. Perhaps most importantly, becoming "The Education Community" requires shared commitment—a willingness for Kalamazoo residents from all walks of life to commit to walking down a common path together.

Kalamazoo is a community with enormous human resources and substantial financial resources, coupled with enormous unmet needs. The problems to be confronted are great, but so is the potential for success. Resources, commitment, personal involvement, and the intelligent use of information by community stakeholders are needed for Kalamazoo to become a caring community that works for kids.

As stated on the home page for the Kalamazoo Promise, the Promise can be a catalyst to make Kalamazoo an even better community.²⁶ The Promise has the potential to focus attention on what it will take to enable students from all backgrounds to benefit from the Promise. The entire community stands to gain by a renewed commitment to bridging the social chasms of class and race and to move Kalamazoo much closer to the American ideal of equal opportunity for all. To do anything less would be a tragedy, not only for the children and families who currently are unable to take advantage of educational opportunities such as the Kalamazoo Promise, but for the community as a

²⁶See www.kalamazoopromise.com

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Appendix

The Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations

Founded in 1989 as the Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations, the Institute was later renamed in honor of Lewis Walker, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, in recognition of Dr. Walker's longstanding and ongoing contributions to Western Michigan University, the community, and to the study of race and ethnic relations.

MISSION

Building on Dr. Walker's work, the mission of the Institute involves teaching, research, and service to promote

- understanding of racial and ethnic relations in the United States and in other multicultural societies
- appreciation of the diverse peoples and cultures of the United States
- more equitable and inclusive communities and institutions

GOALS

By collaborating with scholars throughout the University and with citizens in the surrounding community, the Walker Institute has the following goals for 2008-2009:

- Engage in applied research in Kalamazoo in support of community efforts to enable all students to benefit from the Kalamazoo Promise—especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
 - In the summer of 2008, the Walker Institute will sponsor the “Community Voices, Community Visions” Youth Development Project in which 15 Kalamazoo teenagers from low income neighborhoods will create a video in which they will document what young people in their communities are thinking about education and the Kalamazoo Promise
 - Develop and implement a community information system to provide civic leaders and service providers with accurate information on the health, well-being and learning progress of the area's children and adolescents
- Sponsor a conference on the history, struggles, contributions and prospects of various racial and ethnic groups in Michigan at Western Michigan University, October 9-10, 2008.
- Launch a series of policy briefs on racial, ethnic, and economic equity in Kalamazoo, the state, and the Great Lakes region, with a focus on (a) disparate effects of the economic dislocations that have occurred and (b) innovative responses to changing economic circumstances that result in more stable and inclusive communities.
- Develop an interdisciplinary major in race and ethnic relations.