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PROMISE SCHOLARS

Program to aid Ontario-Montclair students

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Liset Marquez – Staff Writer

ONTARIO - Leslie Sorensen knows students in the Ontario-Montclair area have the aspirations to attend college but they don't have the path to get there. Statistics indicate only 39 percent will make it, and in San Bernardino County the rate is just 29 percent.

Sorensen hopes developing a program in post-secondary education that gets students talking and thinking about college more than they were in the past may help with those aspirations.

The Ontario-Montclair School District has launched Promise Scholars, a series of initiatives meant to create access for college for each grade level starting with elementary, middle and high school and on to college/career preparation. Modeled after the award-winning Online to College program, it will help ensure a place in college for students.

But Sorensen, resource development administrator at OMSD, knows it will take assistance from community and business leaders to provide presentations to students, serve as role models, and support the scholarship component. Partner organizations provide assistance each year for student cohorts as they move through the educational pipeline.

"All OMSD students deserve to be fully prepared to participate in the 21st century economy and a post-secondary education is crucial to our students' future," said James Hammond, superintendent at OMSD.

"This is an exciting time for our community. Promise Scholars ensures a place in college for our students. The Promise Scholars partners pledge to work together to deliver world-class educational opportunities for the young people of our community and inspire students to pursue higher education."

Hammond said the key to the universal program will be the work of its partners: Chaffey Joint Union High School District, the cities of Ontario and Montclair, Chaffey College, Cal State San Bernardino, Inland Empire United Way, Supervisor Gary Ovitt's office and service clubs like Soroptimist International of Montclair/Inland Valley. In addition, Promise Scholars is working with the Alliance for Education, The Community Foundation, and the County Economic Development Agency.

The goal of the program is to increase the college-going rate of Chaffey, Montclair, and Ontario high school graduates from 39 percent to 56 percent, Sorensen said.

"Ontario-Montclair, we know, has some of the most challenging statistics for kids. The homelessness rate is 17 percent, about 3,500 students who aren't stably housed. Coupled with the fact that almost 50 percent of these kids' parents have not graduated from high school. It's an obvious place to invest in the Promise Scholars program," she said.

In order to tackle a wide range of issues and provide programming, officials at the school district knew they couldn't do it alone. Early on, they forged partnerships with officials in the two cities the district serves, Ontario and Montclair, and have expanded an ongoing relationship with United Way, Inland Empire.

"We're making the promise to our Ontario youth that a college education is indeed in their future," said Ontario Mayor Paul Leon. "We believe this program can positively impact our future resident's quality of life and the quality of our future work force."

Sorensen said those who only have a high school diploma will earn 45 percent less than those with a bachelor's degree. In their lifetime, high school graduates earn \$1.3 million compared to those with a college degree, who earn \$2.2 million.

The program kicks off in the fifth grade when students in the Ontario-Montclair district go on a field trip to a local community college, and every year after that, there will be some service focused on helping students go to college. Services will range from classroom activities to exposing students to local business leaders who explain how college helped them on their path to success.

Eventually, students who have met all the requirements of the program will have the chance at a Promise Scholars Scholarship Award as well as access and admissions at a partner college. Right now, those institutions include Chaffey College and Cal State San Bernardino, but organizers are looking to expand to nearby universities and colleges in the coming months and years.

Entering its second year, Promise Scholars got a boost from a recent grant in partnership with Inland Empire United Way for a pair of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers who will focus their attention entirely on the budding program.

The individuals not only will help Sorensen implement the tours, but also help connect with other universities and develop other partnerships. They will document the whole process and help develop a manual of best practices so the program can use it when working with new college and business partners.

"All of our work is focused on low-income families and their children. A good number of dollars and efforts goes into meeting the basic needs, which is critical, but we want to make sure we are not having to do that continually. We want to be investing in strategies in helping lift those kids up out of

poverty. We know, and all the research supports, that education is the No. 1 way to do that," said Greg Bradbard, CEO/president of Inland Empire United Way.

"Promise is the next step in how do we invest in the lives of the kids and how do we become successful as we move forward."

Besides the AmeriCorps volunteers, the United Way has agreed to take on the volunteer coordination efforts for the sixth-grade college career presentation. Bradbard said that was a natural choice for the organization because of its Hands On Inland Empire, which gives them easy access to volunteers.

A new phase being introduced this year to the Promise Scholars program will be a portion of the 12th-grade component, assisting with financial aid. Bradbard said they will be working on developing an assistance program for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in conjunction with CJHUD to really support them and help the kids understand how to fill out the form, which he likened to filling out a tax form.

Research shows 90 percent of students who complete the form will go to college, but recent data from the three high schools - Chaffey, Ontario and Montclair - shows only 32 percent completed the form.

It was a figure that was startling for Sorensen.

"Once I saw that data, that was a key point that can really cause a barrier (to going to college)," she said.

This year, they expect to hold either an all-day event geared toward helping students and parents fill out the form or may consider a peer-to-peer model that pairs recent college graduates with high school seniors.

"We know that most of our kids, if they're able to do the FAFSA, they're going to qualify for all kinds of other supports," she said.

When the program is fully under way - it may be 2020 until every single grade and every single school site is participating - 30,000 students could be served every year, or 7.6 percent of that age group in the county, Sorensen said.

"So with the impact that we can have and reach that 60 percent college-going rate, I think we'll make a big difference even for the region. It's going to take some scaling up. And that's why the AmeriCorps is a big piece of that, but we're going to need to have partners say, 'we're going to adopt seventh grade for you and help you roll that out,'" she said.

Finding the funding

The Promise Scholars program is being funded by the Ontario-Montclair Schools Foundation, a nonprofit organization overseen by community leaders in local government and education, which has already raised \$100,000 for the program.

While the foundation can't yet financially assist with college expenses, the first group of students won't graduate until 2017. Sorensen said they still have to raise a significant amount of money because they will have new groups every year after that.

Several local businesses such as the Cardenas grocery store chain and San Bernardino County are co-founding donors. Financially, they have also received assistance from Soroptimists.

"Sometimes not having much of a budget makes it more sustainable because your partners are there to step up," she said.

The city of Ontario, Sorensen said, is one such partner. Recently, the city announced it would donate proceeds from a run it hosts every December to the Promise Scholars.

"To me this a signpost of a real collaboration, when your partners says we can do this for you. The city is really dedicated to making Promise Scholars go to scale," she said.

Employees in both school districts are also being asked to commit financially.

"We've been doing an employee campaign in partnership with United Way. The idea is we have to commit as well as going out and asking for some business partners."

As for the yearly fundraising goal, Sorensen said she doesn't know what it will be.

"It's going to depend on the capacity of the foundation. And it's going to depend on the community itself and our partners and how we're able to meet that," she said.

They have already projected to 2020 the number of kids they expect to be part the program, but the dollar figure is still dependent on various scenarios, she said. The more partners the programs get the higher the commitment, she said.

"I think it's fairly new, seeing corporations getting involved and volunteering in public schools, but from what I can see, companies are starting to get it. They can see how important education is and that is one of the barriers for long-term success," Bradbard said.

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