

FOUNDATION SPOTLIGHT: Program seeks universal college access

The Ontario-Montclair Promise Scholars Program is a universal college access program. Administrators and supporters want all students to see themselves as college material.

BY REBECCA K. O'CONNOR *Published: Sept. 18, 2015*

PHOTO COURTESY OF ONTARIO-MONTCLAIR PROMISE SCHOLARS

Ontario-Montclair Promise Scholars is a universal college access program that starts working with students and families in elementary school to ensure all students in the district have access to college and vocational training. Promise Scholars starts with fifth-grade students, offering them tours of community colleges. For some, it's the first time they have set foot on a college campus.



Through the rest of their school years, students have the opportunity to meet and learn from local businesses leaders, visit a four-year college, receive coaching for college entrance and advice on how to succeed once they get there. Parents and students are offered assistance and training in filling out college applications and applying for state and federal financial assistance. Every year, students build on their prior experiences and, hopefully, begin thinking of themselves as future college students. Leslie O'Hare Sorensen, who works for the Ontario-Montclair School District and is executive director of Promise Scholars, recalled a mother of one of the children in the program who approached her in tears after a session on college funding.

“She said through a translator that she and her husband had not wanted to talk to their daughter about college because they didn't want to disappoint her,” Sorensen said. “They hadn't realized that there were ways to access the money. Once she knew that was possible, it was liberating. She could encourage her daughter to pursue their dreams for her.”

Sorensen said there is a need for the college guidance program, noting there is a large percent of local parents who do not have a college degree. Promise Scholars began as a pilot project at three elementary schools in the school district in the 1990s. Children in the program were guaranteed a place at Chaffey College upon completion of high school if they met the prerequisites.

Today, the Ontario-Montclair and Chaffey Joint Union High school districts offer the program to all local children in partnership with the Inland Empire United Way, City of Ontario, Ontario Chamber of Commerce, local businesses, nonprofits and community members. Starting in 2016, college access also will be supported by scholarship assistance for Promise Scholar students who finish high school through the Chaffey Joint Union district and go on to one of the partner colleges.

Promise Scholars scholarships will be based on need and distributed according to the capacity of the Ontario-Montclair Schools Foundation endowment. Promise Scholars was recently supported by a grant from The Community Foundation.

Contact the writer: community@pe.com