



## The Pittsburgh Promise: A Community's Commitment to Its Young People

SALEEM GHUBRIL

*A community organization has mobilized resources to make a promise to every public school student in Pittsburgh: if you do well in school, we'll help with the financial burden of attending college.*

**T**he nonprofit community-based organization Pittsburgh Promise aims to help revitalize Pittsburgh and its public school system by offering college scholarships to any Pittsburgh Public School graduate who meets the academic requirements. Executive director Saleem Ghubril spoke with VUE guest editor Jacob Mishook about his organization's successes and challenges.

**Q** What was the impetus for the creation of the Pittsburgh Promise?

**A** Like many other promise programs from different cities, we launched the Pittsburgh Promise because in addition to wanting to transform the quality of public educa-

tion in the city and make higher education accessible to our urban kids, we wanted to have something which might help us reverse decades-long population and enrollment declines. In the fifty years prior to the Promise, the city of Pittsburgh lost about 60 percent of its population and similarly, Pittsburgh Public Schools lost about 60 percent of its enrollment. So our hope with the Promise was to add fuel to the school reform work that was then taking place and is still taking place today, to make higher education accessible but also give an incentive to families who already were in our city and had their kids enrolled in our schools to stay, as well as for those who weren't in our city and in our schools to consider relocating and enrolling.

*Saleem Ghubril is executive director of the Pittsburgh Promise.*

**Q Has the Promise helped stem the exodus of families from Pittsburgh?**

**A** That's really hard to answer for a number of reasons. Not enough time has passed for there to be a dramatic change at the macro level – population, enrollment, economy, work force. Those are among the long-term goals of the Promise. Also, it's really hard to draw a cause-and-effect conclusion that because of the Promise people are now staying in the city, enrolling their kids, and coming to the city.

What I can say, however, without an ounce of hesitation, is that in the last two years, for the first time in fifty years, the population of Pittsburgh grew again. So the five-decades-long population decline seems to have come to a stop and the population is growing, though the numbers are small. The rapid decline in the enrollment of the district has also slowed down, and in the last two years we've seen enrollment in kindergarten grow by 7 and 11 percent respectively. Those are encouraging things.

The RAND Corporation did an evaluation of the impact of the Promise, and they interviewed or surveyed nearly 500 families who have enrolled their kids in Pittsburgh public schools since the inception of the Promise and enrolled them in middle school.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they had school-aged children before the Promise and their kids weren't in Pittsburgh Public Schools, and RAND attempted to find out why they have since enrolled their kids. The families cited three reasons. The most often-cited reason was the Promise. The second and third reasons, which were really close second and third, were the reform work that took place in the district and the diversity of both culture and programs that Pittsburgh

1. See [www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1139.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1139.html).

Public Schools offer that other regional systems don't.

**Q What drew you to the work of the Pittsburgh Promise?**

**A** My wife and I moved to Pittsburgh in 1984 to start a youth organization. We were hired by a local church to start a youth outreach. We thought we would be here for three to five years and then go somewhere else, but we didn't end up going anywhere else. I led that agency, called the Pittsburgh Project, from 1985 till 2008. The work of the Pittsburgh Project focuses on the community, fixing houses and providing affordable housing for seniors and poor people and also youth development. It focuses on the micro level – on the individual child, the individual family, the individual senior citizen, and individual housing.

In December 2007 at our annual holiday party for our donors for the Pittsburgh Project, in my closing speech I said that I'm no longer content fixing houses for seniors on streets that remain unsafe for them. I'm no longer content helping kids with their homework and sending them to schools that are failing them. And then I closed by saying if we really care about these populations, then we have to not shift focus but add to our focus some emphasis on the systems that impact our kids and our seniors the most and in particular, public schools and neighborhoods. And I closed by saying I don't know how we're going to go about doing that, but expect me in twelve months at the next holiday party to report back to you on our plan going forward. In April 2008, four months later, I was approached about leading the Pittsburgh Promise. That, for me, was one of those moments where I thought, maybe it's not the Pittsburgh Project that needs to make a shift from the micro to the macro, from the individuals to the

system, maybe it's a personal shift that I would make.

## A COMMITMENT TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF PITTSBURGH

**Q Who does the Pittsburgh Promise serve, and through what kind of activities?**

**A** The Pittsburgh Promise is its own freestanding nonprofit organization. While we work very closely with Pittsburgh Public Schools as their key partner, and they are our key partner, we are not organizationally and structurally a part of Pittsburgh Public Schools. The Promise is really a kind of partnership between the city of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Public Schools, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and the Pittsburgh Foundation. We exist to serve kids who live in any one of our ninety urban neighborhoods in the city and attend any one of our fifty-seven traditional public schools or eight or nine public charter schools.

**Q How many students has the Promise served?**

**A** In the last five years we have provided scholarships to about 4,100 students, and those scholarships added up to just over \$36 million in the last five years. Our students have gone to 107 different higher education institutions in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Some are public, some are private, some are four-year, some are two-year, some are trade or technical, some are faith-based, some are secular, but basically every accredited post-secondary institution in Pennsylvania is eligible to receive Promise scholars and Promise scholarships.

**Q What is the Promise's financial commitment to students?**

**A** We have committed to up to \$10,000 per year. We reward longevity. Those who've been with us in the district and in our city from kindergarten, they get the maximum, which is \$10,000. As kids started with us or moved into the city in elementary school, they get 95 percent, middle school they get 85 percent, and if they started with us on day one of ninth grade, they get 75 percent. So the range of the annual scholarship is between \$7,500 and \$10,000. It's substantial, and it's enough to give pause if you're thinking about pulling your kid out of the city schools or moving out of the city. If you have more than one child, say you have three children, suddenly it's a \$120,000 college trust fund that you have for your kids. It's a game-changer for many.

**Q Have you had to turn any students away because of the financial crisis?**

**A** The Pittsburgh community's support of the Promise has been absolutely breathtaking, considering the economic realities of the last five years. In each of the last five years, we raised more each year than we spent. But that was the original funding model of the Promise, which was and continues to be that we raise more each year than we actually spend, and then we invest the balance in an endowment for future scholarships. We have established a small and growing endowment that has about \$50 million in it right now.

We haven't turned anybody away and hopefully, with hard work and God's grace we will continue that trend and not turn anyone away. At the Promise basically our message is if you meet the criteria, you get it – it's not a competitive thing where a thousand kids apply

for 300 scholarships – and so far we’ve been able to honor that. And, of course, our board and I are deeply concerned about the sustainability of the model, so hardly a week goes by where I don’t have a meeting where we look very closely at the long-term projections. The question that haunts us all is, right now we’re talking about the Promise right now to every kid in Pittsburgh public schools – what has to happen for us to ensure that the current pre-kindergartners are guaranteed a scholarship when they graduate? That’s priority one. We have a clear path forward to honor that commitment but our hope is to be able to honor it for longer than today’s pre-K class.

### THE CHALLENGES OF PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE IN AN URBAN SETTING

**Q** What kind of challenges do the Promise Scholars have in higher education?

**A** Many of our kids are not adequately prepared. They are graduating from urban schools – some of our fifty-seven schools are preparing their kids remarkably well, and some are very poorly preparing their kids. So the quality of our schools varies, and therefore the quality of the experience that our kids are having in terms of success in post-secondary institutions varies significantly.

Our students’ college knowledge is also a challenge, in terms of their persistence, our students’ study skills, their expectations about what kind of time they should spend each day on studying, seeking help, managing their time, managing their money, managing their stress. The fact that they have to buy books – for many that’s proven to be a surprise. So we need to do a better job equipping our kids with the right kind of college knowledge before they leave

our secondary schools. Lots of our kids are first-generation college students – that’s not unusual in urban districts – and families have underestimated what it takes for the student to be successful. Sometimes there are too many demands from home on the kid’s time that pull the kid away from focusing on their education.

Many of our kids have to keep part-time jobs, and some full-time. I know one student who carried three part-time jobs throughout her four years of college and still finished – remarkably, in four years. Part of it is an economic issue, when a full half of our kids have a zero expected family contribution on their FAFSA application. Another 25 percent have such a low EFC [expected family contribution] that they’re eligible for a Pell grant or a need-based grant.

Some lack the drive. They got the scholarship, and they met the minimum requirements to get the scholarship with no problem – it’s that they didn’t necessarily have the drive to pursue higher education. So we learned about one kid who went to buy books then deregistered because the line at the bookstore was too long.

**Q** How many of the students end up with substantial student debt?

**A** That’s a reality in every community, and certainly a reality for us. The total cost of attendance to any one of the state universities in Pennsylvania is about \$15,000 a year. Half of our kids have a zero expected family contribution, and 82 percent are eligible for Pell [federal] or state grants. So many of them are getting \$8,000 or \$8,500, the maximum, combined Pell or state grants. So if they choose to go to any one of our state schools, they get \$8,000 from the federal government and the state government by way of free money. Our \$10,000 can take them the distance, and they can

graduate without any debt. The only money they have to have is to buy a bus ticket or get a ride to get to the school and back.

Those who have the ability to get accepted to more selective schools and more expensive schools usually also get some institutional aid. The state universities don't have institutional aid. Right now we have about fifteen or eighteen kids at the University of Pennsylvania. We have forty-five kids at Carnegie Mellon University. The full cost of attendance there is around \$50,000 to \$55,000. If they get the \$8,000 from federal or state governments and our \$10,000, they still have a huge gap to fill. But those institutions give pretty substantial institutional aid to help students to cover the gap. And those kids are more likely to borrow money than not. But they're going to great schools that prepare them for future success.

The group that I get much more concerned about are those who are being heavily recruited by some institutions that are expensive to attend, there's not substantial financial aid, and they're not being adequately prepared for post-secondary success. Those students who fall prey to that tend to be our most vulnerable population of students. We try to address that by our magazine articles and by our speeches but without saying, don't go to this type of institution or that one by name.

## WORKING WITH PARTNERS

**Q How do you work with Pittsburgh Public Schools?**

**A** The Promise's success is very directly linked to the Pittsburgh Public Schools' success. The Promise can access and open doors of opportunity, but preparation for post-secondary success is provided by the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Thankfully, they are a

very willing and active partner in this work. So the current conversation that we're having is focusing on ensuring three things. First, we are looking at Promise eligibility at the basic, minimum standards, which is simply maintaining a 2.5 cumulative GPA and 90 percent school attendance. However, Promise eligibility does not equal college readiness. So the next focus is college readiness, which has three components. One is academic readiness. We think that while 2.5 and 90 percent gets you a scholarship, aiming for a 3.0 or higher and 95 percent attendance gives you a higher rate of return in terms of success in college. Second, college readiness includes greater preparation in college knowledge. We have one school, for example, that requires their juniors and seniors to take a half a credit course in their junior year and half a credit course in their senior year that's all about post-secondary preparation and college knowledge. The third component is about the aspirations, dreams, behaviors, and habits of students.

**Q Is there any data you wish you had that the district isn't able to provide?**

**A** Because we have such a great relationship with the district, there's hardly anything we ask for that we don't get. We may not get it as quickly as we would like – sometimes we have to stand in line – but I understand that those folks are working about as hard as they can. Our district had to lay off five hundred employees in the last year and a half due to budget cuts. Many of them are teachers, but our superintendent made really bold student-centered decisions to make the very first set of substantial cuts from central administration, where the immediate impact won't be felt quite as quickly by students. Then, eventually, we have to get to the classroom. Nearly three hundred teach-

ers were furloughed last year. We are well aware that the IT staff and the data staff are working much harder than they were previously and there are fewer than there used to be. We don't get things quickly, but we get them.

**Q How does the Promise work with institutes of higher education?**

**A** It's been interesting to see which institutes of higher education seem to be motivated by the Promise and which are not. Not surprisingly, the very large universities, like the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State, though they have a significant number of our students, our students represent a small sliver of their student population. We don't necessarily see the personalization that we see at either smaller state universities or smaller liberal arts, four-year private schools like California University of Pennsylvania, or Indiana University, the University of Pennsylvania, or Edinboro University, also a small state university, and other private schools like Robert Morris University, Franklin and Marshall University, and Point Park University. There are others, but for those institutions there is a higher degree of personal attention that we're seeing toward the Promise scholars.

Of course, they're motivated by doing what's in the best interest of the kids, but they see that there is a business opportunity that the Promise provides to smaller private schools and more expensive schools by making their schools more accessible with our scholarships. They are working harder at recruiting our students. But to us, even more important than that, they're working harder at figuring out ways to *retain* our students, and some have started school clubs that are just for the Promise scholars. They want to retain this population of students for lots of reasons. They add diversity to the student body. They come with money in hand. They're graduating

from an urban district that is re-engineering itself. They're pushing those services to students rather than letting them happen passively.

**Q How do you work with the local nonprofit and community-based organizations in Pittsburgh?**

**A** We have direct interaction with dozens of nonprofit organizations and afterschool programs. I occasionally get phone calls from foundation executives who say to me, "We are looking at a proposal from such and such an agency. Are they partnering with the Promise?" My answer almost always is that anybody who is working with students who live in our urban neighborhoods and go to our urban schools and is providing some educational support is a partner. In some cases, these are very informal partnerships that are centered more on the common mission. But in other cases, it's a much more formal partnership where we might even have a contract to buy a service or support a service with an existing nonprofit.

For example, right now we are working with twenty-five other agencies, including the department of human services, the United Way, the City of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Public Schools, A+ schools, which is kind of the watchdog organization here, the Office of Childhood Development at the University of Pittsburgh, and other partners that are focusing on a campaign to eliminate chronic absenteeism in our schools.

We work with a whole assortment of mentoring organizations to run a program that we call Be a Middle School Mentor. The goal of that program is to put 2,000 adult volunteers who spend forty-five minutes a week, every week for the whole school year, in school with one middle school student. The focus of that initiative is all about Promise eligibility and readiness but also to begin to put

together some habits and some patterns, some behaviors, some priorities in place in middle school that could result in moving the needle in later years.

## WORK HARD, AIM HIGH, DON'T GIVE UP

**Q** What can other communities learn from the Pittsburgh Promise?

**A** In a way, we promised the moon at the beginning. And now that we've been doing it for five years, I've asked myself a few times if we've over-promised. The work has been really hard. I think there's a reason why some people have given up on urban public education, because it's really a tough nut to crack. We have not given up on urban public education. We can't with a clear conscience give up on urban public education.

So our commitment is unwavering, but the recognition of how big this giant is, how hard it is to slay it, I grow more aware of that with each passing day. I would personally prefer to err on the side of big dreams and big aspirations and big vision and miss them, rather than aim for that which is guaranteed and reach it. So I want to tell other communities: sure, dream big, aim high, work hard, don't give up, but don't expect it to be easy. Transforming urban public education, transforming quality of life in urban neighborhoods, and raising the money to make it happen, all from private sources – those are daunting tasks.