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PRESS RELEASE

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Grassroots to fund promise for FREE college in Muskegon Area

Today, officials from the Muskegon Area Intermediate School District announced the launch of a grassroots effort to fund "Muskegon Area Promise Scholarships." Unlike the Kalamazoo Promise funded by a small number of very wealthy individuals, the Muskegon Area Promise is seeking small investments from many individuals through checks written directly to the Community Foundation for Muskegon County, or via an online donation site (<http://www.gofundme.com/promisescholarship>).

Muskegon Area Promise Scholarships will fund an associate's degree or certificate program at Muskegon Community College or Baker College of Muskegon. To qualify, students must live in and graduate from a high school located within Muskegon Area Intermediate School District boundaries, and have a high school graduation GPA of 3.5 or higher. The timeline is completely dependent on the investment of private individuals, but officials intend to issue scholarships as early as this fall.

Muskegon Area Promise Zone Chair and business management consultant Steve Parker said, "This initiative will not only improve our education base, but also help fill persistently vacant skill-based jobs, and ultimately lead to the opening of new businesses and the expansion of others in the Muskegon area."

"I have personally seen three things happen in communities with a Promise: the population and economic activity grows, students become more serious about high school and their grades improve, and students are more likely to enroll and persist in college," said MAISD Superintendent John Severson. "By asking everyone in our community to invest small sums of money, we fully expect to reach our initial goal of \$250,000 by May 15, and our first-year goal of \$500,000," added Severson.

According to Severson, while some students in Muskegon County earn college degrees, there are simply not enough graduates to meet the demands of the new knowledge-based economy. "Studies show that by 2025, over 67% of the jobs in our county will demand a degree or certificate earned after high school. But today, only 28.7% of Muskegon County residents age 25-64 have completed their college education and earned an Associate's degree or higher," said Severson.

Designated as one of ten "Promise Zones" in the state of Michigan, Muskegon County can eventually capture one-half of the growth in the state education tax to be used for a two-year associate's degree for resident students. MAISD officials estimate a total of \$2.9 million in private funds are needed to fund the Promise Scholarship for years one through five. In the sixth year, the Muskegon Area Promise Zone would likely become eligible for public support as the economy grows and tax base strengthens for all long-term sustainable efforts.

Muskegon Area Promise will also seek major gifts through businesses, challenge grants, organizations and institutions. Seven Michigan Promise Zone communities are already providing scholarships in their communities that allow students to attend community colleges tuition free. Kalamazoo, Michigan launched the nation's first universal scholarship program, The Kalamazoo Promise, in 2005.

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