

## **Columbus Promise Boosts FAFSA and College Applications, Attracts Major Philanthropic Support**

*First cohort of Columbus Promise Scholars set to begin studies at Columbus State this fall*

COLUMBUS, OH – Columbus is fulfilling its promise of free college for Columbus City Schools seniors, with nearly 1,000 applicants so far to the Columbus Promise program, over 70 percent of which have already met all requirements to enroll. Columbus City Schools has seen Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates grow 43 percent compared to this time last year. Thanks to generous community support, the Columbus Promise has nearly met its phase one \$9.5 million fundraising goal to serve the Columbus City Schools graduating classes of 2022, 2023 and 2024.

“We believe in students, and we are excited that they are believing in themselves by taking the first steps to apply for Columbus State,” said **Council President Shannon G. Hardin**, who announced the program in November with Columbus State President David T. Harrison, Columbus City Schools Superintendent Talisa Dixon, and I Know I Can Executive Director Katina Fullen. “This first class is critical to testing the program's design because our hope is to expand it. I cannot thank our partners enough for the hard work to get this first group on the path to certificates, degrees and a career.”

Columbus Promise leaders hosted a meeting on Thursday to update the community and business partners on growing momentum for the initiative aimed at boosting college-going and student success for area students to fill workforce gaps and increase social mobility. The first cohort of Columbus Promise Scholars will graduate from Columbus City Schools this year and start at Columbus State in the fall, where they will enjoy specialized supports and dedicated advising to help them complete their degrees and get a job. Columbus State is working with partners to develop a “learn and earn” program to pair the estimated two-thirds of Columbus Promise Scholars who will want to work part-time with rewarding and relevant paid internship and part-time job opportunities.

“Removing cost concerns for students and families is a game-changer but ensuring student success requires more,” said **Columbus State President David Harrison**. “Promise Scholars will be closely supported by advisors and academic coaches chosen to work exclusively with the Promise cohort. We’ve also created a space at the College just for Promise students—a place to study, meet with peers and support staff, or just hang out. And because we know that most of our students work while going to school, we’re engaging employers to identify meaningful learn-and-earn opportunities to place scholars in jobs that will help them now, and in their future careers.”

Encouragingly, 1,278 Columbus City Schools students have submitted the FAFSA so far this year, compared to 891 this time last year, a 43.4 percent increase. Over those timeframes, statewide FAFSA completions have only risen 1.5 percent and among low-income Ohio schools actually fallen 0.5 percent. FAFSA is an important leading indicator of future college enrollment.

“The numbers we are seeing for FAFSA submissions and Columbus Promise applications reflect the enthusiasm around this wonderful opportunity for our students,” said **Columbus City Schools Superintendent Dr. Talisa Dixon**. “I want to applaud our school counselors and the I Know I Can staff who have been instrumental in cultivating this excitement in our schools and in preparing our students for this journey. They have worked tirelessly – dedicating hours upon hours – encouraging and assisting our students and families with the FAFSA and college applications and providing counseling and guidance to ensure students are Columbus Promise ready.”

As of May 1, 728 students are “Promise-ready”, meaning they have completed the Columbus Promise application, FAFSA, the Columbus State application, and all they have left to do to qualify is graduate. Another 150+ seniors have started the application process but not yet completed it. The application will reopen this month at <https://cbuspromise.com/> and will close on August 15.

“The only way we will achieve our full potential as a city is if everyone shares in our collective success, particularly our young people, who deserve each and every opportunity to succeed in and out of the classroom,” said **Mayor Andrew J. Ginther**. “The Columbus Promise is a terrific example of this aspiration in action, and I am so excited to see the program press forward with great momentum and enthusiasm from across the community.”

Every student who completes these steps is eligible to participate in the program, but some will inevitably opt for other postsecondary options. However, this early application volume suggests the program is on track to meet its goal of enrolling 425 Promise Scholars in the first year. That would signify a 30 percent boost over and above the last three years, when on average 327 students graduated from Columbus City Schools and enrolled in Columbus State the following fall.

The program is a public-private partnership projected to cost \$9.5 million through June 2025. The City of Columbus and Columbus State Community College have pledged \$5 million to the effort. Philanthropic and private sector contributions have totalled \$4.105 million, leaving roughly \$395,000 to raise. This puts the Columbus Promise campaign at 96 percent of its fundraising goal.

“The success of our students is the success of our community,” said **I Know I Can Executive Director Katina Fullen**. “And the way in which the community came together to make this happen shows that Central Ohio was ready for that bold proposition.”

Early contributors to the effort were American Electric Power Foundation, the Edwards Companies & Installed Building Products, the Columbus Foundation, DLZ, and Denison University. Joining them are Nationwide, IGS Energy, Huntington Bank, Cardinal Health, the Wolfe Foundation, The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, Nationwide Children’s Hospital, OhioHealth, Bath & Body Works, SafeLite, Columbia Gas & The NiSource Charitable Foundation, and Mount Carmel Health System.

“The Columbus Promise will help cultivate the strong and talented workforce required by a growing region,” **Kenny McDonald, President and CEO of the Columbus Partnership** said. “The Promise is the Columbus Way in action. It’s another example of leaders coming together across sectors to create a more inclusive economy and future for Columbus.”

Area employers praised the initiative’s effort:

- Angela Bretz, Chief Diversity and Talent Acquisition Officer of **Nationwide**: “Nationwide is honored to support the Columbus Promise and the emerging workforce that this program will create. We know that companies and communities thrive when we work together and have a diverse talented workforce. Congratulations to the class of 2022! It’s our hope that many Columbus City School graduates will take advantage of Nationwide’s Earn and Learn program, where you will earn wages while gaining invaluable on the job training and have exposure to many career opportunities and Nationwide leaders.”
- Scott White, President and CEO of **IGS Energy**: “IGS Energy is very excited to be a Champion to the Columbus Promise. We believe this program will be impactful to our community and we are thrilled at the prospect of growing the IGS team with graduates from Columbus State. As a Champion, we promise to provide our sound advice and support to ensure this program is successful.”
- Dr. Andrew Thomas, co-interim leader and chief clinical officer at **The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center**: “This initiative will provide life-changing opportunities for students and will help them be significantly better prepared to take advantage of job opportunities in our growing community. We’re honored to help the city invest in its future through education and look forward to the positive impact this initiative will have in strengthening the pipeline to create a larger, more diverse, and more inclusive healthcare workforce.”
- Jerome Revish, SVP for Digital Transformation office at **Cardinal Health** and Columbus State Community College trustee: “Being in a position to embrace diversity and demonstrate inclusion can only happen when we build equity and provide everyone the same opportunity to succeed. This is exactly what the Columbus Promise does for Columbus City School students.”
- Sarah Nash, Executive Chair and Interim CEO of **Bath & Body Works**: “The Columbus Promise represents an incredible path to self-sufficiency for Central Ohio students. We’re pleased to continue the Bath & Body Works legacy of giving our time, money and collective efforts to make a difference in the communities where we live and work.”
- Tom Feeney, Executive Chairman, Belron North America (**Safelite**): “The opportunity for tuition-free education from The Columbus Promise shapes tomorrow’s leaders and provides boundless opportunities to strengthen our communities. At Safelite, we can’t think of a better investment than in our younger generation. Helping them discover and embrace the gift of knowledge aligns with our company’s purpose of making a difference and providing unexpected happiness.”
- Stephanie Merkle, Community Engagement Manager at **Columbia Gas of Ohio**: “We believe in creating sustainable growth in our communities through public, private and non-profit partnerships, and we are committed to using our individual and collective strengths to create a future where all can prosper– including our future generation.”

Together with our partners, Columbia Gas and the NiSource Charitable Foundation are proud to help empower students with the access, skills, and resources needed to achieve success beyond college and into their careers.”

- Lorraine Lutton, President and CEO of **Mount Carmel Health System**: "Mount Carmel is honored to support this transformational program for young people in our community. We look forward to working with the Columbus Promise to help provide a pathway for students of Columbus City Schools to become the healthcare workforce of the future."

While more than 150 other cities and several states are home to similar “free college” promise programs, the Columbus Promise has been praised for its inclusive and progressive model. It lasts six semesters, permits part-time students, offers \$500 per semester to defray the cost of books and transportation (in addition to fully covering tuition and fees), and allows the pursuit of either an associate’s degree or another workforce credential.

Program leaders are finalizing plans to hire a third-party evaluator to study outcomes associated with phase one and help explore potential growth opportunities.

Those wishing to contribute on a personal level can [donate to the Columbus Promise Fund at the Columbus Foundation](#), where program funds are professionally managed and invested.

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