

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Pittsburgh College aid plan off to slow start

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The Pittsburgh Promise could be difficult to keep.

Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt introduced the program four months ago today with the hope of raising money by the 2007-08 school year to help graduating seniors pay for college. The \$5 million to \$7 million needed would come from local foundations.

So far, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers -- the union that represents city teachers -- has made the only contribution: \$10,000.

"I think to have underestimated the enormity of the fundraising task is probably reasonable in light of how good the intentions are," said David Y. Miller, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. "It's an extraordinarily ambitious effort."

Representatives from some of Pittsburgh's largest foundations said neither the city nor the school district has asked for donations or provided details about how the scholarship program would work.

Ravenstahl, who announced the program nine days after launching his re-election campaign, said he's still confident in reaching the goal and isn't worried about the slow start. He said Roosevelt might be close to hiring someone to oversee fundraising for the Pittsburgh Promise.

Lisa Fischetti, a Roosevelt spokeswoman, said the district has not asked the foundations for any money. Roosevelt was not available to comment, she said.

Still undetermined is which students would be eligible to receive help based on income and grades. Students who receive money would be required to maintain a certain grade-point average and enroll in a Pennsylvania college.

"We need to see specifics about the plan before we can consider a possible means of supporting that plan," said John Ellis, a spokesman for the Pittsburgh Foundation. Its president, William E. Truehart, expressed support for the program when officials launched it.

Doreen Boyce, president of the Buhl Foundation, said her group typically doesn't support scholarship programs.

"Right now, it's not a priority for us," she said.

Other foundations, including The Heinz Endowments, The Benedum Foundation and the Jewish Healthcare Foundation of Pittsburgh, said they know little about The Pittsburgh Promise and haven't decided whether to support it.

Gregg Behr, executive director of The Grable Foundation, said he hasn't received a request, either.

"The school district and the city want to reach a goal, and it would seem to me that they want to reach that goal in the right way with the right plan in place," Behr said.

City Council President Doug Shields asked taxpayers for help in March after hearing complaints from a constituent, Kathy Smith, of Squirrel Hill.

"My concern was that Luke Ravenstahl was putting (the Pittsburgh Promise) in a campaign brochure as an accomplishment when in fact there's no money," said Smith, a 14th Ward Democratic committee member. "How are people going to get college scholarships when there's no money?"

At the time, Ravenstahl expected a May 15 primary showdown with Councilman Bill Peduto, who has since dropped out of the race. The mayor said the announcement of the program was not an empty political promise.

Shields pushed through legislation that would allow city taxpayers to donate \$20 or more directly to the Promise on a tear-off portion of their tax form.

"It's hard to pull these things together in two to three months," Shields said.

Acting City Controller Anthony J. Pokora, who is tracking donations to the program, said he believes Ravenstahl will be able to raise the money, but the longer the city and school district wait to make their pitch, "the tougher it's going to be."

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