

Raise Expectations Early to Improve College Readiness

THE CHALLENGE

Improve college readiness and create a stronger college-going culture.

THE APPROACH

Provide on-campus experiences for students, starting in elementary school.

THE RESULT

Early interventions have raised the enrollment rates of local students and better prepared them for college.

THE LEADERS OF the Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach City College, and California State University at Long Beach hatched a plan 10 years ago to improve college readiness among local students.

The three institutions had started collaborating even earlier, around the time the Long Beach Naval Shipyard closed, in 1997. As industry was leaving, jobs went with it, and the school district was struggling with high dropout rates, gangs, and crime. To encourage more young people to aspire to higher education, the three institutions, along with the city of Long Beach, formalized an agreement in 2008 called the Long Beach College Promise.

The program guarantees a tuition-free year at the community college and admission to the university after earning an associate degree, but success hinges on much earlier touchpoints with students.

Fourth and fifth graders from Long Beach public schools take tours of the two campuses. In middle school, students and their parents sign a pledge committing to college readiness. And in high school, the school district subsidizes the cost of Advanced Placement exams and allows students to enroll concurrently in credit-bearing college courses at no charge.

Those early interventions have paid off: More than 50,000 elementary schoolers have visited both the community college and university to learn about programs of study and how to pay

for them. By middle school, Long Beach students are already thinking about college, according to the Promise group's research, and some even have career paths in mind. In 2017, 65 percent of local high-school graduates were college ready, up from 43 percent in 2008, according to the group's 10-year anniversary report. Since the program began, enrollment of Long Beach public-school students at the Cal State campus is up 71 percent.

The partners share costs to fund the program. During tours for fourth and fifth graders, for example, the school district pays for busing and transportation, and the college and university pick up campus expenses.

Fourth and fifth graders from local public schools take tours of the community college and university.

"We don't bill each other," says Terri Carbaugh, a Cal State Long Beach spokeswoman. "We tend to say yes to good ideas, and then internally we expect each institution to come up with the resources."