



News Release

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Organizations Partner to Provide Free NIU Degree to RPS Students

ROCKFORD, III. – Today, Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara, Rockford Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Ehren Jarrett, Rockford Promise Executive Director Dr. Tasha Davis and Northern Illinois University President Dr. Lisa Freeman announced a new partnership that will provide free tuition at NIU to eligible RPS 205 students who live in Rockford.

Since 2006, Rockford Promise, a 501(c)(3) location-based scholarship program, has raised more than \$1 million to support full-tuition scholarships for deserving RPS 205 students to attend Rock Valley College and Rockford University. Now, the City of Rockford, through the leadership of Mayor Tom McNamara and the City Council, is proposing to fund a significant expansion of Rockford Promise in 2021 and beyond. With the proposed City contribution, eligible students of RPS 205 would be able to earn a bachelor's degree from NIU with all tuition and general fees paid by Rockford Promise and NIU.

To be eligible a student must live inside the City limits of the City of Rockford, attend RPS 205 all four years of high school and graduate with a cumulative 3.0 grade point average (GPA) on a 4.0 scale. Students currently enrolled in an RPS 205 high school at any grade level are eligible for the program without the four-year attendance requirement.

“Modeled after promise programs around the nation, including the Kalamazoo Promise, our goal is to increase educational attainment in our region while providing a powerful economic incentive for residents and businesses to locate to the Rockford region,” says Dr. Davis. “We also know that these programs have delivered additional benefits to their communities, including enhanced workforce readiness, higher property values and decreased crime rates.”

The Kalamazoo Promise has reached more than 6,000 students since it was created in 2005. Kalamazoo Public Schools have grown by 25 percent, academic achievement is up, and the high-school graduation rate is rising. Almost 90 percent of the district's

graduates head to college or another form of post-secondary training—an exceptionally high rate for a low-income urban school district.

“We are thrilled to partner with Rockford to make an NIU education more accessible to RPS 205 students,” says Dr. Freeman. “Our commitment to this program demonstrates our continued efforts to reduce barriers, create opportunities and invest where we can make a big difference.”

A recent study by NIU concluded that there is significant return on investment for a program like this. Results indicated that for every dollar invested, an estimated \$131.81 would be generated in additional lifetime earnings, increased local expenditures, and avoided costs of social programs and incarceration.

“Making a promise to our students that college tuition will be covered for all qualified residents regardless of family finances is a bold investment with an amazingly high return,” says Mayor McNamara. “The City is pledging \$1.5 million annually because we know this program is a game changer for our community. It is critical that we invest in our youth now to improve our community today and for many years to come. ”

“Rockford Promise has already made a significant impact on many RPS 205 students through its scholarship programs at Rockford University and Rock Valley College,” explains Dr. Jarrett. “Being able to expand this program to include an additional four-year degree option at NIU is incredible. Our students and our community will benefit immeasurably from this opportunity.”

Rockford Promise will continue fundraising and providing scholarships to Rockford University and Rock Valley College, as well as looking for additional ways to expand the program toward its goal of becoming a fully-funded promise program.

The proposed collaboration now heads to the governing boards at NIU, RPS 205, Rockford Promise, and the City of Rockford for final approval.

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