

From The Atlantic

CITYLAB

The Town That Decided to Send All Its Kids to College

Residents of Baldwin, Michigan, pooled together their money to provide scholarships for everyone, and it changed the town profoundly.

ALANA SEMUELS | [@AlanaSemuels](#) | Aug 18, 2015 | [7 Comments](#)



Alana Semuels

BALDWIN, Mich.—College was never much of an option for most students in this tiny town of 1,200 located in the woods of the Manistee National Forest. Only 12 of the 32 kids who graduated high school in 2005 enrolled in college. Only two of those have gotten their bachelor's degree.

That was just a decade ago. Now, nearly everybody who graduated from the high school here in June is off to a four-year college, a community college, or a

technical school. Kindergarten students talk about going to college. High schoolers take trips to campuses around the state and, at a raucous assembly each spring, reveal to the school which colleges they're going to attend.

So what changed? How did one of the poorest counties in Michigan, a state that's struggling, accomplish such a turnaround?

What changed was the introduction of the Baldwin Promise, a fund which in 2009 offered to pay up to \$5,000 a year for any student from the Baldwin public schools to attend a public or private college in Michigan. Now \$5,000 might sound like a pittance when compared to the \$31,000 private college now costs annually. And it's not much when compared to the Kalamazoo Promise, unveiled in 2005, which was funded by anonymous donors and, as a "first-dollar" scholarship, pays for 100 percent of tuition and fees at public colleges and universities in Michigan and can be added on top of Pell Grants. The Baldwin Promise is a middle-dollar scholarship, which means it comes after the student has applied for Pell Grants and institutional scholarships.

“In America, a quality education cannot be a privilege that is reserved for a few.”

But the Baldwin Promise came with a change in the way the community talked about education, something that may have been more valuable than cash. From the day students start kindergarten, they're coached to excel so they can go to college. In elementary school and middle school and high school, students, their parents, and the community, think about college and life after Baldwin schools. If nothing else, the Baldwin Promise effectively marketed college to a town that seemed fairly ambivalent about it before.

It's unclear if the Baldwin Promise will have long-lasting results—students may yet drop out—but its successes and failures are important as states such as [Tennessee and Oregon](#) launch programs that try to market college to their residents by making two years of community college free. President Obama

proposed a [similar plan](#) in January, [saying in his speech that](#) "in America, a quality education cannot be a privilege that is reserved for a few." On the campaign trail, too, candidates say that every American deserves the opportunity to have a college education, and that the nation needs to educate its young people to stay competitive. The story of Baldwin begins to answer the question: What does it look like if everyone in a community goes to college?

* * *

Baldwin is a town that swells in population during fishing season, when tourists come and catch trout, salmon, and bass. For the rest of the year, it's a small place where everyone can't help but know everyone else, since they run into one another at the town's ice-cream shop or the baseball fields, where teams play on long summer nights. The school system is tiny, with the elementary, middle, and high schools located on one campus, the type of place where a kid on the football team can change clothes during halftime to take up his place playing drums in the marching band. (The then-president of the National Honor Society, Alec Wroblewski, did just that until he graduated in June.)

Passing through Baldwin on the way to a fishing trip, one might not think it's the type of place that would dream big. The houses are small and some are in disrepair, and the busiest spots in town, at first glance, seem to be the gas stations. Baldwin is the county seat of Lake County, where 27.9 percent of residents live [below the poverty level](#), according to census data. That's the second-highest poverty level in the state of Michigan. Just 8 percent of people living in Lake County have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 25 percent of the state of Michigan.

But Baldwin did dream big. The Baldwin Promise was the brainchild of a resident named Rich Simonson, a Baldwin native who left the area for his career in politics, during which time he ran Gerald Ford's campaign in Michigan. He returned to Baldwin to retire, and one day while having breakfast with friends at a local restaurant, Simonson came up with a proposal: Why not ask everyone they knew to give some money to the community so that every local student could go to college? His friends were skeptical, said Ellen Kerans,

who was at the breakfast, but he was dogged, and went about asking everybody he knew for \$500. The Kalamazoo Promise had wealthy anonymous donors, he said, but Baldwin had its community, and they cared about their town and wanted to invest in it.



The main street of Baldwin (Alana Semuels)

He convinced school employees to donate and summer residents too. People who couldn't give \$500 up front could enroll in a payment plan. The group set a goal of \$140,000, and they surprised even themselves when they raised \$160,000, Kerans told me.

"We thought this was the most important initiative we'd ever have, and we had to support it big," she said. "It would revitalize the students. It would make them feel like they have a promise, they really could go to college."

(Simonson passed away in 2012 and left a million dollars to the Promise Fund.)

The effort came around the same time that the Michigan legislature and

Governor Jennifer Granholm passed a bill creating 10 [Promise Zone designations](#), low-income communities, in Michigan. Being designated a Promise Zone by the state allowed districts a unique tax-capture mechanism that enabled the districts to keep revenue that otherwise would have gone to the state and instead give it to students in the form of college scholarships. Simonson successfully lobbied to have Baldwin designated as one of the 10 districts.

“I think the kids are more aware of their opportunities now. Before, they didn’t know what to expect after high school. Now they know.”

Taxes slumped during the recession, and by law a district was required to show it could fund the first two years of the Promise without state money. Few of the 10 designated districts could pay out money to students.

Not Baldwin. By 2010—the first year that Baldwin high-school graduates received the promise—14 students of the graduating class of 23 enrolled in college. The previous year, eight had enrolled out of a graduating class of the same size. Baldwin was the first district of the 10 to start giving out scholarships.

The Baldwin Promise is more than just \$5,000 a year for four years of college. It brought with it a complete change in how the town viewed education. Just as elementary school and middle school were in Baldwin, college was a right for everyone.

Stiles Simmons came in as superintendent in 2011, and embarked on a huge curriculum overhaul. There was no coherent aligned curriculum, and no written curriculum at all when Stiles came in. So he hired a consulting company to come in, audit the curriculum, and work with teachers to create a new one. The new plan makes sure that students leave one grade level prepared for what

comes next, in every subject, he said.

Then, Stiles focused on the discipline issues that teachers and parents said were distracting students during class time. He hired a "behavior-implementation specialist" and says that disciplinary incidents are down 60 percent.

Baldwin Senior High, as it's called, recently added an AP class, in environmental science. It encouraged students to "dual enroll" in West Shore Community College, 30 miles away, and ran a bus from Baldwin to the community college. This year, it is offering a class affiliated with Ferris State University, which will take place on Baldwin's high-school campus.

Wroblewski, the football-playing drummer and National Honor Society president, took a math, history, English, and psychology class at West Shore Community College, and says he's less worried about starting school in the fall since he's had community-college experience.

"Things did change in school. Kids started to want to go to college and the teachers knew that and then the kids started to realize, 'We have to learn that to be ready for the harder classes in college,'" Wroblewski told me. "That's the biggest change here." Wroblewski was the first Baldwin student to be accepted to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in more than 10 years. He decided to go to Eastern Michigan University and enroll in the honors program there.



Baldwin's town center (Alana Semuels)

Stiles also overhauled the school calendar to reduce learning loss over the summer; now students have a six-week summer break, a two-week fall break, and a mid-winter break.

The changes go down to the kindergarten level. Now, when 5-year-olds enter Baldwin Schools, they're tasked with creating an image of themselves, wearing a mortarboard, made out of construction paper. Those faces, black, white, and brown, are pasted onto a giant banner, "College begins with Kindergarten," in the elementary school's main hallway.

Sue Moore was a second-grade teacher at Baldwin's elementary schools for 43 years, before retiring in June. I ran into her at a baseball field in town, where a bunch of Baldwin residents were watching their team battle a neighboring town for a softball championship.

In the past, elementary-school teachers wouldn't really speak about college, Moore told me. But now, students learn about opportunities outside Baldwin from the time they start elementary school all through middle school and high school, she said.

"I think the kids are more aware of their opportunities now," she said. "Before, they didn't know what to expect after high school. Now they know."

Part of the reason they know is Ayana Richardson, an effusive, put-together woman with two master's degrees who runs the high school's College Access Center. Richardson runs college tours for Baldwin's middle- and high-school students—day trips to close-by schools for the younger kids, and overnight visits to Detroit or other far-off campuses for ambitious students who had applied. She invites representatives from different Michigan colleges to speak at the high school on Tuesdays, and next year Eastern Michigan University is offering on-site admission at Baldwin Senior High, meaning a representative will come to the school, let the students apply, and inform them whether they've been accepted the same day. She created college events on almost every day of the week, including College Culture Wednesdays, at which people come in and advise students on budgeting and living on their own and College Rep Tuesdays, when representatives from universities come and visit the school. And she also instituted Decision Day, a big assembly where seniors walk out into an auditorium and announce where they're attending, to cheers.



Baldwin's Decision Day board (Alana Semuels)

The College Access Center, the room where Richardson works with students on their applications, was just white walls when she arrived, she told me. Now, its walls and ceiling are decorated with Michigan college mascots and its drawers are jammed with pamphlets about scholarships and brochures from universities all over the state. In the hallway, just below the photos of graduating classes dating back more than 50 years, a bulletin board features pictures of members of the graduating class and a list of the colleges that accepted them.

All of this support and coaching can have a profound effect. As Daekwon Fisher, a 19-year-old who graduated from Baldwin Senior High in 2014 put it, the Promise “put less fear in people’s hearts about going to college.”

“It took a lot of stress off me,” he told me. “Stress off my momma too—she didn’t have to worry about it as much.”

Once students leave and head off to college, Richardson stays in touch, sending them follow-up emails and letters to make sure they’ve met with their

academic advisor and that they utilize the resources available to them on campus. If students start college and drop out, the community's investment is wasted, she said, so it's in their best interest to make sure their students succeed.

"We want to make sure that our investment is actually working," she told me. "I think it's a whole pipeline."

And this has been something of a challenge for the Baldwin Promise. It's a lot easier to enroll in college than it is to finish it.

Students miss home, or decide they want to take a break from school and earn some money. They find that living away from home is expensive, as are books, and that it can be difficult to focus on schoolwork. Students must have a 2.0 GPA in their classes to continue to receive the scholarship. Only two of the 14 students who enrolled in the fall of 2010 have received bachelor's degrees, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

But though that number may seem low, data shows that Promise scholarships have very real results on college completion. In Kalamazoo, for instance, students who received the Promise were one-third more likely to graduate college within six years of finishing high school compared to their pre-Promise peers, according to [a study](#) released in June by the Upjohn Institute.

Middle-dollar college scholarships also have a big effect, said Michelle Miller-Adams, an associate professor at Grand Valley State University and a research fellow at the Upjohn Institute who has studied the promise movement. She calls it the "trading-up" phenomenon: Students who once would have gone to community college now try out a four-year college, those who might have thought college isn't for them will try out a community college or technical school.

"A bunch of students who would not have gone previously are giving it a try. Those who used to go to community college and transfer now go straight to four-year," Miller-Adams said. "All along the range of academic ability, there's this trading-up phenomenon."



Clockwise, from top right: Reese Drilling, Jheresa Lewis, Nicole Mooney, Alec Wroblewski (Alana Semuels)

That was the case for Jheresa Lewis, a quiet student who is the eldest of five children, who breaks into a smile when she talks about her college plans. Her father was incarcerated for much of her life, and money was always tight—she’s working a construction job this summer to earn money. Lewis applied to and was accepted at a number of schools, including West Shore Community College. She was leaning towards going there, since she could still live at home and because her father had said it seemed like a good deal when they visited there on a college tour. But during one of Baldwin Senior High’s college visits,

Lewis also visited Oakland University, near Detroit, and loved the campus, the school, and the graphic design program there.

So Richardson pushed her to apply to scholarships and keep Oakland in her sights. With the Promise and other scholarships, Richardson argued, Oakland was within her reach. She could follow her heart and not worry so much about money.

“Not to say that going to a two-year is beneath someone who has a high GPA, because everyone goes to a two-year for different reasons,” Richardson told me. “But I think, and always thought, that she would do well at a four-year institution.”

Lewis is attending Oakland in the fall.

Some of the changes haven't been popular with all Baldwin residents. Lynn Murtland lives across the street from the school, and has a daughter and two granddaughters in the Baldwin school system. She says the school district has started to kick kids with disciplinary problems out of school, forcing them to go to another town. Her daughter, who is about to enter ninth grade, says the school only cares about students who get good grades or have money or excel at sports. The college trips, she says, are only for the kids without any disciplinary problems.

“They don't try—they just kick them out and send them somewhere else when they're a problem,” Murtland told me.

And there is some controversy about Promise-type programs, and even about programs like Tennessee's that pledge free community college tuition. Most low-income students can already get mostly-free community college, after all, since they can get tuition breaks and Pell Grants to cover the cost of tuition. It's living expenses and books that are expensive, and many students end up dropping out because they can't afford the books, said Debbie Cochrane, research director for The Institute for College Access and Success.

To some, the promise is just a “wrapper,” a way to simply market the idea of college. But in Baldwin, that wrapper is a big deal. That's because it comes with the knowledge that the community is pulling for you.

This is important for students as well as parents. After Richardson started working in the College Access Center, parents would come in with their kids and tell her they didn't know how to fill out a financial-aid application form, because they hadn't been to college and didn't know the procedure. They thank her for her help and say they want their kids to go to college.

"I think what has happened is that everyone is talking about this college thing, saying, 'Mom I want to go on this trip to XYZ, we're going to visit this college'," she said. "Just the pure communication change of the things going on makes the parent want to know and understand."

The difference is easy to see in Baldwin. I met with a parade of students who are in Baldwin public schools or just graduated, and their ambitions seemed boundless.

Nicole Mooney just started her senior year in school, and is looking at schools in Florida and Tennessee. She wouldn't be allowed to use the Promise at those schools, because they are out of state, and both of her parents work at a grocery store, but she's hoping to get scholarships based on her grades and test scores. She's already looking forward to the opportunity to study abroad, maybe in Brazil, and thinks she may want to eventually be a doctor or a nurse and work for Doctors without Borders.



Baldwin schools (Alana Semuels)

Reese Drilling is a hyperactive sophomore whose mother is a teacher in the school system. He's already signed up for dozens of college brochures and emails, and has decided he's going to get a free ride to whatever university he chooses. He attends school board meetings religiously, and already spends much of his day at the College Access Center. He remembers watching the local news when the Promise was announced, and hearing a student interviewed who wanted to be a video-game designer, and now could go to college to pursue that ambition, thanks to the Promise.

"I've never forgotten that. Here's somebody who never thought they could go out and do what they wanted to do," he told me. "In that moment, to see somebody say, 'Hey, I can do it, and there's nothing that's going to stop me.' It was amazing."

Drilling says if he doesn't go in-state to the University of Michigan, he might want to go to Harvard or UCLA.

For a school where no one had been accepted into the University of Michigan

in years, those sound like big ambitions. But with the changes since the Promise, they just might be attainable.

That's the other thing that Miller-Adams's research indicates. Promise scholarships can bring together a community and make it pull together in ways it never has before.

"The pool of money serves as a catalyst for a lot of other things," she told me. "At least as important is that messaging: 'We believe in education, we're going to support our youth.' That's just as important as the money itself."

That message made all the difference for Shavonne Copeland, who was raised by a single mother and, though she always wanted to go to college, struggled in high school to believe that it was possible. She nearly dropped out of high school, and "was ready to give up on myself," she told me. Then Ayana Richardson told Copeland that she saw potential in her, and that she wanted her to go to college, and coached her to apply.

"She made me cry. She made me realize how much my potential was, and I couldn't see it," Copeland told me.

Copeland applied to community college, and then, when her mother got sick, decided to stay in Baldwin and work for Richardson and the College Access Center for a year. She started Muskegon Community College in 2013 and is about to finish up there and transfer to Michigan State, where she plans to major in political science and minor in photojournalism. She'll be the first person in her family to attend a four-year college. She works two jobs, one for a counseling center at the school, another on the night shift at a group home.

She hopes to become a Supreme Court justice someday.

This post originally appeared on [The Atlantic](#).

About the Author

Alana Semuels is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. She was previously a national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*.



ALL POSTS | [@AlanaSemuels](#)