**California Promise program: Community college help for low-income, first-time students**

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Posted:   08/30/2016 03:08:13 PM PDT | Updated:   12 min. ago

OAKLAND -- The idea of helping high school students get into and graduate from college isn't new, but the degree to which all quarters of the community are coming together to do it is. And to Bay Area community college leaders, it's very Promise-ing.

Some 400 college officials and government leaders from around the state gathered Tuesday in Oakland to discuss how to move the California Promise program forward at the local level.

It involves local school districts, the California State University system, business leaders, money people and, perhaps most crucially, the state's community colleges working to find enough money and other resources to pay tuition and related costs for students who might not otherwise be able to go to college.

Bay Area community college leaders on Tuesday gave their full support to either starting new programs or expanding existing ones to find ongoing money sources to pay for tuition, books, transportation and other expenses to get high school seniors to community college and beyond at little or no cost to them.

"You've got to have everyone in the community involved -- educators, businesses, the high schools, the mayor," said Helen Benjamin, chancellor of the Contra Costa Community College District. The district is involved with the newly created Richmond Promise, a community scholarship program guaranteeing that every Richmond public school student who graduates from high school will receive $1,500 to attend college.

The city of Richmond, Chevron and the West Contra Costa Unified School District are also key players, as are several Richmond business and community leaders.

It is one of 23 "College Promise" programs in the state -- almost double the number that existed in 2015 -- and California is part of a larger national "Promise" campaign. Education leaders Tuesday said they want these existing programs to become more all-encompassing than just providing scholarships; the model "Promise" program includes demanding mentorship, a students' community service component, sustainable funding that is dependable regardless of economic conditions and meaningful internship experiences.

"These programs are as successful as their communities allow them to be," said Krissy DeAlejandro, executive director of tnAchieves, a Tennessee scholarship and mentorship program that is what California Promise programs aim to be.

Promise programs got a boost, and an endorsement, from the state Legislature on Tuesday with the approval of Senate Bill 412, co-authored by Sen. Steve Glazer, D-Orinda, and Kevin de Leon, D-Los Angeles, to help students graduate from California State University schools in four years. The bill will now move on to Gov. Jerry Brown.

Jowel Laguerre, chancellor of the Oakland-based Peralta Community College District, said the Oakland community is ready to help take the Oakland Promise program, started last year, from 300 students (mostly at Merritt College) to 1,000 next year. "We'd like to see all students from Oakland be part of this," he said.

The Evergreen San Jose Community College District already works with the San Jose and Eastside school districts to help students become college-ready. Chancellor Deborah Budd said four-year universities, plus businesses, foundations and politicos, are being looped in to San Jose Promise.

"We absolutely have the demographics to help diversify the tech industry," Budd said.

The Chabot Las Positas College District oversees Hayward Promise, but Chancellor Jannett Jackson said that federal grant program is about to expire.

"We want to make that program more regional, find money for it and involve the local K-12 schools," Jackson said.

The prospect of creating a bigger, better work force is tantalizing to business leaders, said Kristin Connelly, executive director of the Contra Costa Economic Partnership. "We can do this in a way that will make it impossible for the business community to say no. They want to be involved."