



Buffering the Promise: Impact of Emergency Funds on Student Postsecondary Persistence During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Introduction

- **The Pittsburgh Promise is a place-based scholarship** available to Pittsburgh grads with at least a 2.0 GPA. Scholars are eligible to receive up to **\$5,000 annually** to attend any in-state accredited institutions for up to 4 years after HS. Promise programs are designed to reinvigorate school districts and the local economy.
- Students can easily be derailed from finishing their degrees due to food and housing insecurity, transportation issues, or problems with childcare. The lockdown response to the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated uncertainties in many high school and college students' lives.
- To combat potential postsecondary stop-outs, **The Pittsburgh Promise made emergency gift cards and tuition assistance available to all Pittsburgh Public School graduates enrolling in higher education from Spring 2020 to Fall 2022.** These emergency funds were available both to students receiving Promise dollars and to students that did not qualify for the traditional Promise award. Additionally, students attending institutions out-of-state were also eligible to receive emergency funding.
- In this study, we explore the impact of the emergency funds on student persistence and retention in postsecondary. Although our estimates are not causal, they provide suggestive empirical evidence of the positive impacts of receiving emergency funds on students' persistence.

Data

- Data for this analysis came from the following secondary sources:
- Student demographic and academic data from the Pittsburgh Public Schools' administrative records
 - Student postsecondary enrollment records from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)
 - Promise administrative files that provided detailed information on emergency fund disbursements (both tuition assistance and gift card disbursements)

The study included **8,629 students from the classes of 2016 to 2020.**
Average Tuition Disbursement: \$2,630 / 438 students
Average Gift Card Award: \$348 / 173 students

Methods

Fixed Effects Regression Model

- To isolate the impact of emergency funds on student postsecondary outcomes, we use a fixed effects regression model. Specifically, we include fixed effects to control for graduation year, institution attended, and student zip code-by-high school combinations. We utilize a zip code-by-high school fixed effect to account for the potential differences in exposure to the Promise's emergency funds advertisement campaign for students who attended different high schools and resided in different communities.
- We additionally control for demographic and academic characteristics, as well as each student's Promise Scholarship receipt status.
- Our key variable of interest is an indicator for whether a student received any emergency assistance funds. We tag a student as having received emergency funds if they received a gift card and/or tuition assistance in the current term or a previous term.
- We investigate the potential impacts of receiving either a gift card or a tuition assistance stipend for two reasons. First, by combining both sets of awardees, we achieve more statistical power and more precision in our estimates. Secondly, the temporary youth development workers that managed outreach and contact with students receiving emergency funds provided a type of case management in combination with the financial awards. Although this case management was not intensive and the youth development workers often had difficulties reaching students, we cannot exclude this as a potentially beneficial treatment.

Research Questions

1. What impact did the provision of Promise emergency funds have on students' postsecondary persistence during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Did different populations of students respond differently to the provision of emergency funds?
2. Were Promise emergency funds disbursed equitably? Specifically, were funds disbursed to higher-need populations?

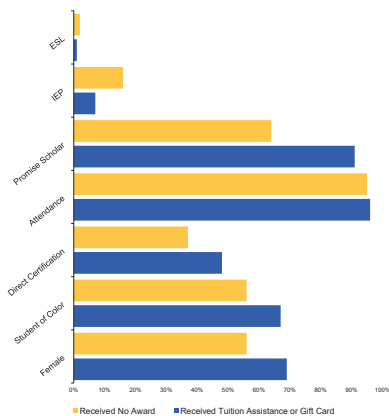
Results

Overall, how did the pandemic affect postsecondary enrollment among PPS graduates?

- We find that the pandemic reduced the likelihood of students enrolling and/or persisting in PS. Enrollment within the first year after high school graduation declined **by 3-4 percentage points** among the pandemic-affected graduating cohorts of 2020 and 2021.
- We find decreases in persistence among the cohorts of 2019 and 2020 as compared to earlier cohorts attending postsecondary in a non-COVID-affected year.
- We find no substantial differences in enrollment between different student demographic subgroups.
- **We conclude that COVID likely hastened stop-out among students who may have been at risk for stopping out even in the absence of the pandemic.**

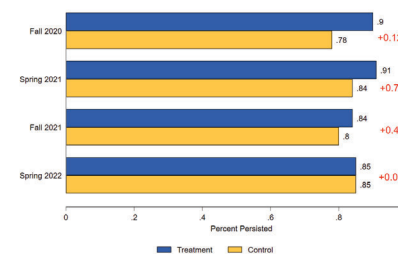
Among students enrolling in postsecondary between Fall 2020 and Fall 2022, which student populations received Promise emergency funding and how do these populations compare to those students that did not receive emergency funding?

- Students receiving Promise emergency funds were more likely to be female, a student of color, or economically disadvantaged than non-recipients.
- Awardees were also slightly more likely than non-recipients to have higher high school GPAs and attendance rates.
- Additionally, emergency fund recipients were 27 percentage points more likely than non-recipient postsecondary enrollees to also receive the traditional Promise scholarship.
- The overrepresentation of women and students of color is a common occurrence in the disbursement of emergency funds on college campuses. This could be because these populations are in greater need of financial assistance, they are in spaces where they are more likely to learn about emergency funds, or they are simply more likely to be responsive to offers of assistance.



Conclusion and Implications

Overall, the provision of Promise Emergency Funds appears to have preserved the postsecondary pathway for many students, especially students of color and economically disadvantaged students, as the program was intended to do.



- Among students that were enrolled in Spring 2020, 78% persisted into the Fall 2020 semester. Students receiving emergency funds were **12 percentage points** more likely than non-funded students to persist.
- Anecdotal evidence from Promise staff indicates that several students with whom they spoke suggested they would not have re-enrolled had the emergency funds not been available.
- Emergency funds were **particularly effective at promoting persistence among groups that often experience more stop-outs** from postsecondary education: economically disadvantaged students and students of color.
- We also find that funded students with graduating high school GPAs between 2.5 and 3.5 were far more likely than their unfunded counterparts to persist into Fall 2020. We find no statistically significant differences in persistence among students with very low or very high GPAs. This may be because students with lower GPAs need more comprehensive support and students with higher GPAs often qualify for merit aid awards and have more support at home.
- These results align with the broader literature on emergency funds that show that small amounts of money awarded at pivotal times can prevent vulnerable students from derailing and stopping out.

Evaluation for Learning Group

The Evaluation for Learning (EFL) team provides rigorous evaluation and research to support the decision-making needs of local and national program leaders and practitioners in the education policy space. For 15 years, the EFL group has assisted the Pittsburgh Promise with program development and improvement research to reflect on whether the program is equitably meeting its key goals of motivating students to and through postsecondary.