Highlights from
College Promise in California: Strategies, Challenges, and Successes

A statewide conference
August 30, 2016

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Event Partners:

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office

California College Promise Leadership Team

College Promise Campaign

Community College League of California

Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd

Table of Contents

Introduction

On August 30, 2016, more than 350 California community college representatives, trustees, and community partners from across the state came together to learn about the College Promise movement and to learn from College Promise experts from California and across the country.

College Promise programs address the challenge of college affordability by offering funding for students who live in a certain geographic area or who attend specified higher education institutions, mainly community colleges.

Fifty-seven of California's 72 community college districts were represented at the event. Attendees included 55 college presidents, 10 trustees of college boards, and 6 members of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors.

The one-day event, sponsored by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd, included the following:

» Remarks from College Promise advocates, such as Eloy Oakley (incoming California Community Colleges Chancellor), Martha Kanter (Executive Director of the College Promise Campaign), Gavin Newsom (California's Lieutenant Governor), and Libby Schaaf (Oakland Mayor).

» An overview of the College Promise movement and the growth in College Promise programs over time.

» Insights and guidance on various elements of College Promise programs.

This document summarizes the content of selected event sessions.

In preparation for the event, REL West identified 23 College Promise programs in California and compiled a booklet containing background information and details on each program. The booklet offers information to those developing, implementing, improving, and evaluating College Promise programs, and aims to encourage a broad community of College Promise learning and support in California. The booklet is available at https://relwest.wested.org/resources/221.

College Promise and the College Promise Campaign

Martha Kanter, College Promise Campaign

Kanter began her presentation by noting that the need for a college-educated workforce in the United States, and specifically in California, has never been greater, but the cost of higher education has increased to the point of being inaccessible to many students from low- and middle-income families. Kanter made the case that College Promise programs can improve college affordability and access by offering funding to students.

According to Kanter, community colleges are a logical place for College Promise programs because they serve more than 40 percent of undergraduates and disproportionately high percentages of low-income and first-generation students.

Defining College Promise

There is no universal definition of a College Promise program. However, Kanter named the following features as being commonly associated with College Promise programs:

» A scholarship component.

» A guarantee, or "promise," to students.

» Program eligibility based on a student's residency, graduation from a specified high school or district, or attendance at a specified college or district.

Kanter also indicated that other features are sometimes included when defining College Promise programs for research purposes, such as the following:

» Financial sustainability.

» Evidence-based program development and improvement.

» Nonfinancial student supports.

» Inclusion of "College Promise" in the program title.

» Early commitment, or "promise," to students about the specific criteria for students' inclusion.

» Clear and simple messages about the financial support that the program provides to students.

Gaining Momentum

Over the last 15 years, the number of College Promise programs across the country has steadily risen. According to Kanter, this momentum appears to have been fueled in part by the visibility of statewide initiatives in Tennessee, Oregon, and Minnesota, and in part by the proposal put forth in President Obama's 2015 State of the Union speech to make community college free through a federal/state partnership. Later in 2015, the College Promise Campaign, a national nonpartisan initiative of Civic Nation—a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization—was established to develop a network of cross-sector leaders from the local, state, and national levels to build and expand College Promise programs.

College Promise Campaign

The College Promise Campaign builds widespread support for College Promise through communications and advocacy, cross-sector leadership development, and support for research and policy development.

The College Promise Movement: Growth, Scope, and Impact

Laura Perna, University of Pennsylvania

Perna, of the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy at the University of Pennsylvania, presented a summary of the characteristics of 131 active College Promise programs across the country.

Residency Requirements

Nationally, more than half of the 131 programs include an attendance requirement: To be eligible, students must have attended a particular school district or high school. Other programs determine eligibility based on student addresses. Of those that do, the largest percentages of programs are state-based (28%), city-based (15%), and county-based (10%). Most (55%) of these programs do not require a specific number of years of residency in the designated location.

Other Student Requirements

In addition to having residency requirements, most programs in the country (52%) also determine student eligibility based on academic standing (i.e., the programs are "merit-based"), and 26 percent determine eligibility based on financial need (i.e., "need-based"). Eighteen percent use both merit-based and need-based criteria when determining student eligibility. The types of school that students must attend to be eligible also vary. About 45 percent of the programs in the nation require that students attend a two-year college, 11 percent require attendance at a four-year institution, and 45 percent of the programs allow students to attend either a two-year program or a four-year program.

Determining Student Need

Almost 60 percent of programs across the country are "last dollar," meaning that all other financial aid for a student is taken into account prior to determining the student's need for College Promise financial assistance.

Covered Expenses

Almost half (46%) of the 131 programs in the nation cover full tuition, 24 percent cover other fees, 2 percent cover room and board, and 7 percent cover books.

Funding Sources

Forty percent of programs nationally draw funding from multiple sources, including private philanthropy, local and state budgets, and foundations.

The California College Promise Movement Landscape

Mary Rauner and Amelia Smith, REL West at WestEd

Rauner and Smith identified 23 College Promise programs in California, 13 of which were announced within the first few months of 2016. In preparation for the event, REL West compiled a booklet (https://relwest.wested.org/resources/221) containing background information and details on each program, which Rauner and Smith summarized during this session.

Residency Requirements

About 50 percent of the College Promise programs in California have a residency requirement. All but one of the other half of California's programs determine eligibility based on the K–12 schools or districts that the student attended. One program in California does not require residency, but requires attendance at a specified institution.

Other Student Requirements

In California, only two College Promise programs (9%) require that students demonstrate financial need to be eligible. Most (87%) of the programs require students to complete a program application, which varies in depth and length across the different programs. In addition to having these requirements, 26 percent of the programs are merit-based (meaning that they require a certain level of academic achievement for students to be eligible), 52 percent require that students enroll in college within a specified amount of time after high school graduation, and 60 percent require students to enroll full-time in college.

Determining Student Need

In California, 80 percent of College Promise programs are "last dollar," meaning that all other financial aid for a student is taken into account prior to determining the student's need for College Promise financial assistance.

Covered Expenses

The percentage of California programs that offer full tuition (83%) is almost twice the national percentage. This difference is due, in part, to the California Community Colleges Board of Governors' fee waiver program, which covers the full cost of tuition for low-income students. Approximately 50 percent of the programs in California cover fees other than tuition, and 50 percent cover books. Thirteen percent of the California programs cover transportation, and 17 percent of the programs offer unrestricted funding (meaning that students can use the funds for whatever purposes they choose).

Nonfinancial Support Services

In California, most College Promise programs offer some additional academic and personal support services. These services vary by program and can include support before college, during college, and during the transition from a two-year to a four-year college or to a career. Parent and community outreach are also elements in some programs.

Funding Sources

Funding sources for College Promise programs in California include city, county, and state government budgets; K–12 and community college school district budgets; foundations; private corporations; and individual donors. More than 50 percent of California College Promise programs draw funding from multiple sources.

The Tennessee Promise: Community Partnerships and Impact

Krissy DeAlejandro, tnAchieves

DeAlejandro, Executive Director of tnAchieves, discussed the Tennessee Promise (TN Promise), a "last dollar" scholarship program for all Tennessee high school graduates. TN Promise is part of Governor Haslam's "Drive to 55" campaign, which aims to have 55 percent statewide postsecondary credential attainment by 2025. Students can use the scholarship to attend any of Tennessee's 13 community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology, and/or several four-year institutions that offer associate degrees.

DeAlejandro explained the three major components of the TN Promise: scholarships, a volunteer mentor program, and a requirement of student community service. She described the mentorship program in detail, and also described the process of establishing local leadership councils and their role in fostering local support for the overall vision of the program.

TN Promise recruits mentors by working with local community groups, such as chambers of commerce, and local media outlets. The program also partners with local colleges to help facilitate mentor recruitment, hosting friendly competitions among colleges to encourage participation. The TN Promise currently works with more than 9,300 mentors.

Volunteer mentors support students in completing their federal financial aid forms, filling out college applications, and offering general advice on the college experience. To support mentors and ensure consistency, the program provides all mentors with a one-hour training (either in-person or via webinar) and a handbook that guides mentors through the detailed steps of the student application process, and suggests effective ways to support students through the process.

DeAlejandro explained the importance of encouraging local ownership of the TN Promise. The local leadership councils that were set up by TN Promise spread the word about the "Drive to 55" vision and the TN Promise, help navigate community culture and dynamics, and assist in volunteer mentor recruitment. These councils typically include mayors, school directors, representatives from chambers of commerce, other local business leaders, and employees from local higher education institutions.

DeAlejandro concluded her remarks by sharing impact data from analyses of recent program data. Tennessee had one of the highest federal financial aid application rates in the nation this year (among high school graduating class of 2016). In addition, the class of 2015 saw a 10-percent increase in enrollment in public higher education and a 25-percent increase in community college enrollment. For the 2015/16 academic year, the state's college-going rate increased by 5 percent, a considerably larger increase than any in the previous decade.

Student Support Systems: Lessons Learned from The Kalamazoo Promise

Janice Brown, The Kalamazoo Promise

Brown, the former Executive Director and a current trustee of The Kalamazoo Promise, discussed the ongoing efforts at Kalamazoo Valley Community College to align internal support systems, remedial education, academic coaches, and student support services to meet the needs of Kalamazoo Promise students.

According to Brown, The Kalamazoo Promise is a four-year scholarship program that serves students who have attended grades 9–12 in the Kalamazoo public school system, graduated from a Kalamazoo public high school, and been accepted to a partner two- or four-year college or university in the state. Students also must maintain a 2.0 grade point average in college and be enrolled as a full-time student. Part-time student status is acceptable at Kalamazoo Valley Community College and for all students who enroll during summer sessions.

Brown highlighted some lessons that The Kalamazoo Promise staff have learned over the 10 years of the program's existence, including the importance of commitment by community college leaders, revisiting approaches to developmental education and student mentoring, centralizing student support services, and an emphasis on continuous improvement.

Brown first emphasized the importance of having a strong commitment, at the executive leadership level, to support underprepared and underrepresented students. She also highlighted the need for rethinking the structure of developmental education, such as by accelerating classes, providing in-class tutors, and merging developmental courses with level 1 courses.

Brown also recommended consolidating student support programs into a single location to increase the chances that students will take advantage of the offerings. Kalamazoo Valley Community College found increased student participation when the college added a student success center that includes all academic, personal, and career supports for its students. Brown emphasized the importance of mentoring and tutoring for student success, and recommended that each community college explore which programs will be most helpful, given the college's particular students and college structure. In realizing the positive impact of mentoring and tutoring on Promise student success, The Kalamazoo Promise hired tutors who work exclusively with The Kalamazoo Promise students for its student success center.

For the purpose of designing and improving programs for student success, Brown emphasized the importance of being aware of the economic and social environments in which the student body exists, both within and outside of the college campus. She also highlighted the importance of making data-informed decisions about program improvements and of factoring in findings from relevant existing research. The final point that she made was to emphasize the importance of taking time to reflect.

Establishing a College Promise Leadership Consortium

Kenneth Ender, Harper College

In his presentation, Ender, President of Harper College, explained that collaboration among leaders within and across sectors is essential to supporting students' transition to, persistence in, and completion of higher education.

To give an example of a successful collaboration, Ender described the Northwest Educational Council for Student Success, based in the northwest suburbs of Cook County, Illinois. The council ties together the time, talent, and fiscal resources of three large suburban school districts and the community college that serves those students.

Describing how to form an effective leadership team, Ender highlighted the importance of developing a compelling narrative around which to build a coalition. When partners are on board, the leaders must listen closely to team members' input. Ender stressed the importance of business partners specifically, and noted that business partners in the Northwest Educational Council expressed the need for students who have a good attitude, consistent attendance, and ongoing commitment to the program. These student characteristics and requirements were explicitly included in the council's College Promise program design.

According to Ender, once the vision and goals are established, the next step is to build a structure that supports collective impact. To accomplish this, Ender explained, individuals and organizations must shift from considering their work in isolation to seeing their work as part of a larger system.

Describing how to ensure a lasting, durable structure, Ender emphasized the importance of collaboratively developing artifacts that display the team's structure and goals. Examples include a vision statement and mutually identified goals, data-sharing agreements, memoranda of understanding, and formal partnership diagram structures.

At the end of his presentation, Ender reflected on the lessons that he had learned through developing and working with the Northwest Educational Council:

» All program champions should be visible and involved.

» Deliverables must be delivered.

» "Early wins" are important and should be shared with relevant audiences.

» Initiatives must be coordinated and managed.

» "We will figure it out" needs to be the prevailing attitude.

How to Develop and Measure College Promise Outcomes

Greg Gillespie, Ventura College
Norbert Tan, Ventura College Foundation

Gillespie, President of Ventura College, and Tan, of the Ventura College Foundation, spoke about identifying and measuring outcomes and using outcome data to inform Ventura College Promise program improvements. Gillespie and Tan outlined the history of the Ventura College Promise, discussed the importance of collecting data, and explained the process that they went through to identify meaningful data to track, analyze, and report.

Gillespie and Tan highlighted the importance of measuring programmatic outcomes for internal improvement and communicating with the program's stakeholders. They identified the primary stakeholder groups for the Ventura College Promise as students and parents, the internal campus community, donors, and the community at large. Students and parents benefit from learning about program outcomes because they become more motivated when they see evidence of program success. Outcome data are useful to the campus community because the results can inform program improvements. Also, having data that highlight the program's successes builds a case for financial support from donors, fosters continued enthusiasm in the community, and shows evidence that the program is using its resources effectively.

Ventura College Promise program leaders met with internal and external stakeholders when the leaders articulated their goals and determined which metrics to track. According to Gillespie and Tan, the program leaders received particularly useful feedback from the college's Office of Institutional Research and its Student Services Office. Program leaders also engaged constituent groups, including students, donors, community members, and the Foundation Board, in the process.

The initial data points that were tracked by the Ventura program were rate of persistence, number of enrolled first-generation students, enrolled students' ethnicities, academic performance of Promise students, and numbers of units completed by Promise students. Program leaders then used these priority data points to identify a research question, which shaped their first internal longitudinal study.

Results from the initial longitudinal study highlighted a number of data gaps. These gaps included lack of information about university success rates, job placement rates, industry relevance to students' areas of study, and some socioeconomic status measures of Promise students. These data will be included in the second internal longitudinal study of Ventura's program, which was in process as of August 2016.

Gillespie and Tan reported that the results of the initial outcome data analysis helped shape revised program goals and helped improve program elements and structures. They also found that sharing outcome data with program stakeholders led to increased funding, which allowed the program to improve student services, and led to better student and community outcomes.

Research on the Effects of College Promise Programs on Students and the Community

Brad Hershbein, W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Hershbein described findings from research on the impact of College Promise programs on student and community outcomes. He then described specific findings from a study of the Kalamazoo Promise. Lastly, he outlined factors to consider when developing a research design for College Promise programs.

Noting that the existing studies are limited in scope and number, Hershbein briefly described the results from several studies focused on the impact of College Promise programs. According to Hershbein, studies at the K–12 level have shown correlations between the presence of a College Promise program and increased student aspirations, increased enrollment in the school district, and increased student achievement. At the postsecondary level, studies have found that College Promise programs increase college enrollment, persistence, and completion. He added that studies have also found that these programs can positively impact housing values and decrease migration out of the district.

Hershbein reported findings from his analysis of the Kalamazoo Promise program's impact on student measures such as enrollment, achievement, and graduation rates. His findings suggest that the announcement of the program was correlated with reversed exit rates and increased enrollment in the district. Student achievement, as measured by test scores, also increased, and student suspensions decreased. In addition, the rate of college enrollment within six months of high school graduation increased, as did college completion rates within six years of high school graduation.

Other data from Hershbein's analysis show that 41 percent of students use part of their College Promise scholarship at a local community college.

The Kalamazoo study also measured the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise on the city's economic development. Hershbein indicated that analysis of the data estimated that salary earnings in the city of Kalamazoo will increase (due to increased college completion rates) by an amount that will be approximately four times greater than the cost of the program.

Hershbein highlighted that the College Promise program design will drive the program's outcomes. Thus, he recommended being intentional about selecting program elements for a College Promise program, such as deciding whether to make the program "first dollar" versus "last dollar," or making the program's eligibility universal versus merit-based.

In closing, Hershbein was optimistic about the potential for positive impacts from College Promise programs. He was also careful to remind the audience that there is still much that is not known about the ways in which College Promise impacts students and the community. Most programs, he noted, are still too young or too small to be studied. Other limitations include the high cost of evaluation work and the challenges associated with identifying measures and gathering data.

Launching a College Promise Program

Shannon Hill, Cuesta College Foundation
Catherine Riedstra, Cuesta College

The first year of a College Promise program can be a daunting experience for those involved with its implementation, funding, and outreach, according to Hill, Executive Director of the Cuesta College Foundation, and Riedstra, Dean of Students at Cuesta College. Their presentation focused on the recent launch of the Cuesta College Promise program in San Luis Obispo County, California. They discussed the history of the Cuesta College Promise and key decisions made during the program's launch. They also shared some of the challenges that they faced or that others might face in launching a program, as well as lessons that they learned throughout the process.

The first key launch consideration that Hill and Riedstra discussed was determining the fiscal viability and sustainability of the program. The Cuesta College Promise was launched with a large gift, a direct result of a strong planned-giving program at the Cuesta College Foundation. They noted that strong partnerships between the college foundation and the community increase the likelihood of the program's financial sustainability.

Next, Hill and Riedstra described a roadmap for launching a Promise program. The steps that they presented, in chronological order, are researching other Promise programs, creating a task force, defining processes and roles, launching the program, maintaining ongoing communication and relationships, and evaluating the program's results.

One of the jobs of the task force established in San Luis Obispo County was to determine whether the school climate was amenable to the development of a Promise program. The presenters explained that Cuesta College was well positioned for a Promise program because offering scholarships and improving college affordability were priority goals for both the president of the college and the Cuesta College Foundation. The timing was also good because there were no competing institutional priorities at that time.

The task force also helped define the process and roles within the program. The presenters highlighted the need to clearly identify the responsible party for each role in the program. They also recommended that the planning team use pre-existing organizational structures and programs to the extent possible, to minimize confusion and burden.

Some strategies that Hill and Riedstra recommended for planning for the formal launch of the program include creating and adhering to a brand, and making the most of the launch to ensure that the program's message has broad outreach.

The presenters also highlighted some challenges faced during the launch of the Cuesta College Promise program, such as being understaffed and having difficulty engaging community groups in the launch process. Other challenges highlighted were the laborious nature of fund-raising, and logistical challenges in determining student residency, which is a program requirement.

Engaging and Communicating with College Promise Partners and Constituents

Sara Lundquist, Santa Ana College

Lundquist discussed the importance of establishing and sustaining cross-sector partnerships for a successful College Promise program. She also emphasized the importance of deliberate and consistent communication with multiple program constituents. Lundquist outlined the strategies used by the Santa Ana College Promise to communicate with students, parents, districts, business leaders, and the larger community, and to maintain close engagement with the program.

First, Lundquist explained the importance of including partners in the process of identifying the program's overarching priorities. She recommended choosing big-picture goals that all stakeholders agree on and can draw direction from.

According to Lundquist, another successful engagement and communication strategy used by the Santa Ana College Promise was to develop a series of domain teams: K–12, Higher Education, Philanthropy and Business, Parent and Community, and Media and Communications. Each of these teams meets regularly to review goals and objectives. The lead of each domain team serves on the core leadership team for the college's Promise program to ensure strong communication and alignment.

Lundquist emphasized the critical importance, to all of the domain teams, of broadcasting and amplifying information about the program. The content and process for communicating, as well as the challenges that impede effective communication, vary by group. For example, according to Lundquist, robocalls are effective with the K–12 team, whereas one-on-one conversations are most effective with business leaders and philanthropists.

Lundquist conveyed some insights about communicating and engaging with College Promise partners. First, she highlighted the importance of ensuring that the goals of each group are aligned around a common set of priorities. She also indicated that it is essential to clearly define each group's domain in relation to the team's areas of strength, and to encourage collaboration across the domain teams.

The Oakland Promise: Engaging the Community from Birth Through College

David Silver, City of Oakland

David Silver, Director of Education for the Mayor of Oakland, discussed the ways in which the Oakland Promise leadership team is engaging the city to ensure that all students have the expectations, resources, and skills to complete college and be successful in the careers of their choice. Silver described the ways in which community members were involved in the program's initial planning process, and provided the audience with guiding questions to evaluate community engagement strategies.

According to Silver, the College Promise team in Oakland first identified a vision that the community had prioritized. The team then convened experts from the community who were already engaged in efforts supporting this vision. The leaders represented local colleges, the K–12 school district, and nonprofits working on college access and success. Together, team members established a common vision—to ensure that every child who graduates from high school has the expectations, resources, and skills to complete college and be successful in the career of his or her choice—and drafted an action plan.
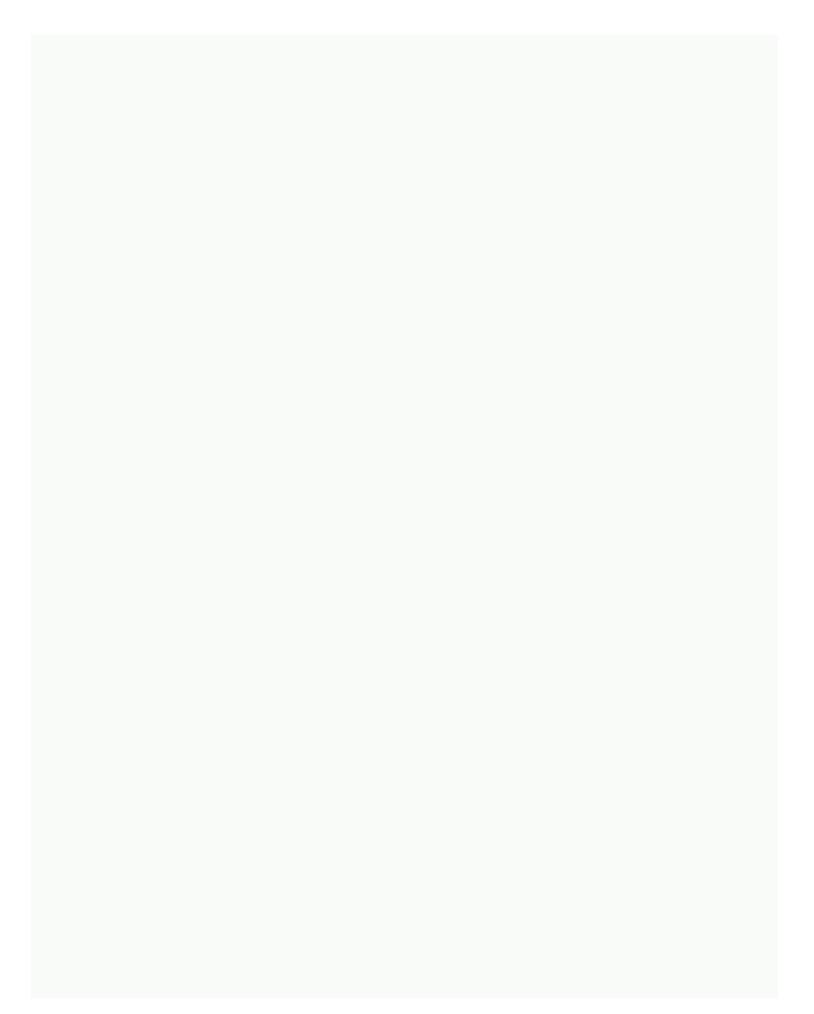
Silver explained that the leadership team next met with stakeholders from all sectors, including elected officials, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and industry, to describe the team's efforts, listen to ideas and feedback from the stakeholders, and gain stakeholders' support. During this period, the Oakland Promise team also established an Ambassador Program in which key stakeholders spread the word about the Promise program, advocated for the program vision, and recruited more support.

Silver stressed that communicating regularly with community members, to share the vision, the goals, and the data showing progress, is important throughout the planning process and program implementation.

Silver recommended that College Promise program leaders enlist existing community groups to work on specific program efforts, such as data collection and analysis, to ensure engagement and enthusiasm. He also urged the audience to create multiple opportunities and channels for other community members to participate at every stage of the process of planning and implementing a Promise program.

Lastly, Silver offered a list of key questions that can be used by other Promise programs to evaluate their community engagement strategies:

» Do you have a structure that enables key groups of community members to get involved in meaningful ways?

» Are there ways for partners to get involved through multiple channels and at every stage in the planning and implementation process?

» What percentage of the key elected officials have endorsed/will endorse your initiative?

» What is your target number of champions/endorsers (individuals and organizations) from your region?

» How are you communicating regularly to constituents (monthly email blasts, collateral materials, meetings, etc.)?

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