

A Brief Overview of Activity to Date: What began three years ago as a vision to replicate the Kalamazoo Promise and further economic development in Muskegon County, has become an initiative with community-wide interest and support. The group is attempting to bring universal access and needed support to post-secondary education for all graduates from the 12 public, two parochial and one charter high school(s) within the MAISD boundaries. In late summer of 2006, a small committee was formed to explore the idea of offering a scholarship program similar to the Kalamazoo Promise to Muskegon County high school graduates. In a knowledge based economy the need was obvious, as only **18%** of Muskegon County residents over the age of 25 hold bachelor degrees or higher. The state average is **25%** and the national average is **27%**. Even more alarming is the fact that Michigan's overall ranking is **35th** in the nation. As recently as **2003**, Michigan ranked **29th** in the nation.

The committee members envisioned the Muskegon Opportunity as a program that offered our students the ability to attend the post-secondary institution of their choice, with the M.O. funding their education. It was not long before the M.O. committee realized that a program of such magnitude was financially impossible at the current time and began work to decipher what could be done to raise the level of education in our county. Much hard work by many people representing business/industry, foundations, education, government and economic development interests has brought the M.O. to where it is today. The current program model has three parts.

1. **Broad-based student preparation program:** All high schools are joining in an effort to build a culture of learning in the Muskegon County area; preparing ALL students for postsecondary education or formal training, academically and financially.

2. **Intensive support:** *For students most at risk of not completing high school, extra assistance through graduation and into post-secondary education or formal training.*

3. **Muskegon Opportunity safety net scholarship:** Financial assistance will be granted for a two-year degree or program at identified institutions. More specifically up to \$3,400.00 each year to attend Muskegon Community College, Baker College of Muskegon, or one of several institutions recommended by the staff of the Muskegon Area Career Technology Center. In doing so, M.O. will become a change agent for how post-secondary education information is delivered in our county.

As of June 2008, the M.O. committee and constituent k-12 superintendents unanimously endorsed a statement of intent that addresses the "nuts and bolts" of the process to launch the program. Final financial projections are being completed and efforts are underway with a fundraising campaign to hire a full-time coordinator. The committee plans to launch the attached program activities in autumn 2009.

Additionally, the Muskegon Area Intermediate School District (MAISD) applied for and received one of the Promise Zone (PZ) designations. Dr. Meston, Superintendent of the MAISD and CEO of the Muskegon Promise Zone Authority (MPZA), is busy recruiting 9 of the 11 members that will serve on the PZA. Soon after the Promise will be defined, an actuarial model will be built to define the cost. That model will then be submitted to the Department of Treasury for approval. Thereafter, fundraising will begin to support the first two years of the Promise so that funds captured can be used to sustain the initiative for years to come.