

**Evaluating the Impact and Potential for College Savings
Programs in Baltimore City**

Executive Summary

**Prepared for the Junior Achievement of Central Maryland by
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Evaluating the Impact and Potential for College Savings Programs in Baltimore City

This executive summary describes a unique feasibility study that took place in Baltimore City in 2013; it was conducted by the community partners listed on the previous page, and it delved into whether or not a matched college savings account (CSA) program is workable and feasible as a pilot program in two Baltimore City elementary/middle schools. This summary will discuss the study and its results, along with next steps for the project.

Study Purpose and Methods

Rarely do researchers and practitioners have the luxury of conducting an empirically based feasibility study prior to implementing a promising new program. This study allowed the researchers to employ a concurrent mixed methods research study to: 1) investigate current “best practices” in the implementation of CSAs in other states and localities; 2) evaluate findings from a series of focus groups or “listening sessions” at these two elementary/middle schools which explored in-depth the perceptions and attitudes regarding CSAs as a pilot in these schools, along with feedback on college and career aspirations and the challenges of saving money in a troubled economy; 3) conduct an environmental scan of these schools’ neighborhoods and communities; 4) develop readiness check-lists for successful implementation of this program in Baltimore City; and 5) review specific CSA features to understand what will work best for the families in the two neighborhoods, the financial institution, and for overall implementation.

This study allowed the partners to truly listen to community stakeholders, including administrators and teachers, parents and/or caregivers, and students. This opportunity to listen to and study schools and communities before implementing a new CSA program is recommended in the research, but rarely was able to be implemented, until this study.

A significant part of the feasibility study involved analysis of data stemming from the series of focus groups conducted in May and November 2013 at the two elementary/middle schools. The groups were conducted by the community partners and each group was led by one facilitator from these groups with another person present for note-taking and observation. Six groups took place in May with two sessions, respectively, at the schools with teachers, parents, and students. Four groups took place in November with teachers and parents, respectively, at the schools. Each group was tape-recorded and transcribed with permission of the participants. The researchers then analyzed the rich, candid data generated from these groups using a grounded theory approach in order to code the data and identify patterns, categories, and themes.

Key Findings

Results from the focus groups and surveys highlighted the importance of each school as a central location within the two distinct urban communities studied and the potential to build a successful CSA program within and around the schools. The researchers discussed and agreed on nine broad themes that captured the essence across all groups of participants’ perspectives on the strengths and challenges of implementing a CSA program. The themes that emerged from the data are summarized in the table below.

Table 1: List of Themes Emerging from Focus Groups

Name of Theme	Description of Theme
1. Saving is Hard	"If you can't tell them how to save, they're not going to save."
2. People Recognize Small Ways to Save a. Visualizing the Power of Accrued Savings	"A dollar a week." "Look where you would be with your child."
3. Need for Guidance and a Plan	"We need directions to get there."
4. The College Mindset	"Me, I'm going to be the first one to go to college."
5. The Power of Role Models	"My mom and dad want me to follow his path."
6. Stakeholders Are Not All on the Same Page	"Because without college, you're not going to achieve these goals."
7. Role of Community and Children's Sense of Responsibility to It	"Some of them have family responsibilities also."
8. Matched Accounts	"Basically the matching would get me."
9. Road to Success a. Personalized, Sustained Attention; "High Touch" b. Trust c. Starting Early d. Modes of Communication e. Incentives f. Enrollment g. Innovative Strategies to Promote CSAs	"Somebody who comes up to me and be like, 'SAVE!'" "As long as someone is helping me achieve something, especially for the benefit of my kids, who could go against that?" "It should be when I'm ready." "I just think that education of our parents—educating them to understand the importance of this."

Implications

By using a multi-informed, stakeholder approach to data collection, this rich data reflects viewpoints from all end-users of a CSA program. Conducting a detailed feasibility study at a CSA's launch will, in theory, lead to better end results for a pilot program because hurdles referenced in this current and prior research are being addressed. These include engaging teachers, parents, and students in the program; building trust in the community for partnership; and starting and sustaining the "college mind-set" for the entire community.

Throughout all of the focus groups, energy and commitment to the program remained high among all stakeholders. An unintended outcome from the second set of focus groups included the fact that the teachers and parents were even more excited about the program. Parents expressed interest in signing up immediately. The timing is ripe to implement a pilot CSA program in these two schools.

Conclusion

The literature review of existing programs and best practices supports the notion that interest in CSAs in urban environments with high poverty rates is growing, and that short-term outcomes regarding attitudes about college and savings are positive. In addition to the literature review, this study shed light on the importance of having consistent, on-site encouragement by a dedicated staff person who administers or works for the CSA. Families and teachers were also interested in financial education that could be provided in conjunction with the CSA. Though research is ongoing about CSA implementation and there is still much to be learned about the long-term outcomes in CSA participation--including reaching and completing college--the outlook is encouraging that CSAs can and do help fill the financial gap that often prevents students from even considering college as an option.

Next Steps

Some of the key points and recommendations in moving forward with implementation of a CSA pilot program at these two schools include:

- Continue listening to the stakeholders as the project is formulated and implemented
- Build on and maintain the initial partnership developed with administrators, teachers, parents, and students that was initiated during this feasibility study
- Grow and sustain the college mind-set, while integrating this emerging mind-set with existing programs such as collaborating with local colleges for tours, alumni programs, and community advocates
- Consider innovative strategies for communication, engagement, implementation, and incentivization, as suggested by the various stakeholder groups, including students
- Integrate the CSA into the fabric of the school and surrounding community by building the community around the school as a wrapper
- Discuss and determine the best age for enrollment with stakeholders; younger and early engagement was desired among teachers and parents in the current study; however, enrollment age varies across past studies throughout the U.S.
- Provide ongoing financial education and college savings workshops for students, family members, and teachers
- Provide long-term ancillary services for families that are consistent over time and go beyond the matched savings program
- Ensure that services rendered are “high-touch,” especially regarding initial ongoing enrollment and support, i.e., provide on-site staff and personalized messages via phone, text, and email
- Decide whether or not the CSA will utilize universal or selective enrollment, as some programs studied target very low-income families
- Continue research to arrive at consensus from all stakeholders regarding the best formula for matching individual contributions and the overall duration of the program
- Design the program to encourage sustained savings behaviors, not just episodic
- Address concerns, especially from parents and families, about college affordability and attendance for the students
- Capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm exhibited among all stakeholders

Engaging partners and building trust over the long haul are several of the most significant barriers to implementing successful CSA programs. Yet this feasibility study has successfully established the groundwork from which a pilot project can emerge. Perhaps this student said it best: “Because my goal has been the same for about eight years and I’m not going to throw it out. I’m doing this for myself and for the pride of it—that I’ll be the first one in my family to go to college.”