

LOCAL NEWS

Bank of America gives \$200,000 to help Ontario-Montclair students succeed in college



6th grade students raise their hands after being asked if they plan to go to college during the Promise Scholars Business Leader Presentations at Wiltsey Middle School in Ontario on Friday, Nov. 2, 2018. During the presentation the Ontario-Montclair School District Promise Scholars program received a \$200k Neighborhood Builders grant through Bank of America. (Photo by Stan Lim, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

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[Since 2011](#), the Ontario-Montclair School District has been working to increase the number of its students who will attend college and improve their chances of success once there through its [Promise Scholars](#) program. On Friday, Nov. 2, the program got some big help, with a \$200,000 grant from Bank of America.

“My experience with grants is they happen at the right time, when you’re ready for something,” Promise Scholars executive director Leslie Sorenson said earlier in the week. “It’s kind of a natural next step for us.”

The Promise Scholars program exposes district students to college at a young age, with support continuing through the college years, guarantees a spot for eligible students at local partner colleges and universities, and provides help with financial aid once students begin applying for college.

[According to the U.S. Census Bureau](#), in 2016, only 19.3 percent of San Bernardino County adults age 25 or older had a bachelor’s degree or higher diploma compared to 32 percent statewide. In the Ontario-Montclair School District, only 6 percent of parents have college degrees and 30 percent of parents never completed high school, according to the district. That means many former OMSD students (the district serves students from kindergarten through eighth grade) don’t have families with the background knowledge required to help their students prepare for or succeed at college.

Bank of America Inland Empire President Al Arguello presented a \$200,000 Neighborhood Builders grant check to the program Friday morning during a program at Wiltsey Middle School. The program also includes leadership training for Promise Scholars staff and other support from Bank of America.

“They fill a tremendous need in the Inland Empire, which is educational attainment,” Arguello said earlier in the week. “They don’t want students to think that high school is the end of their education. Jobs of the future are going to require more education.”

Ten Inland Empire nonprofits were invited to apply for the grant, and a group of community leaders selected Promise Scholars for the grant. Arguello was the only Bank of America vote on the panel, he said.

“What they’re doing there needs to be replicated, because it’s really working,” Arguello said.

The grant money will be used to start a new College Ambassador program. Trained students at colleges and universities around the Inland Empire, including Azusa Pacific University, Cal Poly Pomona, Cal State San Bernardino, Chaffey College, Moreno Valley College, Mt. San Antonio College, Riverside City College, the University of Redlands, the University of La Verne and others, will work with Ontario-Montclair schools on Promise Scholars programs.

"We're helping the younger students but we're also helping those older students, because they may learn about how to transfer colleges and about other supports on their college campuses," Sorensen said. The student ambassadors will also help support other Promise Scholars at their college, pointing them toward resources they might not otherwise know about.

The Promise Scholars' curriculum focuses on understanding the college application process and FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) application that's used, not just by the federal government, but by nearly every other provider of student aid. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 90 percent of students who complete the FAFSA go on to college. Since the Promise Scholars program was created, Ontario-Montclair alumni completion of the FAFSA has climbed from 32 to 58 percent, according to the district.

The Neighborhood Builders grant also includes a year of leadership training for the program's executive director and an emerging leader at the organization, access to a network of peer organizations across the U.S., and the opportunity to access additional capital to expand their impact.

Bank of America has awarded Neighborhood Builders grants in the Inland Empire for 15 years, providing \$4.2 million in grant funds to 21 local nonprofits.

The check presented by Bank of America on Friday is the single largest donation the Promise Scholars program has ever received, and more than double the \$90,000 donated by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in August.