D2 Promise Scholarship Evaluation: Early Findings on First-Dollar Participation

Executive Summary

The D2 Promise Scholarship was established to reduce financial barriers to higher education by providing eligible Harrison School District 2 graduates with tuition assistance to attend Pikes Peak State College (PPSC). Since the program's inception, the scholarship has evolved from a **last-dollar** model, which supplemented other available financial aid, to a **first-dollar** model that allows students to apply Promise funding before other grants and scholarships. The last-dollar period includes students graduating from D2 at the end of the 2019-20 through 2023-24 school years. Students graduating from D2 at the end of the **2024–25 school year** were the first cohort eligible under the first-dollar model.

This report provides an early look at participation patterns for that first-dollar cohort and compares them with trends observed during the previous five years of the last-dollar program. Consistent with the broader evaluation framework, the analysis focuses on early measures of access, including overall participation and differences by income, gender, and race and ethnicity, while establishing a baseline for tracking longer-term outcomes such as persistence, completion, transfer, and workforce success.

At this stage, the clearest findings relate to **access and initial postsecondary participation**. The first-dollar cohort was associated with a meaningful increase in participation at PPSC, alongside a decline in the share of students with no identified postsecondary enrollment. These trends suggest that at least part of the growth in Promise/PPSC participation may represent an expansion in overall postsecondary access, rather than only a shift in where students enroll.

Key early findings include:

- **Promise/PPSC participation increased substantially.** Among students exiting[1] D2, Promise Scholarship participation increased from an average of 20% during the last-dollar period to 28% in the first-dollar year. Excluding charter students, participation increased from 18% to 30%. At the same time, the share of students with no identified postsecondary enrollment declined (from 50% to 44%).
- **Participation gains extended across multiple student groups.** Some of the strongest increases were among students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL) and Hispanic students. While participation among male and Black students also improved, male students continued to participate at lower rates than female students, and Black students remained below the overall districtwide proportion, highlighting areas for continued attention.
- **It is too early to speak to chosen fields of study for first-dollar students, but last-dollar data show Promise students pursued diverse education and career pathways, with a strong emphasis on two-year degrees.** Among 666 D2 Promise graduates at PPSC in 2020–2025, 91% pursued two-year degrees, with general studies and nursing-related pathways among the most common choices. Other common career pathways included business and other health-related fields (with the latter being the highest demand industry today and for the next ten years).

[1] "Exiting" student are students who began high school at the same time (as a cohort) and left because they dropped out or graduated in the four years since starting high school.

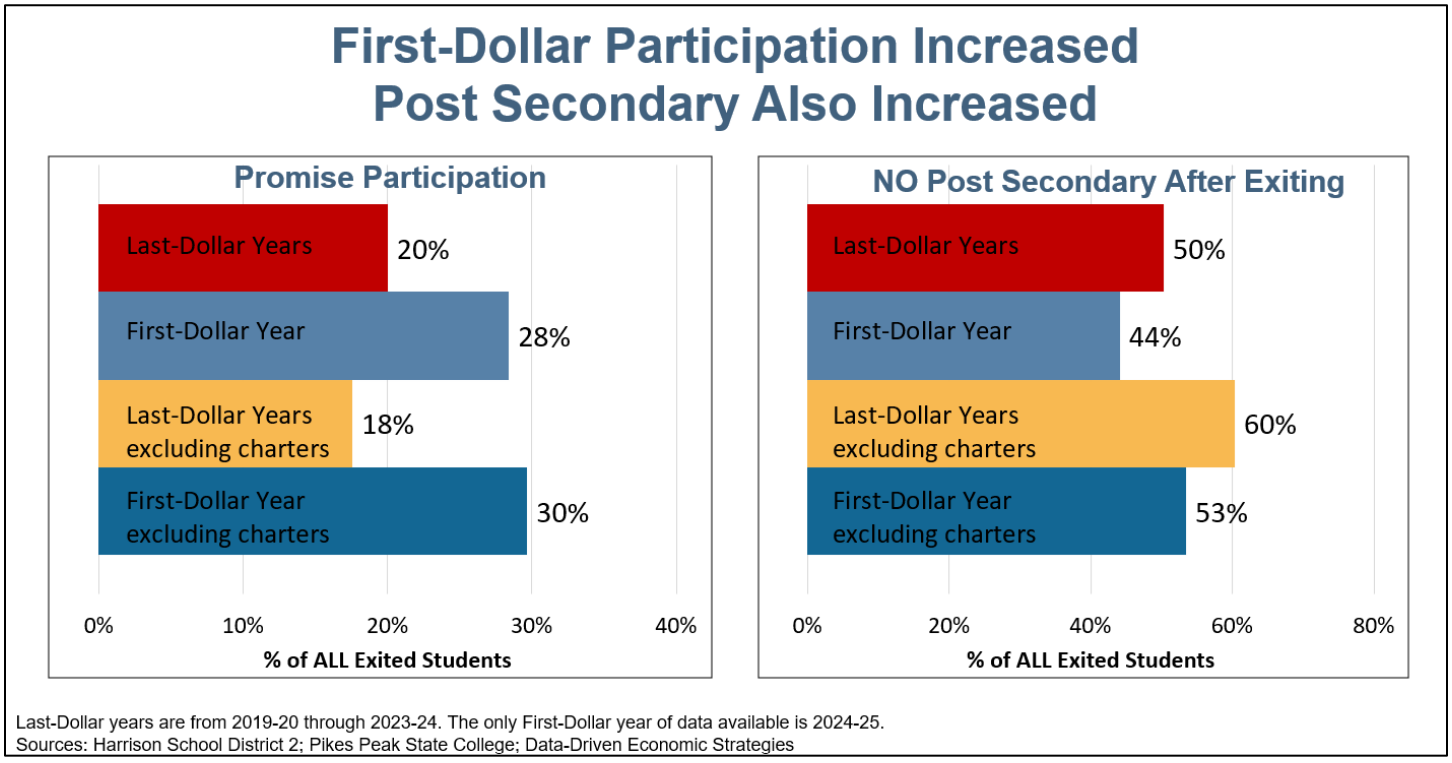
First-dollar data for other long-term outcomes including persistence, retention, transfer, and completion are not yet available. As additional cohorts and outcome data become available, the evaluation will assess whether these initial participation gains are sustained and ultimately translate into stronger postsecondary progress and completion. Future plans for this first-dollar evaluation also include economic analyses of higher labor participation, wages and (government) tax revenues for the students who participate in Promise versus the students who would have no postsecondary education in the absence of Promise.

Overall First-Dollar vs. Last-Dollar Participation

First-dollar implementation coincided with a substantial increase in participation in the D2 Promise Scholarship at PPSC.

The first year of the first-dollar model shows a clear increase in the share of students participating in D2 Promise/PPSC. During the last-dollar period, an average of one in five students exiting D2 participated in the Promise program (20%). In the first available year of the first-dollar model, participation increased to 28% overall, or nearly one in three students. The increase in Promise participation between first- and last-dollar was even more pronounced when charter students were excluded, rising from 18% in the last-dollar model to 30% in the first-dollar.

The increase in Promise/PPSC participation occurred alongside a decline in the share of students with no identified postsecondary enrollment. This is an important part of the early story. The data suggest that the increase in PPSC participation was not occurring only among students who otherwise would have enrolled elsewhere; it also coincided with fewer students remaining outside postsecondary education altogether. The change is particularly pronounced when charter students are excluded as seen in the graphs below.



Last-Dollar years are from 2019-20 through 2023-24. The only First-Dollar year of data available is 2024-25.
Sources: Harrison School District 2; Pikes Peak State College; Data-Driven Economic Strategies

These findings provide an encouraging early indication that the first-dollar period is associated with broader access to postsecondary (via PPSC). Additional years of data will help determine whether this increase is sustained. The last-dollar years also saw increases in (Promise-related) postsecondary access despite the pandemic (when postsecondary enrollment fell nationwide). As such, it is plausible that Promise participation in coming years may see marked increases between the added advantage of first-dollar availability as well as the continued improvement (post pandemic) in the pursuit of two-year degrees and certifications/licenses.

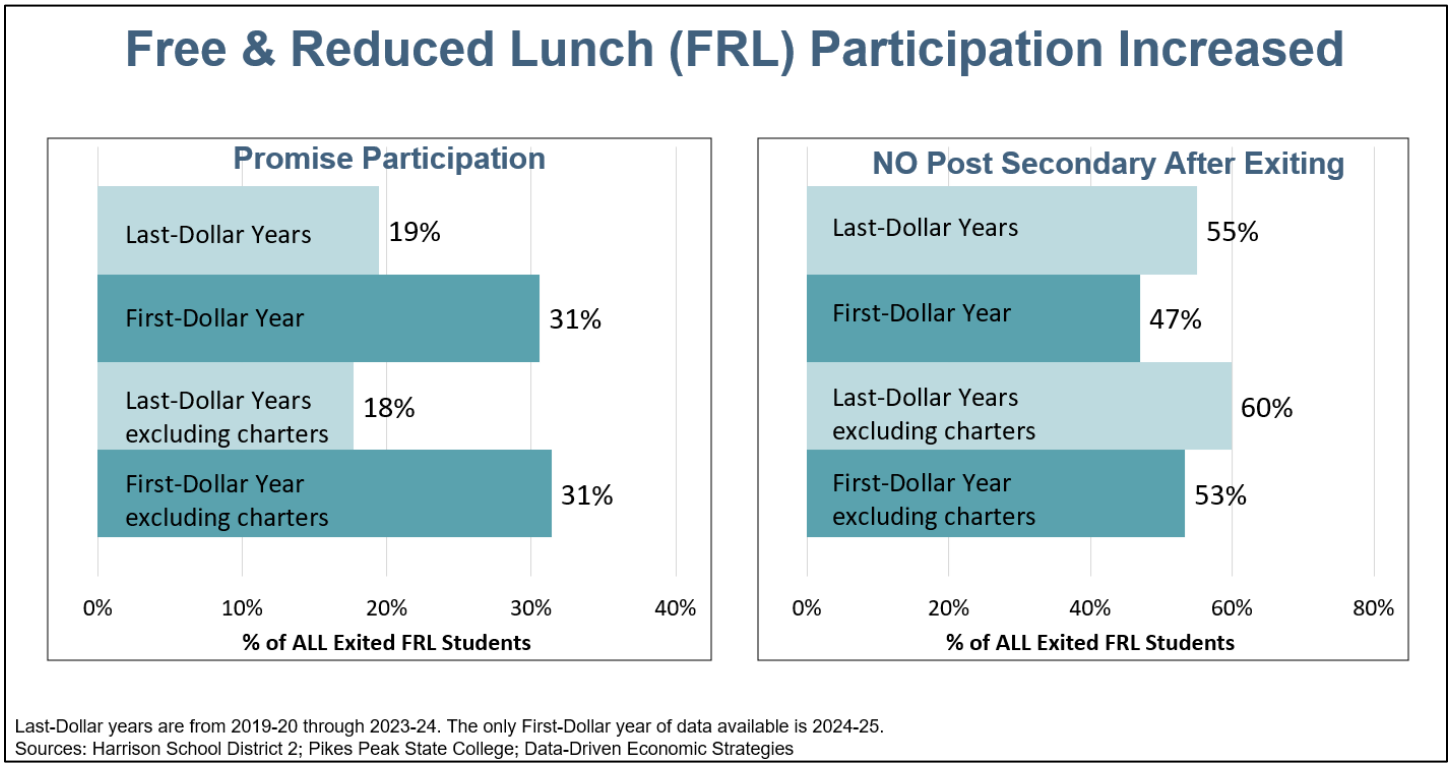
The next sections address whether these gains were experienced similarly across student groups or whether the shift was concentrated among particular populations. The first disaggregation suggests that some of the strongest gains occurred among students from lower-income households.

Participation by Income

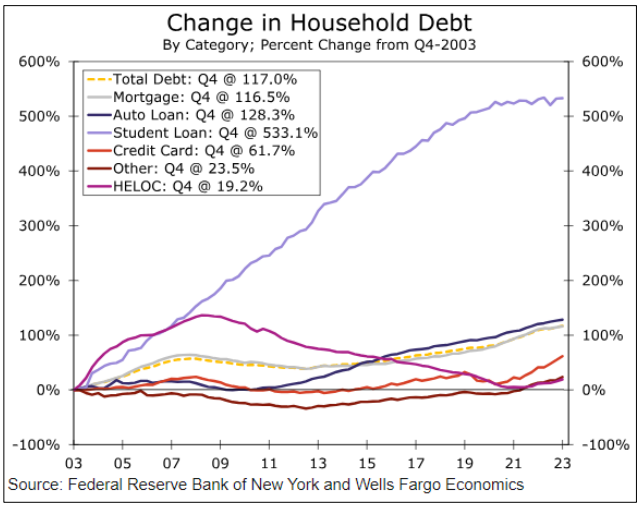
Lower-income students saw a substantial increase in Promise scholarship participation under the first-dollar model.

Because direct household income information is not available, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) is used as a proxy for student income status. FRL eligibility is a commonly used indicator of economic need in K–12 education research. Students eligible for FRL experienced one of the largest increases in Promise/PPSC participation. Participation among FRL students reached 31% in the first-dollar year, regardless of whether charter students were included. Compared to the last-dollar years, this represents an increase in Promise participation of approximately 12 percentage points (from 19%) across all FRL students and 13 percentage points (from 18%) when charter FRL students are excluded.

Similar to the broader story, the increase in PPSC participation was accompanied by a decline in the share of lower-income students with no identified postsecondary enrollment. Among all FRL students, that share fell from an average of 55% during the last-dollar period to 47% in the first-dollar year. A similar percentage decline is evident when charter students are excluded.



This is one of the strongest early access findings in the data. Given a large proportion of low-income high school students at D2, (an average of 70% of all D2 high school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in the 2024-25 and 2025-26 school years), increased Promise participation for FRL students is especially meaningful. Although the current analysis cannot determine whether the change in scholarship structure caused the increase, the timing and magnitude of the shift suggest that the first-dollar period may be reducing barriers to PPSC participation for students with greater financial need. As such, the availability of Promise scholarships is not only increasing postsecondary enrollment, it is increasing access and enrollment for the students with the highest (cost) barriers to higher education. This is a seminal issue especially today in the context of the exorbitantly high costs of higher education and the financial burden of student loans (see graph).



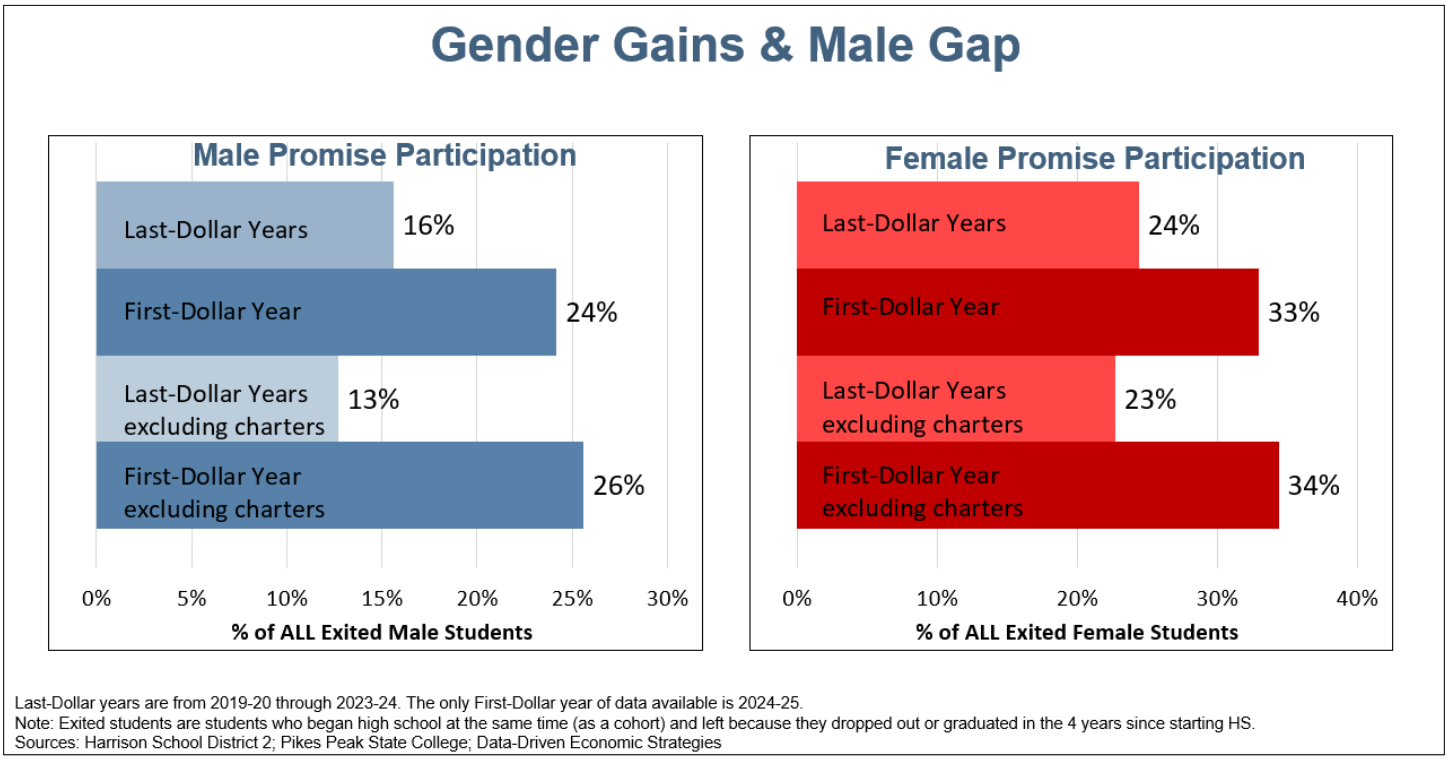
Participation by Gender

The data also show meaningful changes by gender, with male and female participation increasing substantially during the first-dollar year.

Male participation improved substantially during the first-dollar year, but a meaningful gender gap remains.

Under the last-dollar model, male students participated in Promise/PPSC at considerably lower rates than female students. While a gender gap persists, the first year of the first-dollar model brought meaningful improvement in male participation, particularly among non-charter students. Across all students, male participation increased from an average of 16% during the last-dollar period to 24% in the first-dollar year. When charter students are excluded, the increase was larger, rising from 13% to 26%.

The broader growth in Promise/PPSC participation was not limited to one gender. Female participation increased from approximately 24% during the last-dollar period to 33% in the first-dollar year (and from 23% to 34% excluding charters).



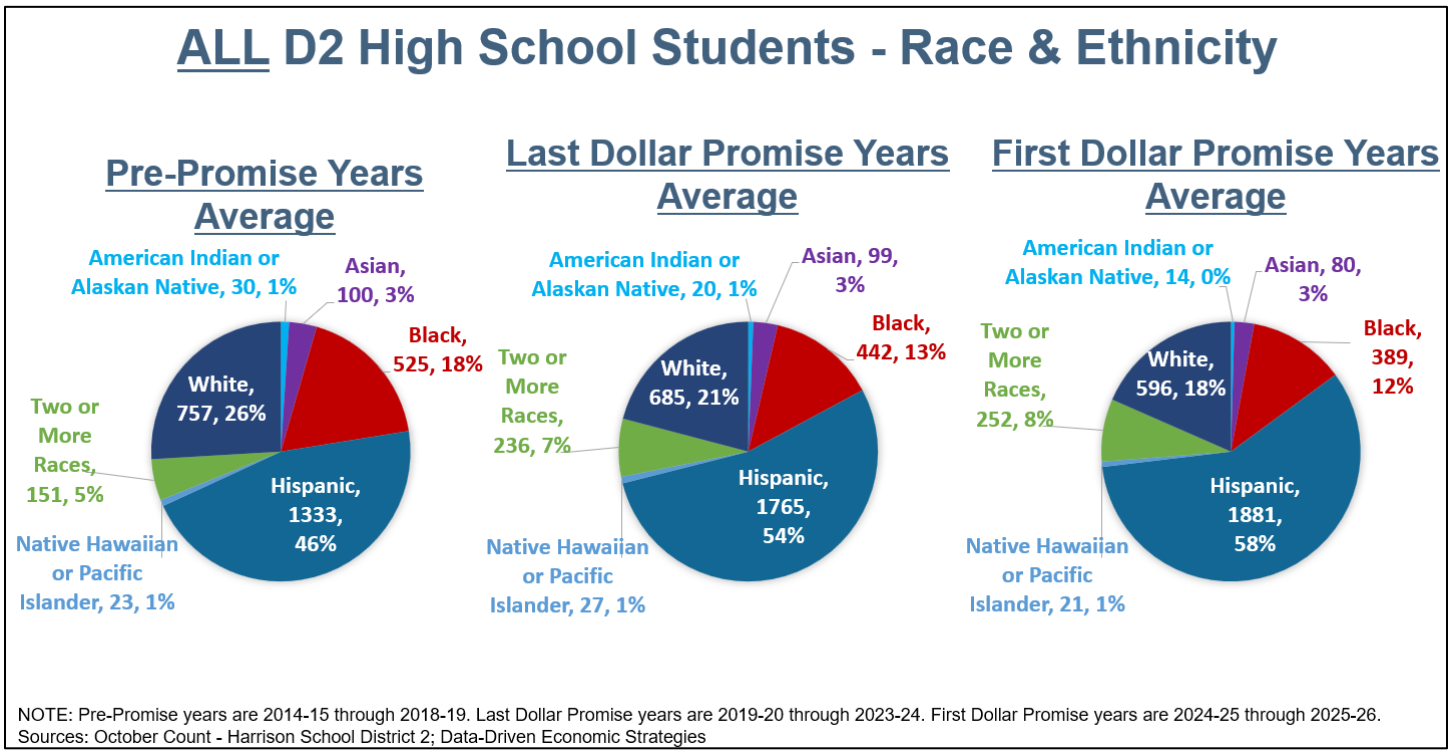
Last-Dollar years are from 2019-20 through 2023-24. The only First-Dollar year of data available is 2024-25.
Note: Exited students are students who began high school at the same time (as a cohort) and left because they dropped out or graduated in the 4 years since starting HS.
Sources: Harrison School District 2; Pikes Peak State College; Data-Driven Economic Strategies

At the same time, a gender gap remains. In the first-dollar year, approximately one-third of female students participated in Promise/PPSC, compared with approximately one-quarter of male students. The gap is similar when charter students are excluded.

Participation by Race and Ethnicity

In expanding the story around access and utilization of the Promise scholarships, participation also varies across racial and ethnic groups. But before making statements on these Promise-related trends, it's important to highlight that the racial and ethnic composition of D2 has changed over the study period. The district's student population has become increasingly Hispanic, while the number and share of White and Black students have generally declined. These demographic shifts make it important to focus on the percentage of students within each racial and ethnic

group who participate in Promise as opposed to the number of students. The graph below illustrates this demographic change.



NOTE: Pre-Promise years are 2014-15 through 2018-19. Last Dollar Promise years are 2019-20 through 2023-24. First Dollar Promise years are 2024-25 through 2025-26.
Sources: October Count - Harrison School District 2; Data-Driven Economic Strategies

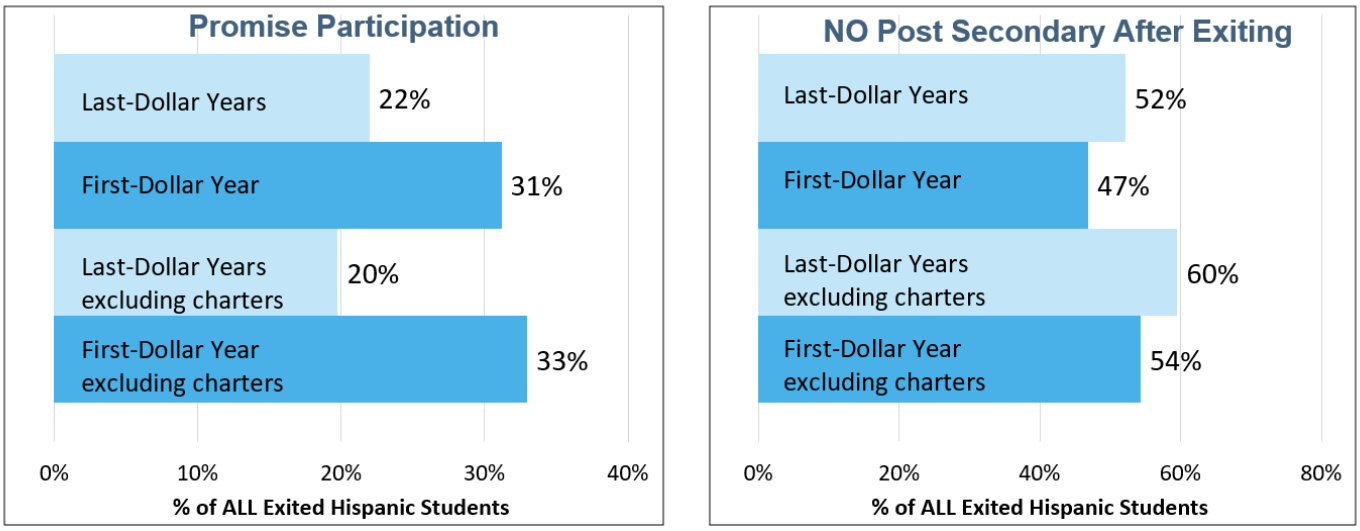
Hispanic Students

Focusing on the relative shifts (percentage of students versus absolute number), certain trends still prevail.

Proportionally, Promise participation amongst Hispanics increased substantially above and beyond the overall increase in the Hispanic student population.

Promise Scholarship participation among Hispanic students increased from an average of 22% during the last-dollar period to 31% in the first-dollar year. Excluding charter students, participation increased from 20% to 33%. At the same time, the share of Hispanic students with no identified postsecondary enrollment declined.

Hispanic Participation Increased



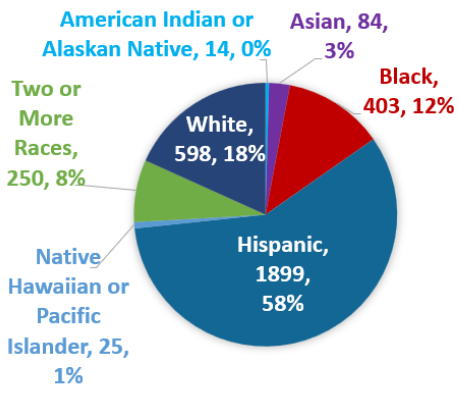
Last-Dollar years are from 2019-20 through 2023-24. The only First-Dollar year of data available is 2024-25.
Sources: Harrison School District 2; Pikes Peak State College; Data-Driven Economic Strategies

Hispanic students also represented 63% of first-dollar Promise/PPSC participants, compared with 57% of students exiting D2. This suggests that Hispanic students participated at a somewhat higher rate than their share of the exiting student population.

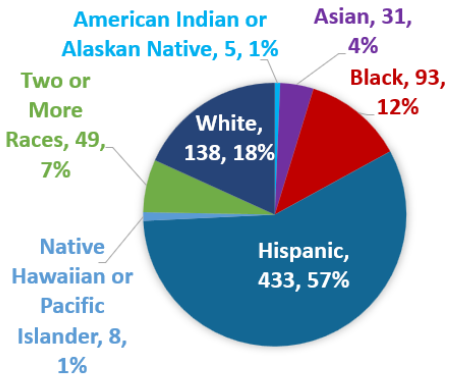
First Dollar Participation by Race (2024-25)

There was a larger share of Hispanic students in the Last-Dollar program than the student body or those that exited.
There was a smaller share of black students in the Last-Dollar program than the student body or those that exited.

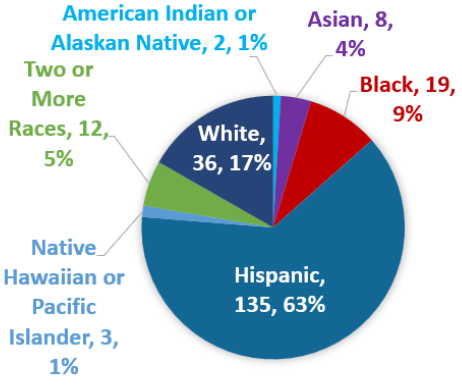
First Dollar Promise Average D2 HS Population



First Dollar Promise Average D2 Exited



First Dollar Promise Participants



Sources: Harrison School District 2; Pikes Peak State College; Data-Driven Economic Strategies

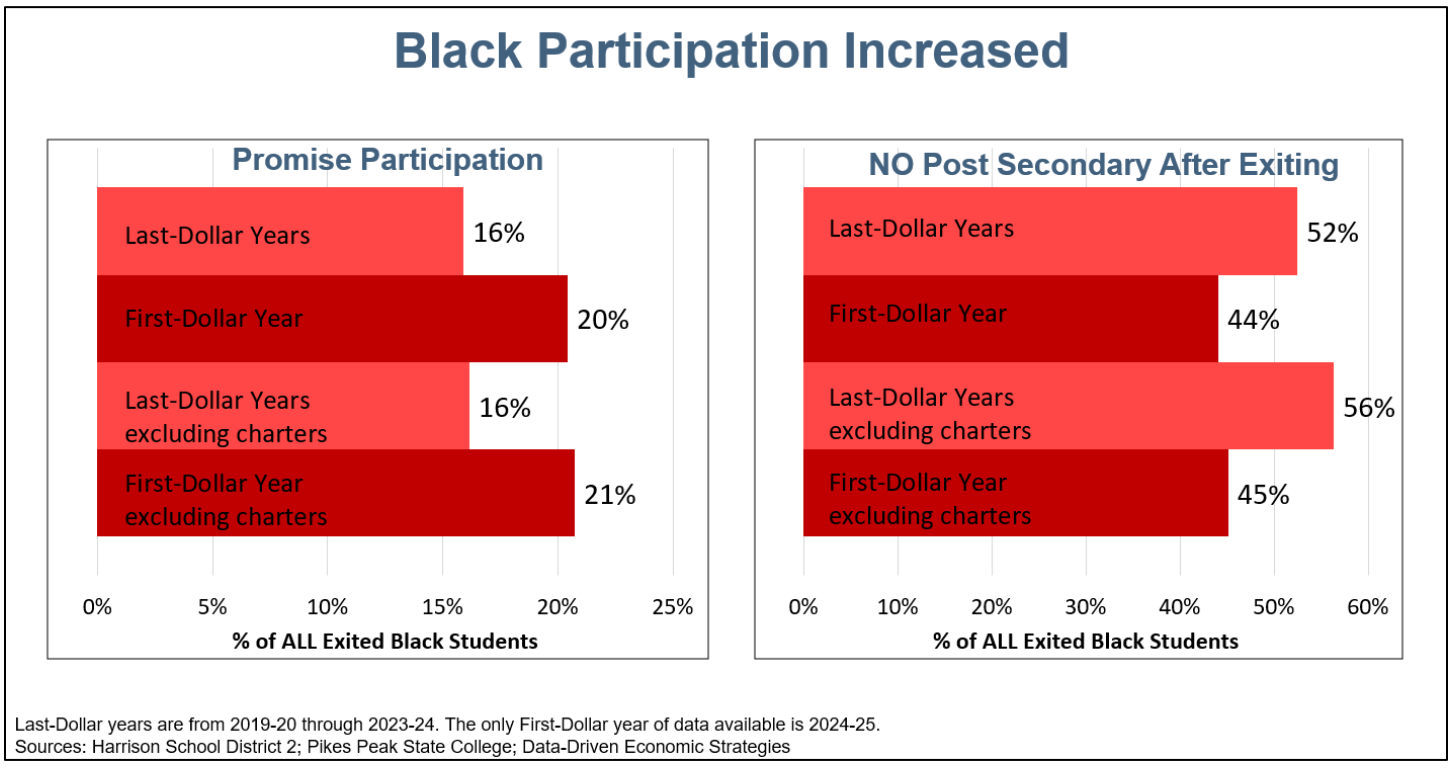
This is particularly important as Hispanic students represent a growing share of D2 students. The proportional increase in Hispanic student Promise participation is therefore an important part of the broader first-dollar access story.

Black Students

While Promise participation amongst Black students improved, it remains proportionally underrepresented compared to the student population.

Black student participation also improved during the first-dollar year, although gains were smaller than those observed among Hispanic and FRL students. Promise/PPSC participation increased from approximately 16% during the last-dollar period to 20% in the first-dollar year, and to 21% when charter students are excluded.

The decline in the share of Black students with no identified postsecondary enrollment was particularly notable, falling from 52% to 44% overall and from 56% to 45% when charter students are excluded. However, Black students were proportionally underrepresented among first-dollar Promise participants, accounting for 9% of participants compared with 12% of Black students exiting D2 that year (as shown on the previous page).



Last-Dollar years are from 2019-20 through 2023-24. The only First-Dollar year of data available is 2024-25.
Sources: Harrison School District 2; Pikes Peak State College; Data-Driven Economic Strategies

The racial and ethnic findings suggest that the first-dollar period has coincided with broader access to PPSC, but the magnitude of that change has not been uniform across groups. Hispanic students experienced one of the largest proportional increases and were somewhat more highly represented among Promise/PPSC participants than among students exiting the district. Black student participation also improved, and the share of Black students with no identified postsecondary enrollment declined substantially, but a participation gap remains relative to the districtwide proportion.

These findings reinforce the value of continuing to examine both overall participation and differences across student populations as additional first-dollar cohort data become available.

Programs of Promise Scholarship Participants

Looking beyond who participates, data from previous Promise cohorts also provide insight into what students pursue once they enroll at PPSC and the career pathways the scholarships may help make possible. While the current evaluation focuses primarily on the transition to the first-dollar model, data from previous Promise cohorts provide important context on the education and career pathways students have pursued at PPSC. Given that first-dollar data is only available for one year (2024-25) and that those students have not yet graduated, this career-pathway information is for last-dollar cohorts who have graduated.

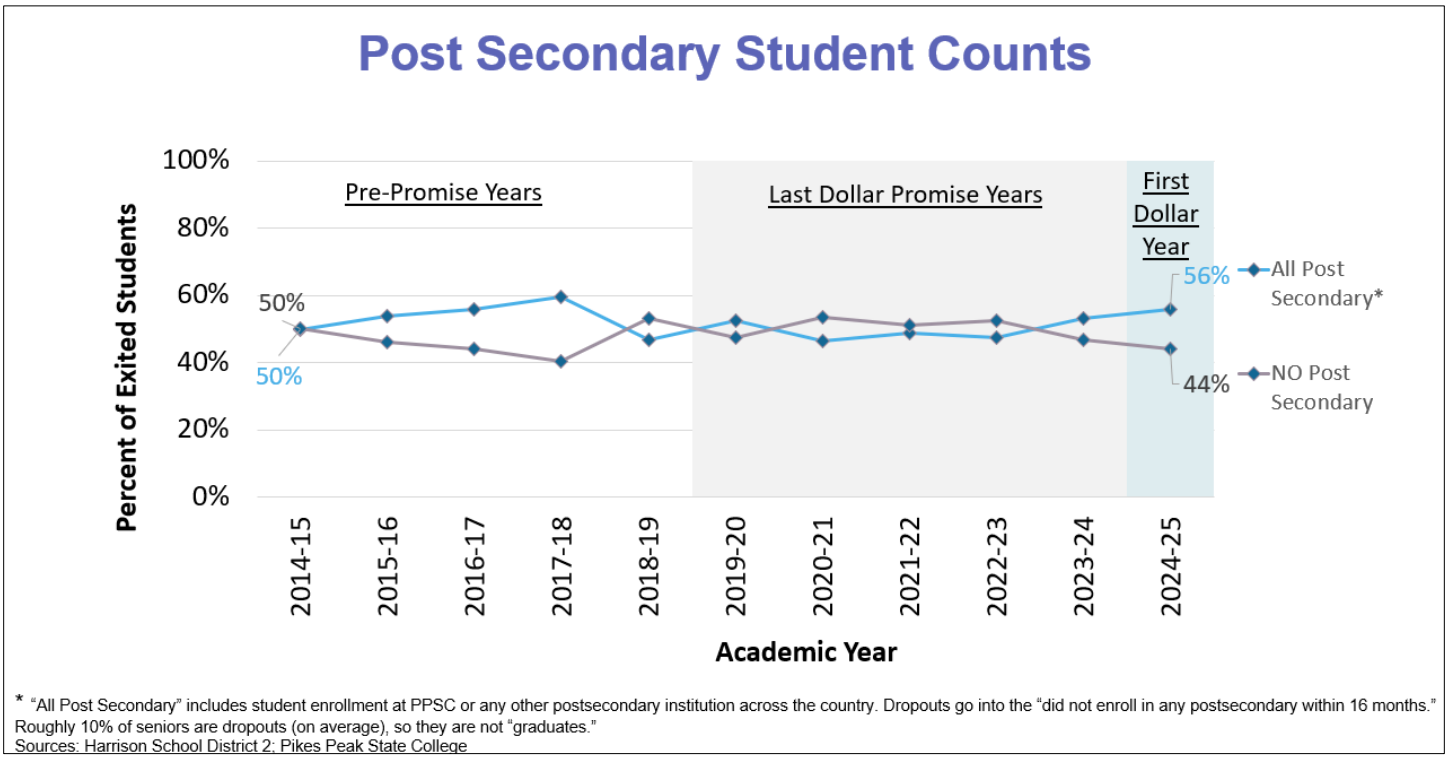
Among 666 D2 Promise graduates at PPSC in 2020–2025, students pursued 147 different majors, degree programs, and certificates. Most students (608 or approximately 91%) were pursuing a two-year degree, while 55 students were pursuing certificates.

Students pursued a wide range of pathways. While many enrolled in general studies or transfer-oriented programs, others selected more specific career pathways in fields such as healthcare, business, public safety, and skilled trades. Popular career-focused programs included nursing, medical assisting, radiologic technology, criminal justice, and automotive technology. Nursing-related pathways were particularly prominent: the two pre-nursing tracks listed among the most common programs included 51 students combined, and according to PPSC staff, many general studies students are on pre-nursing tracks. The data also show participation in several pathways connected to specialized occupations and regional workforce needs, and DDES plans to evaluate the broader connection of these programs to economic opportunities in the next phase of analysis.

These findings provide an early picture of how Promise participation may support pathways beyond high school and into further education and careers. Some students are pursuing occupationally focused credentials that can lead directly to employment, while others are enrolled in broader associate and transfer programs that may serve as a foundation for continued education and bachelor's degree attainment. Interestingly, Kalamazoo (Michigan) Promise evaluation results over many years has shown that one of the greatest benefits to the increased postsecondary access to two-year colleges has been the added increase (with its benefits) to four-year university enrollment and completion. The D2 Promise evaluation conducted by DDES will examine this in coming years as data becomes available.

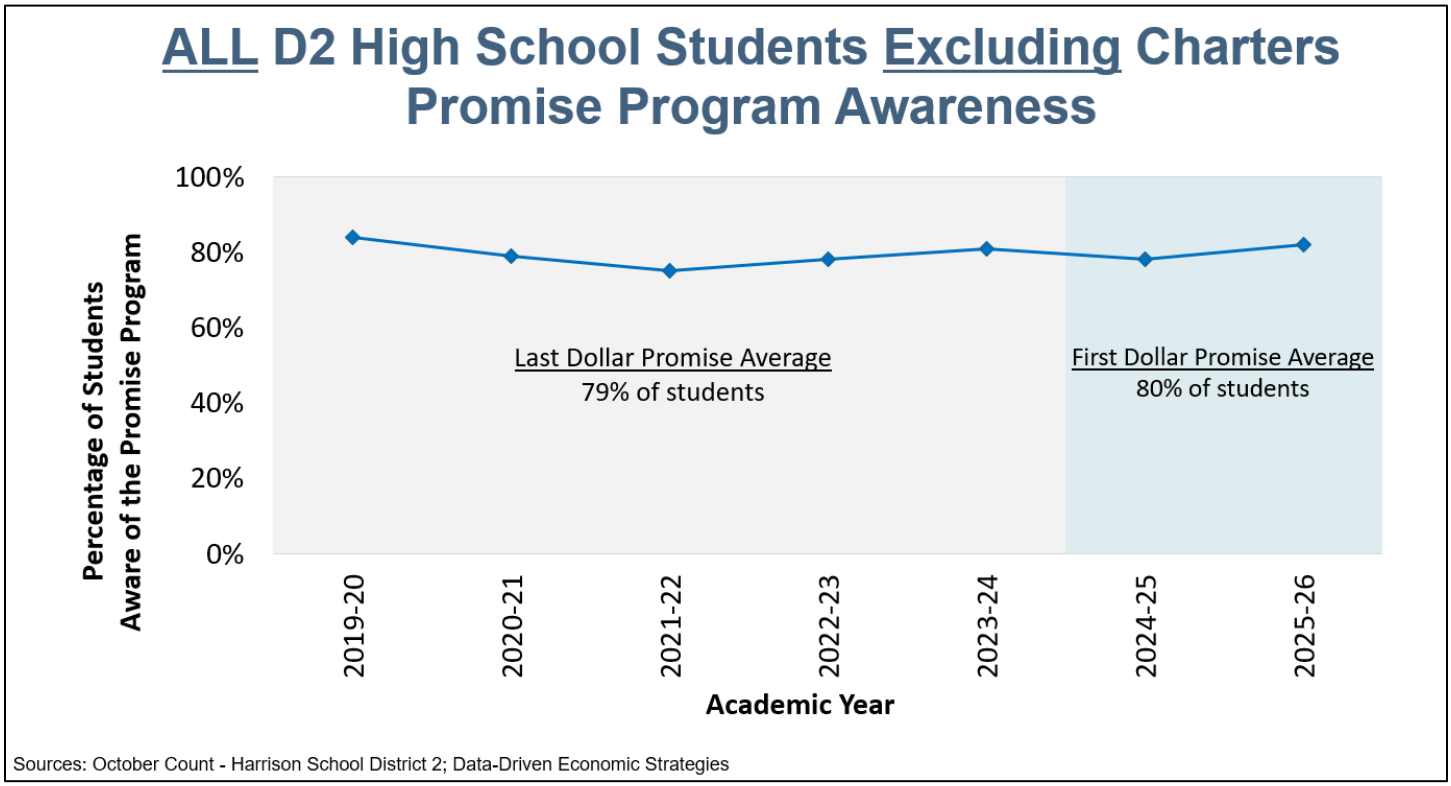
Conclusion and Early Recommendations

The first year of the first-dollar model provides an encouraging early indication that the D2 Promise Scholarship is expanding access to PPSC and to postsecondary opportunities for students who might not otherwise have access (see graph).



This evaluation by DDES shows that Promise participation, in particular, increased overall and across several student groups, while the share of students with no identified postsecondary enrollment declined. These findings establish an important baseline for determining whether early access gains are sustained and ultimately translate into longer-term student success.

Given that only one year of first-dollar data is currently available, the findings do not yet support major changes to the program model. Instead, D2 and its Promise partners should focus on targeted refinements. For male students, this could include examining whether differences in postsecondary plans, scholarship awareness, or perceptions of PPSC contribute to the remaining participation gap and using those findings to tailor advising and career-connected outreach. Similarly, D2 should seek input from Black students, counselors, and other school-based partners to better understand potential barriers to participation. While D2 currently shows that 80% of students have awareness of the Promise program (as shown below), D2 could further disaggregate the data on awareness by race and gender to assess if additional outreach is needed for these specific student groups. At the same time, the program should document and continue the communication, advising, financial aid, and enrollment strategies that appear to be effectively reaching FRL and Hispanic students. For all D2 students and their families, Promise awareness should be at 100%.



As additional data become available, the focus should increasingly extend from access to student progress and success. D2 and its partners should ensure that increased enrollment is accompanied by academic advising, financial guidance, and other supports that promote persistence and completion, while the evaluation continues to track retention, credit completion, transfer, and credential attainment across student groups. Likewise, as the evaluation progresses, linking program-of-study information with completion and labor market data will help assess whether these pathways translate into credentials and employment opportunities with greater earning potential than typically available to individuals with only a high school diploma. This will bring a broader economic lens to the (thus far) highly positive academic results of the D2 Promise scholarship opportunity.

Data analytics in this report were conducted by Data-Driven Economic Strategies (DDES). Thank you to David Rodgers, Andrew Bristol, and Hannah Newman for their incredible partnership in providing critical data from D2 and PPSC.