

PREPARED FOR SUCCESS?

The State of Post-secondary Readiness in Shelby County 2015



seeding success

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ABOUT

SEEDING SUCCESS

Seeding Success is a diverse partnership representing K-12 institutions, not-for-profits, business, health, civic, faith and philanthropic organizations that are committed to fearlessly pursuing educational outcomes for children. Each organization in the partnership agrees to focus on a common set of goals and to work through a collaborative action process together with other sectors. We work with PeopleFirst to support Shelby County's Cradle to Career vision for children. The Seeding Success Partnership collaborates to ensure every child graduates high school prepared for college, career and success in life. The partnership focuses its efforts on eight outcomes:

- Kindergarten Readiness
- Third Grade Reading
- Middle School Math
- College and Career Readiness
- High School Graduation
- Opportunity Youth
- Post-secondary Access
- Post-secondary Attainment

More information Seeding Success can be found at: seeding-success.org



America's Promise leads an alliance of organizations, communities and individuals dedicated to making the promise of America real for every child. As its signature effort, the GradNation campaign mobilizes Americans to increase the on-time high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020 and prepare young people for postsecondary enrollment and the 21st century workforce.



FOREWORD

seeding success focuses our work on 8 outcomes: kindergarten readiness, third grade reading, middle school math, college and career readiness, high school graduation, opportunity youth, post-secondary access, and post-secondary attainment. Helping to coordinate the GradNation Summit gave us an opportunity shine a spotlight on 4 of our outcomes.

It is essential for individual and community success that we ensure students graduate from high school ready to take advantage of a post-secondary opportunity and actually pursue the opportunity and are retained to completion.

In this report we have attempted to juxtapose the thoughts and feelings of Shelby County high school seniors with research and scholarship on the issues they put forth. The ultimate message these students send is that they want to have successful and productive lives and are willing to work for it, but they need adults in the community to expect that of them and support them in their pursuits. They need us to believe in them and build systems to ensure their success. Seniors also take a great deal of responsibility for their outcomes, too much in fact, which suggests fertile ground for our efforts. If we pave the pathway, they will do the work to travel it.

Thank you for taking the time to read what our youth think, why they think it, who they feel is helping them, and what more they want and need from us.



In partnership,
Mark Sturgis

THE DATA

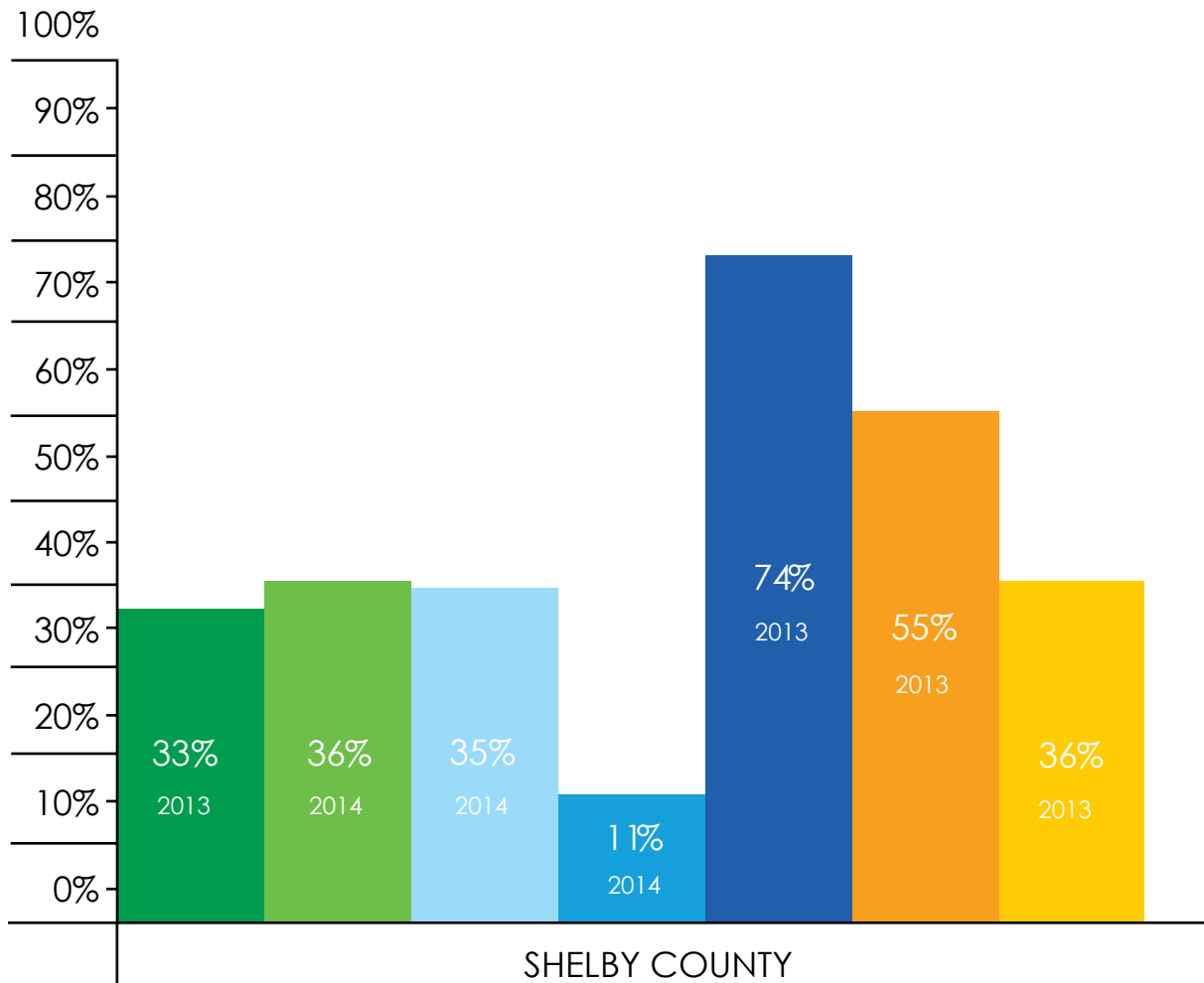
As a part of America's Promise, a GradNation summit was held in Memphis on September 12th, 2014. Coordinated by the City of Memphis Office of Human Talent and Capital, Shelby County Schools, and Seeding Success, the summit hosted 400 high school seniors from across the county. The goal was to discuss opportunities of pursuing post-secondary education and how to ensure that more Memphis children graduate high school college and career ready and have access to a post-secondary opportunity. Guided by facilitators from partner organizations, local leaders, and businesses, the students spoke candidly about their own personal experiences, obstacles, and proposed solutions.



The discussion was sparked by a data presentation regarding the achievement rates of Shelby County students, from kindergarten to high school graduation, and why these numbers are important to ultimate success throughout a school career. The students were then asked to give their initial opinion on the statistics they learned. Did they consider the percentages high or low? Were the students surprised by the findings and, if so, why?



THE DATA



- Kindergarten Readiness:**
Only 33% of children enter kindergarten with basic literacy skills in 2013.
- 3rd Grade Reading:**
Only 36% of 3rd graders read on grade level according to the 2014 TCAP.
- Middle School Math:**
Only 35% of 7th graders were proficient in math according to the 2014 TCAP.
- College and Career Readiness:**
Only 11% of students were college and career ready in 2014 according to the ACT Benchmarks.

- High School Graduation:**
74% of seniors graduated from high school in 2013.
- *Post-secondary Access:**
Only 55% of the Class of 2013 graduates enrolled in 2-year, 4-year, or technical college.
- Post-secondary Attainment:**
Only 36% of residents have an associate degree or higher as of 2013.

*Students described in this data attend post-secondary institutions that participate in the National Student Clearinghouse data exchange. Students who are enrolled in other institutions will be counted as not enrolled.

WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK?

Across the board, the students were surprised by the low percentage of children with sufficient early literacy skills at the start of kindergarten, but they were also fully aware of the influence that early education has on low percentages in post-secondary success. According to one group, “some teachers aren’t fit to teach younger grades,” while others felt that children are “not pushed hard enough” in elementary school and are “babied through,” a trend that propagates itself as the years pass resulting in “not [being] ready for the responsibility” of later life. Their comments reflect a reality. Pre-K to 2nd grade standards are not assessed like standards for 3rd grade or higher, which reflects a difference in academic expectations. Although it is not necessarily the case that early childhood educators “aren’t fit,” it is the case that they have historically been held to less stringent standards and are not given the same professional development or coaching opportunities as are likely to exist in the higher grades.¹



When faced with the statistic of only 55% of Shelby County high school graduates moving on to a post-secondary opportunity, the students shared some unfortunate realities about the expectations placed on them. It came to light that some teachers “don’t expect everyone to pass” and some counselors and teachers “push students away.” It was acknowledged that there is only so much teachers can do, but the students feel that some teachers simply do not care. Researchers have consistently found over almost 50 years that the expectations of teachers have a significant impact on student outcomes both in terms of grades and pursuing post-secondary options.² Research has also consistently found racial and social class biases among teachers and counselors specific to post-secondary options.³



WHY DO THEY THINK THAT?

The students were then asked to shift their attention to the college and career readiness statistic and discuss why they felt the statistic was as low as it was. Despite the shock expressed at the early education statistics and their impact on each succeeding grade level, the students showed relatively no surprise regarding the low college and career readiness number. For these students, hearing the phrase “college isn’t for everyone” seemed to be common in their schools and homes. They did not feel like the adults in their lives care about the students’ post-secondary plans, but are simultaneously treated as though they are not mature enough to make these life decisions for themselves.



Sherman, Student

“My teacher, he would tell me, ‘You can be a lawyer or anything.’ I just took that as I can be a lawyer or politician, all that. Instead of being something bad to the community, do something good to it.”

The expectations of adults broadly have a significant effect on student outcomes. Intuitively, when adults have high expectations they behave in ways that support student learning and success, especially when they are well equipped to do so.⁴ Regardless, “college isn’t for everyone” reflects a general lack of knowledge among adults—educators and families alike—that a post-secondary credential (e.g., certificate, license, or degree) is essential for employment and economic security. Dissuading high school graduates from pursuing a post-secondary option means preventing them from having the ability to support themselves and their families in the future.⁵

Challenges in students’ personal lives were brought up several times during the early stages of the discussion. As one student expressed, they are “dealing with a lot at home.” For many, they are the first people in their family to attend college or even consider attending college. This creates significant pressure on the student to figure out their own path and, most likely, a situation where the option to attend college is not recognized until it’s too late. Students expressed their tendency to not achieve in high school because they are not aware of or have not been taught the consequences. Potential first generation students have barriers around preparation and taking the necessary steps to enroll in a post-secondary option; family economic distress exacerbates those barriers.⁶ These challenges seem to be compounded by a lack of support in their schools. Teachers were said to not have empathy for their personal situations and obstacles and the students felt that school staff should be a model of support and professionalism.

WHY DO THEY THINK THAT?

In regards to the classroom, the students said that teachers should engage them better and demonstrate relevance.

"We need to be prepared for the real world before they give us the real world," Tario continued. "I won't say that I had too many teachers that were mainly engaged, but I had quite a few that made me motivated to do something better, to know that the other teachers were acting lazy and that there's some type of support out there." They want teachers to push them to succeed and prepare them for college level work.



Tario, Student

"We need one another to help each other survive, For the teachers, if they don't love their job...they need to be engaged with their job instead of just doing it."

Tario described the difference between effective and ineffective teaching; students recognize effective teaching when they see it. Effective teachers are engaging and able to help students understand where the course content fits in their lives. They work to make sure all students have access to the content by identifying and addressing deficits. And they hold students to high expectations which helps to put them on a pathway to success. In addition to being the greatest budget item for school districts, teachers are the single most important school-based factor in student performance.⁷ To prepare students for post-secondary work, effective teachers are defined not only by their ability to teach but by knowledge of their content. Students need access to teachers with sufficient pedagogical content knowledge in fields like math and science to properly prepare them for post-secondary courses.⁸

The students also admitted, however, that they themselves were part of the problem, as well. They said that most students were not used to authority, nor were they very responsive to it. Because of this, the students felt that they were equally responsible for supporting each other, taking responsibility for themselves, and creating a richer learning environment. One group put it simply: "Own your education." Student responses here indicate an understanding of the need for personal responsibility, but also a naivety about the barriers they face. Although they may indeed be, "part of the problem", given the scope of the problem, they are mainly influenced by it because as children and youth, students respond to the systems they occupy and the adult behaviors that shape their worlds.⁹



WHO IS HELPING?

The students had extensive lists of what helped them prepare the most for post-secondary opportunities. Family, spirituality, and peers were naturally a factor; however, teachers, counselors, and extra-curricular instructors were also frequently mentioned as giving “encouragement to move beyond high school.” There were specific instances noted, such as teachers staying after school to tutor and a band director who used grades as a determining factor in whether or not a student would perform at a game. School staff was said to provide assistance with finding free standardized tests and filling out online college applications, as well as enforcing consistently high levels of expectations for their students. These instructors were also key in some of the students moving on to college with scholarships in athletics and music. Counselors were consistently a positive for the groups, the only negative being that the counselor to student ratio was too high in some schools.



DeMarcus, Student

“My coaches helped me out a lot. They showed me what I like to do, my weaknesses and my strengths.”

College and career mentorship, either from internal tutors or outside individuals and leadership organizations, was frequently referred to by the groups as key to post-secondary preparedness. One group referenced “job shadowing,” while another referred to the Memphis Ambassadors program and GradNation as examples of mentorship outside of the classroom.

Availability of AP and Honors courses showed up in many groups' lists as another determining factor in moving on to college, specifically in math, English and science. This appeared to go hand in hand with the desire of the students to be exposed to fields of post-secondary study in a more in-depth manner.

WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT TO KNOW?

A recurring theme amongst all of the groups was the desire to know more about their post-secondary options earlier. They felt the ninth grade would be ideal, but some suggested even as early as the seventh grade. Potential first generation students should begin 9th grade with a clear understanding of their pathway to a post-secondary option, which requires a middle school focus on post-secondary schooling at the very latest. ¹⁰



Curtis, Student

“It seems like most schools don’t try to emphasize [college readiness] until you get into 12th grade, which throws a lot on you.”

Common fears were how to pay for college, what fields of study were available and accessible for them, what to expect with regards to the ACT, and why the ACT even matters. They also were concerned on a personal level about adjusting to life after high school- not knowing anyone when they go to college, how to navigate a college campus and what to expect while they adjust to this life change. College preparatory courses require well-prepared and effective teachers. All of these student concerns reflect the reality of potential first generations students and students from low and moderate income families. If these needs are going to be addressed, institutions have to organize themselves differently, which is challenging when adults have fixed ideas of what should be happening. ¹¹



Marty, Student

“The first week of ninth grade, or the first day, [they should] tell you what you’re going to need, what to take just to get to college...programs you can go to, after-school activities to go to, to help you decide your future.”



WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT TO KNOW?



Fortunately, there are many other positive experiences that the students recounted regarding their exposure to post-graduation options. One group was inspired by military representatives coming in to talk about career opportunities. The same group then shared an anecdote about a band teacher who took students to see college marching bands play and told them, "This is your future." This type of inspiration was mentioned frequently and all boiled down to this: Students simply want and need support, and they need it as early as possible.



Tionna, Student

"I messed around a lot in ninth grade and now it's kind of hard to get my GPA back up. I wish I hadn't done that. I wish I'd just stayed on track."

WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED?

TOP REQUESTS

College visits and exposure

Getting basic information sooner and more often

Support from family and teachers

Financial support and information

Access to transportation

Smaller counselor and teacher to student ratios

When reflecting on the information discussed throughout the day, the students boiled down their primary list of needs in bullet point form. They expressed the desire for city and county leadership to be more engaged and “show them the way.” The students felt that “one on one” time would be beneficial, as well as the sense that leaders “believe in us.”

When asked what they need to be successful after they graduate, students placed the responsibility squarely on their own shoulders. Students used words such as “discipline,” “determination,” “persistence,” “perseverance,” “ambition,” and “focus” to summarize what they felt was most important to moving ahead in life. Again, the level of personal responsibility reflected in their language could be interpreted as a good sign, but it might also indicate an understanding that they have no other choice but to be personally responsible within a system that requires them to persist in the face of so many moveable barriers.



WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED?

BARRIER	LOCAL SOLUTION
Early childhood education (ECE) opportunities and standards	Expanded Pre-K; clear ECE instructional standards and evaluations
Promotion policies (not tied to mastery)	mastery-based promotion policies, especially in ECE
Low expectations of educators	Educators operating from the position that all children can learn because it is a fact of human cognition, and having the support they need to meet student needs.
Lack of acknowledgement/inattention to non-school stressors	Making licensed social workers core to the counseling functions of schools; adopting wraparound service models with community partners
Lack of early knowledge about the post-secondary preparation process, especially financial aid	Integration of "college knowledge" into school curriculum and into parent engagement programming beginning at grade 6 (at the latest)
Low personal motivation or responsibility among students	Create an environment of high expectations and high performance to prove the value of schooling to children and youth
Lack of knowledge about job and career options	Create individualized post-secondary preparation plans for students beginning in grade 9, or earlier, that include introductions to jobs/careers
Preparation for and access to AP and honors classes	Ensure mastery of core content and skills prior to high school; Make AP/IB courses available broadly
Exposure to people with post-secondary credentials	Engage community partners in improving outcomes for children and youth and providing volunteers for tutoring and school-community projects

*Barriers presented by students and evidence-based solutions



“It’s kind of difficult of knowing what’s the right qualities of college, you know- how am I supposed to choose that this is the right college for me? So it’s kind of difficult, but having this program opened up my eyes a little more to pick the right college.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the generous support and leadership of our partners, who helped make the Memphis GradNation Summit possible including the City of Memphis Office of Talent and Human Capital for leading and convening the planning of the summit; AT&T for their financial support of the campaign nationally and locally; Christian Brothers University for hosting the event; Lipscomb Pitts Insurance and HRO Partners for providing marketing support; and Shelby County Schools for transportation, meals, and logistic support.

We also want to thank our other partners for contributing through planning, facilitating break-out sessions, and participating as presenters including:

AT&T - Local office
BioWorks Foundation
Data Quality Campaign
Duncan Williams Inc.
Memphis Challenge
Memphis Regional Chamber
Memphis Talent Dividend
Mo's Bows
National League of Cities
News Channel 5 - Memphis
PeopleFirst Partnership
Rhodes College

A special thanks goes to Mr. David Johns of the White House - African American Initiative for Educational Excellence for helping our students see a path to a brighter future.

And finally, we want to thank the 400 plus Shelby County seniors and graduates who gave us their personal and powerful testimonies about navigating a process that all too often leaves them to find their way on their own. This report is only one way we hope to validate their thoughts and take actions to improve outcomes for future students.



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WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT TO KNOW?

¹⁰ See **Cabrera & LaNasa** above.

¹¹ **Metz, M. H. (1990). Real School: A Universal Drama Amid Disparate Experience.** In **D. Mitchell & M. Goertz (Eds.), Educational Politics for the New Century** (pp. 75-91): Falmer Press.

