

# Can a City's Compassion Remedy Educational Inequity?

By Karin Fischer | June 19, 2016

LOUISVILLE, KY.



Luke Sharrett for The Chronicle

In Louisville, where a relatively low percentage of public-school students go on to earn degrees, a broad coalition is working to raise that figure.

When students at the J.B. Atkinson Academy for Excellence arrive for the assembly that opens the elementary school's year, they don't line up by teacher. Rather, they gather by year — 2026, 2027, 2028 — the year, they will tell you proudly, when they will go to college.

Messages about college are everywhere for the 435 pupils here, in Louisville's West End. Teachers talk with 7- and 8-year-olds about possible college majors.

Plaques in the hallway list where every staff member earned a degree. Outside the library, a signpost notes the distance to different colleges: Six miles across town to the University of Louisville; 76 miles to the University of Kentucky; 2,352 to Stanford.

But the distance to a college diploma — one measured in expectations and opportunity, not miles — could be even greater. Ninety-eight percent of Atkinson students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches. Few of the parents have gone to

college. So many are without a high-school diploma, in fact, that Atkinson officials regularly hand out GED information at open houses and family nights. Generational poverty among her students, says Stephanie Nutter, the principal, is profound.

Ms. Nutter and her staff are among many in this city who are determined to break that cycle. Famous for bourbon, baseball bats, and, of course, horse racing, Louisville now wants to be known for something else: sending its kids, all its kids, to college.

That hasn't historically been the case. Louisville trails places like Charlotte, Indianapolis, and Memphis in its share of college-educated adults. Although high-school-graduation and college-going rates have picked up here, less than a third of public-school students go on to earn degrees. The city ranks last among its peers in the percentage of black residents who have completed college.

As more and more jobs require higher education, local leaders fear that such statistics could set Louisville further and further back.

### **Does Higher Education Perpetuate Inequality?**



Colleges are seen broadly as engines of opportunity, as economic equalizers. Is that reputation deserved?

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A broad coalition — K-12 and higher ed, government and the private sector, churches and charities and community groups — is working to change those outcomes. The 10-year effort is known as 55,000 Degrees, for the number of degrees — 40,000 bachelor's degrees and 15,000 associate degrees — that Louisville's residents will need to earn for the city's college-attainment rate, among adults age 25 to 64, to reach 50 percent. The goal is to do so by 2020.

55,000 Degrees has been a convener, a facilitator, an illuminator of problems. The campaign has placed mentors in schools and coached at-risk students through rough patches. Businesses have stepped up to encourage employees with some college credits to go back to finish. Better data have helped identify leaks in the educational pipeline. The percentage of graduates from the local Jefferson County Public School district who are deemed "college or career ready" has doubled from 2010 to 2015.

Still, though degree attainment in Louisville is at a record 42 percent, at its halfway point 55,000 Degrees is not on pace to meet its goal. And serious achievement gaps remain between white students and black students, between low-income students and their wealthier classmates.

"We're making progress," says Tony Peyton, program director at the C.E. & S. Foundation, a local philanthropy that focuses on education. "But it's not fast enough, and it's not for everyone."

Many here like Mr. Peyton, a former mayoral aide, believe that for Louisville to truly thrive, it must do well by its least-advantaged residents, like the students in Ms. Nutter's classrooms.

But can a community, even one that sees education not just as an economic but a moral imperative, radically change outcomes? Can will, and good will, equalize opportunity?

In Louisville, they say yes. "We can't have excellence without equity," says David A. Jones Jr., chairman of the Jefferson County School Board. "We can't be excellent if we leave half our kids behind."

**T**his isn't the first attempt in Louisville, voluntary or otherwise, to provide educational parity.

Like many American cities in the years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Louisville's newly merged city-county school district was ordered by federal courts to desegregate. Amid protests — the National Guard had to be called in to escort buses for a time — integration of its schools began in 1975.

Over the years, the schools tried a variety of approaches. At one point, Barbara Dempsey, who grew up in Louisville and today is in charge of student placement for the district, recalls being assigned to a school based on the first letter of her last name.

In time, public opinion shifted. After a judge declared Louisville's schools officially desegregated in 2000, the school board decided to voluntarily maintain guidelines for the percentage of minority students in each school.

But in 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Louisville's integration plan. Fearful of resegregation, school officials crafted a new strategy that emphasized socioeconomic factors, like family income and parental education, in assigning students to schools, instead of using race alone, which the court had declared unconstitutional. In doing so, Louisville became one of the first major school districts to embrace class-based integration.

Stephen P. Imhoff, a Louisville lawyer and at the time a member of the school board, says the district was lucky to lose the court case because that allowed it to shape a more effective strategy for closing educational gaps. He points to research by Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, suggesting that socioeconomic status matters more to academic achievement than skin color does. Low-income students of all races perform better in middle-class environments, where their fellow students, and those students' parents, are more engaged. Race matters in part, Mr. Kahlenberg contends, because pigment can be a proxy for poverty.

Still, proximity alone — putting students from different backgrounds in the same classroom — doesn't ensure equal outcomes.

John Marshall is chief equity officer of Jefferson County Public Schools. It's an uncommon position. "There aren't a lot of me's in other school systems," says Mr. Marshall, who has been on the job for three years. Being the top administrator with a portfolio focused on how to best meet the needs of low-income and minority students is a challenge in a district where two-thirds of families qualify for free lunches, and where the student body became majority-minority three years ago.

Blunt and direct, Mr. Marshall is the kind of guy who keeps a stuffed elephant in his office as a symbol of his willingness to not tiptoe around tough topics. It's not enough to give students the same opportunities, he says, without recognizing that some will need extra assistance if they are to seize it.

"We've got to get beyond talking about equality and talk about equity," Mr. Marshall says. "Equity is providing what is needed to do what is best."

**T**rying to close educational divides may be frequently couched as a moral good in Louisville, but it's a principle fueled by economic realities.

Originally an inland port and manufacturing hub, the city has become a center for the health-care, food-service, and logistics industries. The managed-care company Humana is headquartered here, as is the fast-food giant Yum Brands,

owner of KFC, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell.

But the economic transition hasn't benefited all residents uniformly. As in other parts of the country, newly created jobs are likely to require a college degree or at least some sort of postsecondary certificate. In Louisville, workers with a bachelor's degree can expect to make, on average, 71 percent more than those with just a high-school diploma. (Nationally, having a four-year degree increases lifetime earnings by about 65 percent.)

Kent Oyler, chief executive of Greater Louisville Inc., the chamber of commerce, says when companies like UPS, which bases its parcel fleet in Louisville, look to expand, they aren't held back by infrastructure but by a hiring pool that's still too shallow. "The stakes are high" for the region's economy, he says. "We need to get more skilled people in the work force."

Concerns that lagging educational attainment could squelch the city's economic momentum prompted then-Mayor Jerry Abramson to bring business, civic, and education leaders together six years ago to talk about ways to accelerate college-going and bring about "transformational" change in the city. The plan that emerged, in the fall of 2010, was 55,000 Degrees.

In laying out a numeric and, as even its supporters concede, ambitious goal, 55,000 Degrees set out the terms for success. It isn't improving math scores or bettering graduation rates or upping the number of students who apply for federal financial aid, although all those matter. Success is college degrees. "They've determined the finish line, and that's a college credential," says Haley Glover, strategy director at the Lumina Foundation. Lumina has supported Louisville's work with grants and information about best practices.

Tess McNair, executive director of the C.E. & S. Foundation, says the effort has helped focus philanthropic support. The Louisville-based group has made a high priority of funding education, looking for opportunities to underwrite experimental programs that schools and colleges don't have the budgetary flexibility to pay for.

One such project is kindergarten readiness camp, which helps low-income students master skills like reciting the alphabet and identifying basic colors by the time they start school.



Luke Sharrett for The Chronicle

The 10-year campaign to raise Louisville's college-attainment rate is called 55,000 Degrees. Among its tactics are visits by representatives to high schools, like this one, to offer advice and coach at-risk students through rough patches.

55,000 Degrees also shines a light on trouble spots that otherwise might be easy to overlook, like summer melt, the phenomenon in which students apply and are accepted to college, maybe even pay their deposit, but never show up for the first day of class. The public schools were already working to increase college-going. Jefferson Community and Technical College is part of Achieving the Dream, a national program dedicated to helping community-college students

succeed. But more than 700 students were melting away during the summer between high school and college. Whose problem were they?

Pamela Royster, a college and career-readiness specialist with the school system, says 55,000 Degrees was a space where the school district and local colleges could come together to fight summer melt. "It was like there was a big neon sign that said, 'Hey, look at me! Come solve me!'"

The campaign adopted strategies like text "nudging," customized text messages sent periodically throughout the summer to keep students on track. The messages might remind them that the course-registration deadline is approaching or prod them to send in their housing deposits. They were also able to bring on AmeriCorps Vista volunteers, mostly current college students, to act as mentors.

In the project's first year, summer melt dropped three percentage points, or about 100 students: the first decline in five years. This summer organizers hope to sign up 500 students for text messages or one-on-one coaching.

55,000 Degrees, Ms. Royster says, is a forum for taking on a collective problem and seeing it as such. Summer melt became, she says, "a we thing."

**T**hat sensibility, of shouldering a shared burden, crops up throughout the city.

Four years ago, members of the Rotary Club of Louisville wanted a way to mark the group's centennial. What better way to give back to the city, they decided, than to invest in education?

The club adopted two struggling high schools, Iroquois and Western, and made a pledge to the freshmen: Graduate with a 2.5 grade-point average and a good attendance record, stay out of trouble, and we'll pay your way through community college. The Rotarians raised \$1 million to endow the scholarship, and the University of Louisville promised \$10,000 more to students who transfer there after earning an associate degree.

Western is located in a Louisville suburb, near a commercial strip of chain restaurants and car dealerships. Poverty might come with a small front yard out here, but it's no less real. Eighty-one percent of the students qualify for free lunch. At the start of the Rotary partnership, the state deemed just 4 percent of Western's students college-ready, making it one of the poorest-performing schools in Kentucky.

But under the principal, Michael Newman, Western has become an "early college" high school, where students can take community-college courses even as they work toward their diplomas. The idea is to send the message that college can be for all students.

Nikkia Rose, 19, graduated from Western in the spring of 2015 already having earned 35 college credits at Jefferson Community and Technical College. Being able to work toward a degree without having to foot the bill — the costs of early college are shared by the district, the college, and several philanthropies — was important to Ms. Rose, who says her family has never been financially stable.



Just as crucial to her success, says Ms. Rose, a culinary student who has interned with Edward Lee, a local celebrity chef, is the strong support she got from teachers and professors. After her father died, in the spring of her junior year, one teacher bought her a dress so that she could go to the prom. Another cooked breakfast for Ms. Rose and other Advanced Placement students on the day of exams because she knew that many came to school hungry.

"I never knew how kind or passionate people could be toward kids," says Ms. Rose, who hopes to be a culinary instructor one day.

Today, like Ms. Rose, about 60 percent of students at Western complete some college coursework — real progress, although college aspirations are still far from universal.

Rotary Club members have acted as mentors, providing job-shadow opportunities and setting up some students with part-time work. At graduation this May, 36 students at Western, out of a class of 167, qualified as the first Louisville Promise Scholars; five, in fact, had earned associate degrees and would go straight to four-year colleges.

William Mitchell (Mitch) Rue Jr., chairman of the club's scholarship committee, calls it "the best thing I've ever done with my life."

"I want to be there for the next step and the next one," he says. "I want to help them through college. I want to help them find a job."



Louisville, of course, isn't the only place where civic groups, business leaders, and others have joined educators to try to widen college attainment. Boston, for example, has sought to turn around poor-performing public schools and has set a community-wide goal of having 70 percent of its high-school graduates finish

Office of the Mayor, Louisville  
Greg Fischer, mayor of Louisville, says he takes a "cradle-to-career" view of student success. In January he announced an expansion of kindergarten-readiness camps.

college. In Los Angeles, the Chamber of Commerce has taken the lead on projects that include improving school readiness, enhancing teacher preparation, and

increasing the number of city kids who pursue careers in science and engineering. And Akron, Ohio, recently won a \$1-million prize for notching the biggest increase in college graduates, 20 percent in four years, among nearly 60 cities. Partners there worked to smooth the pathway from community college to four-year institutions and funded "completion scholarships" for students who were close to graduation but at risk of dropping out.

The Kresge Foundation sponsored the college-degree competition. Cities should have real motivation to invest in college attainment, says William F.L. Moses, managing director of the education program at the foundation. For metro areas, every increase of one percentage point in degree holders means an \$856 increase in per-capita income.

"Every single graduate is money in the bank," Mr. Moses says.

Yet too often, would-be partners fail to connect. They can operate in separate silos or lack incentives to work together. Public universities, for instance, are not typically a line item in city budgets; they get funding from the state and federal governments. Even institutions within the same sector, like two- and four-year colleges, don't always play well together. When it comes to transferring credits, two institutions might be a couple of miles apart, Mr. Moses says, "but as far as a student is concerned, they might be a million miles away."

In Louisville, the stakeholders say they're right across the table from one another. Laura Smith, dean of student affairs at Jefferson Community and Technical College, says involvement with 55,000 Degrees has helped the eight partner colleges see themselves as allies working toward a common goal, not as competitors for students.

Now, when Ms. Smith and her colleagues at Jefferson identify obstacles that cause students to stumble, they might look off-campus for possible fixes. Poor money management — "they treat their Pell Grants like Monopoly money," Ms. Smith says — would lead students to drop out, so the community college worked with the regional office of the Federal Reserve to design a financial-literacy curriculum that has been incorporated into the freshman seminar and to train faculty members to teach it.

Transportation, too, can be a hurdle, so a year ago, Ms. Smith, together with the local bus system, provided free passes to 200 low-income students. Semester-to-semester retention rates for those students, she found, were 26 percentage points higher than for their classmates. One of her goals, she says, is to subsidize travel costs for all needy students, and she's talking with public-transit officials and donors about how to make that a reality.

Done right, with all participants committed to change and working toward agreed-upon goals, collaborations benefit everyone, most of all students, says Ann Larson, dean of education at the University of Louisville. Her college is one of several there that do work at Atkinson, the low-income elementary school. The university's dental school provides free screenings, and students in social work intern at Atkinson each semester. Nursing students hold workshops for parents, like one on creating homemade cleaning supplies that are both cheap and green.

Ms. Larson's students teach in Atkinson classrooms, and faculty members advise on the curriculum and do professional development with staff members. Louisville professors also created a summer program, since expanded beyond Atkinson, to keep at-risk students on track academically, particularly in reading.

The work aids not only Atkinson but also Ms. Larson's students, many of whom will go on to teach in high-poverty schools. Each year, in fact, Ms. Nutter, the principal at Atkinson, hires at least one of the student-teachers full time.

"It takes a village," Ms. Larson says, "to help a community."

**O**n a recent spring day, high-school seniors from across Louisville crowded into a downtown sports arena for College Signing Day. Wearing high-school T-shirts and college sweatshirts, they snapped selfies and listened as recent graduates offered advice about choosing a major, surviving your roommate, and whether to join a fraternity. Local celebrities gave pep talks. The University of Louisville Cardinal did the nae nae. At the end of the morning, everyone signed certificates saying where they would attend college in the fall — "I proudly commit to continuing my education, earning a college degree, and overcoming all obstacles to achieve my goals," the cards read — and cheered, "Here! We! Come!"

But for all the pomp and pep, Louisville still has a long way to go.

A recent report from the Bluegrass Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank, found that in the public schools, gaps between black and white students on college-readiness exams and in high-school graduation rates have grown over the past three years. The disparities are greatest within individual high schools, researchers said, including some of the city's top schools.

A separate study, of Louisville ninth graders from the 2007 and 2008 academic years, found that at point after point in the education pipeline, they were likely to fall short: Students on free- and reduced-lunch programs were 15 percent less likely to graduate from high school than their peers, 26 percent less likely to go to college, and 13 percent less likely to make it from their freshman to their sophomore year of college.

"When you look at what's happening with African-American and low-income white children," says Rev. Jerry L. Stephenson, of Kentucky Pastors in Action Coalition, a group that favors charter schools, "you see an educational gap that's widened over the years, and it's not getting any better. We're falling further behind."



Luke Sharrett for The Chronicle

High-school students talk about their college plans as part of 55,000 Degrees, a citywide campaign.

Even the most recent report from 55,000 Degrees characterizes Louisville's progress as "stagnant." Though the city has added 23,000 degrees since the effort began, college attainment rates were flat in 2014 for the second year in a row, creeping up by just two-tenths of a percentage point. The number of adults with associate or bachelor's degrees actually fell that year. (More-recent data from Jefferson

Community and Technical College shows an uptick in degrees and credentials granted this year.)

"We were making headway, but we may have stepped back," says Mary Gwen Wheeler, executive director of 55,000 Degrees. The city, she says, is dealing with "stubborn realities" like structural racism and entrenched poverty.

Haley Glover, of Lumina, praises Louisville for its transparency and for staying the course. The city could have abandoned its goal or refocused its effort on less-disadvantaged students who would be far more likely to succeed.

"When you take a 'raising all boats' approach," she says, "you're still left with yachts and dinghies."

On the contrary, Louisville is doubling down. Using data, 55,000 Degrees is trying to identify the weakest rungs in the educational ladder and working on the many problems outside the classroom that affect students' performance. It is considering signing on to become the next partner city of a national organization, Say Yes to Education, which provides support to communities to craft comprehensive strategies to improve college-going.

An associated group, 15,000 Degrees, is working to improve the educational outcomes of low-income black students, pledging that 15,000 of the 55,000 degrees will be earned by African-Americans. Fewer than half of the black students in the 2015 graduating classes of Jefferson County schools are meeting college- and career-ready standards, while three-quarters of the white students do.

Greg Fischer, Louisville's mayor, has expanded his predecessor's work, taking what he calls a "cradle-to-career" view. It's too late once students get to high school to begin thinking about college, he says. Instead, the community must intervene, early and often. He's tapped groups as varied as the United Way and the local work-force-development board to provide educational and social supports — things like maternal care and universal pre-kindergarten — to help all children succeed.

Mr. Fischer, who has said a good mayor should have the heart of a social worker and the head of a chief executive officer, talks about compassion at times when his fellow elected officials might invoke economic arguments (though he makes those, too).

It's impossible to have a great city, he says, when its citizenry displays wide gaps in education and income, in potential and possibility.

"I happen to think this is a moral obligation," he says. "And if we don't deal with it, we'll have the inequities to live with."

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