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Nashville Students Face Potential Lifetime Earnings Loss as COVID Compounds Known Challenges of College Affordability and Access

NPEF's fourth annual Bridge to Completion report includes recommendations for increased postsecondary preparation and related supports

NASHVILLE, TENN. – May 4, 2021 – Shining light on college-going trends and barriers for Nashville public school graduates, the [Nashville Public Education Foundation \(NPEF\)](#), in partnership with the [Tennessee College Access and Success Network \(TCASN\)](#), has released the **2021 Bridge to Completion report**. The [fourth in the annual series](#), this year's report reveals the unique challenges and inequities for Nashville public school graduates exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The report was completed in partnership with Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) as well as the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce and other organizations involved in the [New Skills Ready initiative](#).

The [2021 Bridge to Completion report](#) illustrates an estimated 800 students who in any typical year would be enrolled in college are now not enrolled – due largely to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, MNPS graduating classes of 2019 and 2020 could experience an estimated collective loss of lifetime earnings totaling \$184.4 million. While not all college-going trends identified in the 2021 report are directly tied to COVID-19, the pandemic has played a large role in worsening existing inequities and barriers that students face in their postsecondary trajectory. COVID-19 played a major role in many students' decisions to forgo enrolling in a two- or four-year institution or to continue their attendance as many programs moved online and students and families experienced increased economic hardship.

“This year's Bridge to Completion reveals several stark downward trends suggesting Nashville students need increased postsecondary prep and supports more than ever,” said **Jennifer Hill, Vice President, Policy and Programming at the Nashville Public Education Foundation**. “Indicators of college-going intent for the class of 2021 suggest downward trends, but with community leadership and intervention, as well as smart policies and practices, Nashville can still make a positive difference for students seeking to return to postsecondary programs or those who desire to enter college following this school year.”

The 2021 Bridge to Completion report makes three key recommendations: 1) accelerate robust college and career exploration and counseling as a core part of students' high school experience and deepen the participation of local employers and nonprofits; 2) diversify and strengthen academic and career preparation so that more students have the ability to earn early college credit and high-demand certifications while still in

high school; and 3) advance policies and practices across the postsecondary ecosystem that reduce economic barriers for students to enroll, persist, and complete college.

“The pandemic poses an unforeseen burden on students and families, intensifying issues in both college affordability and access for all students, particularly those most vulnerable,” said **Bob Obrohta, Executive Director of the Tennessee College Access and Success Network**. “While no single entity is at fault for the declines in enrollment and persistence resulting from COVID-19, it is our collective responsibility to increase supports and implement necessary changes to policy and practices. The postsecondary attainment of our students is at stake, in addition to the vibrancy and economic health of Nashville.”

The 2021 Bridge to Completion report found that while 81% of MNPS students took steps towards college this past year – a rate similar to past years – 41.9% of students experienced “melt” – meaning they had college-going intentions but did not end up enrolling in the fall of 2020. The rate of melt over the summer more than doubled from the previous year – an additional 996 students – likely due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. The district’s 2020 college-going rate was 46.9%, a -8.3% decline from 2019, and the lowest point in over a decade.

All high schools across the district and nearly all demographic student groups were affected by decline. College-going equity gaps remain with enrollment declining for all demographics, and race/ethnicity gaps largely the same as previous years, with fewer Black and Latinx students enrolling than their white and Asian peers. After moving in a positive direction in 2018, persistence data for the class of 2019 plummeted – with only 59% of students persisting from their first year of college to their second year, the lowest persistence rate since 2012 for both community college and undergraduate students.

The Bridge to Completion report analyzes National Student Clearinghouse data on MNPS graduates from the last 7 years as well as data from interviews with college and career professionals. The report’s analysis reveals a number of ways that the district, local employers, community organizations, and the city as a whole can contribute to improved postsecondary outcomes.

“All Nashville students deserve to thrive in school, as well as beyond graduation and into their path to college and career,” said **Hill**. “It’s crucial we inform both policymakers and the public at large about the continuing inequities and barriers standing in the way of Nashville students. With in-person learning resuming in Nashville and more individuals being vaccinated, it is possible to improve downward trends but we must actively address issues of affordability for low-income students.”

NPEF regularly convenes stakeholders to advocate for data-driven solutions and change. In addition to college access and success, NPEF programs and coalitions address topics such as education funding, the importance of effective principals and leaders, teacher recruitment and retention, and the conditions that must be present in schools for children to thrive.

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About the Nashville Public Education Foundation

The Nashville Public Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization that raises private funds to support teachers and leaders, champion successes, and dismantle inequities in Metro Nashville Public Schools. More information is available at nashvillepef.org.

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