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Emergent Learning: Increasing the Impact of Foundation-Driven Strategies to Support College Enrollment and Completion

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Introduction

As part of its focus on better access to quality education and credentials that lead to secure employment opportunities, the Lumina Foundation has established criteria for strong postsecondary achievement goals that are “rooted in the global shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy. The vast majority of jobs being created require education beyond high school, and that trend shows no sign of abating” (Lumina Foundation, 2019a, para. 4).

Research data bear this out: In 1973, workers with postsecondary education held only 28% of jobs; by 2010 that share had risen to 59%, and to 65% by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Yet while the workforce requires a greater level of education to earn a family-sustaining wage, Americans in the lowest income quartile have achieved only incremental increases in postsecondary completion. By 2018, only 16% of students in that quartile had obtained a bachelor’s degree by age 24, compared to 62% of students in the highest quartile (Pell Institute, 2020, page 145, Graph 5a(i)).

Seeing these trends play out in Mississippi, which has a postsecondary attainment rate of 45% but no formally established, statewide postsecondary attainment goal (Lumina Foundation, 2019b), the Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF) launched the Get2College program in 1997 to provide resources and support for students, their families, and educators to increase the number of Mississippi students getting to and through college. And as it became apparent that more was needed to move that needle, in 2016

Key Points

- This article examines lessons learned as part of the continued development of the Get2College Pilot School Program, an initiative of the Woodward Hines Education Foundation, designed to test a strategy for increasing college enrollment among Mississippi students through greater college exploration opportunities and application and financial aid supports.
- While a review of the first three years of the pilot found it had an impact on college-going culture at its eight participating schools, Get2College found no significant increase in college enrollment over the 2016–2018 academic years and a retrospective analysis revealed flaws in the program’s design and theory of change. In response, the foundation partnered with a consultant to refine its strategy for a second phase of the pilot. Among the results of this partnership were four major lessons for the foundation: Begin with a commitment to engagement between school districts and school administrators; create a “college team” at each school to embed support for enrollment and completion; build a strong theory of change and evaluation method; and customize support strategies to regional contexts and individual schools.
- These lessons from the Get2College Pilot School Program can be of value to other foundations considering a transition from direct intervention to systemic change in their approach to college enrollment and completion support.

TABLE 1 Get2College Pilot Program Impact: School Years 2017–2019

School Year	Students served at Get2College centers and through outreach events	FAFSAs completed at FAFSA events and Get2College centers
2017	34,407	7,105
2018	34,268	7,503
2019	34,361	7,807

WHEF launched the Get2College Pilot School Program, providing counselors, teachers, and administrators at eight rural Mississippi high schools the tools and professional guidance to support students in strengthening their school-work and taking the other steps necessary to enroll in college.

The foundation was not alone during that time in considering how to shift its programmatic interventions to create broader systems change. In 2018, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors observed,

Realizing that the world’s pressing challenges are becoming more complex, and often seemingly intractable, many philanthropic funders are reflecting on how to create more transformational impact. They wonder whether they are putting their resources to best use, and what they could do differently to create more sustainable solutions to the challenges they aim to address. (Grady, Diggins, Schneider, & Paley Rose, 2018, p. 2)

During the first three years of the pilot, WHEF identified an impact on college-going culture in the high schools but did not see a significant increase in college enrollment. A retrospective analysis of the program revealed flaws in its design and theory of change. As foundations and organizations look to transition from direct intervention to systemic change in their college enrollment and completion efforts, there are opportunities to learn from the challenges faced by WHEF’s pilot program and how they were met.

WHEF’s Get2College Program

Mississippi’s history of structural racism continues to limit the economic and educational

achievements of its population. Children of color in the state are still more likely to be born into poverty and are less likely to climb out of it than their white counterparts. Nonwhite Mississippians were commonly denied access to educational opportunities and placed in separate and unequal schools and school districts. Despite much progress in the more than 50 years since landmark federal civil rights legislation, wide disparities remain: 38% of white adults in Mississippi hold a postsecondary credential, compared to 25% of African American adults (Lumina Foundation, 2019b). When attainment rates are broken down by county, the disparity comes into even sharper focus. In Issaquena County, where 64% of the population is African American and 35% is white, only 6.7% of its residents over 25 have a bachelors degree or higher. In Madison County, where the demographics are flipped — 58% white and 38% African American — more than 48% of residents have a bachelors degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

In the 23 years since it began providing free college counseling and financial aid support to any person in Mississippi who requests it, WHEF’s Get2College program is now serving over 34,000 students each year through a range of community- and school-based events. (See Table 1.) Get2College staff also provide direct assistance to help students complete their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and submit their college enrollment information to the National Student Clearinghouse. (See Table 2.) Though the program was able to show a strong correlation between counseling support at Get2College centers and rising college enrollment, it was clear that more than direct programmatic

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TABLE 2 Get2College Enrollment Rate by High School Graduating Class

	Seniors who received one-on-one support	% enrolled in college first year	% of enrolled college students who persisted to Year 2
Class of 2017	2,167	88%	84%
Class of 2018	2,217	88%	82%
Class of 2019	2,001	89%	Unavailable

Note: This enrollment rate, for students whose data Get2College submitted to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), is slightly lower than the total number of seniors served in each class because not all students who received support provided a birthdate, which is among the data required by the NSC.)

intervention was needed to ensure all 30,000-plus high school seniors in Mississippi have the opportunity to enroll and complete their post-secondary education.

The Pilot School Program

To scale Get2College’s impact beyond the few thousand students it could provide with one-on-one counseling support, WHEF piloted a strategy to improve the college-going culture in Mississippi high schools and make college planning a part of the student experience.

The Get2College Pilot School Program, a partnership with eight rural Mississippi high schools, was designed to increase students’ college-going rates through intensive, on-site support of the schools’ own efforts to increase college access and success. Using nationally identified best practices, the National College Attainment Network’s (NCAN) Common Measures,¹ and data points from NCAN’s Benchmarking Project,² the pilot program provided training for counselors and teachers at the beginning of each school year that focused on the college admissions process and how to create a college-going culture on high school campuses. Interested teachers were provided ACT prep training and ACT workshops were made available to students.

The pilot program also offered timeline workshops to juniors and seniors and financial aid

and college-planning workshops to families. Days were blocked off for students to meet one-on-one with a Get2College staff member for advising and help with admissions and financial aid applications. The program organized college tours for juniors and seniors and sponsored application, FAFSA completion, counseling, and signing-day events. From 2016 to 2019, the pilot program’s 740 events reached over 2,000 high school students.

Evaluation

In 2018, the Get2College Pilot School Program was evaluated by researchers at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center (SSRC). Using a multimethod approach that included student focus groups, interviews with counselors, and in-depth analysis of student-level data, SSRC found that the pilot schools’ college enrollment rates showed little change. (See Figure 1.) In 2015, the year before the intervention was launched, the college enrollment rate was 64%; in 2018, after three years of the pilot program, the rate was 64%.

During the same period, however, smaller schools — those with fewer than 100 graduating seniors — had higher college enrollment rates overall and a larger increase in those rates than did the larger schools. Enrollment rates at smaller schools increased from 64% in 2015 to 69% in 2018; in those same years, college

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¹ See <https://www.ncan.org/page/CommonMeasures>

² See <https://www.ncan.org/page/BenchmarkingProject>

FIGURE 1 Enrollment Rates for Get2College Pilot High Schools

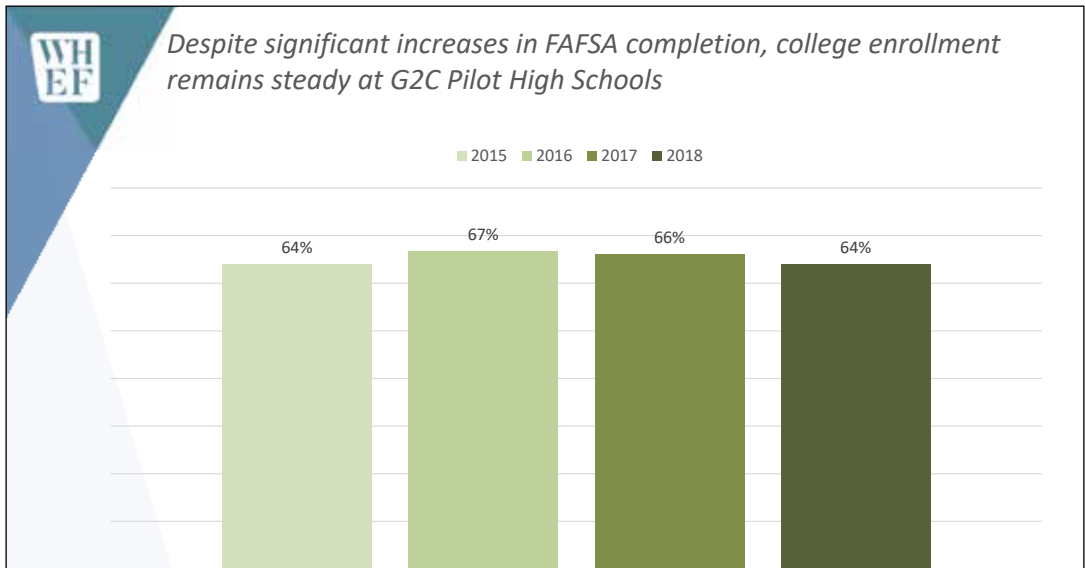
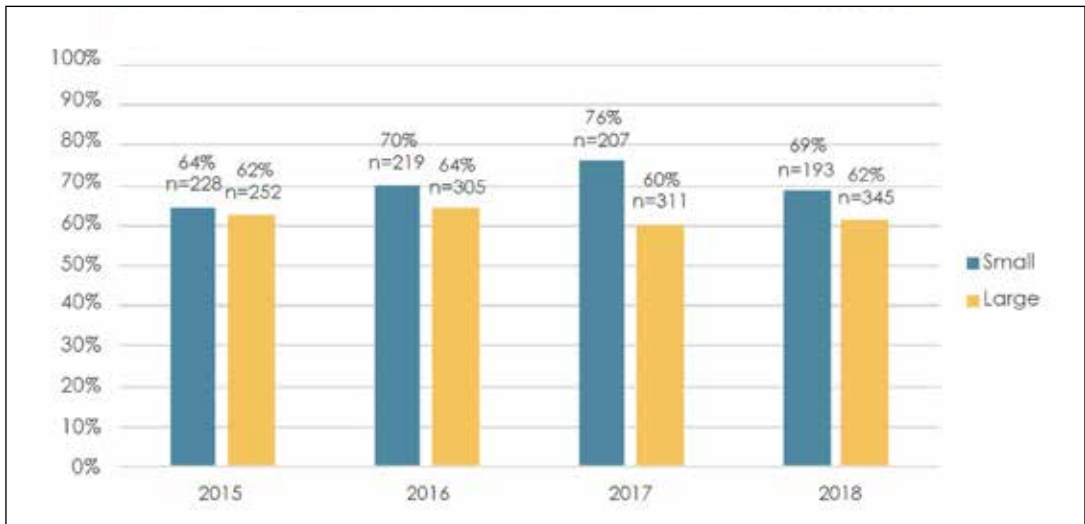


FIGURE 2 Enrollment Rates for Get2College Pilot High Schools by School Size



enrollment rates were at 62% in larger schools (WHEF & Mississippi State University SSRC, 2020). (See Figure 2.)

Beyond the enrollment data, SSRC found that the clearest difference between pilot schools and their nonpilot counterparts emerged in students' access to information about college. Pilot-school students consistently reported

access to high-quality information that met their needs. Nonpilot-school students reported widely varied access to and quality of such information (WHEF & Mississippi State University SSRC, 2020). Despite demonstrated access to better information about college planning, however, the pilot did not realize the ultimate goal of improving students' postsecondary outcomes.

Pilot 2.0 Strategy

To address these shortcomings, WHEF sought support in devising a Pilot 2.0 strategy from UnlockED, an education consulting firm with experience working to create systemic change in school districts. Among the results of the partnership were four major lessons for organizations focused on improving postsecondary achievement that are considering a shift from a direct service model to one that seeks to create systemic change.

Lesson No. 1: Start With District/School Administration Engagement

At the launch of the Get2College Pilot School Program, the participating high schools signed a partnership agreement that required engagement from school leaders. Beyond the initial connection, however, there was no sustained relationship between Get2College and school leadership. While school staff were committed to the pilot program and to supporting students' college enrollment efforts, the presence of Get2College staff often meant that schools increasingly relied on them for support. Get2College support, in other words, supplanted rather than fostered the schools' own efforts. This isolation of effort, with either Get2College or school staff, would never represent a systemic solution or provide school leadership with the tools to understand how to integrate postsecondary supports into the fundamental work of the school.

UnlockED and NCAN have observed this type of reliance on outside college access and support organizations in programs around the country where the initial approach was based on student-specific support. In contrast, NCAN recently documented the work of AchieveMpls, a nonprofit based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that has partnered with the city's public school system to increase engagement from school principals in providing students with career and postsecondary planning services.

Formed in 2002, AchieveMpls is a 501(c)(3) whose staff of nearly 40 operates career and college centers in 11 Minneapolis and four St. Paul public

high schools, serving more than 15,000 students annually. The organization coordinates with district counselors and college access network partners, including other local NCAN members, and brings principals into the conversation about how to shift from a narrow focus on preparing students for postsecondary enrollment to broader thinking about postsecondary persistence and completion (Debaun, 2020).

Lesson No. 2: Create a College 'Team'

During the first three years of the Get2College pilot, counseling staff changed at four of eight schools and five schools were assigned a new principal. This type of turnover is not unusual. In the 2016–2017 academic year, 35% of principals nationwide had remained at their school for less than two years and only 11% had been at their schools for 10 years or longer. The most recent national study also found that 18% of principals were no longer in their same position one year later; in high poverty areas, that rate was 21% (Levin & Bradley, 2019). In 2014–2015, the average ratio of students to school counselors in Mississippi was 438 to one — a ratio that far exceeds the recommended ratio of 250 to one and helps to explain the high turnover rate at pilot schools (National Association for College Admission Counseling & American School Counselor Association, n.d.).

Get2College found that creating cross-functional teams can provide better holistic support for students and help prevent the burnout and turnover associated with high counselor-to-student ratios — results seen in other school districts that adopted this team approach. As part of a program launched in 2016 by the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), each high school built a college team led by the school's college and career coordinator that brought together college support organizations that work with the high school, senior-class teachers, and other relevant staff in partnership and collaboration to ensure that each student received appropriate support. Since the implementation of both a district-level strategy and school-based teams, the DCPS has seen its college enrollment rate increase from 42% to 55% (DCPS, 2019). With these teams, schools gain access to

actionable, building-level data and are thus better able to “identify ways to expand opportunities to reach students who are otherwise disconnected” (Savitz-Romer, 2019, p. 136).

Lesson No. 3: Build a Strong Theory of Change

All programs and interventions, no matter their size, scope, or sector, benefit from a clear and shared understanding of that effort’s theory of change, data collection and analysis strategy, and evaluation method. Developing, sharing, and agreeing upon these elements in advance of programming has myriad benefits and sets the program or intervention up for a better chance of success. Consider each in turn:

- *Theory of change/logic model.* Although theories of change and logic models are not interchangeable, they are related and critical to laying out a road map for all stakeholders of a project or program. A theory of change describes the broad picture of how an effort will affect its target audience, while a logic model offers detailed documentation of the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes the effort will employ and is expected to achieve. A shared understanding of what a program will do, how that will happen, and why it is necessary is critical both for stakeholder buy-in and implementation fidelity.
- *Data collection and analysis strategy.* Each of the logic model’s components should have an associated indicator and a strategy for data collection, storage, and analysis. Establishing a project’s data requirements early on will make stakeholders’ day-to-day efforts easier, reduce burdens on participants, prevent confusion, and improve the evidence base for assessing impact.
- *Evaluation method.* “How do we know if our efforts have succeeded?” is the eternal question for social impact. Would results have been achieved without the program or intervention? Program evaluation is not monolithic; it can be qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of both. Evaluation methodologies and strategies vary widely. Understanding at the outset the methods

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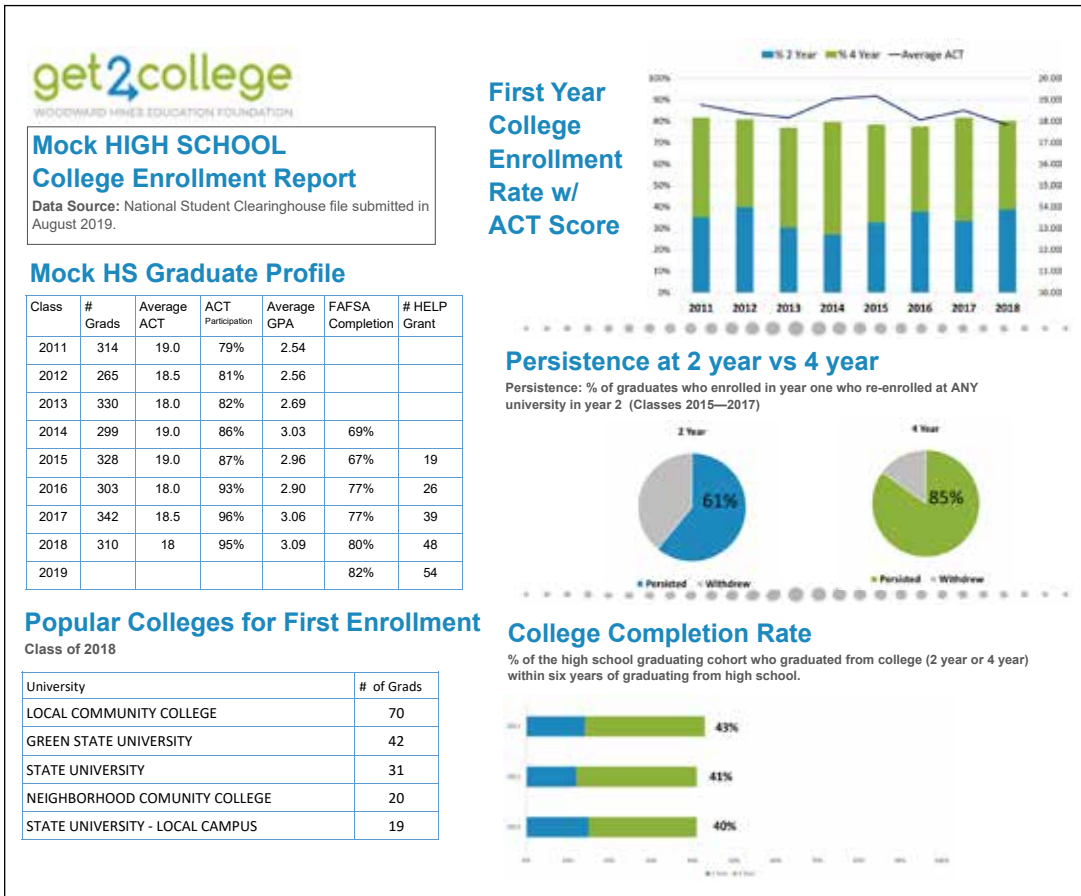
that will be used to measure impact has implications for implementation fidelity, stakeholder accountability, and buy-in for the work.

Each of these elements could have been improved upon during the Get2College pilot. Although the project had a theory of change and an understanding of what practices would be employed with schools, their codification in a logic model would have provided consistency and fidelity across their implementation. Additionally, as the pilot progressed, adaptations were made in the way data on student behavior were collected and the specific information that was being tracked, possibly obfuscating or muddling actual results.

Changing the methods for data collection and analysis midway is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it represents nimbleness and responsiveness to shortcomings or new challenges. On the other, it creates breaks in trend data and difficulties in comparing results over time. Such changes also place burdens on personnel: Get2College team members, for example, had to go back to the school staff and request additional data on grade point averages and ACT scores and then modify the Get2College tracking system to accommodate that new information.

Midstream changes to the program and its implementation also created challenges for the SSRC

FIGURE 3 Data Shared With Pilot High School Leaders: Sample Dashboard



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team in evaluating the impact of various interventions. Without consistency, over time and across sites, it became much more difficult to assess which program components were effective.

Lesson No. 4: Customize Strategies for Regional/School Context

The WHEF pilot had a singular, programwide strategy of support and interventions, but the participating schools varied in size and, among other differences, had unique district priorities and distinct regional contexts. As noted earlier, program results did begin to show some impact when school size was taken into account. As the SSRC found,

[D]isaggregating the college enrollment rate by school size shows that smaller schools generally had

higher college enrollment rates overall and showed a larger increase in the college-going rate between 2015–2017. Students from small schools had a lower college enrollment rate in 2018 compared to previous years but were still significantly higher than their large school peers. (Pellegrine et al., 2018, p. 8)

The pilot was designed to reach all students in each high school. That goal, however, was much more difficult to achieve at the larger schools, and therefore a limited number of students in those schools actually received all services.

When this finding is taken into consideration along with the lessons regarding principals’ engagement and school-based teams, it serves as additional evidence of the need for a systemic approach that embeds college and financial aid application assistance in the work of the school.

Pilot School Program: Phase Two

In 2019 Get2College launched phase two of the program. Five of the eight original pilot schools opted to participate in this phase, which required them to obtain their college enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse and partner with Get2College to evaluate the data.

Phase two kicked off by providing the five participating schools with evaluations of their college enrollment and completion trends. Each school received support in identifying equity gaps in enrollment, opportunities to bridge gaps in college and financial aid supports, and universities with strong and weak records of student persistence and completion. Along with sharing the dashboard with the data on enrollment trends, Get2College staff met with school-based staff to ensure they were prepared to take ownership of building a postsecondary strategy that took into account their schools' historic trends and outcomes. (See Figure 3.)

The meetings with leadership and school-based teams were opportunities for conversations with Get2College that went deeper than merely scheduling the spring FAFSA sessions — which, while important, are only a part of equipping the school to create a stronger college-going culture. Together, the teams were able to examine the challenges to college access and opportunity faced by students in rural communities, to think critically about the importance of the new Mississippi curriculum requirement for a dedicated College and Career class, and to explore opportunities to build deeper partnerships with local universities.

With this information, Get2College worked with each school to determine what specific supports and services were needed to connect with the school leadership's unique vision, understanding that such assistance is part of an ecosystem of college supports within the school and that those supports are a shared responsibility.

With the four key lessons in mind, Get2College also adopted a new commitment to building schoolwide partnerships, embedding the work in multiple areas of the school, and providing a

A clear theory of change and logic model, an established data collection plan and proposed evaluation strategy, and staff and stakeholders who understand the role of each and their responsibilities within the project provide a strong foundation on which to build.

buffer for staffing transitions. As Get2College partners with schools across the state to build their postsecondary teams, students will have consistent messaging and guidance that ensures their access to the tools and resources to enroll, persist, and complete their intended postsecondary goals.

As Get2College expands pilots and launches new work, the program will take a more purposeful, pragmatic approach to ensure that these components are in place before programming begins. A clear theory of change and logic model, an established data collection plan and proposed evaluation strategy, and staff and stakeholders who understand the role of each and their responsibilities within the project provide a strong foundation on which to build.

Conclusion

Get2College continues to grapple with how to deliver quality services to students while simultaneously creating the systemic change it sees as necessary to ensure all Mississippians have access to college planning services, and to increase college access and completion. Taking what was learned from the Pilot Schools Program, Get2College is reshaping its programs and initiatives to better align with the needs of school leaders, students, and their communities. At one pilot school this is being approached by creating a deeper partnership with the local community

college, where 66% of the school's college-going students enroll. At another school, it means increased support for FAFSA completion and targeted work assisting students in completing the state grant application.

The supports provided to the five phase-two high schools are specific to the needs of each school's student population. While this strategy does take more time, the focus is on creating systemic improvements to student support, empowering school-based staff, and focusing the time and resources available on the interventions that best meet the identified needs.

As an organization, Woodward Hines Education Foundation is also strengthening its connection with the Mississippi Department of Education and higher education leadership to advocate for a statewide postsecondary attainment goal.* In partnership with district superintendents and school principals and counselors, they are helping to create a college-going culture in every school across the state with the goal of increasing postsecondary attainment in Mississippi.

* October 2020, immediately before publication, the Mississippi Department of Education approved a postsecondary attainment goal.

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