

Achieving dreams: Project GRAD aims to boost graduation rate, college ranks

By J. Laurens Tullock
Sunday, March 1, 2009

As our national, state and regional leaders grapple with an unprecedented economic crisis, there is agreement on at least one element that will be key to a vibrant economy and quality of life. That is the need for improving high school graduation rates and increasing the number of graduates who seek post-secondary education. These are essential goals for all students, but are particularly critical for students attending our nation's most disadvantaged schools.

Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) is an education reform model that starts with the belief that college begins in kindergarten. The GRAD commitment is that all kindergarten- through-12th-grade students, regardless of background or economic circumstances, will learn and succeed in an environment of high expectations and can successfully continue their education past high school.

The program was founded in Houston in 1992. Today GRAD public-private partnerships are in 13 cities across the country serving 133,703 students in 211 inner-city schools. GRAD is the only kindergarten-through-college model that is delivering results consistently, confirmed by national research on a significant national scale.

This is important to Knoxville because Project GRAD Knoxville is now in its eighth year of a 12-year initial partnership with the Knox County Schools. The program serves all 7,500 students attending Austin-East and Fulton high schools, two middle schools and 10 elementary schools that serve the heart of Knoxville neighborhoods. The goal of the Project GRAD Knoxville partnership is to ultimately increase the Fulton and A-E graduation rate from 50 percent to 100 percent and to increase the number of graduates attending post-secondary college or technical school from 30 percent to over 70 percent, which is the school system's goal districtwide.

GRAD is a long-term commitment, and the local data already document significant improvements in K-8 achievement. This is important because it creates a stronger pipeline of students prepared to succeed in high school and post-secondary education. Even though students who have fully received the GRAD model's supports since kindergarten have not yet reached high school, the number of scholarship qualifiers at the high schools has already increased by 48 percent since the first GRAD scholarships were awarded in 2005.



We now have 248 scholars attending college on GRAD scholarships, and this spring we will see the first class of GRAD scholars graduate from college. The GRAD college access staff has also recently been doubled at both high schools to support the increased number of high school students expecting to attend higher education.

Recently our new superintendent of schools, Dr. Jim McIntyre, reaffirmed GRAD as a key partnership framework to achieving his vision for the Knox County Schools. As the leader of the Knox County school system and a GRAD Knoxville board member, McIntyre is integral to the leadership team that guides this partnership.

GRAD USA supports the network of 13 sites, and Knoxville has been used in other site start-ups as a best practice for how to structure a strong partnership between the private sector and the school system. GRAD USA also has brought over \$6 million in national funding to Knoxville over the first eight years of our implementation.

In 2008, GRAD USA achieved a significant milestone when the GRAD reform model made it through a rigorous process to become endorsed and specifically included as an authorized program in the Higher Education Act. The authorizing legislation outlines specific criteria defining the GRAD model, details quality standards for accountability and provides a specific formula for federal funding to match local funding. Sen. Lamar Alexander and U.S. Rep. John J. Duncan Jr. were key leaders in a bipartisan movement to include GRAD in the legislation. Now our attention turns to securing the appropriation of federal GRAD funding consistent with the authorizing legislation. When the funding is fully appropriated it could mean up to \$1.2 million annually to support the ongoing partnership between Project GRAD Knoxville and Knox County schools. There is a terrific demand for expansion of the model to other cities, but such expansion will not occur until the federal appropriation is complete.

Here in Knoxville we are well underway on this marathon effort to change the expectations of at-risk students and their families to an absolute belief that they can access and succeed in post-secondary education and that it is the key to economic prosperity and quality of life. Graduation really achieves dreams, and we are witnessing GRAD results daily in the lives of our heart of Knoxville students.

For more information contact www.projectgradusa.org and www.projectgradknoxville.org

Knoxvillian J. Laurens Tullock was recently elected chair of the Project GRAD USA Board of Directors. Tullock is president of Cornerstone Foundation of Knoxville and is one of the founding board members of Project GRAD Knoxville. Tullock may be reached at 865-637-1912 or ltullock@cornerstoneofknoxville.org