

Please find below the joint statement from the founders of Project GRAD Knoxville, endorsed unanimously by each of GRAD's founding members and partners, all of whom agreed to be listed.

JOINT STATEMENT FROM THE FOUNDERS OF PROJECT GRAD KNOXVILLE

April 25, 2018

As the original founders of the Project GRAD Knoxville partnership with Knox County Schools, we want to thank the Knox County School Board for delaying its vote on the FY19 budget and for its consideration of restoring full funding to KCS's partnership with Project GRAD.

For some who may not know the history, when Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) started in 2001, it was the first major public-private partnership with Knox County Schools. What led to this partnership was the fact that our inner-city schools, filled predominantly with low-income students, were failing miserably with graduation rates that were less than 50 percent. As a result, college-attendance and post-secondary success by these students were almost non-existent, and at least one of our 14 inner-city schools (Maynard Elementary) was slated to be closed by the State of Tennessee. At that time, our community came together to address the specific needs of Knox County's most vulnerable children and to turn these dismal stats around.

The School System and Project GRAD Knoxville jointly agreed to measurable goals from the very beginning: 1) Move graduation rates at our inner-city schools from 50 percent to more than 80 percent; 2) Push our college (and other postsecondary education) going rate to more than 50 percent of those high school graduates; and 3) Continuously improve our post-secondary completion rate. Working together, we jointly met these measurable goals by 2012, and have met or exceeded the goals almost every year since.

Because of the success of the Project GRAD joint effort, the Great Schools Partnership was formed to work on other partnerships with the school system, such as Community Schools, the Parents-as-Teachers Birth-to-Kindergarten program, and Leaders for Readers. Again jointly, the partners agreed to a goal of becoming the *Best School System in the South*; and Project GRAD Knoxville agreed to become a permanently linked supporting organization of the Great Schools Partnership to make sure there is full programmatic and financial alignment.

Project GRAD has been funded as a public-private partnership from its beginning. The highest costs to implement Project GRAD were in the first 5 years. Private donors agreed to cover more than 75 percent of those up-front costs and the school system agreed to cover the majority of annual costs in subsequent continuing years. In recent years, Knox County School's \$1 million annual investment in Project GRAD has leveraged an additional \$1.5 million each year in private and other funding--- funding that would be at great risk if the school board chooses to end its partnership with Project GRAD. All-in-all in nearly 18 years, the School System's \$18 million in funding has leveraged over \$32 million in private and other support for the Project Grad partnership.

Project GRAD has become a symbol of hope and opportunity in our community, as everyone could see through the massive grassroots' turnout to the April 9th Knox County School Board Workshop of more than 1,000 citizens from all walks of life—students, graduates, teachers, principals, parents, clergy, and neighborhood, business, non-profit and government leaders. Just as importantly, current 9th graders at Fulton and Austin-East have already been promised and signed four-year scholarship contracts; have been promised on-campus summer academies at Pellissippi State, the University of Tennessee and the Tennessee College of Applied Technologies; and have been promised robust family, social service, funding, college, and career supports. To end this partnership abruptly without fulfilling those promises is unacceptable.

It is difficult to fathom that our school board would reject the advances of the past 18 years, and unilaterally tear down the partnership bridges that have been built to increase the success rates of our most under-privileged children, with nothing proposed of relevance to replace the current joint effort. This community has made promises that need to be fulfilled to these children. In addition, the school board's decision will impact continued and future public-private partnerships of all kinds for many years to come. We, the undersigned below, strongly urge the school board to focus on these concerns and we appreciate the school board's action to take the time to thoughtfully consider a better resolution.

Sincerely,

Project GRAD's founding partners

(Please see the following page for the names of those endorsing this statement.)

2001 Knox County Schools' Partners

- Sam Anderson, former KCS School Board representative
- Montina Jones, former KCS Vine principal
- Marion Quinn, former KCS Austin-East principal
- Michael Reynolds, former KCS Fulton principal
- Dr. Sharon Roberts, former KCS elementary principal

2001 Community Partners

- Gloria Deathridge
- Steve Diggs
- Takisha Fitzgerald
- Rev. Joseph Smith
- LeRoy Thompson
- Pam Trainor
- Dr. John Turner

2001 Business/Foundation Partners

- Chrisi Haretos (Bollinger)
- Governor Bill Haslam, who served as Project GRAD chair until he took office as governor in 2010
- Rodney Lawler
- Larry Martin, former COO of First Tennessee Financial Services
- Larry Mauldin
- Kelly Milam
- Lila Pflieger, Executive Director of Lucille S. Thompson Family Foundation
- Bob Talbott
- Laurens Tullock

2001 Partnering Organizations

- Terrence Carter
- Dr. Allen Edwards, former Pellissippi State president
- Dr. Robert Levy, former University of Tennessee executive
- Alvin Nance
- Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero and former director of Knoxville's Promise – The Alliance of Youth
- Vaughn Smith

2001 Founding Project GRAD Executive Director

- Jerry Hodges