

Hamilton County/Chattanooga



THE ENTRY POINT

A countywide collaboration between the school district, foundations, businesses, post-secondary education institutions, and other civic partners to build pathways of success from high school to college and employment

THE CHALLENGE

How can a district make sure, in a post-industrial economy, that education in high school leads to college and workplace success?

THE PARTNERS

Hamilton County/Chattanooga Public Education Foundation
Hamilton County Schools
Benwood Foundation
Carnegie Corporation
Lumina Foundation for Education
Lyndhurst Foundation
Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga
Academy for Educational Development
Hamilton County Education Association
Partnership for College Access and Success
College Access Center
Local businesses and unions

The Story

Like many areas in the South, Hamilton County/Chattanooga – once known as the “Dynamo of Dixie” due to its wealth of manufacturing jobs – has strong blue-collar roots. As recently as 1975, nearly half of Chattanooga’s employed residents worked in factories and foundries. College attendance was traditionally low because local plants provided decent wages and lifelong employment for the county’s citizens.

Recently, however, as the bulk of the manufacturing sector has left the South, many well-paying blue-collar jobs have gone with it. Today, fewer than 20 percent of the county’s jobs are in manufacturing. With no traditional imperative for post-secondary education, Tennessee ranks forty-second out of the fifty states in the proportion of adults with four-year college

Hamilton County Public Schools: Quick Facts

Superintendent: Jim Scales

Number of schools	81
Total enrollment	39,939
White	62.0%
African American	33.4%
Hispanic	2.8%
Asian	1.5%
Native American	0.2%
Limited English proficiency	1.9%
Students with disabilities	17.0%
Economically disadvantaged	52.3%
Title I	34.2%

Source: 2005 State of Tennessee
Hamilton County Report Card

degrees. Unless those figures are turned around, it will be harder for high school graduates to support a family. Parents want their children to have good jobs and opportunities but are not sure they want their children to leave home to get the education needed for those opportunities.

The merger brought new energy – not just in the schools, but in the community. It was a catalyst for greater community involvement and investment.

– Dan Challener, president,
Chattanooga Public Education Foundation

It was in this context that the Chattanooga City Schools and the Hamilton County School System merged, in 1997, combining two very different systems. The county system was largely rural and suburban, with a student population of around 22,000, the majority of whom were White, primarily from blue-collar, middle-class families. The city system was primarily urban, with a student population of around 21,000, the majority of whom were African American and from low-income families. A new school board subsequently chose Jesse Register, who had presided over a North Carolina city-county school merger, as superintendent, to plan the merger and lead the unified district.

The operational merger of two systems with separate staffs, facilities, and management systems was, in itself, a difficult enough task. But beyond that definable and finite task, the unification of two school district communities diverse in geography, population density, racial demographics, achievement, funding, and history was quite another matter. Views about the merger varied widely, from those believing it would improve results and equity for the most underserved city schools to those concerned that more successful suburban schools would have their standards and achievement lowered – with many views in between. Feelings over whether the merger was a good thing or not covered a complex array of feelings and viewpoints – city versus county, Black versus White, magnet versus traditional school, middle-class versus poor – reflecting values, priorities, expectations, and history.

Development of Partnerships

In the newly merged district, a local education fund, businesses, and post-secondary education institutions joined forces to change generations-old beliefs and practices about who should go to college.

Schools for a New Society: Improving Conditions for Student Learning

The business community and parents frequently expressed concerns about the rigor and relevance of instruction and learning in the high schools. In 2001, the Hamilton County/Chattanooga Public Education Foundation (PEF) and Hamilton County Schools received a five-year, \$8 million grant from Carnegie Corporation’s Schools for a New Society initiative to improve the district’s high schools by creating a more engaging, challenging, and personalized learning experience for all students, leading to increased graduation requirements across the board. Local partners included city and county elected officials, district administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students, as well as leaders in community organizations, higher education, and business.

Chattanooga high schools were reconfigured into small learning communities organized as theme-based academies, ranging from construction and engineering to liberal arts, that simultaneously would prepare students for college-level work and build the next generation of workers. While each school had considerable autonomy in identifying needs and determining priorities for the academies, each had to address four basic districtwide goals:

- Establish a more challenging, relevant, and engaging curriculum.
- Improve teaching by providing more professional development for teachers, leaders, and staff.
- Create a more personalized and engaging experience for students.
- Allow more flexibility to meet student needs more effectively.

Each academy offers classes in all core subject areas, as well as a range of career-oriented options, and has strong ties to the business community. Each academy is also designed to attract students who reflect the demographics and academic achievement of the school as a whole. For example, East Ridge High School has a strong connection with the Association of General Contractors. The academy prepares students for the workforce, for apprenticeships, and for college – students can now prepare to go on to local colleges and universities while at the same time gaining the skills to become qualified electricians, plumbers, carpenters, or bricklayers. Gone is the two-track system of college preparatory vs. vocational-technical.

The Single-Path Diploma

In 2003, the district adopted a single-path curriculum requiring all students to complete a course of study that includes mathematics, science, foreign language, fine arts, and other core subjects. Beginning with the ninth-grade class entering in 2005, all Hamilton County high school students are being prepared to enter college when they graduate from high school. This means four years of math, science, and English that qualifies them for admission to a four-year college.

This was a controversial strategy on many fronts. In one large suburban high school, some faculty, parents, and students worried that changes would water down the curriculum or change the school they believed did not need to change at all. In other neighborhoods, families worried that college going would undercut values they had instilled and encourage young people to move out of the county.

It is now understood that the capacity to successfully reform and improve education for all children cannot be realized unless many traditional and non-traditional partners come together to make it happen.

— Jesse Register, former superintendent, Hamilton County Schools

Then-superintendent Register built significant community support for this change by reaching out to parents and leaders in the business and higher-education communities and repeatedly emphasizing the importance of raising standards. In addition, the district and the PEF provided the school board with data from The Education Trust showing that in places like New York and Texas, higher graduation requirements led to higher achievement, higher graduation rates, and more students going to college.

Partnership for College Access and Success

Ultimately, providing opportunities for Chattanooga’s students to attend college depended on a partnership that was broader than the district or the county. Given the enormous changes needed in the workforce, hundreds of separate programs have sprung up to help students prepare for college. The Partnership for College Access and Success (PCAS) is an eight-city program that helps communities bring together a broad variety of local organizations – the school district, institutions of higher education, community- and faith-based organizations, businesses, and government – to prepare students to succeed in college. Funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga and administered by the Academy for Educational Development, PCAS also aims to increase family awareness of opportunities for enrolling in and paying for college. PCAS chose Chattanooga as one of its eight sites in part because of initiatives already under way to improve students’ access to and success in college, including the Schools for a New Society (SNS) high school reform initiative and the single-path curriculum.

The idea was, rather than having isolated programs, we should all be working together. We’ve operated in isolation too long.

— Susan Street, founder,
College Access Center

In Hamilton County, the PEF serves as the organizing center for the local partnership. This partnership is one of equal players: no single partner drives it or controls it. Instead, a steering group representing twenty organizations and community groups meets monthly and uses a set of agreed-upon priorities to drive the work. Currently, the PCAS partnership is focusing on three high schools, representing diverse urban, suburban, and rural populations, which are serving as pilot schools for the project.

Leadership teams at these schools are implementing strategies and approaches such as college-night programs, sophomore and senior retreats, college tours, test-preparation activities, and faculty training to ensure that all students and parents have the information they need to plan for, apply to, and pay for college. College access counselors, funded by Lumina, SNS, and district funds, work to help each school build its short- and long-term capacity to make the changes implicit in the move to a single-path curriculum, the goal of which is to ensure that all students graduate with the option of college. Summer interns help high school upperclassmen and their families explore post-secondary aspirations by taking them on college visits, helping them refine post-graduation education plans, and meeting families in their homes.

PCAS’s work is not limited to these three schools.

The partnership has provided five full days of professional learning for all high school counselors and community-based organization staff who want to attend. The sessions, developed by counselors and community-based organization staff, includes topics such as financial aid, college visits, challenges for freshmen, and help for students in writing essays. Keynote speakers included Cedric Jennings, who was featured in *Hope in the Unseen* by Ron Suskind

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes community partners to encourage our high school students to be all they can be through further education.

— Partnership for College
Access and Success Web site

(Broadway Books, 1998). PCAS helped fund a bus tour that took at least one counselor from each high school to colleges across the state to meet college admissions officers and tour colleges. The partnership also helped fund one counselor from each high school to attend the annual National College Access Network conference for the first time this year.

In addition, partnerships with the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Chattanooga State are aimed at improving retention for entering students. Data from the first cohort of students showed that college students from Chattanooga high schools were lagging behind in math – more than 50 percent of Chattanooga’s students entering college were placed in remedial mathematics courses. To address this issue, a working committee of high school and college math teachers meet frequently to discuss how they can help Chattanooga’s students achieve more success in college mathematics. This summer, the committee will be conducting a first-ever grades 6–14 countywide math numeracy institute. In addition, the two college presidents and the new superintendent, Jim Scales, have met with representatives from the Lyndhurst Foundation and the PEF to analyze data to drive the development of a strong student success program. This group will attempt to identify what pathways students can take that lead to success in college.

Result: Improved Student Outcomes

There have been substantial positive outcomes for students. For example, 1,345 of 1,915 regular diploma graduates (70 percent) entered college in fall 2004; 955 of those who entered (71 percent) were still enrolled in fall 2005; 112 graduates from 2004 entered college for the first time in 2005 (20 percent of those who had not gone to college immediately after high school, or 6 percent of the total class). Data from the National Student Clearinghouse show that well over 1,450 students have enrolled in college in 2006 – over 100 more students than in 2005 with a stable high school population – and that there is an increase in the percentage of students enrolled in four-year, versus two-year, colleges. Finally, data show modest but positive gains around the achievement gap.

I’d be willing to start out at a community school, but I’d like to venture out into a bigger challenge. I want to be able to know that I can handle things on my own.

– Amanda Green, Chattanooga high school student

Taking It to Scale

Some pieces of the PCAS’s work are already at scale. In fourteen high schools, lessons learned from college access counselors about how to communicate more effectively with students are in place. High school principals have access to data that they can analyze continually to determine what the issues are and what resources they can apply to those issues. PCAS has created an interactive map that shows where former Chattanooga high school students are enrolled in college and provides e-mail addresses for some of them, so that current high school students can contact them. In addition, the school system and the county are trying to communicate broadly with the community about the benefits of college and how to get students to apply. This year, the partnership is focusing on getting more parents involved by scheduling a series of parent focus groups.

If Hamilton County students are going to compete globally and at home, the commitment of resources, time, effort, and expert guidance will be tremendous. Parents, community leaders, and the business community, along with district staff, must actively engage in this endeavor. The involvement of the entire community is critical and necessary.

— *Jim Scales, superintendent,
Hamilton County Schools*

Challenges remain. There are not enough high school counselors with the necessary skills to continue this work. The partnership is still struggling with how to most effectively involve the community – particularly faith-based organizations – and how to get the needed community support on this effort. The partnership wants to explore the idea of adding more summer interns (they will be in nine high schools this summer) and to figure out how to build student/intern relationships earlier in the process. PCAS is looking at how to reach an entire community and feels it does not have an effective plan for how to do this, especially given the resources at hand.

Critics of the reform efforts worry that the reforms are not being expanded quickly enough or reaching enough students. They also agree that broad community engagement beyond traditional partners continues to be a challenge. Sustainability after program funding runs out remains a concern, as does keeping partners engaged over the life of the program.

At the end of the 2005-2006 school year, Superintendent Register retired and was replaced by Jim Scales, former deputy superintendent in Dallas. Superintendent Scales has kept these reforms on track and is looking to take the college access work to the next level. His board-approved strategic plan calls for the community and citizens of Hamilton County to partner with the district to prepare students with the skills they need to succeed in the twenty-first-century global marketplace, including expansion of the PCAS partnership to serve all high schools in the district and to provide more students with the tools and resources they need to be successful in college.

Questions for Forum Participants from the Hamilton County Site Team

- How do a district and its partners create the capacity to develop a broader set of partnerships?
- What is an effective strategy for creating a broader community engagement approach in a district so that it reaches all schools and all schooling constituencies? How can an effort like PCAS meaningfully engage all parents?
- How do you get people inside the school system to realize the importance of engaging students, parents, and families?

Site Team Members

Dan Challener is president of the Hamilton County/Chattanooga Public Education Foundation. As president, he oversees the foundation's efforts to strengthen student achievement in Hamilton County's public schools. Among these programs are the Benwood Initiative, Schools for a New Society, and the Hamilton County Leadership Initiative.

Stacy Goodwin Lightfoot is program director of the College Access Center. A charismatic leader who has a deep passion for serving in the community, she is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the Southern Association for College Admission Counseling, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, and the National College Access Network. She also serves as the director of the Ruben Studdard Foundation for the Advancement of Children in the Music Arts in Birmingham, Alabama, which sponsors the Ruben Studdard Summer Music Camp and provides scholarships for high school students interested in majoring in music in college.

Jesse Register is former superintendent of the Hamilton County Schools and senior advisor for district leadership at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. In 1996, he became the first superintendent appointed by the school board in the combined city-county district of Hamilton County/Chattanooga. Under his leadership, the district successfully completed the merger of the urban and suburban districts, restructured nine low-performing elementary schools, and launched a major redesign of the district's high schools.

Jim Scales is superintendent of the Hamilton County Schools, where he has worked to create effective lines of communication with staff, students, parents, community leaders, elected officials, and business leaders. His primary focus is improving student achievement through the county and supporting opportunities that will ensure "Success for All Students."

For More Information

- Hamilton County Department of Education: <www.hcde.org>
- Hamilton County/Chattanooga Public Education Foundation: <www.pefchattanooga.org>
- College Access Center: <www.collegeaccesscenter.org>
- Partnership for College Access and Success: <www.chattanoogapcas.org>