

FORUM



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NOW WHAT?

What middle school students think about college, careers

By Ashton Bishop

If, like me, you're a student at Green County Middle School in Greensburg, Kentucky, you cannot avoid hearing the phrase "college and career ready," a fact that sometimes prompts an automatic eye roll.



Ashton Bishop

But a round-table discussion I held with seven friends from across the academic spectrum for the Student Voice Team suggests that the talk of college at our

age feels premature. When I asked them to tell me what the right age is to begin preparing for life after high school, there was a strong consensus that middle school is too early.

13-year-old Kobie said, "I think it's too early because it rushes you from being a kid to being an adult and worrying about things and it stresses me out." And Abigail, also 13, agreed. "I think it's too early because we're supposed to be free and not worry about that stuff," she said. "I think we're all just kids and we don't necessarily think it's all that important when we're in middle school to think about college and career."

But my peers and I may have reason to worry. When it comes to postsecondary transitions, there seems to be a huge disconnect between middle school expectations and reality. Research shows that 93% of mid-

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The Prichard Committee Student Voice Team is an independent nonprofit group that mobilizes citizens to improve Kentucky schools. During the past year, the group conducted an investigation into how its peers are preparing for life after high school.

WHO WE ARE

Consisting of more than 60 self-selected middle and high school students and college undergraduates, the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team is an extension of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, an independent nonprofit that mobilizes citizens to improve Kentucky schools. The Student Voice Team strives to integrate students as full partners in that work.

WHAT WE DID

Over the last year, we conducted an investigation into whether and how our peers are preparing for life after high school. In addition to pouring over the latest research and data, we interviewed academics, policymakers, parents, teachers, administrators, and most notably, students, from across the state, all to get a better handle on the challenges inherent in the postsecondary transition experience.

WHY WE DID IT

As students on the forefront of postsecondary transitions ourselves, we felt an especially acute sense of urgency to understand why so many of our peers were faltering on the way to or so soon after high school graduation. We were concerned about the dire but little-discussed statistics about how many young people start but do not finish a college or associates' degree program.

The following commentaries are meant to complement our report, "Tripwires to Postsecondary Success." Together, they represent our attempt to marry data with the voices and stories of the real students to whom they refer. By infusing the statistics about college transition challenges with voices from Kentucky youth, we aim to illuminate the research and make it more accessible. And at the very least, we hope we can stimulate a more honest conversation among policymakers and the public about what it takes to ensure a smooth journey for all of our peers after high school.

For more information and to view the Project report, visit www.prichardcommittee.org.

The Student Voice Team's Postsecondary Project was underwritten by a generous grant from the State Farm Youth Advisory Board.

The tripwires that can hinder postsecondary transition

By Gentry Fitch

A high school diploma is no longer the same commodity it was half a century ago.

High school graduates are making slightly more than \$30,000 a year while those with a bachelor's degree earn twice as much. Over the long term, college-dropouts sacrifice nearly \$500,000 in lifetime earnings. Unemployment among young adults whose

highest level of education is a high school diploma is 17.5 percent, whereas a young adult whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree is only 7 percent. Furthermore, in Kentucky, over 60 percent of new job openings and 90 percent of new jobs in growing industries with high wages will require some postsecondary education by the year 2020.

It is strikingly clear that for a student to be economically self-sufficient beyond high school, a postsecondary education is a prerequisite.

Fortunately, the Commonwealth's college-going landscape shows some important, positive developments. Kentucky's high school graduation rate now stands at 86.1 percent, and according to the Kentucky Department of Education, 62.5 percent of Kentucky's 2014 high school students are considered "college

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LEARN MORE

Get more information on the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team on their Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pctstuvoiceteam>.

COMMUNITY FORUM

The Courier-Journal
A Gannett newspaper founded 1826

Wesley Jackson, President & Publisher
Neil Budde, Executive Editor

EDITORIAL

Minimum wage needs continued examination

When KET brought together the Republican candidates for governor on “Kentucky Tonight” on May 11, one of the questions posed of the four men was: “What do you think a reasonable annual income for a family of four is in Kentucky ... that would live comfortably for a family of four?”

The candidates’ answers were all between \$40,000 and \$50,000 in household income. The eventual GOP winner Matt Bevin said, “A rough metric might be \$10,000 per person. ... In terms of comfortable it depends on what a person’s ... idea of comfortable is.”

We were reminded of that exchange when Gov. Steve Beshear announced this week the somewhat symbolic move to raise the minimum wage for 510 state workers at the lowest pay level from \$7.25 an hour to \$10.10. He also encouraged all other employers in the state to do the same.

State workers getting this new minimum wage will now be earning an annual income of \$21,008, assuming a 40-hour workweek and paid vacations.

Will T. Scott may have finished a distance last in the primary, but he did have one thing right on his answer to that question: He acknowledged that two members of a household might be working to get to that theoretical “comfortable” level.

At the old minimum wage of \$7.25 it would be more like three 40-hour-per-week jobs per household to hit the level deemed comfortable by Scott and the others.

We hope Beshear’s executive order puts new life in the movement to make \$10.10 the new minimum wage across Kentucky, which failed in the 2015 General Assembly despite being one of the top priorities of House Speaker Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg.

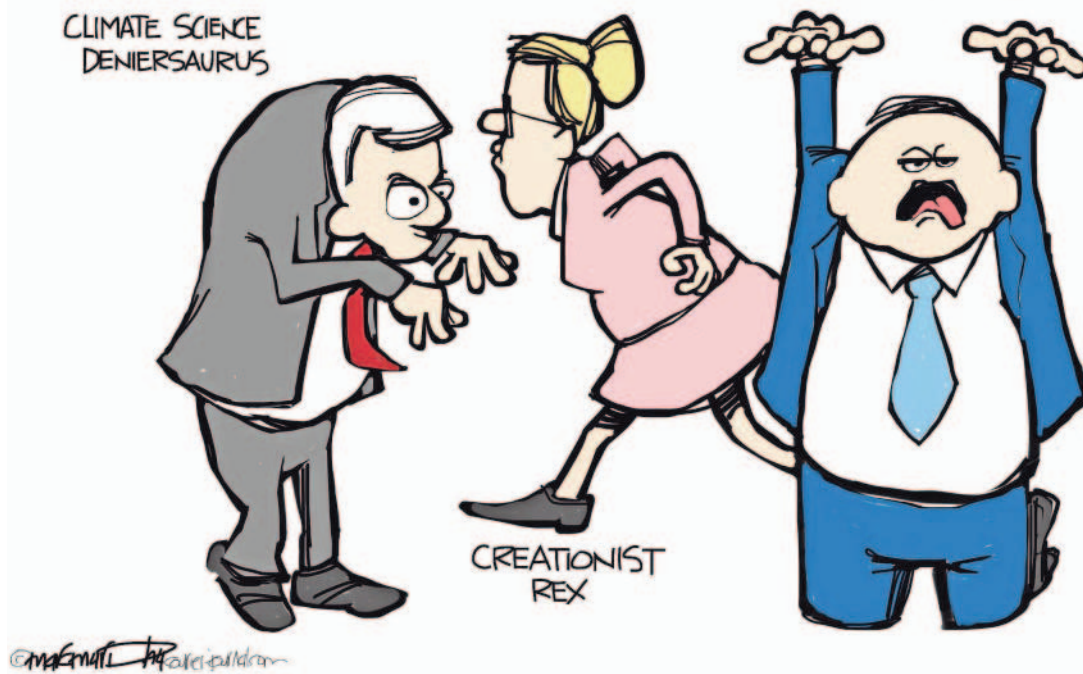
It certainly will make for one clear point of differentiation between Bevin and his Democratic opponent, Jack Conway, who has supported a higher minimum wage. And perhaps that’s part of Beshear’s motivation.



Republican candidates Matt Bevin, left, James Comer, Hal Heiner and Will T. Scott debated on KET television before May’s primary. COURTESY KET

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READERS’ FORUM

Applauds school board for audio posting

I want to thank and celebrate the recent move toward greater transparency by the New Albany-Floyd County Consolidated School Corporation Board of Trustees.

By proactively posting the audio of their meetings online the public has an opportunity to listen, with historical accuracy, to what exactly transpired at the meeting instead of relaying on the distilled minutes. The beauty of government is in the details, not in the summary.

Board Member George Gauntt asked if there would be any public interest in the audio. The public may be interested in a topic presented at the previous meeting or wish to research how a specific issue evolved over time. The return on investment is magnitudes beyond the initial required effort; trim the ends of the file, amplify, compress, and upload. Nothing to redact, since it took place in a public meeting.

I would also like to encourage every individual (including students, members of the public without students, etc) to attend the next school board meeting and push for the adoption of the second transparency resolution that

was tabled. Once passed, even greater transparency will be achieved by posting supplemental materials prior to scheduled NAFCCSC Board meetings. An informed community is an empowered one.

Remember, do not limit your political life to the ballot box. There are plenty of opportunities to engage your community now, regardless of your age, without waiting for the next election.

ZACHARY BAIEL

West Lafayette, IN 47906

Healthcare is a privilege not a right

I wonder if the thousands of people in Kentucky that signed up and obtained healthcare through Kynect, also known as Obamacare and the Affordable Care Act, realize how lucky they are that our governor set up the exchange. Because of him they will not lose their newly acquired health insurance if the Supreme Court decides to take away health care from over 6 million people in states that did not create their own exchanges (all with Republican governors).

If it had been left up to McConnell and Paul there would not be an exchange and those thousands of people would not even have health insurance. McConnell and the rest of his party does not even

have a plan to cover the millions of people across the country who may lose their health insurance.

Thankfully here in Kentucky we do not have to worry about that. Our governor stood up for the principal along with President Obama that healthcare is not a privilege but a right. People in Kentucky owe these two men their appreciation and thanks.

CHERYL ALLISON CAMPBELL

Louisville 40218

How to submit letters

Letters to the editor are welcomed.

E-mail your letter to: cjletter@courier-journal.com
Best-read letters are under 200 words and on topics of general interest. A letter must be original and contain the signature, address and daytime telephone number of its writer. The editors reserve the right to condense or reject any letter and to limit frequent writers. Letters to the editor, opinion and editorial columns, and articles submitted to The Courier-Journal may be distributed in print, electronic or other forms.

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Wal-Mart’s wage increase has had a positive effect

By Barry Ritholtz

I have been writing critiques of Wal-Mart’s wages and employment policies for years. Today, I break with tradition and offer up some positive perspectives on the retail giant’s recent actions.

A brief history of Wal-Mart and its enormous retail staff is telling. The company’s 2.2 million employees make it the world’s biggest private employer. It also is one of the largest employers in the U.S., with 1.3 million workers in 4,540 stores.

Wal-Mart has historically given shabby treatment to its huge workforce. As we noted recently, labor was seen as a cost rather than a driver of sales. Wal-Mart never seemed to think of its associates as human capital, just a cost. Beyond low wages, there was a history of forcing full-time employees to work part time to minimize even the meager benefits the company offered.

But financial success trumped philosophical enlightenment, and for most of Wal-Mart’s history the way it treated employees didn’t hurt results very much. Wal-Mart became the world’s biggest company by revenue and it ranks among the 20 most profitable.



Wal-Mart Store, Inc., Chief Executive Officer Doug McMillon speaks at the Wal-Mart shareholder meeting in Fayetteville, Ark., Friday, June 5.

What we also know is that the way Wal-Mart treated employees was a major reason that turnover was very high compared with the rest of the retail industry. The 2001 documentary film “Store Wars: When Wal-Mart Comes to Town” reported that turnover was about 70 percent a year, much higher than the rest of the retail industry, though it has fallen since then.

Two months ago, Wal-Mart said it would increase its minimum hourly wage to \$9, higher than the federal minimum of \$7.25. That affects about a

half-million of its workers; many others are in states with higher minimums or have worked their way into positions paying more than the minimum. Wal-Mart’s bottom pay scale will rise to \$10 an hour next year.

This has had a positive impact on employees. Last week, at the company’s shareholder meeting, Chief Executive Officer Doug McMillon made several announcements about the raises:

» “Our job applications are going up and we are seeing some relief in turnover.”

» Wal-Mart is expanding its \$1 billion program in wages, training and employee relations.

» The company is raising minimum wages for another 100,000 U.S. employees.

» The company will also be raising wages above next year’s \$10 minimum rate.

» It will improve working conditions for 1 million U.S. hourly workers.

» My favorite improvement: no more “constant loop of Celine Dion and Justin Bieber music blasted into stores from headquarters.”

These are not minor adjustments. The company seems to have found some religion when it comes to how it treats its workers. Given the increasing competition for employees, it may have little choice. To remain competitive in reducing turnover and attracting new employees, it needed to do something.

Perhaps the company’s stock price is the motivation. It hit a 52-week low on Tuesday, down 20 percent since January.

The company also is struggling to address the issue of slowing growth. First-quarter earnings fell about 6 percent from the year-earlier quarter, and sales were little changed. Some of this could be attributed to the recovering economy,

as customers who can now afford to shop elsewhere often do.

But it’s likely more than that. As we noted in February, the Wal-Mart shopping experience is one to avoid if you can -- merchandise is often in disarray or missing, the aisles can be messy, the staff often is surly. My personal experience is that the stores are dingy and depressing.

Apparently, I’m not the only one who sees them that way. Greg Foran, who runs Wal-Mart’s U.S. Stores unit, noted, “If we look at what customers say about our business, about half of (our stores) are where we would want them to be, and the other half need improvement.” That is corporate speak for “Half of our stores stink.”

The bottom line is this: The strengthening economy and competitive labor market have forced changes on the retail giant. So far, it seems to be having a beneficial effect for the employees.

Time will tell if it’s enough to turn around the world’s biggest retailer.

Barry Ritholtz, a Bloomberg View columnist, is the founder of Ritholtz Wealth Management. He is a consultant at and former chief executive officer for FusionIQ, a quantitative research firm.

Guidance counselors often need help, too

By Susie Smith

The role of a high school guidance counselor has evolved rapidly in the past few decades, becoming an even more essential component of a student's path to education beyond high school. No longer simply about scheduling, high school guidance counseling is more about being able to advocate for and advise students as they make important transitions to postsecondary life.

But with an average caseload for a Kentucky guidance counselor equaling 444 students, just how effective can he or she be?

And even beyond the daunting ratio, counselors have to contend with myriad tasks. On top of the duties of advising students on how to prepare and apply for postsecondary training or education, Kentucky's school counselors are often saddled with administrative duties that relate to testing and data collection. These extra duties subtract from the precious time counselors spend with their students, time that students like me and so many of my friends cannot afford to lose.

This public school guidance crisis prompts many people to hire private counselors to assist them in navigating the college admissions process. In Lexington where I live, families routinely shell out \$3,000 and more to give their kids the guidance they need to apply to a competitive school or identify the most lucrative scholarship opportunities.

But the students who cannot afford this bill are put at a major disadvantage, especially if their families cannot navigate the complicated and ever-changing admissions process. "There are kids out there whose family doesn't know how to push them further or guide them," said Paul Laurence Dunbar head guidance counselor Deanna Smith. "If there's not anyone at home who knows how to push and guide them, then there has to be someone at school who can do that."

The fact of the matter is that the extra requirements and large caseloads assigned to guidance counselors stop them from effectively doing their jobs. "Expecting any one person to deal with that amount of kids and accomplish everything that they want us to do with each individual kid is unreasonable. There's no way that you can get to know these kids, no matter how efficient you are," Mrs. Smith told us.

As a high school senior who will be attending Kentucky's flagship public university on a full academic scholarship, I cannot begin to tell you how important the role of a guidance counselor is and how much I appreciate mine. But I enjoy a distinct advantage over almost every other Kentucky student I know: Mrs. Smith is not only my guidance counselor; she happens to be my mother.

Susie Smith is a senior at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School.



Susie Smith

Poor students need more assistance from policymakers

By Amanda Wahlstedt

I understood early that as a kid growing up without a lot in Appalachia, doing well in school meant I was not always running as a poor kid. So staying on top of my schoolwork has been my plan from the beginning, and that's probably why my own father felt compelled to spell it out for me once: "We're poor. You know that, right?"

My dad can be forgiving for trying to set me straight since when it comes to academic achievement and succeeding after high school since the statistics related to students with my background paint a stark picture. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, a distinct minority—only 21.3 percent of Appalachians over 25—hold a bachelor's degree.

Even for high-achieving students who succeed in graduating high school and aspire to continue their education, great obstacles remain. Since 1998, tuition at public colleges and universities in Kentucky has more than tripled, and Kentucky community college tuition costs are the 11th highest in the nation.

Various scholarships cater to low-income Appalachians. These include: The Kentucky Coal County College Completion Scholarship for students from coal-producing counties to com-

plete a bachelor's degree, the federal Pell Grant, the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship, (KEES), which provides state money based on grades and ACT scores, the College Access Program (CAP) for students wishing to attend any type of postsecondary program, and the Kentucky Tuition Grant (KTG) for students wishing to attend a private college.

But while there is some money out there to help make college more affordable for people like me, cultural and financial barriers remain.

According to Ashley Spalding, a policy expert at the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED), part of the reason can be explained by the fact that low-income Kentucky families don't know enough about what is available to them. "Two-thirds of students who qualify for the College Access Program do not receive it," she told the Student Voice Team.

Spalding said that in Kentucky, public financial aid is first-come, first-served, and that those families that are not savvy enough to apply after midnight on January 1 are out of luck since the state runs out of money earlier and earlier each year.

University of Kentucky director of the Center for Poverty Research, Dr. Jim Ziliak, underscores the issue, saying there seems to be a huge mismatch between the knowledge of how poor families pay for college and the eligibility for assistance. Ziliak told the Stu-

dent Voice Team: "This is a real problem because a lot of these kids could afford to go to college; they just don't know it."

And then, there's another scary truth: Even for those low-income students who do manage to take advantage of financial aid programs, the difference between what they can get and what a postsecondary degree actually costs is typically many thousands of additional dollars.

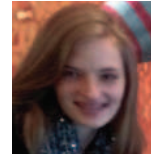
That is a deal-breaker for families who are barely able to pay for food, housing and healthcare.

But there are at least a few proven solutions. Research shows that in Kentucky, access to services like intensive academic advising and career counseling raise completion rates and shorten the time students take to get a degree—approaches that help low-income students overcome both financial and cultural barriers to success after high school.

The fact that these very programs did not survive the last round of budget cuts in Frankfort is disheartening. As an informed, poor kid from eastern Kentucky, I hope that our policymakers will reconsider that decision.

Surely when it comes to ensuring a successful transition after high school, there is more we can do to support and encourage students with less in Kentucky.

Amanda Wahlstedt is a student at Knox Central High School



Amanda Wahlstedt

DON'T LET MINORITY FORTUNES FOUNDER

By Naomi Kellogg

I will always remember the first play I was in. The "gifted" group in my first-grade class put on a production of "Elmer's Colors." In the story, Elmer, who is an extremely colorful elephant, learns to accept his uniqueness around all of the other elephants that are shades of gray. Cast as Elmer, it took me only a few moments to realize the differences between my classmates and me.

As I grew up, it seems the differences never disappeared. Years went by and I was still the only African American in my gifted classes. Fast forward to high school, and I am one of the two African Americans at my western Kentucky school for advanced math and science students wondering how the rest of my minority counterparts were left behind. Is it because my minority friends aren't intelligent? Or are they simply not recognized?

The achievement gap has been plaguing our country for decades and comes into especially stark relief when looking at the racial imbalance in gifted education. According to the National Educational Longitudinal Study, gifted and talented programs composed of only 16.7 percent of minority students. This lack of diversity is problematic for all students living and learning in a democratic society who stand to benefit from multiple perspectives and ideas.

Historically, many school districts have relied on IQ testing as a way to identify gifted youth. However, this



Students pose with Kentucky Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes.

method of identification has been shown to be racially biased because minority students statistically score lower than their non-minority peers on standardized tests.

The issue may also have social roots. High-achieving black students are often rejected by their minority peers. All too often, we hear that we are "acting white" because of our lack of slang and increased motivation to do well in the classroom. If this is one of the most salient factors, the solution could require the involvement of parents or community leaders to create new models of expectation and lift the educational stereotypes.

Although there is no magic solution

that will resolve the issue of education inequality for minority gifted students, an effort to change recruitment strategies along with more expansive identification instruments that take into account qualities other than high achievement test scores may be the winning combination.

As one of only a handful of minority students in my former high school and now in my academically challenging college, I am left to wonder in my honors program exactly what I did so many years ago while playing the role of Elmer: Why are there so few others here who look like me?

Naomi Kellogg, of Elizabethtown, is a Wells scholar at Indiana University.



Naomi Kellogg

The high price of Kentucky's remedial education

By Mariah Mowbray

As I worked myself into a frenzy this spring writing a string of never-ending essays for what seemed like every financial-aid scholarship in existence, I wondered if I would be able or ready to take on the burden of a loan. I can only imagine what I'd be facing if I also needed to worry about paying for college classes that didn't count toward my degree.

Yet that is exactly what thousands of Kentucky's recently graduated seniors are facing. One of the greatest costs of a college degree is one you don't hear so much about: remedial education. These are courses for which students must pay and take in order to graduate but for which they receive no academic credit. In Kentucky, nearly one third of students enrolled in the state's college are also enrolled in one

or more remedial course.

For many high school students, learning about the need for remedial education is a rude awakening. "Morehead State says that I have to pay for and earn remedial credit before I'm allowed to start taking classes," Haylee, an incredulous senior told us. "It isn't fair that I have to pay more for fake credits."

Dr. Rebecca Simms, Director of Secondary Partnerships at Bluegrass Community and Technical College, told me that among her students who struggle more than most to obtain a postsecondary degree, "60-70% need at least one remedial course." That conforms with data from the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher which reports that high school teachers nationwide estimate that 37% of their graduating seniors will be inadequately prepared for college-level coursework and require remediation in order to get a college degree.

The case for continuing education after high school has never been stronger. According to the Kentucky

Office of Employment and Training, by 2018, postsecondary education will be necessary for 29% of jobs and 48% of new jobs in Kentucky. And MIT economist David Autor estimates that not going to college will cost a person about \$500,000 in lifetime earnings.

Facts like these are surely motivating for the many students who strive for a degree despite the daunting costs. But the additional burden of paying for low-level classes for no academic credit, often at the additional expense of not being able to work at a paying job—on top of crushing tuition costs—may be just too much. Might the price of remediation help explain why the University of Kentucky is the only public college in the state with over 50% of students able to graduate within 6 years?

Fortunately, some places in Kentucky are actively exploring creative solutions to the crisis.

Four Districts of Innovation—Jefferson, Taylor, Danville Independent, and Eminence Independent—have begun to blur the lines between secondary and postsecondary education. Each of

these districts has placed focus on mastery of content rather than placement by chronological age. Students receive their diploma when they're truly prepared to continue on a path to college, all but eliminating the need for remedial courses. At Eminence Independent, Superintendent Buddy Barry explained that students can graduate with an associate's degree, even if they've stayed an extra two years to complete it.

For students who don't have access to such progressive districts, perhaps schools could offer a rewards program. That way, if a student takes one or more remedial course and still graduates within six years, they could be refunded part or all of what they paid for the class. However, this doesn't truly correct what may be the essence of the remedial education problem: high schools that graduate students who are simply not ready to make the postsecondary transition.

Mariah Mowbray is a student at Lafayette High School.



Mariah Mowbray

BISHOP

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dle school students report that their goal is to attend college but only 44% of us enroll in college, and only 26% graduate with a college diploma within six years of enrolling.

And there is another reason why talking about our plans for after high school may need to start earlier than we want. There is research showing that the decisions we make about what classes to take matter even at our age. For example, if students do not pass key "gatekeeper courses" such as Algebra I on time, it can be difficult to complete the full sequence of coursework needed for postsecondary education, particularly in 4-year colleges.

Are middle schoolers really too young to start thinking about these things?

I decided to push the group of seventh and eighth graders further and learned that most of them have strong ideas about what they want to do after high school, and they even had specific ideas about how they were going to achieve those dreams.

"I kind of like science and a nurse anesthesiologist is in the science field," Kobie explained. "My momma told me about it. They make pretty decent money. I'd have to go to college for four years to be a nurse. Then I'd have to be a nurse for a year I think. Then I'd have to go back for two years for anesthesia school. We looked it up on the Internet."

"I'm wanting to be a game designer," said Bryce. "That's what I do best. I'd have to know how to work a computer. I'd want to make role playing games and games like black ops."

"I want to be a dentist," said Abby. "I'd have to go to college for four years and that would get me one degree and then I'd have to go to dental school for four more years."

Savannah said she wants to be a trauma surgeon and already knows, "I'd have to go four regular years of college and then medical school."

These same students who said they were too young to be thinking about postsecondary life not only had dreams and plans but they also had given thought to exactly what type of education they would need to achieve it all.

Noah, for example, was already sure he wanted to apply to military school. Kobie, the same person who earlier said that he was too young to think about preparing for college and a career, told me he was set on attending Western Kentucky University for nursing school and then going to Cincinnati for anesthesia training. Savannah was counting on the University of Louisville for medical school, and Abby had her heart set on local Campbellsville University because "it's really small and not too crowded."

So what exactly prompted these students to think so specifically about life after high school?

When pressed, Abby admitted that Green County Middle School's approach to college and career might have been at least a little helpful. She singled out a tool called the ILP, or Individual Learning Plan, as particularly helpful because it "helps you understand [how to prepare for postsecondary life]."

Abby was exposed to the ILP and additional conversations about college and career as part of GEAR UP, a program funded by the U.S. Department of Education that is designed to create a college-going culture. GEAR UP works with 30 middle and corresponding high schools in 22 counties in Kentucky and provides services directly to students like academic advising and career exploration and activities for family members to help students succeed in college.

Maybe it's not a question of whether to talk about college and career at our age but more a question of how often and when.

Bryce summed it up, as perhaps only a middle school student can: "I think it's okay to remind us about college every now and then, but not to keep telling us over and over."

Ashton Bishop is a student at Green County Middle School.

Affordability and the college dropout crisis

By Andrew Brennen

For those of us nearing the end of adolescence, we are experiencing the last time we can somewhat irresponsibly run around doing whatever we please with minor regard to consequence. There's a plan to follow on the path to maturity: Go to college, spend four years studying harder than we ever have before, graduate, and prepare to drop to our knees begging along with our fellow graduates for a job that probably doesn't yet exist while straddled with a total of somewhere between 902 billion and 1 Trillion dollars in debt from student loans.



Andrew Brennen

But though this is indisputably both a popular and unfortunate set-up, there's an issue even more pervasive and insidious. In Kentucky's public four-year institutions only, 46.6% of college undergraduates finish their degree in six years and 22.1% graduate in four. And in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, just 12.8% of students earn an associates' degree in three years.

There is a college dropout crisis. I'm sure this number is especially startling to anyone who has been listen-

ing to the post-secondary education policy narrative coming out of the White House lately which has been almost exclusively centered around increased affordability and accessibility. We spend a great deal of time and money trying to push students into college who either aren't ready, or for whom college isn't quite the best choice, and then, as expected, watch them fail.

Hunter, a high school junior, described to us how the financial pressure of paying for college took a toll on his family. "My older brother dropped out after Thanksgiving of his sophomore year in college because he didn't know how to manage his job and the hard classes," he said. "He's paying off something like \$26,000 on loans without an education."

Another high school junior shared a similar cautionary tale. "A friend of mine had to drop out after his first semester at Union College because he had pressure back home to work and make money rather than go to college and spend money," he told us. "The thousands of dollars he spent for that first semester are now wasted."

But the financial pressure around postsecondary education can begin long before a student makes it onto a college campus.

In a trip the Student Voice Team took to Letcher County, one of Kentucky's lowest-income school districts, we met a

student who described what so many are up against.

Robbie told us a story of how he had a nearly two-hour commute to and from school every day and how while most of his family dropped out of high school, he managed to scrape by and graduate. Robbie told us about how on some days he wasn't sure where his next meal would come from and shared with us a story of how he used to sell empty Coke bottles on the bus to his classmates in order for them to have a place to spit their dip (other than the bus floor). He said he used the money to supplement his extremely meager diet.

Why are we telling students like Robbie that the only way they'll be successful is by incurring the cost of attending a four-year institution? How can we expect Robbie to focus on things like the 130 question FAFSA for financial aid when he isn't sure what he's going to do about a place to sleep? Why are we spending so much time, energy and political capital getting kids like Robbie into college and then abandoning them to fail once they arrive?

It's simply irresponsible.

The college dropout problem will not be solved overnight, especially since so many of the people students look up to are unwilling to admit we have a problem in the first place.

Andrew Brennen is a student at the University of North Carolina.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE 'GIFTED' LABEL

By Eliza Jane Schaeffer

Educators call me gifted, but really I'm just lucky. When I dissected a variety of animals in Academy Advanced Biology, students outside of the magnet program dissected none. When I participated in a month-long qualitative analysis in Academy Advanced Chemistry, my peers in other classes did not. While I am taught how to approach applying for college in a weekly zero hour seminar, other students, who may need it more than I, are not.

But being labeled as "gifted" does even more than unlock special opportunities. In a study at the University of Kentucky, random students were labeled as advanced. Those students performed at a higher level than their peers, simply because of their label. This discrepancy can be attributed to what researchers call the self-fulfilling prophecy, in which people become what others expect them to become. Students who aren't deemed "gifted" feel inadequate, and perform to a lesser degree, while those who are labeled "gifted" feel empowered, and are often treated with more respect.

This system is based on outdated studies suggesting a "fourth grade shift" takes place, after which basic skills and intelligence are cemented. But newer studies question the existence of a universal shift. For some students, it comes earlier; for others, much later, and the late bloomers are done a great disservice. As Sara, a high school sophomore, told us: "I wasn't identified as gifted when I was in third grade, and I feel like it really stunted my growth. The label prevented me from tapping into a better [learning] environment."

Even before third grade, children are sorted into groups within the classroom. But because there is no formal method, teachers use first impressions of affluence, obedience, and hygiene-reliable measures when determining adults' potential for success, but qualities that are



SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL
Ashton Bishop, Nicole Fielder and Eliza Jane Schaeffer pose for a photo while visiting Washington, D.C., in support of House Bill 236.

more reflective of the children's parents than themselves.

Why all of these divisions? For one, it makes teaching more efficient. By dividing children into like-minded groups, teachers can alter their teaching style to match what they believe is that group's level of intelligence. But as the research clearly shows, many if not most students are capable of more than is initially apparent. By grouping students before they have a chance to prove themselves in a classroom environment, we are likely retarding their intellectual growth.

I have taken full advantage of the opportunities granted to me by my label, but I cannot do so with a clear con-

science. I see non-GT students who work tirelessly to do their best, I see GT students who carelessly disregard or disrespect the incredible opportunities available to them, and I see struggling non-GT students who need the best teachers' attentions, not the worst.

Would getting rid of the Gifted and Talented track create a little extra work? Perhaps. But educating the next generation should not be about convenience.

I am at least gifted enough to know that.

Eliza Jane Schaeffer is a student at Henry Clay High School.

FITCH

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ready." Most significantly, more than 3 in 5 high school graduates are enrolling in a postsecondary institution.

From these numbers alone, it would seem as though Kentucky is on track to supply our local and national economy with a record-breaking, well-educated, highly skilled workforce.

But in fact, that is not the case. When we examined similar indicators of success in postsecondary education, we found the results discouraging, bordering on abysmal.

In Kentucky's public four-year institutions, 46.6 percent of college undergraduates finish their degree in six years and 22.1 percent graduate in four. More unsettling realities lie in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System where just 12.8 percent of students earn an associates' degree in three years.

What is happening between students' high school graduation day and - more than likely - their college dropout day? What is contributing to so many un-

successful postsecondary transitions?

For over a year now, members of the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team's Postsecondary Project have investigated just these questions.

During our research and many conversations with students, parents, educators, policy experts, and others about the postsecondary transition experience, a central theme emerged, one that has to do with inequality.

Two features students have virtually no control over, their home zip code and their family's income, determine so much of what we call college success. And while the college admissions process purports to be a meritocracy, these indicators disproportionately predict access to valuable resources and information that help successful college graduates earn a degree with manageable or no debt.

Some of the students we talked with, for example, told us they needed to work for pay during the school year and forgo the often expensive extracurricular activities which would otherwise make them more attractive to competitive postsecondary admissions offices. And then there were the students we spoke with who came from families with no

history of college graduates, making the cultural leap they were hoping to take that much more difficult. We found too that some students who were uncertain about whether they would make it to the next level of education after high school also had insufficient access to critical information like whether and how to apply for financial aid or what, besides academic achievement, a person needs to thrive in a college setting.

Our investigative team is calling the inequalities that thwart students from making successful postsecondary education transitions "tripwires." These are the little-discussed, powerful obstacles that tend to sabotage students on the way to a self-sufficient, thriving life after high school.

We hope these commentaries, our special report, and our attempts to disseminate them to students and families across the state prompt more of us to consider what it would mean to have more transparent conversations about the transition to college not only in the public policy arena, but also in our homes and in our schools.

Gentry Fitch is a student at West Jessamine High School.