

Fund Students First Coalition
915 E. McLemore Ave, Suite 201
Memphis, TN 38106

Thursday, April 13, 2017

Mayor Jim Strickland
City of Memphis
125 N. Main St. Room 308
Memphis, TN 38103

Greetings Mayor Strickland:

Over the next few weeks, you will be finalizing your FY 2017-18 budget for presentation to the Memphis City Council. As you embrace the immense responsibility of prioritizing funding for efforts to protect and improve quality of life for Memphians, we urge you to consider providing financial support directly for education provided by the public schools located in Memphis.

While the mandatory fiscal responsibility for public schools does not currently rest with the city of Memphis, we believe it is imperative to demonstrate your commitment to and active involvement in supporting the success of our city's greatest asset – our children. As you have indicated many times, education is one of the top three critical components for the future success of Memphis. We must rise to the occasion and commit to supporting education as a city.

We request that you include funding for education programs in the budget proposal that you will submit to the Memphis City Council. We ask that the City of Memphis budget for 2017-2018 allocate at least \$10 million for an education fund that will invest in efforts in and out of Memphis public schools that have a direct and measurable impact on students' academic achievement and/or career development. At least half of the funds should be accessible by public schools located in Memphis and the remaining portion should go to out-of-school programs with similar outcome goals. We believe the greatest impact for city priorities would be achieved by directing funding in the following ways:

- **Establish and expand career technical education (CTE) programs in high schools that are relevant to the workforce needs in Memphis.** Shelby County Schools (SCS) is working with industry and workforce partners on a CTE strategic plan, but will need funding support to implement the programs. Funding could support development of new career pathway programs, the purchase of equipment, the construction of facilities and/or the recruitment, licensing, employment and training of personnel to provide career technical education.
- **Establish and expand graduation success and dropout-prevention strategies in high schools.** Strategies may include:
 - o Establishing or expanding initiatives to support programs that use attendance, course grades, credits earned, and disciplinary referrals to identify students at risk of not graduating
 - o Providing academic and social supports for students at risk of not graduating to enter 10th grade on track and stay on track to graduate - summer programs, additional instructional time, tutoring or small-group instruction during the school day, or counseling services
 - o Implementing and supporting activities designed to reduce chronic absenteeism
 - o Supporting data management systems that provide timely reports on students' grades, absences and discipline by school and by course
 - o Counseling and coaching services to provide early exposure for students to requirements/options for post-secondary education and/or career opportunities
 - o Wraparound services to support families

- **Establish and scale high quality out-of-school learning opportunities.** There is significant work already underway between the city administration and community partners to build this system, including technical assistance from the National Summer Learning Association and local philanthropy. With adequate funding and leadership, the city could put a city-wide learning system in place by summer 2018.
- **Expand job experience and training opportunities.** This would include expansion of the MPLOY/MAP program to serve more young people and supporting third-party programming towards the goal.

The paradigm of local funding changed significantly with the 2011 surrender of the Memphis City Schools (MCS) charter, the 2013 merger of MCS and SCS, the subsequent demerger of the systems in 2014, and the resulting creation of multiple municipal school systems. Leading into those changes, the Memphis City Council challenged the fairness of Memphis being the only municipality to pay into public education causing a type of inequitable double taxation. That balance across the county has since shifted, and suburban municipalities eagerly took up the charge to fund public education within their communities. **The City of Memphis is now the only city in Shelby County that does not contribute additional funding to public education.**

It is important to recall that several Council members stated their intent in the funding discussion was to rid the city of the mandate for public education funding, but maintain the possibility of discretionary education funding from the city. Throughout campaigns and speeches in the intervening years, education continues to be referred to as a major issue and top area of concern for the city. And it should be.

Unfortunately, spending priorities of city taxpayers' dollars have not followed the rhetoric, and our city has abdicated its ability and responsibility to support effective programs in schools located in Memphis which increase academic achievement, improve graduation, and enhance postsecondary success. We believe that prioritizing funding for these strategic investments will lead our children and city into a thriving future economy.

In recent years, SCS has been forced to cut more than \$200 million from its budget. The district continues to be underfunded by the state and Shelby County government has been slow to fill the funding gap created by the city's decision to cut education funding. Even with these cuts, SCS has made improvements in its programs and outcomes for students. Investments from the Gates Foundation and federal funds have supported development of teacher and leader effectiveness, academic improvements in Priority Schools by the iZone, and increased access to quality pre-k across the city.

It was recently reported that for the first time in years, SCS began its FY 2017-2018 budgeting process without a projected shortfall. While the district is operating within its current means, we know that this budget remains lower than the actual needs of all the children in our district. Still, the district is taking this opportunity to identify and prioritize investments that it can make to further improve academic achievement for students. One of the exciting investments SCS will make is in the Superintendent's Summer Learning Academy. This will provide a free program for 5,500 students to experience learning and fun throughout the summer, which aligns to one of your stated priorities. The district is also planning investments in schools that are in critical need of support to improve academic achievement, enhance facilities, expand programs, and increase enrollment which could keep them from the need to close more schools and further impact our underserved neighborhoods and their prospects for redevelopment. Improving these schools and their surrounding neighborhoods requires the alignment of strategic planning efforts and community development efforts fueled by the city.

Without a pending funding crisis, this is an opportune time for the city to reconsider its investment strategy in public education. With a focus on impacting outcomes and investing in best practices, this is an investment that will shape the future Memphis. While the continuation of the MPLOY program and the development of summer and spring break camps are a start, our city must do more. We also must ensure that the investments in

education achieve needed academic and youth development outcomes that will support our students in school and beyond.

In your State of the City address this year, you said, “Yet, it is not all about police officers and Mike Rallings. If anyone tells you that’s all my crime plan entails, then that tells you that they’re not listening.” After which you went on to discuss plans for youth engagement. We hope that you will think of our youth not under a crime plan, but under a youth success plan where supporting their educational achievement is paramount. Our young people should be viewed not as part of a crime problem, but as the solution to the challenges of our city. Our commitment to education and youth success should be at least as much of a priority as increasing the police force. Investing in our students’ success is not just an education issue, and certainly not just a crime problem. Committing to the success of our young people is the best strategic goal for building our competitive advantage in attracting jobs, growing the economy, and increasing the city’s population.

Memphis has a higher percentage of opportunity youth than the other 50 largest metropolitan statistical areas. A recent report stated that there are over 16,000 unfilled jobs available in Memphis. It is estimated that only 7% of students in Memphis are graduating from high school college or career ready. Additionally, a recent study found that SCS was one of the most fiscally disadvantaged school districts in the country facing “some of the most extreme fiscal conditions.”

To address these challenges, and ensure that they do not persist, we must identify solutions, fund them, measure their success/impact, and expand or change the program solutions based on their outcomes. Research supports that to address these issues, we must invest in high school graduation success (dropout prevention), ensure students are prepared for college and/or have access to local industry relevant career technical education, and provide opportunities for youth to learn and apply skills. These things cannot happen by just expanding library hours, creating spring break camps, and continuing to only provide summer learning and job experiences for 1,000 young people (when 7,000 apply).

Despite the city’s many commitments and liabilities, to realize its full potential, a commitment to improve education outcomes for all our young people must be made. We believe the city can make investments in education and help scale and sustain effective programs that have the highest opportunity for success. Two local education funds in Memphis have expressed interest in supporting efforts to disburse education funding from the city with low or no administration costs. This provides a mechanism for supporting education without creating a maintenance of effort issue. Seeding Success has built an infrastructure for identifying gaps in our cradle to career pipeline and methods to assess and improve outcomes from education institutions and community partners that impact academic achievement. There are other potential funders available, but the city must show a commitment to its own future and build the case for additional investments.

Consider the potential impact and return on investment:

- Increased number of young people who are prepared for college and career
- Expanded career and technical training opportunities to build a stronger workforce
- Expanded access to educational and enrichment opportunities from summer and afterschool programs that will allow young people and families to build a better future
- Introduction and maintenance of a proactive approach to address economic and workforce development needs, reduce crime, and reverse negative trends

Across the city, public meetings are currently being held and planned to allow citizens the chance to share their budgeting priorities. We anticipate you will find that in terms of allocating resources, a majority of your constituents hold our young people and their education in the highest regard. As the question ‘What is your top priority?’ is posed to citizens throughout the budget review process, we encourage you to consider how you will and should answer.

Funding education should be a top priority for everyone who has a vested interest in moving Memphis forward, and creating opportunities for more residents to thrive. Now is the time to come together to ensure our city's future leaders are positioned to succeed.

We hope you will make the right decision to fund students first. By putting their education needs at the forefront of our hearts, minds, and budget discussions, we can ensure the brightest possible future for Memphis.

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss our shared goals for the success of our youth and our city. Coordination for response or meeting available by Cardell Orrin - corrin@stand.org or 901-509-1325.

Respectfully,

Black Lives Matter
Business Contracting Consortium
Campaign for School Equity
Memphis Education Fund
Memphis Grassroots Organizing Coalition
Memphis-Shelby County Education Association
Our Revolution 901

School Seed
Seeding Success
Shelby County Young Democrats
SisterReach
Stand for Children
Tennessee Young Democrats

Rep. Raumesh Akbari
Rev. Anthony Anderson
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Chris Caldwell
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