

**Programs and Partnerships**  
**Niswonger Foundation Board Update**  
**Thursday, August 13, 2020**

**Niswonger Consortium of Schools Systems**

The Niswonger Consortium (19 school districts) are jointly providing the resources to support Comprehensive Educational Resources (CER). A recently hired curriculum director will work with all school districts in the consortium to accomplish five primary tasks. First, a regional curriculum will be developed, aligned to state standards and containing the rigor to help students master essential skills. This curriculum will be supported by the necessary materials and resources to successfully implement the curriculum. Secondly, pacing guides will be established for all core subjects. Thirdly, benchmark assessments will be developed to ensure students have mastered essential skills. Next, a data management system will be developed to help district level staff analyze and effectively use state/benchmark data to drive the instructional program. Finally, the director will maintain regular communication with the Superintendents, keeping them aware of progress and challenges. Dr. Mia Hyde, longtime educator, literacy specialist, and former director of the First CORE office of the Tennessee Department of Education, has been hired to direct this work. She is based at the Niswonger Foundation.

**Rural LIFE (EIR Grant)**

This summer was intended to be a major transition point for the Rural LIFE project. This summer was to mark the completion of our major research study. It was also the time we would shift our focus for the first set of 36 “treatment” schools in the study to the other group of “comparison” schools. We have previously described how the numbers of schools were declining. We finished with 35 “treatment” schools and the 36 “control” schools were reduced to 31; these reductions were based on consolidations and closures by school systems (based on declining enrollment and fiscal efficiencies).

***COVID Response Plan for 2020-2021 School Year***

The largest impact, however, was the impact of the COVID-19 closures in March (and ongoing uncertainties). The school transitioning to virtual instruction, and ultimately early closure meant that the TN Ready achievement tests were cancelled. The student test scores were the key measure for the research study. We are working with our external evaluator to revise the research plan. We expect to have some significant (and positive) findings; we are yet to know what the new measures will be.

Prior to COVID, the Rural LIFE staff had prepared for the approximately 50 summer professional development programs provided “on-site” in the Niswonger Learning Center. Rapidly, the staff shifted to a Virtual Summer Institute. Through this effort there was a series of more than 40 one-hour webinars attended by more than 1,000 teachers and

administrators. The webinars were led primarily by our coaches, with some key collaboration from other experts.

Another significant (COVID-related) adjustment is that we are consciously “backing off” from the new schools, the ones we were “onboarding” this summer and fall. By design, there would have been some “required” professional development, with some protocols and paperwork serving as prerequisites for the program. However, because the schools are overwhelmed with uncertainty and change, we are acting more as a supportive resource. We are serving to provide several voluntary supports.

We will be starting the school year with a reduction of “in-school” coaching. We will be volunteering to coach teachers involved in remote learning. We will be supporting the implementation of the new English/Language Arts (ELA) curriculum; all schools have a new ELA curriculum this fall. We will be implementing a series of short Professional-Development sessions. The sessions, a series of 30-minute webinars called the NF Remote Learning Series, will be modeled after a successful offering this summer.

#### **Developing Academic Coaches (EIR Grant Partnership with New Teacher Center)**

The partnership between the Niswonger Foundation and the New Teacher Center continues to progress with the goal of developing academic coaches within schools and districts. We have 68 schools who have elected to participate in this grant. Thirty-four of those are in the treatment group for this year and will receive direct support. Those schools represent elementary, middle, and high schools.

We have 61 participating individuals from those 34 schools/districts. Most participants are current classroom teachers who will be receiving training and experiences to foster their development as an academic coach for their teaching peers. Some participants are currently in an academic coaching role at their school and/or district. Those individuals will receive support which will promote the growth of their coaching skills in their current position. Participants may do coaching in the areas of English/Language Arts, Mathematics, or Science. The focus of this grant will involve working with teachers in the span of grades 4-9.

Dr. Richard Bales, former director of Johnson City Schools and, more recently, Niswonger Foundation employee for the Rural LIFE grant, is directing this work. Two lead coaches are employed through the grant. Those lead coaches are the most critical piece in making sure the participants' experiences are of the highest quality. The two lead coaches are Allison Seeley and Alise Wilson. Allison Seeley has academic coaching experience in addition to her classroom experience in English Language Arts at the middle and high school levels. Her most recent coaching experience was through the Rural LIFE grant. Alise Wilson has academic coaching experience in addition to her classroom teaching experiences at the elementary and middle grades in the area of Mathematics. Both lead coaches have tremendous experiences in working with children and adult learners. They also both have rich content knowledge, which will serve the students, teachers, and academic coaches well.

## ***COVID Response Plan for 2020-2021 School Year***

The Developing Academic Coaches grant has embraced a flexible implementation philosophy regarding working with the participants. The planning meetings between the project director and the lead coaches have been, and will continue to be, held virtually. Careful monitoring of participating schools continues to occur as opening decisions are made by the various school districts. In July, the 34 principals involved this year received a virtual two-day training on the goals and implementation strategies that will be used in the coming year. Also, in July, 60+ teachers/academic coaches attended a four-day virtual training. A fifth day is to be scheduled after all schools begin their year. With the goal of supporting participants as they implement coaching strategies with their peers, the lead coaches will work with individuals on how best to implement effective practices. We are prepared to work with each individual school through virtual coaching or in-person strategies. Our plan is to be responsive to schools in a way that adheres to the CDC guidelines adopted by each school. As of now, it appears most of our work will be through a virtual format in addition to the normal electronic forms of communication. Sharing resources for working through a virtual format will be of highest priority as districts move to a remote or virtual format. Both lead coaches have experience in working with online platforms such as Google Classroom and the Learning Management System (Canvas).

### **Niswonger Online**

- Summer 2020 online instruction closed on July 24<sup>th</sup>. As an indication of the direct results of COVID, in Summer 2019, 585 students were enrolled in Niswonger Online. For Summer 2020, 256 students were enrolled. With early school closure, students did not have access to the high school counselors who would have normally assisted with enrollment. With potential budgetary losses, school system officials were less likely to support the cost of the courses.
- Florida Virtual (FLVS) is ending all perpetual contracts with partners. This means that using their online courses with our teachers and having them updated by FLVS each year will end in May 2021. We will take the FLVS courses that we have and use them as a model to create our own online courses, therefore, ending our reliance on a third party for assistance. During this 2020/21 school year, our staff will work with our online teachers to create 26 courses.
- Sevier County will begin enrolling students in our courses this fall. They will be offering students at all their high schools the opportunity to take Latin.
- NiswongerOnline.com is continuously being updated with semester dates and information, our course catalog, and program partnerships.
- Dual enrollment partnerships are being fostered and recent online meetings have been held with ETSU and Tusculum University. Our website reflects DE information for ETSU, Tusculum University, WSCC, and NESCC. I have also been sending out information to all school contacts and students/guardians about extended dates to apply, and other information.

- Affiliate school systems are still showing strong enrollment, even though most are paying in full, with all CARE Foundation funds being used.
- This fall we will be offering two new courses, American Sign Language and Fundamentals of Education. These bring us two new teachers, Erica Phillips (ASL, Washington County Schools, VA Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher) and Kimber McIntyre (Fundamentals of Ed, Greeneville High School).
- Niswonger Online Course Catalog Expansion - This year we will offer additional Math (Algebra I and II) and Science (Chemistry) courses in a fully online setting. Algebra I will be ready this fall, Algebra II and Chemistry will be available in the Spring.

### ***COVID Response Plan for 2020-2021 School Year***

Niswonger K-12 Initiative – We are researching a possible K-12 expansion with the current focus on adding the middle grades, 6-8. This expansion could be used by systems throughout the state to give an online option that can bring home-school students back to public schools. This need has been highlighted due to COVID-19 but is one that will benefit students and school systems long after this crisis passes.

Registration for Fall 2020 is underway. Due to concerns and variations in school opening schedules, we will be lenient on allowing new enrollments through September.

### **NiswongerCARE College and Career Advising**

#### ***Staffing Updates***

- Three full-time advisors have been hired to fill vacancies for 2020-21.
  - Alyssa Gibson, will serve Dobyns-Bennett High School, D-B Excel, and Volunteer High School.
  - Faith Dulling, will serve Cherokee High School, Cosby High School, and Morristown West High School.
  - Heidi Armstrong, will serve Greeneville High School, North Greene High School, and South Greene High School.
- Two part-time advisors were hired through our higher education partnerships.
  - Bailey Hansel, will serve Cocke County High School.
  - Jarad Turpen, will serve Chuckey-Doak High School.

#### ***Delivery of Service Plans***

- All 30 schools have been contacted to determine fall reopening protocols.
- Advisors will begin serving students as schools reopen by providing in person and/or virtual services as determined by each districts' plan.

### ***Summer Training/Professional Learning***

- Advisors completed 18 days of formal virtual and in person trainings
- Advisors completed an online professional learning course developed by the NiswongerCARE Leadership Team that included information, assignments, book studies, and interactive discussion boards
- New Advisors completed 16 units of online training to earn the National College Attainment Network’s “Certified Advisor Badge”
- All Advisors completed specialized training and practice sessions for engaging and assisting students in the virtual environment
- Preparing to provide virtual services through phone, email, text, and video conferencing

### ***Summer Melt Initiative***

Advisors are actively serving recent high school graduates in Big\*Bright\*Future (B\*B\*F) as they prepare to start their journey into post-secondary education this fall. The program’s mission is to help mitigate “Summer Melt” which can be best described as the phenomena in which students who graduate high school, are admitted to and plan to attend a post-secondary institution, never enroll.

- Advisors communicate with students through *Remind*, which is a two-way text messaging platform. Students receive weekly, personalized text messages based on their college choice that will continue until September. Students can ask questions anytime, and can request virtual meetings with their Advisor.
- Advisors also track and monitor progress of students, meeting them where they are and encouraging them through the final steps to enrollment, while informing them of post-secondary updates, changes, and deadlines.
- In 2019, B\*B\*F had a matriculation rate of 74%, meaning that of the 445 students that participated, 329 enrolled and attended a post-secondary institution.
- 481 students are currently enrolled in B\*B\*F, an 8% increase in students from the prior year, despite early school closures due to COVID-19.
- Advisors have sent 3,684 messages to current B\*B\*F students since April 1st, with a high response rate.
- Advisors are currently providing assistance, deadline reminders, and COVID-19 updates for 38 different colleges.

### ***Outcome Data Highlights***

<b>A. 2019-2020 Student Contacts - Pre-COVID Closures</b>	
<b>One on One Student Meetings</b>	<b>Number Served</b>
College Search/Applications	2,427
Financial Aid - FAFSA, TN Promise, Scholarships	6,284
ACT & SAT/Dual Enrollment - Test Prep and registration	580
Total Group Presentations	416

Total # Students in attendance at Group Presentations	7,405
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<b>B. 2019-2020 Virtual Contacts - During COVID Closures</b>	
<b>Virtual Services</b>	<b>Number Served</b>
Individual Student meetings via email/text/virtual meetings	1,863
College Applications	267
Financial Aid/Scholarships	693
Total # Emails/Texts/Calls sent to students and school staff	20,983

### **2019-2020 FAFSA DATA**

- As of July 17th, our schools' submission rate was 89% compared to the state rate of 87%.
- As of July 17th, our schools' completion rate was 79% compared to the state rate of 77%.
- Since March when schools closed due to COVID, 579 students completed their FAFSAs.
- As of July 17th, the FAFSA completion rate was 4% lower than this same time last year; however, this number attests to the Advisors' efforts through the Spring school closures when you consider the state and national data noted below.

Note: Because of COVID all states, including Tennessee, have struggled with FAFSA completion. Nationally, FAFSA completion rates in small towns were down 6.2 percentage points, while rural areas experienced a drop of 4.5 percentage points (NCAN, July 2020).

### ***COVID Response Plan for 2020-2021 School Year***

NiswongerCARE is committed to providing services to students during this uncertain time. With schools offering a myriad of learning opportunities for students, Advisors are prepared to reach students in whatever environment they have chosen. One of the strengths of this program is that our near-peer advisors are incredibly effective at communicating with students. However, when in-person access is limited, it becomes increasingly important to use multiple methods of reaching students; methods that this generation is comfortable with. Advisors have received training on multiple platforms and are well prepared to meet students where they are. Below you will find detailed information regarding our team's response to the COVID challenges as we begin the 2020-2021 school year. Overall, our Advisors are fully equipped and readily prepared to provide college and career assistance in a remote, virtual world, while also utilizing cost-effective ways to support students.

## ***Partnership Building***

***School Administrators and School Counselors*** have always been strong partners with NiswongerCARE. Our leadership's work with the Directors of Schools and the ongoing communication with this key group has provided greater direction in how to move forward with our programming. Considering the challenges they are currently facing, communication with administrators is key to gaining access to students. Because of the strength of these relationships, which we have built over the years, we are able to collaborate on how to best serve students as school reopens this fall.

***Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC)*** and NiswongerCARE have developed a strong partnership. Erika Adams, their outreach representative for our region, provides much needed data. As students complete college-going milestones, such as TN Promise application, FAFSA, etc., this data is collected through TSAC's e\*Grads system. Through our partnership with TSAC, Ms. Adams sends weekly reports with student level data allowing each advisor to see which students in his/her school have completed tasks, need assistance with tasks, or need to complete tasks. This was vitally important in the spring when schools were shut down. With these reports, advisors knew which students to reach out to, in order to provide assistance.

In addition, this partnership has allowed us to expand on the data we currently collect. With additional report information, we can now track student data on the Hope Scholarship. This will allow us to see how many students in our service area qualified for Hope, as well as, how many actually used the Hope Scholarship in the fall, thereby ensuring that they followed through with their college-going plan in a TN institute of higher education. This will be important information this fall as we struggle with keeping students on track to attend postsecondary, this year, as the uncertainties associated with COVID-19 have made many students rethink their plans. We can also begin to track retention with scholarship reports, a data point we had previously been unable to obtain.

***Other College Access Providers*** are collaborating with NiswongerCARE to form partnerships to most effectively reach all students. Tennessee Higher Education Corporation and AdviseTN, who also serve a limited number of students in our region, are working with our leadership to find areas of alignment and to share resources.

## ***Technology Tools***

In preparation for the number of students who will be in remote learning environments, NiswongerCARE has identified and trained Advisors, on several virtual tools, to reach students under various circumstances. The three tools described will provide communication and access to students in multiple ways.

- ***Remind*** is a two-way texting platform that our advisors use during the summer to communicate with students in our summer melt program. Through Remind,

advisors can send announcements (texts to large groups of students) or can send text messages to individual students. In addition, students can text our advisors through Remind, thereby protecting our advisors personal cell phone numbers. Our goal for this school year is to get every senior into our Remind account so that, as some, or at times all students, are working remotely, we are still able to communicate. As one school principal recently noted, “While we will be communicating with students primarily through email, we need to use everything at our disposal to keep students informed and engaged. This adds an additional layer of communication.”

As we transition from a paid subscription of Remind to the free service, we face several challenges. The free service limits the number of students in each account as well as the number of “classes”. Advisors are also limited in the number of characters they can send students in group announcements. Despite the limitations the free service produces, our advisors have creatively structured their individual Remind accounts to ensure that they are able to serve each senior student. The restrictions regarding the number of characters allowed will require advisors to shorten the length of the group messages and announcements sent to students; however, they will be able to attach images or screenshots with more specific details or provide a link to a college-going task. Fortunately, advisors will be able to individually message each student in Remind with no limitations and students can respond back, just like an actual text message. Students will also be able to attach images or screenshots if they need assistance in completing a specific task.

- **Zoom Video Conferencing** is a cloud-based video communications App that allows you to set up virtual video and audio conferencing, webinars, live chats, screen-sharing, and other collaborative capabilities. We believe that Virtual Advising through video meetings can help to establish a strong, trusting and productive advising relationship. Advising sessions through email, texting, and phone calls can be effective, but often lack the visual cues that help students and advisors to develop a positive advising relationship. In face-to-face advising sessions, the Advisor can see reactions on the student’s face, and students can see the advisor’s face to determine if s/he is genuine, caring, and competent. Video meetings offer many advantages when working with individual students and groups of students; however, organizing and planning are key to their effectiveness.

Advisors have received training for delivering services through Zoom. Training included a focus on exploring best practices for hosting virtual video meetings, and proactively preparing for technical issues. In addition, they have completed two role playing scenarios to give them an opportunity to experience and practice every aspect of hosting a virtual video meeting, for an individual student, as well as, a group of students. This tool will especially be effective when students are trying to complete more complicated tasks, such as, applying for TN Promise and

the FAFSA application. Even more importantly, video conferencing provides Advisors with the opportunity to build relationships with students.

- **Phone Access** for Advisors is more important during this time. Many parents and students have complicated issues and situations that cannot be effectively communicated through text and email. In consideration of the increased needs for this kind of communication, Dr. John Payne worked diligently with TUC Technology, the Foundation's phone provider, to explore cost effective options. As a result, Advisors were able to have an office phone number assigned to them at a cost of \$1.50 per month. Each Advisor was able to install an application on their mobile device, which allows them to initiate and receive phone calls from students and parents without the liability of exposing the Advisor's personal mobile numbers.

### ***Social Media***

When schools transitioned to remote learning in the Spring, we began concerted efforts to better utilize our multiple social media platforms to engage our followers and get important college-going updates in the hands of students, parents, and school staff. We learned quickly that social media is a crucial piece in continuing to reach students, especially when working remotely. As a result of the enhanced efforts to engage students and families on social media, we increased the number of followers and subscribers across our three main platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) by 70% since March. Key considerations for leveraging social media are provided below.

- Launch an outreach campaign to increase followers across all of our social media platforms.
- Increase student engagement with the assistance of NiswongerCARE advisors who will enlist students to follow social media accounts while advertising their services and interacting with students.
- Create multiple social media resources for students, parents, and school staff that post multiple times a week.
  - Posts include reminders for completing important college-related tasks and deadlines, such as, completing college applications, submitting TN Promise applications, submitting the FAFSA, as well as, offering encouragement, support, and assistance.
- Connect with other college access professionals and state officials to stay current with new initiatives, mandates, and expectations, in regards to COVID-19 that could impact our students in Northeast Tennessee.

### ***Accountability and Data***

Data collection and logs to record daily activity have been updated to include even greater accountability for virtual services. Updated collection measures include more

detailed documentation of virtual contacts and tasks completed with students and other stakeholders. Not only does this data collection create greater accountability for Advisors in regards to student outcomes when communication and services are provided virtually, but will also provide important feedback regarding the effectiveness of the various types of virtual communications. We hope this data will help us to identify best practices and inform our future work.

### **CareerConnect**

- The CareerConnect program graduated 35 seniors within the Class of 2020. Due to COVID-19, graduation ceremonies were altered, including the annual senior banquet. However, we still celebrated our seniors' accomplishments by sending out individual senior shoutouts via our social media pages and sending care packages.
- CareerConnect selections were made for the Class of 2023. Twenty-five students from each participating school were selected. Due to COVID, orientation plans shifted and will now be held in August.
- The annual Summer Experience had its share of challenges navigating the COVID-19 climate. Originally there were two camps scheduled for two weeks - one in June for rising seniors and one in July for our rising juniors. As the summer progressed, a decision was made to condense camps to one week each in July. In the end, both of those camps were cancelled due to a rise in positive COVID cases in Greene County and surrounding areas.
- CareerConnect was able to send two students for a six-week paid internship at MECO in Greeneville. Our students gained valuable hands-on experience in engineering and product development. Both of our students received great reviews from their supervisors, and even asked to stay on for the remainder of the summer.

### ***COVID Response Plan for 2020-2021 School Year***

- Creating virtual COVID-19 backup lesson plans for our monthly CareerConnect meetings. If schools have switched to virtual learning, CareerConnect will shift as well with adapting lessons to be online-friendly.
- Created virtual CareerConnect hubs through Google Classrooms that will house everything CareerConnect related - from recorded lessons, to lesson materials, to dropboxes to turn in assignments. This will allow a seamless transition if schools switch from in-person to virtual learning. Additionally, this will allow students in the CareerConnect program to still be able to participate from home.
- Contacting students/families letting them know about virtual changes and getting them set up accordingly.
- Researching different opportunities for career/college exploration that can be done virtually.

### **WE Track (Work Ethic Diploma Tracking)**

- A new partnership with the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce includes the addition of several Southeast Tennessee school districts.
- The addition of Rutherford County school district pushed our progress to over 200% growth since Summer 2019.
- A partnership has been created with the Crater Region of Virginia (8 school districts). Since this is an out-of-state project, it will be revenue generating in support of the CareerConnect program.
- The online WE Track site is being updated and expanded with new features to assist with functionality (particularly in a post-COVID world)

### ***COVID Response Plan for 2020-2021 School Year***

- We have had to respond to slower communication with schools leading to slower pace of onboarding of new Explorers.
- The lack of consistent school start times will impact marketing to students and student participation.
- The loss of funding from state has impacted the continued expansion of the technology (although able to use carryover from last year's funding).

### **Grant Activity**

#### ***Grants Submitted***

- 2020 Mid-phase (\$8 million) Education, Innovation and Research (EIR) grant was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. This grant is designed to 1) focus on strengthening the teaching/learning classroom experiences with engaging materials for students and professional development for teachers; 2) experiential out-of-school time opportunities to explore STEM content; 3) expanding participation in rigorous STEM and dual enrollment courses.
- National Security Administration grant partner with University of Alabama-Huntsville. This proposal includes the development and implementation of an online cybersecurity high school curriculum targeting rural and home school students.
- State of Tennessee Community CARES grant proposal to be one of six agencies to provide administrative oversight for the \$150 million being provided to Tennessee not-for-profit agencies.
- State of Tennessee Community CARES grant to not-for-profit agencies to support new initiatives for Niswonger Online and Niswonger CARE.
- 2020 Early-phase (\$4 million) Education, Innovation and Research (EIR) grant is in the initial stages of preparation. This grant will focus on efforts to develop, implement, and evaluate teacher-directed professional learning projects designed to enhance instructional practice and improve achievement and attainment for high-need students.

***Grants Received***

- The Niswonger Foundation received a forgivable loan in the amount of \$200,529 through the Payroll Protection Program (PPP).

**Recent Donations (May-July 2020)**

Tennessee Board of Regents	\$ 125,000.00
The Care Foundation	\$ 50,000.00
First Tennessee Bank	\$ 25,000.00
John Deere	\$ 10,000.00
Ballad Health	\$ 6,500.00
Brandon and Jama Boles	\$ 1,250.00
Patrick Creutzinger	\$ 1,000.00
Anthony Pentz	\$ 1,000.00
Michael Roberts	\$ 1,000.00
Michael & Betty McCullough	\$ 100.00
Corporate Giving	\$ 88.39
Total	\$ 252,938.40