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Knox Education Foundation Launches to Support Project GRAD Knoxville, Community Schools and Innovation in Knox County Schools

Board Announces CEO to Lead New Non-Profit

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. April 24, 2020 —The Knox Education Foundation has launched this week to support Project GRAD Knoxville and Great Schools Partnership's Community Schools and Innovation initiatives. The non-profit's board has unanimously chosen a chief executive officer: Chris Letsos, who has 25 years of leadership and fundraising experience with Boys & Girls Clubs and for the past five years, has served as president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Tampa Bay.

Letsos will begin his new position in June. Until then, Jonathan Scoonover will serve as Knox Education Foundation's interim CEO. Scoonover has served as interim president of the Great Schools Partnership since October.

"The Knox Education Foundation will provide oversight and streamline fundraising, finance and human resources support for Project GRAD Knoxville and Great Schools Partnership's Community Schools and Innovation initiatives," said Anthony Wise, Knox Education Foundation board chair and president of Pellissippi State Community College. "We're in the perfect position to build upon the good work that's already been done with Knox County Schools to foster equitable generational change, encourage innovation and improve outcomes in our community,"

There are currently no plans for changes to programming impacting students, schools, families and communities. The foundation's structure does allow for expansion in the future.

"With this new organization in place, new board and new leader, the possibility exists to look at what else we should be doing to support public education and how we might be a catalyst for better outcomes for all of our children," said Wise. The board selected Letsos to lead the new Knox Education Foundation because of his leadership and fundraising experience with the Boys and Girls Club in Tampa. He has successfully partnered with one of the [nation's largest school districts](#), Hillsborough County, Fla.

Letsos says it's a humbling honor to be called to bring together Project GRAD Knoxville and Great Schools Partnership under one umbrella for the first time as the Knox Education Foundation's first CEO. "It's an incredible privilege to bring my family to Knoxville to not only raise them up but to help our new community raise up all the children," said Letsos.

"My entire career has been dedicated to serving all youth and particularly those who are disconnected. I've done so through collaboration and I've been committed to it because it's been my path, my journey. I am a first generation American. My parents came here to give us a better life. The great equalizer in my life has always been education."

Letsos and his wife will be moving to Knoxville in the coming weeks. He said they are extremely excited about raising their children in Knoxville and having them attend Knox County Schools (KCS). He is equally looking forward to leading a foundation with programs that have made such a positive impact in our community.

That impact continues today. While schools are closed due to COVID-19, Great Schools Partnership and Project GRAD Knoxville have continued partnering with Knox County Schools and our community to care for the district's children and families.

During this challenging time, our teams were able to provide supports on a variety of levels. Project GRAD Knoxville continues to provide weekend food support to the students at Fulton and Austin East High Schools, while also providing academic and other support to K-16 students. Community Schools continues supporting students in their weekend backpack program across all 16 sites, while also quickly leveraging existing partner relationships to develop a system that is infusing an additional 8,000 meals each week into our community's most vulnerable neighborhoods. Innovation has been working with the school district to support specifically identified needs related to food, technology access, and other needs.

"Our teams have been working with the Knoxville-Knox County Emergency Management Agency, Second Harvest and a myriad of other partners on how to best support our communities and families," Wise said.

ADDITIONAL INFO ON THE NEW KNOX EDUCATION FOUNDATION'S THREE COMPONENTS

As noted above, the Knox Education Foundation will support three strategic areas: Project GRAD Knoxville, Community Schools and Innovation. Below is some additional information on each area.

[Project GRAD Knoxville](#), established in 2001, is a nationally recognized K-16 (elementary through postsecondary) education non-profit program known for helping to improve post-secondary attendance and completion rates among students from disadvantaged circumstances. Ronni Chandler will continue to lead Project GRAD Knoxville.

Great Schools Partnership was founded in 2005 as a non-profit charitable trust to support Knox County Schools. Great Schools Partnership's [Community Schools](#) strategy will be one of the core focuses of the new Knox Education Foundation. Community Schools convenes community resources by utilizing the school as the neighborhood hub to remove barriers to student learning, and to promote healthy, vibrant families, schools and communities. Working with more than 275 agencies and partners across our community, Community Schools are established trusted neighborhood centers. The Community School initiative will continue in the 16 schools that have been served by Great Schools Partnership. Cheryl Ball, who has served as vice president of operations, will continue to lead the Community Schools strategy.

The foundation's third focus is **Innovation**. Innovation is a solutions-focused approach that supports Knox County Schools by creatively addressing real barriers to student learning through evidence-based, best practices. Past programs include [Leaders for Readers](#), the [TeacherPreneur](#) grant program, Arts-Integrated Tutoring and [Thank-A- Teacher](#). Jonathan Scoonover, who is currently serving as the interim CEO of the Knox Education Foundation, will lead the Innovation initiative.

Stephanie Jenkins, who has served as vice president of finance and human resources for Great Schools Partnership and Project GRAD Knoxville, will now oversee finance and human resources for the Knox Education Foundation.

KNOX EDUCATION FOUNDATION INAUGURAL BOARD MEMBERS

Anthony Wise, Knox Education Foundation & Community Schools Advisory Board Chair

Larry Mauldin, Project GRAD Knoxville Advisory Board Chair

Laurens Tullock, Innovation Advisory Board Chair

Knoxville City Mayor Indya Kincannon

Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs

Knox County Schools Superintendent Bob Thomas

Knox County Schools Board Chair Susan Horn

Knox County Commission Chair Hugh Nystrom

Crissy Haslam, Board at Large A

Randy Boyd, Board at Large B

LeRoy Thompson, Board at Large C

Susan Brown, Board at Large D

For more information about the Knox Education Foundation go to: www.knoxed.org.