

Program helps students 'REACH' college

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In most middle class American homes 25 years ago, young people were expected to continue their education after high school at a four-year university or technical college. This was considered to be a necessary step toward fulfilling the American Dream.

Today, too many students in our community are living in homes at or below the poverty level. As their parents do well to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, the thought of going to college is not even in their dreams. Other than their teachers, many don't personally know anyone with a college degree. There may be no one in their immediate family who completed high school, much less graduated from college.

Because finding money for college may seem like an impossible goal to almost three-fourths of the students in Whitfield County Schools, we decided to participate in Realizing Educational Achievement Can Happen, or REACH, our state's first needs-based mentorship and college scholarship program. Gov. Nathan Deal launched REACH Georgia in 2012 at the Georgia Institute of Technology as part of the state's Complete College Georgia initiative. Estimates indicate that by 2018, more than 60 percent of available jobs in Georgia will require post-secondary studies. We want our students to be prepared to fill those jobs.

The organization, REACH Georgia, partners with eligible school systems to identify low-income, academically-promising eighth-grade students who can apply to be a REACH scholar. To be eligible to apply, students must qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Price School Meals Program, meet citizenship and residency requirements, and have good grades, attendance and behavior. A committee of community members and school system employees will review those applications and choose five students to participate in the program. Students chosen to be REACH scholars receive additional college-related support and the promise of a financial scholarship upon successful program completion. Five new eighth-grade students will be added to the cohort each year.

The REACH students are selected during middle school and sign a contract to maintain a 2.5 grade point average, avoid crime, drugs and misbehavior, and meet with a volunteer mentor and academic coach until they graduate from high school. Their parents or guardians also sign a contract to support their student through high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation. The school system will match each participant with a mentor to meet with the student during school at least two times each month. The mentor remains with the student until they graduate.

Students who complete the program requirements earn a scholarship of up to \$10,000 (\$2,500 a year for up to four years). They can use the REACH scholarship at any eligible two- or four-year institution in Georgia and still qualify for the Georgia HOPE Scholarship. REACH scholarships are provided using a combination of state funds, statewide private donations and local community donations. The governor has recommended \$3.6 million in his fiscal year 2018 budget.

This is an excellent opportunity for our students and can be a benefit for our entire community. If you are interested in learning more about this program, would like to volunteer as a mentor or would like more information on helping to sponsor scholarships, please call the Whitfield County Schools central office at (706) 217-6780.