

Beyond getting into college

By AMY HOLDSMAN

DURING his inaugural speech in January, Mayor Nutter said, "Here in Philadelphia, only 18 percent of city residents have a four-year bachelor's degree. That ranks us 92nd on the list of the top 100 cities in the country."

He challenged us to double the number the city residents with a four-year degree over the next five to seven years. It's an ambitious goal, but attainable.

Just a few weeks ago, White-Williams Scholars celebrated the graduation of 300 Philadelphia public high school seniors, 96 percent of whom are going on to college in the fall. How did they do it? They worked hard, stayed committed and asked for help from the agencies and services that are here to provide it.

White-Williams Scholars has been providing high-achieving, low-income Philadelphia public high school students with financial, academic and social assistance since the 1800s.

For years, our focus was on helping motivated students traverse the often rocky terrain of high school by offering financial stipends to cover basic needs like transportation, clothing and school supplies. To supplement these services, we began including academic enrichment programs to help prepare students for college admittance.

Two years ago, we became acutely aware of our need to make changes. We understood that a disconnect existed between requirements for high school graduation and the ideal college prep curriculum recommended by most colleges. We learned that a number of our scholars who maximized the curriculum in their high schools still ended up taking non-credit remedial courses when they entered college.

While we were providing support to help students get through high school and make it into college, we needed to focus on making sure these students graduated from college. In a city that offers a wealth of higher education options, we are firmly committed to seeing that more of the city's youth not only have the opportunity to attend college but are prepared to graduate.

The evolution of our program has resulted in the birth of College Connection. With this program, we not only meet current needs of our students but prepare them for college by offering challenging and rigorous academic training.

WE BELIEVE that students who complete this four-year program will graduate with the academic skills, self-knowledge and firm understanding of career and educational options that will prepare them for college success.

Increasing the number of college-educated citizens, especially among the most disadvantaged, will move Philadelphia further along the road toward being the world-class city we all desire.

The cycle of poverty and hopelessness often stifles the dreams and aspirations of young people. Our scholars are a diverse group of talented students who offer inspiration, motivation and support to each other despite negative social influences. Despite many obstacles, they're committed to the future and to their success.

We plan to work on behalf of, as a model for and in partnership with the School District of Philadelphia and the city to provide students with the tools they need for academic and life success. We share the enthusiasm of Mayor Nutter and the responsibility for meeting his stated goal.

Mr. Mayor, I can assure you that you have a partner in education right here in Philadelphia. *

Amy Holdsman is executive director of the White-Williams Scholars program.