CPE

Opening Remarks – Dr. Aaron Thompson
The Path Forward Forum
Why The Path Forward? Opening Remarks

Good morning! I'm thrilled to see such a large and diverse group of educators here today to talk about the future of education in Kentucky after COVID.

This conference combines two annual CPE events – the Student Success Summit for college and university professionals, and the Institute for a College-Going Culture, for GEAR UP Kentucky educators working in middle and high schools.

I think the interdisciplinary nature of this event will promote the kind of systemic thinking we'll need to make student transitions more seamless.

Over the next three days, we'll be brainstorming about how we can move more students, more seamlessly, from secondary to postsecondary education, and from postsecondary education to the workplace.

It's hard to believe it's been over a year since the global pandemic shuttered schools and businesses, forcing us to work and learn from home.

I don't know about you, but I'm more adept at Zoom, Teams, WebEx, Blue Jeans, Skype, Google Meet, and GoToMeeting than I ever thought I'd be.

Working remotely not only changed the way we work, it changed our perception of time. With no firm boundary between work, school and home, all of our tasks have started to bleed into each other.

We've learned how to work and study in shorter chunks of time, *all* of the time, it sometimes seems. We switch from homework to housework like toggling between two computer screens.

Now that we're finally getting shots in arms, some parts of our Pre-COVID routine are starting to return. But our goal shouldn't be to go back to "life as usual." If COVID taught us anything, it's that **a lot of what we were doing before the pandemic wasn't working for a lot of people.**

The challenges that have always limited educational access and success in KY became even greater obstacles

in 2020. Poverty, poor mental and physical health, chronic absenteeism, inadequate Internet access – all of these risk factors worsened, particularly for people of color and rural residents.

- According to KY Kids Count, about two-thirds of Kentucky's Hispanic households with children lost income during the pandemic— higher than the overall rate of 53%.

- When surveyed, 45% of Black parents said they were employed, far lower than the 63% of white respondents.

- According to Common Sense Media, over a third of KY's K-12 students lacked an adequate Internet connection.

It shouldn't have taken a public health crisis to make us take equity in education seriously. But now that we have, there's no going back.

This has been the most trying time we've endured in recent memory. We've lost a lot, and many of us are suffering. Our students didn't get to celebrate important milestones like prom and graduation. Stress, frustration and isolation have made it difficult to perform at our

highest level. Businesses closed, people lost jobs – thousands of Kentuckians lost their lives.

But adversity has a way of reminding us of what is truly important. Our pivot to virtual learning proved our resiliency, and taught us skills that can move us into the future. As we return to our offices and classrooms, we have an opportunity to think about how or if we keep doing what we've always done.

Think about this question - **What could we accomplish in education if we stopped worrying about upholding tradition or maintaining the status quo?** For instance:

- Does a 6-hour school day with summers off still make sense? What about two semesters of college a year?

- What if the length of a semester or course were determined by competencies instead of seat time?

- What if every student began earning college credit in high school, not just the highest performing students?

- What if high school seniors had to opt out of college, instead of opting in?

- What if they had to opt out of the FAFSA, instead of opting in?

- What if every student was guaranteed a seat in a college classroom, either at KCTCS or a public university?

- What if we decided that standardized admissions tests had outlived their usefulness, and were better at predicting socio-economic status than academic potential?

There is much uncertainty surrounding the future of education, and circumstances that we can't control.

- We don't know if college enrollment will continue to drop, or if students who took a gap year last year will return this fall.

- We don't know how many high school students will decide to take advantage of the General Assembly's offer to re-do their senior year, and how that might affect fall enrollment.

- We don't know if the demand for online or hybrid learning has grown or diminished because of the pandemic.

But there is much within our control, which we have the ability to change. We can build on the lessons we've learned during the pandemic to make our educational system more equitable and effective.

- We've learned that teleconferencing made some of the services we provide, like counseling and advising, more convenient and less intimidating for students. Maybe that should continue.

- We've learned that it's not unreasonable for students and parents to expect that a college's business functions will be automated, so they can order transcripts and pay bills online, outside of normal business hours.

- We've learned that when done well, hybrid teaching gives students the flexibility to keep learning even through the most difficult of circumstances.

I stand before you today with more questions than answers, but that's okay. What I do know is that we can determine the best path forward if we work together and share our knowledge and expertise. I hope this will be the first in a series of conversations to help us do just that.