



Nashville, Tennessee

# Task force work helps disadvantaged students get to coveted classrooms

*Find out how Nashville uses the Ready by 21 framework to create new partnerships that help drive kids to school.*



Free rides: Students use their school IDs to take public buses.

**F**or those who think a task force never changes anything, some youths in Nashville can prove otherwise – if you can catch them as they hop on city buses for school, rec programs, libraries and home, all for free.

They do that through a new program that shows how building broader partnerships can lead to on-the-ground changes for young people.

Partnerships broadened significantly here in 2010, when Mayor Karl Dean formed a task force to develop a youth master plan for Davidson County and Nashville (the county seat). That was part of a larger effort by Dean to improve youth supports and outcomes throughout the city – an effort that employed Ready by 21 strategies and earned Nashville a selection to the Ready by 21 Southeast Cities Challenge, bringing technical support and other resources to implement those strategies.

As the task force created its youth master plan, two virtual strangers were assigned to the group's transportation subcommittee: Paul Ballard, CEO of

Nashville's Metropolitan Transit Authority, and Fred Carr, chief operating officer for the Metro Nashville Public Schools. Before this, "the MTA and school district did not talk at all," says Danielle Mezera, director of the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth.

But through the task force, Ballard says, "All these personal relationships were developed between the schools and the MTA. This synergy developed. We started saying, 'How can we do this better, how can we do that better?'"

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## Seeking Solutions

There was plenty of "this" and "that" to work with. The subject of transportation "kept coming up" in different subcommittees, Ballard says. "The working groups kept coming back to the issue of, 'We have great programs, but how do you get the young people where they need to go?'"

That's especially challenging in a county of more than 500 square miles. "We have a lot of neighborhoods that are deserts in terms of activities for young people and jobs for young people," says Mezera of



the mayor's office. "Their ability to get out of their neighborhood and get where they need to go is crucially important."



For example: Nashville offers an array of specialty schools that students can attend in lieu of their neighborhood schools; these include magnet schools with advanced academic programs and academies that focus on such fields as arts, business and engineering. The twist is that the students often need to arrange their own transportation – and low-income students typically don't have a parent available to shuttle them around or the money for daily bus commutes. "To accomplish our diversity goals," Carr says, the school system needs to make those schools more accessible to more students.

The MTA, meanwhile, is "trying to make it as easy as possible for young folks to use public transportation," Ballard says, so they know that "you don't have to jump in your car to go everywhere."

The men found a solution in student ID cards; kids use them for such transactions as riding school buses, getting lunch and checking out books from public libraries. Ballard and Carr worked out a deal through which a chip can be imbedded in the cards and read by the MTA fare meters. Any student ID can now be an MTA bus pass.

The chip-imbedded cards were rolled out this fall to students in free- and reduced-price meal programs who attend specialty schools. The youths can use the cards to go anywhere, anytime. Metro Nashville Public Schools pays a flat monthly fee for each student rider. (Most users are in middle and high school.)

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The arrangement "levels the playing field for entrance to magnet schools for kids that might not be able to afford cross-town transportation," Carr says. And "it's a whole lot more efficient for us to provide a student with an MTA bus pass than it is to hire a driver and buy a bus."

For the MTA, the deal helps "build ridership for a lifetime," Ballard says.

Some city officials are talking about expanding the program to all students.

## Lessons

"Smart" ID cards themselves are not new. What this initiative shows, Ballard says, is that "relationships matter."

When it comes to building relationships, nothing beats face time. "E-mails are great," Ballard says. "But when you're trying to create new ideas, new thoughts, you can't do that by e-mail. You've got to sit down face-to-face, look at people, bounce off ideas."

In fact, school and bus officials now meet every two weeks to discuss other ideas, like putting students on MTA buses when the MTA and school bus routes overlap. "Now we have a very robust relationship between these two agencies around student choice when it comes to transportation," says Mezera of the mayor's office.

City Councilman Ronnie Steine adds another takeaway: That school and MTA officials took action after "their interaction with young people during the community master plan process or through their work on the Nashville Afterzone Alliance. This is a perfect example of what can happen in a community when adults and youth are at the same table."

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