

Phillips Foundation gives Say Yes a \$5 million thumbs up

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Elizabeth Phillips, executive director of the Phillips Foundation, announces the organization's pledge of \$5 million toward Guilford County Schools' \$28 million goal set to land a partnership with Say Yes to Education, a foundation that helps provide children the opportunity to go to college. Kristen Zachary | HPE

Free college tuition for all Guilford County students inched closer Monday to reality.

The Phillips Foundation, a grant-making organization in Greensboro, pledged \$5 million — its largest gift ever — toward a goal of \$28 million needed by Guilford County Schools to land a partnership with Say Yes to Education.

Say Yes, a program known in the Northeast for increasing graduation rates and giving students the opportunity to go to college, is expanding, and Guilford County is the lead contender.

The \$28 million GCS, the Guilford Education Alliance and other organizations are working to raise is a fraction of what ultimately would be a last-dollar scholarship endowment fund for district graduates.

Officials would not say the total amount raised as of Monday but said the fundraising team's focus right now is major gifts. Additional announcements are expected in the coming weeks.

"To achieve this goal would send a strong and necessary message to Say Yes that we have the financial wherewithal and commitment in Guilford County to back up the excitement we feel about this potential opportunity," said Mona Edwards, chief operating officer of The Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro. Edwards said she believes Guilford County can meet the challenge of securing the funds in time for a fall launch. That would mean 2016 Guilford County graduates could be the first to benefit.

The Phillips Foundation kicked off the fundraising effort Monday with its \$5 million gift, the largest in its history and the first major pledge for Guilford's Say Yes campaign. "Phillips Foundation seeks out once-in-a-generation, transformational grant opportunities that produce positive, measurable outcomes for our community," said Elizabeth Phillips, executive director. Say Yes has a proven track record of inspiring and impacting students' lives and graduation rates, she said, making it an easy choice for funding.

The Say Yes effort, founded in 1987 by George Weiss, originally focused on securing scholarship money for graduates of individual schools before it turned its focus to entire communities in New York with citywide efforts beginning in Syracuse and Buffalo in 2008 and 2012, respectively. About a year and a half ago, Say Yes began eyeing expansion and looked at 120 of the larger school districts across the nation. That search was narrowed to 21, then to three.

Say Yes would propel Guilford into being viewed as a child-centered county, said Alan Duncan, board of education chairman. "This initiative is transformative in what it can do for our children and what it can do for our community," he said. "The old saying, 'To those who have the least, we owe the most?'" Duncan said. "That's our children. On any kind of scale, our children are the ones with the least," he said. "We can make a place in this county to serve as a shining example where our children who may have the least are looked out for the most."

The opportunity to attend college with tuition paid would be life changing for students, their families and Guilford County, said Edwards, who also serves as a member of the GEA board of directors. The effort not only would pave the path for every student to attend college, she said, but it also would unite the community. "This is a long-term investment for our community, one that will spark cultural and

economic dividends and ultimately yield the workforce and talent pool to meet the demands of our community's businesses and to attract new industry to our community," Edwards said.

But Say Yes in Guilford is not a done deal. "There is much work for all of us to do over the next few months to make Say Yes a reality in Guilford County," she said, "and we cannot stress enough that a Say Yes commitment is a community-wide undertaking for Guilford County."

Say Yes basics

- All Guilford County students who are U.S. citizens would qualify to receive funds to attend a two- or four-year public college or university or waiver of tuition at one of 70 participating private institutions.
- Expenses like room and board or meals would not be included.
- The program brings in about \$15 million to kickstart the effort.
- Before Say Yes will OK Guilford County as its next project, the community must raise 40 percent of an estimated \$70 million endowment — or about \$28 million — to provide these scholarships.
- If the partnership goes through, 2016 Guilford County graduates could be the first to benefit.