

What Compels Us to Act?

The obstacles faced by those living in poverty are wide-ranging and unforgiving, affecting students at home, in class, and throughout countless other aspects of their lives. Plainly, poverty in school-aged children is correlated with lower levels of school achievement, adverse behavioral outcomes, and higher rates of delinquency in part because those experiencing it have fewer opportunities to develop necessary motor skills, communication skills, and achieve optimal physical health. These unfavorable circumstances are only compounded by other harsh realities facing many children living in poverty, including malnourishment, homelessness, and/or a lack of sleep, all of which make it more difficult to concentrate and retain information.

Furthermore, the stressors of poverty coupled with undiagnosed mental health challenges often result in under-resourced youth and families experiencing depression, anger, anxiety, and other mental illnesses at high rates. Without intervention, these mental health disorders can lead to children underperforming in school, experiencing higher rates of suspension, facing lower rates of high school graduation, and can more generally negatively impact behavior and quality of life. However, with proper treatment, resources, and support, students facing mental health challenges can rechart their courses and defy the expectations placed before them.

This opportunity compels us to act.

Research suggests that the inability to escape the cycle of poverty both within and over the course of multiple generations is significantly perpetuated by mental health disorders, many of which were exacerbated by circumstances of poverty in the first place. The immense pressures facing impoverished parents increases their likelihood of experiencing mental health struggles and/or substance abuse themselves, which diminishes their capacity to engage in positive parenting practices and increases the potential for child abuse and/or neglect. That being said, by empowering caregivers with resources, tools, and strategies to broaden their child's horizons, they too can play an integral part in their child's journey towards a fulfilled and healthy life.

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Ultimately, in recognizing that the ramifications of poverty are often passed on from one generation to the next due to social, economic, and political barriers, we believe that by nurturing the well-being of youth living in adverse conditions through holistic support, genuine partnership, and continued investment in their success, they will experience a restoration of hope in their pursuit of happiness.

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What Is Our Approach?

Because poverty affects each individual differently, we have chosen to respond to it by addressing each student on a one-on-one basis with an eagerness to instill values of hope, kindness, respect, reliability, diligence, and discipline through shared experiences.

The Pursuit of Happiness will target students living in underserved, under-resourced communities. The appropriate certified professionals and community members, led by Michael Gordon, will partner with youth and their families to offer mental health services, mentorship, professional experience, and educational opportunities on a consistent basis.

Our mission and vision statements collectively speak to the importance we feel rests in the choice we have made to address such a large problem on an individual level:

Our mission is to restore hope by alleviating the drivers of poverty one life at a time.

Our vision is that we intend nothing less than to heal our culture one life at a time.

In order to accomplish our mission, we will rely on core values spelling out the word “pursuit” to guide us in each step we take.

Partnership, professionalism, principles

Unique counseling and individualized services

Respect families and restore hope

Support families in achieving desired outcomes

Understand through active listening

Investment, inclusion, and integrity in everything we do

Trust our families and believe in teamwork

The Pursuit of Happiness will build upon three key program pillars to achieve the goals identified above:

- **Counseling**
- **Mentoring**
- **Internships/Conferences**

By incorporating all three pillars above in our holistic approach, we will collectively nurture the health, educational well-being, and professional preparation of each individual with whom we partner. In doing so, we believe we can indeed restore hope by alleviating the drivers of poverty one life at a time.

Pillar I: Counseling

Purpose: With a focus on in-home counseling services, The Pursuit of Happiness will provide short-term (approximately 12-16 weeks) behavioral and clinical services to identified and referred youth in under-resourced areas of the community. These services will empower the students with the necessary skills to live fulfilled and successful lives at home, school, and in the community while preventing and/or reducing involvement with the Juvenile Justice System. Counseling in-home intentionally includes household members so that all residents are equally invested in the student’s success, and it does so in a cost-effective and accessible way. Frequent mental health therapeutic support directs young people towards having a greater awareness of consequences in decision-making, and through trauma-informed care, the student’s mental health situation is not viewed as “what is wrong with him/her?” but instead as “what negatively impacted him/her?” We believe that this approach of compassion and care has the potential to empower a young person towards a life of achievement and fulfillment.

Overview of the counseling process:

1. The referred/identified student will undergo initial screening using Adverse Childhood Experience’s screening tool and then will be treated through Trauma-Informed Care.
2. Following the screening, the staff member will meet with the family and/or referral source to explore basic needs and goals as well as to discuss results from the initial screenings. The multi-disciplinary team will then develop a treatment plan for the student including any necessary outpatient therapy, mentors, medical management, etc.
3. Student progress as a result of counseling will be documented by comparing previous suspensions, referrals, missed school days, and communications between teachers and parents with the same data points following the implementation of the care plan. Principals, teachers, administrators, caregivers, parents, community members, and other necessary people may be included in this care plan for accountability and observation.
4. The student will be visited two to three times per week for twelve to sixteen weeks, or until the course of treatment is complete.

Below are the goals and strategies we foresee pertaining to this counseling program:

Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address underlying mental health struggles adversely impacting student’s quality of life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage student’s immediate community in treatment plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer strategies to the parent/guardian of the student for continued support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce out-of-school time and disciplinary action in schools

Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a written care plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show up consistently as well as on an as-needed basis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer ACE screening and Trauma-Informed Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with necessary people that have influence over student’s life to include them in the care plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set aside time to discuss strategies with the family



Pillar II: Mentoring

Purpose: Mentors offer introduction to otherwise new experiences and provide a consistent, positive presence in the life of a young person facing negative pressures and adverse circumstances. By cultivating positive social and emotional development, elevating self-esteem, and instilling attributes of professionalism, quality and invested mentoring greatly enhances a student's motivation, dedication, and commitment.

Overview of the mentoring process:

1. Staff will identify a young person between the ages of 5-17 needing a positive and consistent role model through a home, school, and/or community referral channel. Upon identifying the individual, staff will seek to match the student with an appropriate mentor through an evaluation including considerations of age, gender, interests, needs, and personality characteristics.
2. Following the establishment of a mentor, the pair will meet one-to-two times per month at home, school, or at another appropriate location in the community.
3. Additionally, the mentor will meet with the most suitable school representative, whether teacher or administrator, on a biweekly basis to discuss relevant academic progress, strategies, and/or concerns. The mentor may also meet with community members such as coaches, pastors, etc. who have significant influence over the individual.
4. The mentor will then relay the necessary information to the student's guardian after each meeting to ensure proper measures are in place for the student to maintain expected academics, behavior, attendance, etc.
5. Understanding that effective mentorship requires dedicated individuals willing to make a long-term commitment to one another, the length of mentorship will vary for each case, with check-ins enduring over months and years.

In order to track the success of this mentorship program in working to achieve the mission of the Pursuit of Happiness, the organization will:

- Keep a database of all mentees upon referral/identification
- Record initial referral concerns as well as the goals set during the initial meeting
- Require the mentor to submit a monthly progress form to document mentee progress, goals, and data points^A
- Track high school graduation rates and college acceptance rates of mentees
- Track incarceration rates of mentees over ten years, when possible
- Track rates of mentees securing a steady job that provides reliable income

^A See Appendix A

Below are the goals and strategies we foresee in ensuring the success of this mentoring program:

Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To empower families with expectations, information, resources, skills, decision-making strategies, and stress/tragedy coping tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To minimize restrictive environments and broaden horizons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To stabilize and reduce out-of-home placement, whether in the Juvenile Justice System, group homes, foster care, and/or in state custody
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To advocate for the child and prevent in-school suspensions and referrals resulting in truancy and/or out-of-school placement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To bridge any gaps and nurture relationships between the child, family, school, and community

Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept referrals from schools, courts, and juvenile systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop individualized plans with families via a multi-disciplinary team including ACE and trauma-informed care screeners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with school-based behavior team as assigned by the principal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer immediate crisis response 24/7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide in-home/in-school visits weekly or biweekly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host parent training for the family and student on a quarterly basis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate holistically for the family and child within and beyond home, school, clinical, and community environments through trauma-informed care, including but not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Employment -Nutrition -Untreated Mental Illness -Positive Role Models -Illiteracy

Pillar III: Internships/Conferences

Purpose: Through internships and conferences, students in grades 9-12 as well as those in their first year of college coming from underserved and under-resourced communities will gain the experience and professionalism needed to enter the workforce by working alongside community leaders in their respective fields. Additionally, these internships and conferences will be paid due to the fact that students living in low-income circumstances often do not have the luxury to accept unpaid internships. If money for transportation is needed, it will be covered. We envision these internships and conferences as experiences in which students will learn workplace etiquette and gain opportunities and skills that will serve as steppingstones to their obtaining of long-term employment that offers consistent income and allows them to eventually accrue wealth.

Overview of the internship process:

1. Each year, staff will identify 40 students amongst varying Title I schools in the greater Chattanooga area. Applicants will submit written applications, including an essay, and participate in a formal job interview.
2. Staff will align selected interns with specific local businesses that offer internship opportunities relevant to the students' professional goals.
3. Interns will participate in a soft skills training prior to the internship and have weekly check-ins with their site supervisor to discuss progress and opportunities for growth.
4. Interns will work four days a week (two hours a day) during the school year for \$10 an hour, or five days a week (for six hours a day) during the summer for \$10 an hour.
5. Following the completion of the internship, interns will have an exit interview with their supervisor to evaluate growth and discuss future opportunities/plans. Interns will also be able to use their site supervisor as a reference for college applications and/or job applications so long as the internship was successful.

Overview of the conference process:

1. Michael Gordon will host personal development conferences twice a year for 40 students within the Pursuit of Happiness network.
2. Each conference will have two four-hour sessions, and students will be paid a \$40 stipend for attending. Conferences will offer networking skills and the opportunity to hear from a variety of guests who volunteer to speak on topics related to their roles in the workplace.
3. Ten students, determined by their reflective essays, will attend the NAIS Conference, in which they will stay one week to learn different trades and network with professionals.

In order to track the success of the internship and conference programs in working to achieve the mission of the Pursuit of Happiness, the organization will:

- Keep a database of all program participants upon acceptance to an internship program or conference
- Ask site supervisor to submit exit interview progress report documenting growth and achievements of interns^B
- Record high school graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and rates of securing a full-time job for interns and NAIS conference participants

^B See Appendix B

Below are the goals and strategies we foresee as we implement these programs:

Internships:

Internship goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide professional contacts to students in their field of interest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain greater understanding of diversity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To align students with purpose-driven opportunities that foster growth in their chosen career path
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To offer opportunities for students in low-income areas to work alongside successful business professionals and entrepreneurs to gain knowledge of leadership principles that carry over to successful careers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To supplement the income of the students as they gain meaningful and directive experience

Internship Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require formalized application experience to expose students to real-world processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide necessary soft skills training beforehand to ensure success during the internship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require weekly check-in meetings to evaluate progress, offer encouragement, and redirect needed areas of focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement an exit interview expectation and subsequent form for reflection and discussions about the intern’s future
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide consistent professional advocates for the intern for references, referrals, etc.

Conferences:

Conference Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain knowledge and broaden understanding regarding professionalism and workplace environments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To foster networking skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build relationships with like-minded leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To offer exposure to a myriad of travel, cultural, educational experiences through speakers and conference attendance

Conference Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome a variety of speakers from different trades and backgrounds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require conference applicants to submit a written application
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require conference applicants to submit a reflective essay after the completion of the conference as a sort of application to NAIS conference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask exceptional conference participants to present their experience to potential donors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supplement the experience with a stipend so students can miss work if needed to attend

