

Change at the Speed of Trust

Advancing Educational Opportunity Through Cross-Sector Collaboration in Louisville

Epilogue

GAYLEN W. MOORE, JORRIT DE JONG, AND PASCHA MCTYSON

Overview

In October 2018, Marland Cole—a health care executive skilled in public and board relations and process management—took on the role of executive director for the new nonprofit launched by the Louisville Promise Cabinet. She had two staffers from 55,000 Degrees (55K, the cabinet’s sunseting backbone organization), three years of operating funds, and a mandate to use data and evidence-based practices to promote systemic change in Louisville’s education space through last-dollar “promise” scholarships and “wraparound” supports. To ensure its name would not emphasize the scholarships over the comprehensive services, the collaboration rebranded the nonprofit as evolve502 (502 is Louisville’s area code).

At the outset, based on recommendations from Say Yes to Education consultants (the Weiss Institute), evolve502 had a two-board structure. Mary Nixon, a retired executive from YUM! Brands, led the scholarship board, and Audwin Helton of 15,000 Degrees (a 55K partner organization focused on ensuring equitable opportunity for Black students) led the evolve502 Inc. board, which would be responsible for coordinating support services. The fundraising campaign kicked off with a \$5 million challenge grant from the C.E. and S. Foundation (CES)—a family philanthropy run by Humana founder David Jones.ⁱ The work of the comprehensive services board stalled at first, with board members awaiting analyses from the Weiss Institute, but gained focus following Cole’s hiring of Dr. Charles Davis—a Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) staffer with deep knowledge of the school system and educational collaborations—as chief comprehensive services and data officer in July 2019.

Nixon and others on the scholarship board worked effectively to raise funds, but for Cole and her staff, managing and reporting to two boards proved challenging. Moreover, some members of the evolve502 Inc. board’s operating committee deemed Weiss Institute recommendations (for example, smaller class sizes and more school-based supports) unworkable in Louisville’s fiscal and political context. These doubts created an opening for a revised approach. Davis began gently pushing for a model of service provision that utilized community partners in students’ own neighborhoods rather than in the

ⁱ A challenge grant promises a specified donation contingent on a specified amount of money to be raised. In this case, CES promised evolve502 \$5 million once the organization had raised \$15 million.



schools they attended, often by long bus ride. As a board merger got underway, Davis’s proposal got an unexpected boost from an unwelcome development: the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the spring of 2020, with the city under lockdown, evolve502 hit its stride. Cole’s confident relationship-building and strong team had established the credibility for evolve502 to serve as the natural convener for the city’s crisis response team on education. Davis worked with JCPS and other key partners to establish and equip a network of after-school care providers as “community learning hubs” that would serve as safe, no-cost venues for students to get supervision and support with remote school, as well as food and other necessities. This network of providers would continue after schools reopened as outlets for after-school tutoring and other educational services for JCPS students.

In the summer of 2020, the pandemic and racial unrest created new pressures and tensions within the newly merged board. Despite the uncertainty and fraying trust, evolve502 decided to announce that it had raised enough money to offer promise scholarships to the JCPS class of 2021. It was a leap of faith, but the gamble paid off. With Mayor Greg Fischer’s strong advocacy, city council appropriated \$3 million for fiscal year 2022, giving the organization the infusion it needed to receive the challenge grant from CES. Just a little over a month after the first 577 evolve502 scholars matriculated at Jefferson Community and Technical College and Simmons College of Kentucky for the 2021 fall semester, evolve502 announced that funds would be available for every currently enrolled JCPS high school student to receive two years of tuition and fees (after state and federal grants) towards an associate degree at participating colleges upon graduation.

Mayor Fischer, who had been determined to see the effort through, felt relief and pride at the cabinet’s hard-won successes, made possible in part by the impossible year of 2020. Other developments that year—particularly the police killing of Breonna Taylor in a botched raid and subsequent protests—made it necessary for the mayor to celebrate more quietly than he otherwise might have. Still, he could take heart in knowing that the team he had convened and watched grapple for years with the legacy of racism did not fracture but instead carried on together, focused on the next generation.

Please read the remainder of the Epilogue and Appendices for a more detailed account of evolve502’s work.

Meet Marland Cole

The Louisville Promise cabinet’s decision to launch an independent organization “not tied to the baggage of anything else or anyone else,” in the words of Matt Berry, former director of strategy and impact for 55K, was not without risk.¹ Much depended on finding the right person to lead it. As 55K prepared to sunset, the cabinet’s executive director search committee looked to the horizon, hoping to spot a unicorn galloping across. (See Appendix 1 for data from 55K’s final report.)

In some ways, Marland Cole was an unlikely candidate for the position. She had spent most of her career in health care, serving as assistant vice president of governance and board support at a Louisville hospital for the previous four years. But friends and colleagues in her professional network who had participated in the cabinet’s work urged her to apply. “I could very clearly see the passion that they had around this work and the transformation that we could have if we were successful,” said

Cole.² She was good with people, understood the ins and outs of board governance, and knew how to build and support a team. Her mother had been a schoolteacher, and her daughter attended JCPS. She had served as a parent representative on the School-Based Decision Making Council and as a member of the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) at her daughter's elementary school. A stint as vice president of institutional advancement at Simmons College of Kentucky, a historically Black college, provided just enough experience in higher education to suggest she might be the right fit.

Getting Started, Raising Funds

In late 2018, with the Community Foundation of Louisville as fiscal sponsor, two key staffers from 55K working under her, and an office borrowed from a Community Foundation employee on maternity leave, Cole got to work. Former YUM! Brands executive and sitting University of Louisville Board Chair Mary Nixon led evolve502's scholarship board, and geographic information systems (GIS) entrepreneur and 15K Co-Chair Audwin Helton led its comprehensive services board. (See Appendix 2 for evolve502's governance structure over time.) The cabinet had invested considerable time and energy in working with the Weiss Institute to adapt the Say Yes to Education model to the Louisville context, and this board structure reflected both Say Yes's two-pronged approach (scholarships and services) and the desire to establish a firewall of sorts between funds designated for scholarships and funds for operations and service provision.

Cole spent her first months on the job familiarizing herself with her new operating environment, meeting with board members, and hiring staff. "It took me some time to really get my arms around all of this work," she said. "I think a good leader surrounds themselves with people that know the work better than they do." She initially leaned on the counsel of 55K's Mary Gwen Wheeler, whose decades of experience as an education leader in state and local government had long guided the work Cole would now shoulder. The staffers who had come over from 55K helped orient Cole to the work and the board, but both Wheeler and Cole acknowledged some growing pains. "She was very new, and I was very opinionated," Wheeler explained.³ Wheeler was confident that the Weiss consultants' emphasis on data analytics would steer the organization toward their desired outcomes. Some key members of evolve502's operating committee were more skeptical. Moreover, sharing sensitive data on student performance and school finances provoked anxiety within the public-school ecosystem, and it took a long time for the consultants to negotiate data-sharing agreements and complete their analysis.

On the scholarship front, Wheeler was not only chair of the fundraising campaign, but also very closely tied to a critical funder: her father-in-law's foundation (CES) kicked off the campaign with the \$5 million challenge grant. But it was not clear to Cole or to those on the other board whether evolve502 could fundraise for the purpose of coordinating comprehensive services. "We had some struggles over, well, what are we fundraising for?" said Wheeler. "Are we fundraising for the services? Are we fundraising for the scholarships?" Raising enough money to promise "last-dollar" post-secondary scholarships (covering two years of tuition and fees after state and federal grants) to every student in JCPS was a challenge somewhere between formidable and impossible, and the price tag for services remained a series of question marks.

But failure was not an option for Cole or Wheeler. "We have to show that we are really serious about this," said Cole. "And part of that is to just put a stake in the ground and say we're moving forward. We

are going to start with one class, and when we know we've got enough money to take care of that class fully, we need to announce."

In the summer of 2019, Mayor Fischer proposed a \$2 million budget allocation for evolve502 for fiscal year 2020, but city council approved only \$80,000 for operations support. Some council members were initially unhappy with decisions evolve502 had made about the scholarships, asking why they would only be available for JCPs students. They wanted the scholarships to be available for parochial school graduates, too. "Let's be clear about who we are targeting," said board member and Louisville Urban League CEO Sadiqa Reynolds.⁴ "I think evolve502 has been able to target those with the greatest need because of the limitations on funding. We don't have the resources to fund everybody. Because of that, let's prioritize anybody who's Pell grant eligible. Let's ensure that they get access to these funds first, because that's how you change outcomes for families." The constraints on funding also led the board to take tuition for private colleges off the table. Ultimately, according to evolve502 Chief Scholarship and Policy Officer Matt Berry, "We took an approach which started with really clarifying our purpose and then the populations that we most wanted to serve, and that's how we back-built the policies and structures of the scholarship program."

Local foundations and companies, including YUM! Brands, Humana, and the Urban League (contributing funds from Blue Meridian), believed enough in this vision to make sizeable contributions. To ensure there were funds available to continue operating and building momentum, CES agreed to break its challenge grant in two—providing \$2.5 million once evolve502 had raised \$7.5 million, with the remainder to come once it reached \$15 million. The Rotary Club agreed to bring a scholarship program it ran under the umbrella of evolve502. The University of Louisville committed to covering two additional years of study for low-income students who received associate degrees through evolve502, creating a tuition-free pathway to a bachelor's degree. Little by little, the organization crept toward its goal of promise scholarships for the first class of JCPs graduates.

Saying No to Say Yes

Cole was less clear what kind of a stake evolve502 would or could put in the ground on the services side. The operating committee within the services board, which would advise Cole on uses of data and where to focus services, "took some time to get going," Wheeler said. Part of the problem was the long wait for the consultants to complete their fiscal analysis. When they finally presented their findings and recommendations, some board members were underwhelmed. Several of the ideas presented had already been explored and rejected as nonstarters in the Louisville context. Others were already in process. "I think there was a feeling—just being completely honest—of 'What are we getting out of this that we can't do on our own?'" said JCPs Superintendent Marty Pollio.⁵

Cole hired Charles Davis from JCPs as chief comprehensive services and data officer in July 2019. Looking at Weiss's proposal for school-based wraparound supports, Davis identified several obstacles. One was individual schools' relative autonomy in implementing supports. "If it's not something that's driven purely by a curriculum standard or something," Davis explained, there was no way to ensure schools would utilize the supports offered.⁶ Another difficulty was tied to the legacy of racist redlining and school integration. Most students in the district attended schools outside their neighborhoods and relied on school buses for transportation. There were no buses to bring them home from after-school

activities. “The kids don’t live where they go to school,” Davis explained. “So it’s hard to build community and community-based resources.” In his view, “If we go into the schools, we will die a slow, miserable death.”

With the collaboration moving away from the Say Yes model, proponents of a merged board were able to persuade their colleagues that a single board would streamline the work going forward. “What we spent a lot of time doing when we had two boards was explaining why we had two boards and arguing about whether or not we should change it,” said Matt Berry. The chairs of the two boards, Audwin Helton and Mary Nixon, Berry explained, were “driven by the mission and really savvy business folks who didn’t have time to have turf wars about it.” Once the boards merged, “they just operated together and didn’t really care who got credit.”

COVID and Community Learning Hubs

Davis met with Helton, chair of the comprehensive services board, to pitch an alternative approach to the Say Yes model. The city was rich in local resources—“community centers, libraries, churches, nonprofits”—that families and kids already utilized. What he proposed was partnering with these organizations to provide supports and programming, meeting families and students where they already were. At times, he would describe this approach as a sort of virtuous virus—finding a host organization, taking root, spreading, and evolving. This choice of metaphor proved eerily prescient. “People didn’t get it,” said Davis, “but then the pandemic happened, which changed everything.”

With children unable to attend school, Cole leveraged the convening power of evolve502 to bring together education leaders from across Louisville metro. Helton, Superintendent Pollio, the head of the teachers’ union, the heads of the Louisville Urban League and Metro United Way, the metro government’s chief of community building, CES’s program officer, and several other key community stakeholders formed a “rapid response team” that met weekly while schools were closed. (See Appendix 2.) “We took on anything and everything that we could do to be a support for the public school system in the midst of pandemic,” said Helton, “whether it was making sure that we had wireless connection for our kids, making sure that we had tutors, making sure we worked with family resource coordinators in the community.”⁷

One of the challenges of Davis’s neighborhood-centered approach until this point had been incomplete information about which organizations were serving the school-age population. The exigencies of the pandemic gave providers across Louisville a strong incentive to connect with evolve502 as a hub for reliable information and resources. Davis circulated a questionnaire to known providers and urged them to share it with other organizations providing care for the children of “essential workers.” Through a series of “snowball” surveys, evolve502 got familiar with care providers and what they needed: personal protective equipment (PPE), food, help staffing their spaces, internet connectivity, and support in navigating online learning.ⁱⁱ

The rapid response team worked to organize and deliver these supports. Evolve502 secured and distributed PPE; JCPS delivered food. Rules that prohibited care providers from talking directly to

ⁱⁱ Snowball sampling or surveying involves outreach to a small sample population who then pass the survey along to other members of the target population to increase the sample size.

teachers were relaxed. Davis’s knowledge of the school and city bureaucracy allowed evolve502 to navigate red tape and place one hundred substitute teachers at sites offering childcare and education support across the city, creating a new network of “community learning hubs.”

Launching Scholarships Amid Crises

For Louisville, 2020 was a year of extraordinary upheaval and grief. COVID-19’s arrival coincided with the March 13 killing of twenty-six-year-old Breonna Taylor, a nurse and former emergency medical technician, shot by police in a flimsily justified raid on her apartment.⁸ Outraged protest followed, much of it directed at Mayor Fischer as well as the Louisville Metro Police Department. In May, gunfire broke out at a protest, injuring seven. Adding to the community’s pain, two leaders in Louisville’s Black Lives Matter movement, Travis Nagdy and Kris Smith, were shot to death in separate instances during the months following the protests.⁹

Through all this, evolve502’s Black leaders continued to push forward alongside their colleagues on the board. Cole, Helton, and Urban League President Sadiqa Reynolds had begun meeting weekly not only with fellow members of the rapid response team but also with Black-led organizations convened by the Urban League, “to just check in and see how we could support each other,” said Cole.¹⁰ Throughout the spring, this group developed a broad agenda for advancing equity in the city through education, affordable housing, and small business development. Their vision, “A Path Forward for Louisville,” was submitted to the mayor and city council on Juneteenth. After meeting with Mayor Fischer and Council President David James to discuss the agenda, its authors wrote a letter voicing “deep concern with [the mayor’s] ability to lead [...] while our city remains in crisis.”¹¹ Reynolds, Cole, Helton, and Alice Houston of 15K, and the president of Simmons College of Kentucky were among the cosigned. But there was never a thought of abandoning the work they had already undertaken with Mayor Fischer. “I personally was physically in the street protesting and also still running a civil rights organization, attending all kinds of board meetings, as well as attending evolve502 board meetings alongside the mayor our community was in conflict with,” said Reynolds. “But you just have your blinders on, and you have to do what you have to do. And I think we all knew that we had to make sure that evolve502 was successful and remains successful. We also understood how important access to scholarships and opportunities were for our community.”

Cole saw evolve502’s work as deeply aligned with the education agenda outlined in the “Path Forward,” and she and the board were more determined than ever to demonstrate their commitment to JCPS students. Relentless advocacy from Wheeler, Board Chair Mary Nixon, Mason Rummel of the James Graham Brown Foundation (Louisville’s largest philanthropic foundation), and others had kept the fundraising machinery whirring amid the unrest, and in August 2020, evolve502 announced it had enough money in the bank to promise last-dollar scholarships to the JCPS graduating class of 2021. “It was six in the morning,” said Simmons College student and scholarship recipient David Oliver.¹² “My mother just woke me up out of nowhere, saying, ‘David, David, David, you can finally go to school for free!’”

For Mayor Fischer, seeing his “cradle to career” education agenda through and helping launch evolve502 had been the primary reasons to run for a third term, but when the time came to announce the scholarships, it was made clear to him that he should remain behind the scenes. “Many people in

Louisville were emotionally hijacked,” during the summer of 2020, said Fischer. For everyone working in the mayor’s office, “It was like, ‘Hey, here’s twenty-five challenging decisions we need to make today that all have no universally embraced outcomes. What are the best ‘least worst’ decisions we can make?’”¹³ One key decision was to funnel federal dollars from the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act through evolve502, some of which was used to establish summer programming at the sixty-odd community learning hubs, which had quickly become essential infrastructure for both the community and the school district. “The right things happened at the right time,” said Fischer, “which is usually what happens when you stick with it and work hard over a long period of time.”

In April 2021, the James Graham Brown Foundation committed \$3 million for “opportunity grants” to help cover additional expenses for scholars whose households earned less than \$40,000 a year. Mayor Fischer proposed a corresponding \$3 million for scholarships in the metro government’s budget for fiscal year 2022, and council approved the appropriation on July 1, 2021. By October, evolve502 had raised the remaining \$7.5 million to trigger the second payment from CES. Cole and Pollio held a press conference at a middle school announcing that the evolve502 promise scholarships would be available to students in grades 8-12.

“It’s Going to Be Better”

If, to some degree, a global pandemic and a national reckoning with racism created an opportunity for evolve502, according to Matt Berry, “it was an opportunity born out of a genuine dedication to the mission.” Moreover, he said, “We had one of the best thinkers in community-based education in the country, in my opinion, in Charles Davis. And he was able to see the opportunities that presented themselves.” Davis, for his part, was frank about the personal costs of pursuing these opportunities: “I almost drove myself crazy. It might sound like, oh wow, that’s so inspirational, and—no. I wasn’t sleeping. But I knew, if we can make it through this, things will be different. It’s going to suck for four months, but on the other side, it’s going to be better.”

As the crisis period of the pandemic receded, with children returning to school buildings and the first class of 613 evolve502 scholars enrolling at local colleges, the rapid response team gave way to an operating committee within the board that met monthly. The learning hubs hosted thousands of JCPS students in summer learning programs and hired college students through evolve502 to tutor 2,500 students in reading. Davis requested funding for support staff and hired a comprehensive services coordinator and several part-time workers—mostly recent JCPS retirees—to clarify and document processes, track expenses, and act as liaisons with the learning hubs. Student success coordinators—some of them JCPS graduates—fanned out into the schools, making sure even the most disadvantaged students had the information and support they needed to apply for evolve502 scholarships. (See Appendix 2 for evolve502’s organizational chart.)

A collaboration that had begun more than a decade prior to make Louisville’s work force more competitive with peer cities had morphed into a widely respected organization poised to help make Louisville a leader in advancing equity in education. The work was rooted less in nitty-gritty data, hard targets, and national models than initially envisioned, and Cole acknowledged the organization still had work to do to ensure it was tracking, using, and sharing the right data. As Superintendent Pollio

explained, “We’ve come up with some indicators as a group: . . . Let’s track third grade reading. Let’s track attendance. Let’s track eight grade math.” But, he added, “all of that is the staircase to saying, for a child, ‘Do they have it all?’ Just take away the barriers. I know that is not a number, but for me that is what I want—that no matter whether a kid is from a homeless household here in Jefferson County or an English language learner or whatever it may be, that every single kid has what they need to have access to post-secondary.”

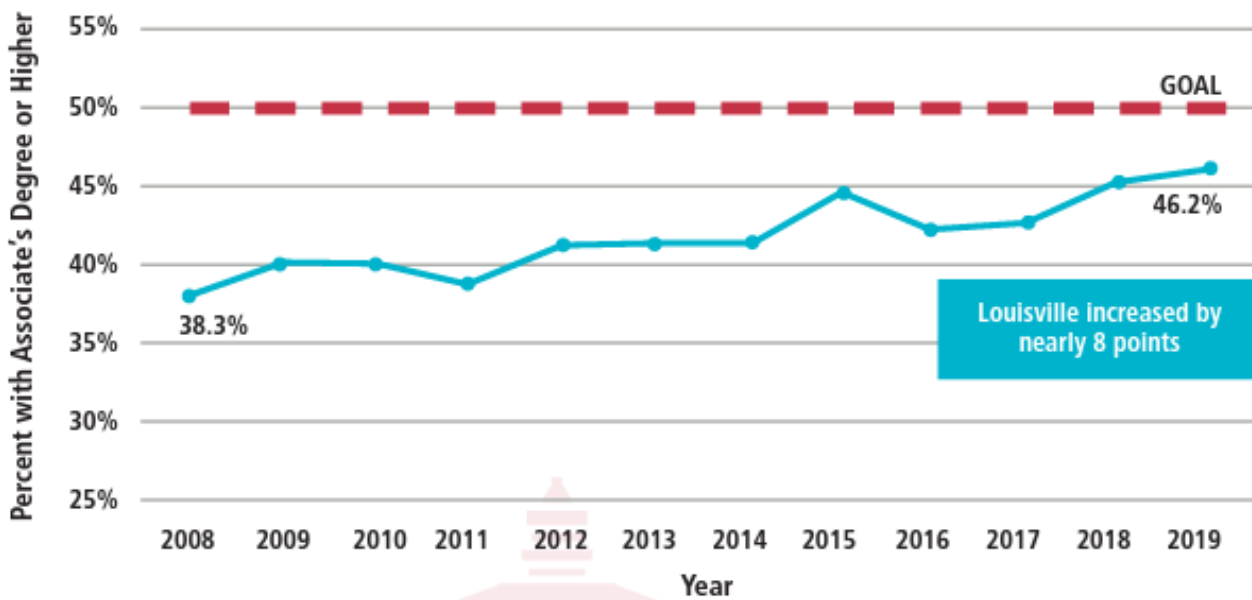
After years of wondering, “Are we ever really going to do it?” said Cole, evolve502 had finally set things into motion. For the first time, JCPS graduates could enroll in tuition-free post-secondary education. Younger students had access to tutors and educational supports during out-of-school hours, right in their own neighborhoods. But there were, of course, still questions to answer, logistics to navigate, and substantive arguments to hash out. “I think we’re still figuring out, ‘What are the pieces that make sense for us to own, and what are those other pieces that we’re just convening conversations around and making sure that somebody at the table is addressing?’” Cole explained. “As an education-based organization, we too have to continue to learn, evaluate what is and isn’t working, keep iterating, and adapt to meet the changing needs of our students and their families.”

Appendices

Appendix 1 Details from 55,000 Degrees’ final report

55,000 Degrees, the backbone organization supporting the collaboration, fell short of its goal of 55,000 new degrees (50 percent of Louisville residents holding a post-secondary degree) by 2020, but observed significant progress even as state spending on education declined.

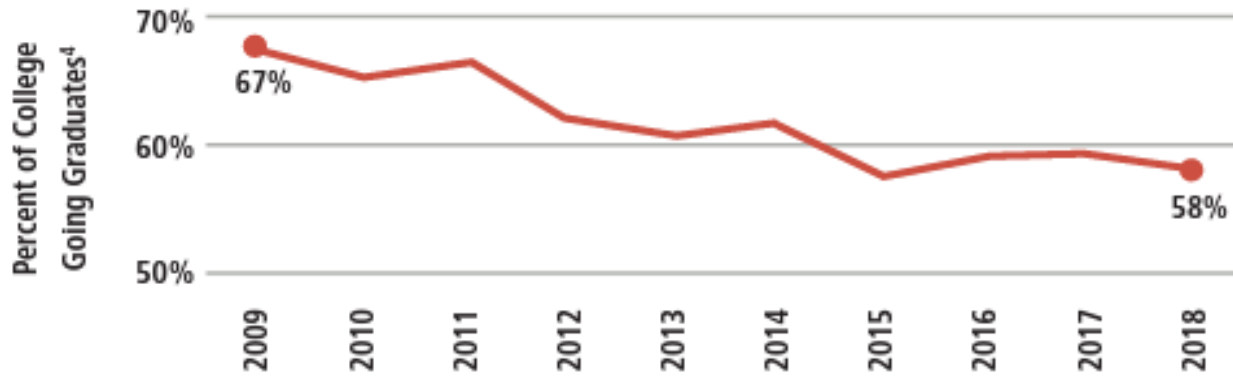
Education Attainment of Louisville’s Working Age Population



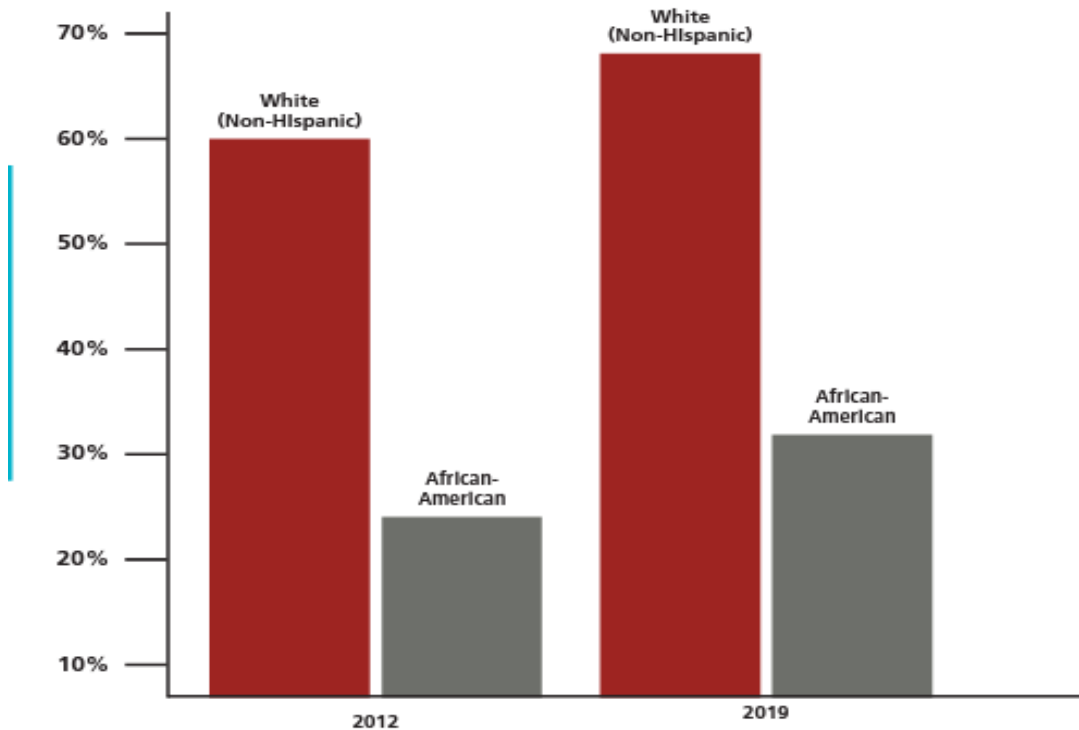
SOURCE: 55K Dashboard, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Despite improved college readiness and graduation rates, the percentage of JCPs students enrolled in college after high school dropped, and the opportunity gap between white and African American students remained essentially unchanged.

Jefferson County Public Schools College Going, District Total



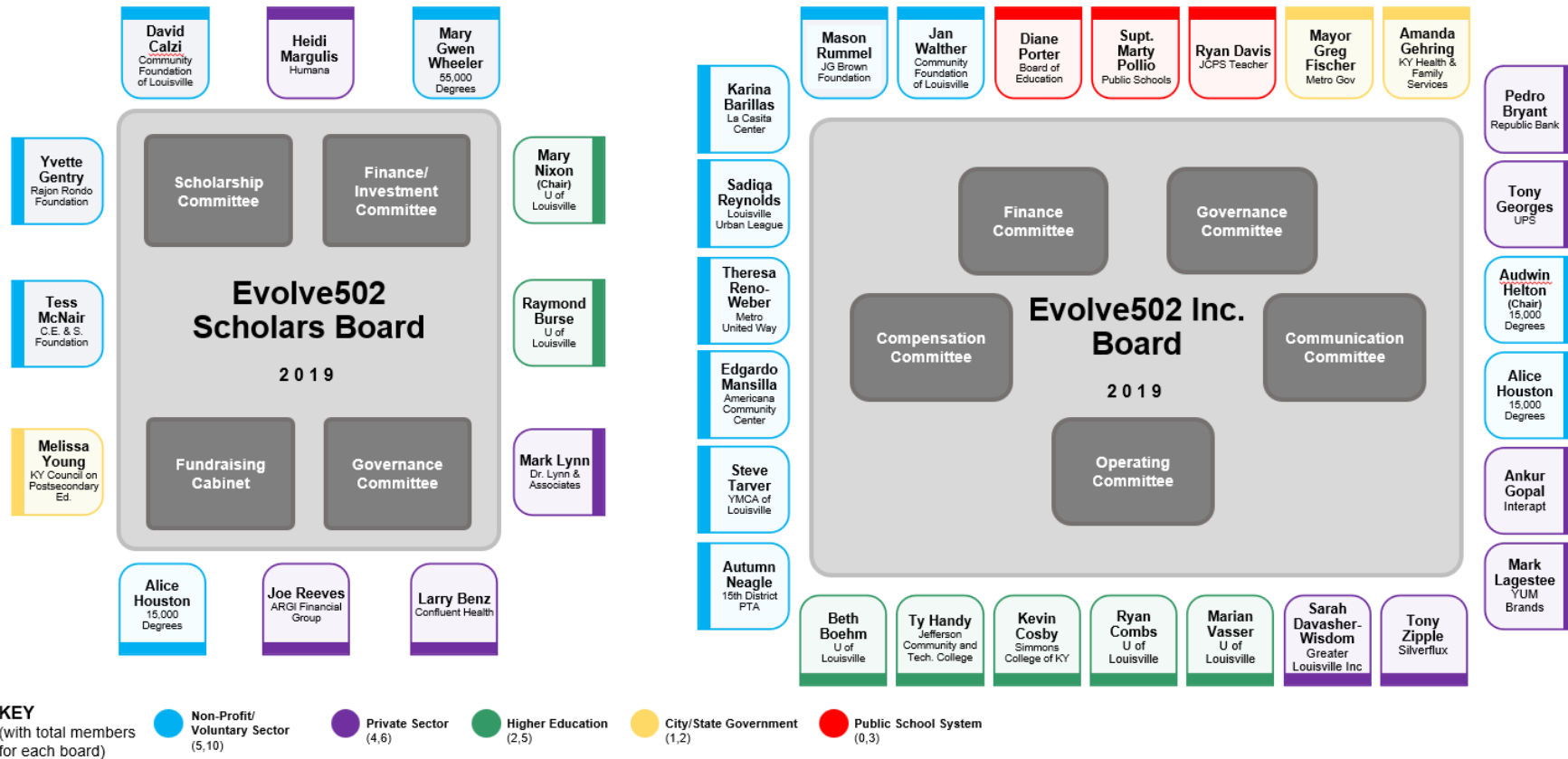
JCPs College/Career Readiness Scores by Race



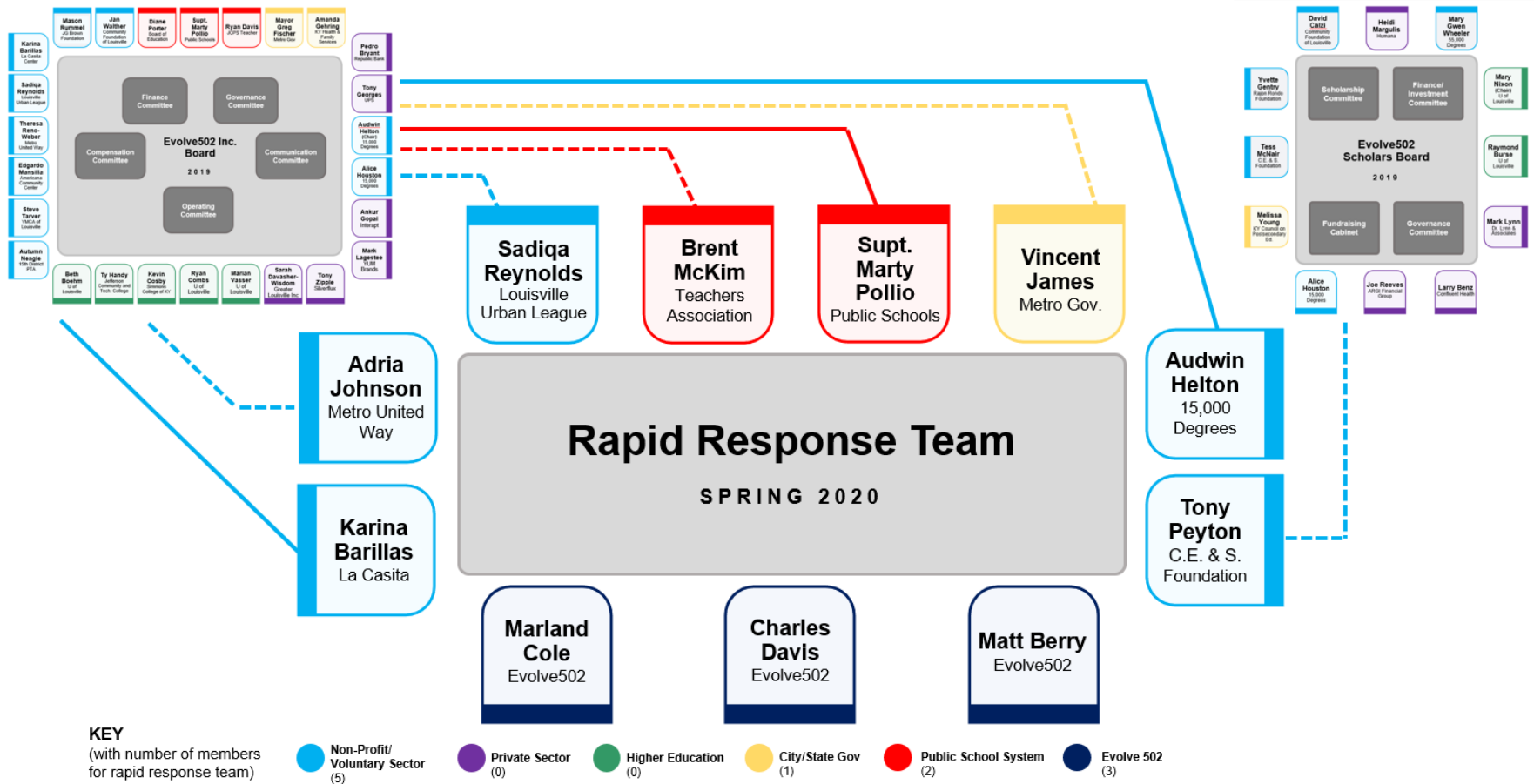
Data source: 55,000 Degrees and the Jefferson County Public Schools

Appendix 2 Governance Structure Evolution

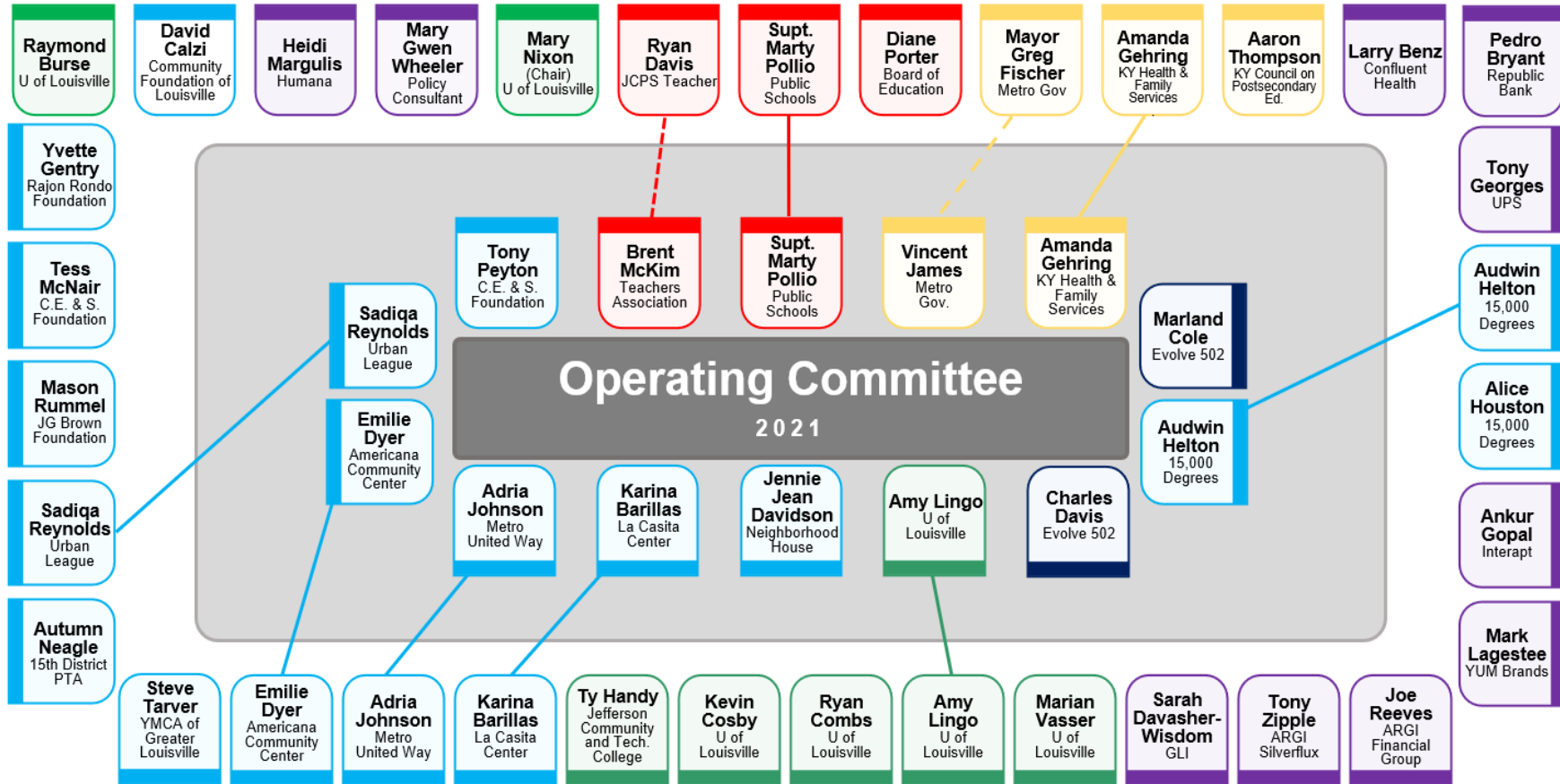
Initial two-board structure:



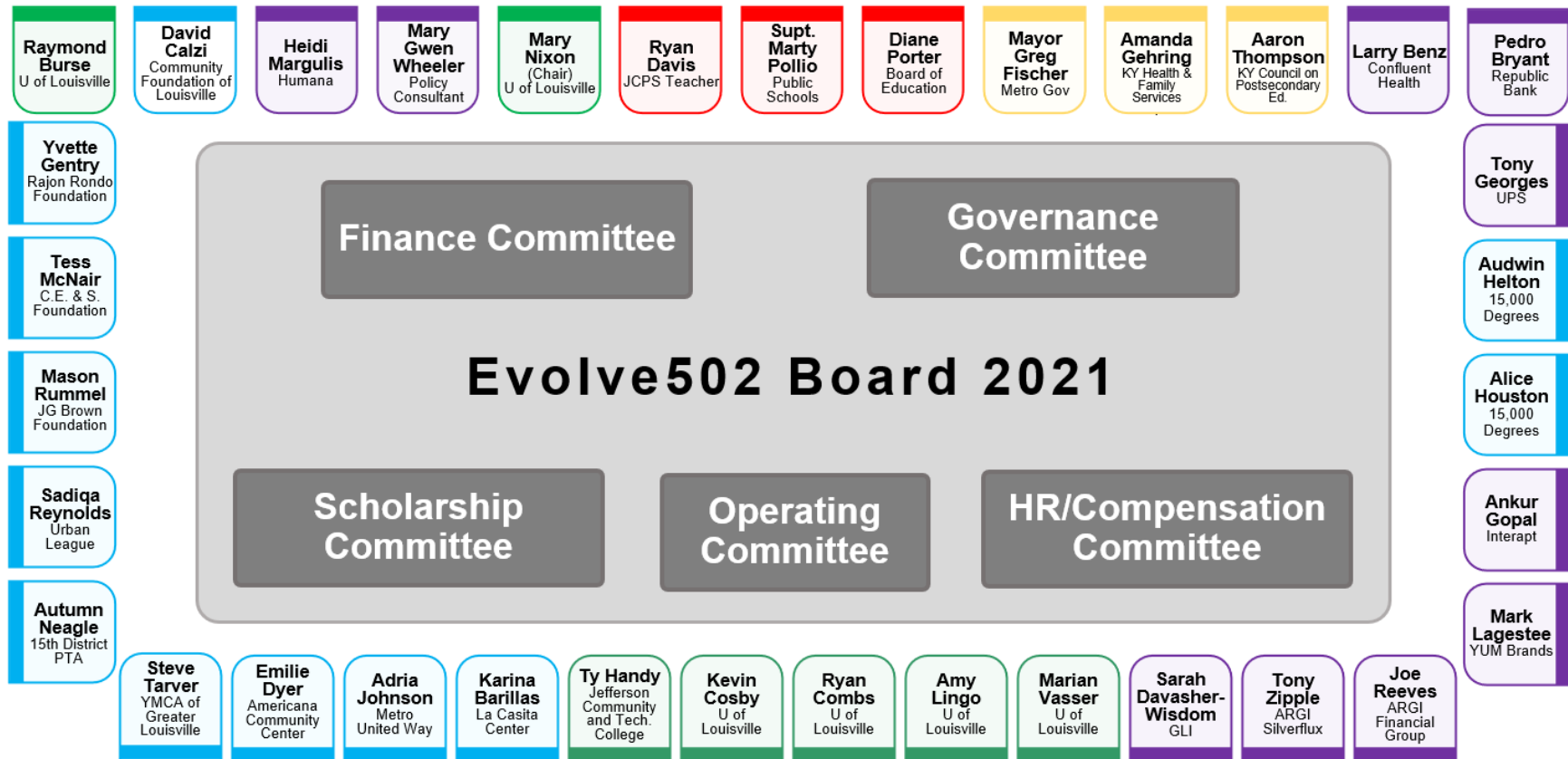
Rapid response team:



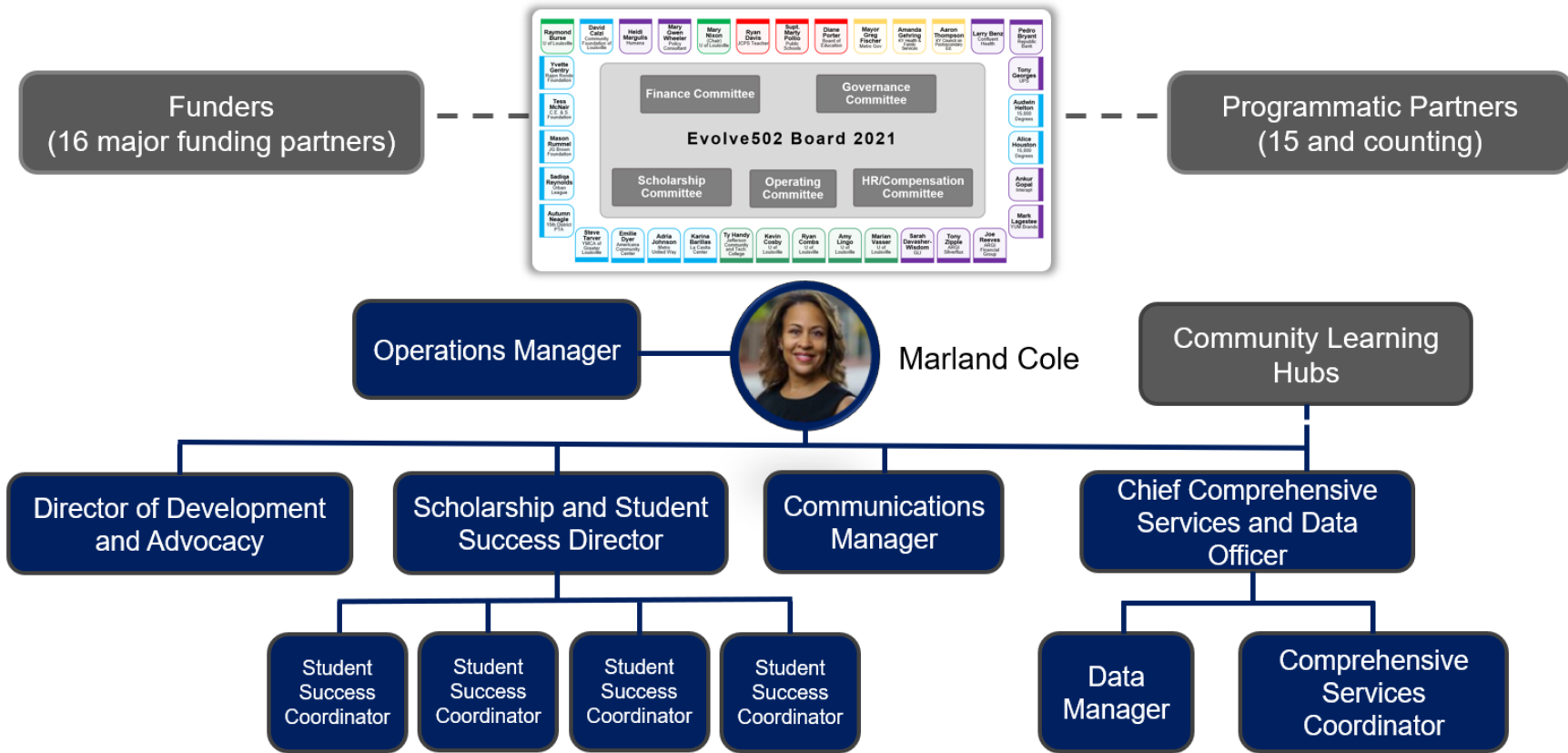
Merged board with operating committee:



Merged board with operating committee and additional standing committees:



evolve502 organizational chart with board and partners:



Endnotes

¹ Matt Berry, interview with Gaylen Moore and Pascha McTyson, October 26, 2022. All additional quotes from Matt Berry from this interview.

² Marland Cole, interview with Gaylen Moore and David Giles, August 18, 2022. All additional quotes from Cole from this interview or a second interview with Jorrit de Jong, Gaylen Moore, and Pascha McTyson, on September 13, 2022, unless otherwise noted.

³ Mary Gwen Wheeler, interview with Jorrit de Jong, Gaylen Moore, and Pascha McTyson, September 12, 2022. All additional quotes from Mary Gwen Wheeler from this interview.

⁴ Sadiqa Reynolds, interview with Gaylen Moore and Pascha McTyson, October 19, 2022. All additional quotes from Sadiqa Reynolds from this interview.

⁵ Marty Pollio, interview with Jorrit de Jong, Gaylen Moore, and Pascha McTyson, September 12, 2022. All additional quotes from Marty Pollio from this interview.

⁶ Charles Davis, interview with Gaylen Moore, Pascha McTyson, and Lisa Cox, October 17, 2022. All additional quotes from Charles Davis from this interview.

⁷ Audwin Helton, interview with Jorrit de Jong, Gaylen Moore, and Pascha McTyson, September 12, 2022. All additional quotes from Audwin Helton from this interview.

⁸ Richard A. Oppel Jr., Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, “What to Know About Breonna Taylor’s Death,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html>.

⁹ Ben Tobin, “Louisville Police Say Shooting Deaths of 2 Black Protest Leaders Appear Unrelated,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2020/12/11/two-people-shot-louisville-one-person-critical-condition/6510825002/>.

¹⁰ Marland Cole, email correspondence with Gaylen Moore, February 16, 2023.

¹¹ Sadiqa Reynolds et al., “A Path Forward for Louisville,” June 19, 2020 (updated July 7, 2020), letter to Mayor Greg Fischer and Louisville Metro Council President David James, <https://apathforward4lou.org/education/>.

¹² David Oliver, focus group discussion with Pascha McTyson, Jorrit de Jong, and Gaylen Moore, September 13, 2022.

¹³ Greg Fischer, interview with Jorrit de Jong, Gaylen Moore, and Pascha McTyson, September 12, 2022. All additional quotes from Greg Fischer from this interview.