

## CONNECTING CLARKSDALE: Teaching Financial Literacy & Promoting Online Learning in Clarksdale High School

BY AMBER PETTY

### ABSTRACT

Financial literacy is an enormous problem that we need to tackle. Today, however, maintaining healthy finances needs access to and understanding of the Internet. Not only are there a plethora of resources on how to manage your finances online, but mobile and online banking and online account management are also becoming increasingly commonplace. In teaching young people healthy financial habits, then, it is important that we also ensure they are able to do so with access to the Internet. EveryoneOn partnered with American Express, Moneythink, and Cable ONE to implement exactly this sort of program in Clarksdale, MS.

### THE PROBLEM

Only 14 states mandate personal finance courses. Twenty-two states require economics and just five test students on basic financial skills. More than half of young adults admit to knowing very little about how to manage their finances. Youth will inevitably face the financial realities of adulthood. Why aren't we preparing them for the future?

Moneythink is a movement of young people working to restore the economic health of the United States through financial education. Moneythink partnered with American Express to introduce the Clarksdale *Dollars and Sense Program*, an expansive financial literacy curriculum taught during the Senior Government and Economic Classes for seniors attending Clarksdale High School (CHS).

This curriculum will teach students valuable skills to help them achieve financial stability such as how to land a well-paying job, planning for daily and future expenses, and saving. The curriculum will be taught by committed mentors from local universities, such as Delta State University or Coahoma County Community College. Mentors will teach once per week during class over the course of the academic year.

As part of the Moneythink curriculum, seniors will also have access to Moneythink's innovative smartphone app, which will help apply

classroom financial knowledge in real-life settings.

Alongside the financial literacy training, in December 2013, Clarksdale Municipal School District won the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top—District Competition, which will enable every student at CHS to learn on a Chromebook both in and out of school. In order to ensure that all CHS students are able to take advantage of the programs, providing access to home Internet became a crucial step in the project's success.

Mississippi ranks last of all states in connectivity, with approximately 36 percent of the population lacking home Internet access. Top barriers to home access include cost, relevancy, and digital literacy. These are issues that disproportionately affect low-income and minority communities, who are therefore more likely to be unconnected.

With 40 percent of Clarksdale residents living below the poverty line, easing the burden of Internet expenses is a necessity.

### THE SOLUTION

As a result of the Race to the Top grant, CHS will be able to sponsor Chromebooks for the entire student body. With the adoption of

“WE HOPE THIS PROGRAM WILL NOT ONLY HELP THE COMMUNITY OF CLARKSDALE, BUT ALSO SERVE TO EDUCATE AND MOTIVATE OTHERS TO EXPLORE SIMILAR FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAMS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.”  
- DR. MANIKA KEMP, PRINCIPAL, CHS

individualized devices, CHS is able to move forward with the implementation of digital learning curriculums. With the introduction of a 1:1 program and more digital resources, students' need for Internet access to complete assignments increased. Therefore, Clarksdale looked for options to ensure home access would not be a barrier to student learning.

EveryoneOn partnered with the Clarksdale *Dollars and Sense Program* as well as with local Internet service provider Cable ONE to sponsor unlimited, high-speed home Internet for all families with students enrolled at Clarksdale for the duration of American Express' three-year program. (Those families who were already subscribed to Cable ONE Internet service were not eligible for the offer.)

In addition the home Internet offer, EveryoneOn partnered with Tracfone and the *Dollars and Sense Program* to provide free smartphones to all seniors who would be participating in the financial literacy class.

The phones, equipped with 180 minutes, 180 texts, and 2 GBs of data for every three-month cycle, enable the *Dollars and Sense Program* curriculum to be accessible via the mobile application sponsored by Moneythink. This feature will allow students to manage their finances and get tips on responsible behavior wherever they are.

## RESULTS

CHS sponsored an informational sign-up session to be held at the time allotted for progress report distribution. During this session, 152 families submitted applications for Cable ONE's free Internet service offer and 86 senior students opted for the free smartphones from Tracfone. Over the remainder of the school year CableONE and EveryoneOn opened enrollment

for the program to a rolling process, which allowed for more applications throughout the school year. This yielded 20 additional applications. Moving forward EveryoneOn will work to host more school and community events to engage parents in adoption efforts.

## BEST PRACTICES

In facilitating these adoptions, we have been able to develop the following best practices:

### *Needs Assessments*

Work with key stakeholders and community-based organizations to identify unconnected households. Surveys are the best way to assess your constituents' demographics.

### *Coverage & Mapping*

Exact addresses at which the home Internet will be deployed are imperative to ensuring coverage prior to distribution. CHS and CableONE performed a complete coverage check with all student addresses on file (identifying data was anonymized), which allowed EveryoneOn to enact targeted outreach with pre-qualified families.

### *Distribution*

Developing a streamlined distribution strategy is essential to program implementation. The Clarksdale program proved that organizing a distribution or enrollment event that is heavily marketed is the best way to reach your target audience.

### *Training*

In efforts to deliver a holistic solution with higher rates of technology retention, it is necessary to consider digital literacy.

### *Roles & Responsibilities*

When collaborating with multiple partner organizations to deliver home access solutions, clear and defined roles and responsibilities allow for more effective and successful program implementation.

### *Outreach & Marketing*

It is key that the programs key stakeholders can effectively communicate the program details, news, and upcoming events to your target population.