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## **College is a home, a job, a future**

**Baltimore students - in essays, poems and art - explain what higher education means to them**

By Sara Neufeld

Sun reporter

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You're never too young to set your sights on college, the folks at Baltimore's CollegeBound Foundation say, so the organization's "What College Means to Me" annual contest starts with kids in kindergarten.

At 6 years old, MaKayla Westry knows a thing or two about the subject: She sometimes tags along to her mom's forensic accounting classes at Morgan State University. The Leith Walk Elementary first-grader's views on college ("it's fun!") won her a prize in the contest's poetry division.

MaKayla was among 27 city students in elementary and middle school honored yesterday at the Port Discovery children's museum for their essays, poems and artwork reflecting what college means to them. The ceremony kicked off a series of activities for November's College Awareness Month.

The winning entries, selected from among 500 submissions and displayed on the walls of the museum, ranged from adorable to heartbreaking.

Mehgan Kane, a fourth-grader at Lyndhurst Elementary, drew a picture of older versions of herself and her friend getting their college diplomas beside a globe. "Graduation = A world of possibilities," the picture reads.

"This picture means a lot to me because, when I grow up, I want to be an artist so I can help my grandmother pay for the house," said Mehgan, who was dressed in a sparkly pink sweater-scarf set to celebrate not only her third-place win but also her ninth birthday yesterday.

In her first-place essay, Paul Laurence Dunbar Middle School eighth-grader Breyona Dandridge wrote about how she wants to make her family proud and avoid becoming like her cousin. Her cousin was once a great student, but his parents were drug abusers. He dropped out of school, and now he has a 3-year-old daughter and no job.

"College to me means a way out of Baltimore City," Breyona's essay says. "Don't get me wrong, I love Baltimore, it's making me ready for the world. At the same time, I don't want to see my children grow up in the same type of environment I have. ... I want to become an engineer and design bridges or help design computers. College will help my dreams come true."

In her second-place poem, William H. Lemmel Middle School seventh-grader Briante Lashawn Maulsby wrote about how she will "cross the ocean of Achievement, Excellence and Success," and how on the other side of that ocean, she can be whatever she wants.

"We as people have been held down and looked at crossly," the poem says. "Holding me down stops here."

The "What College Means to Me" contest is in its sixth year, sponsored by the nonprofit CollegeBound. CollegeBound contracts with the city school system to provide college preparatory services to students in 20 Baltimore high schools. It will host 14 college fairs at high schools around the city in early November.

At Port Discovery yesterday, the contest winners were surrounded by their teachers, principals and families, some with Mylar balloons in tow. During a ceremony hosted by Konan from 92Q-FM, they were presented with backpacks stuffed with college T-shirts and hats, as well as toys like puzzles and coloring books and gift cards to Wal-Mart. They got lunch from Chick-fil-A.

They heard words of inspiration from Port Discovery's president, CollegeBound's executive director and city schools chief Andres Alonso, who released dismal statistics about city students' track record in college last week.

The statistics, compiled by the National Student Clearinghouse, show that only 14 percent of students who graduated from Baltimore's public high schools in 2001 had earned a college degree five years later. However, the clearinghouse did not have information from Morgan State University, so the figure is probably slightly higher.

Alonso said in an interview that the statistics show the importance of starting college preparation early.

"If we wait until they're in 10th or 11th grade," he said, "it's probably too late for many students."

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For a full list of the winners of the "What College Means to Me" contest, see The Sun's education blog at [www.baltimoresun.com/classroom](http://www.baltimoresun.com/classroom).

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