



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Local education nonprofit forges ahead to double the number of Central Texas students first in their families to graduate college amidst COVID-19**

***Despite pandemic challenges, Breakthrough Central Texas offers vital educational resources and sends 91 percent of high school graduates to college***

**AUSTIN, TEXAS** – Breakthrough Central Texas, Austin’s nonprofit organization that helps students become the first in their family to earn a college degree, provides vital educational resources to 2,000 students from under-resourced communities across Central Texas including Wi-Fi hotspots, Chromebooks and academic advising as they prepare to return to classrooms this fall in Austin, Del Valle and Manor Independent School Districts and college campuses nationwide. Despite the summer melt phenomenon that keeps more than a third of college-bound high school seniors from beginning their freshman year, 91 percent of Breakthrough’s Class of 2020 will begin college this fall.

“We recognize that many of our students and families are grappling with challenges from every direction, which highlights the importance of doubling down on our mission to create a path to and through college for students who will become the first in their families to earn a college degree,” says Breakthrough Central Texas Executive Director Michael Griffith. “Here at Breakthrough Central Texas, we make a 12-year commitment to our students to help them reach their full academic potential. We must persist in supporting these students despite the immense challenges brought on by COVID-19.”

Early in the spring, Breakthrough Central Texas suspended in-person activities to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students and staff. Since then, the organization has offered continuous one-on-one advising and virtual programming to more than 2,000 students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Breakthrough Central Texas recognized a gap in access to online and digital technology early as the pandemic swept across Texas. The organization has dedicated more than \$20,000 to date in technology assistance to help students access virtual learning. With funds raised from the [Student and Family Support Fund](#), the nonprofit has provided technology support in the form of laptops, iPads, and mobile Wi-Fi hotspots to 197 students. Additionally, [All Together ATX](#) distributed a \$30,000 digital equity grant to Breakthrough Central Texas in August to help keep students connected. This supplied Breakthrough students with 100 additional Chromebooks to help ensure they have access to course materials.

Breakthrough staff have devoted more than 2,000 hours of virtual academic advising for students and families since March 2020 to keep everyone on track toward their goal of college completion. Additionally, the organization’s College Completion Team launched a week-long virtual "Thrive Summit," a retreat for college-bound high school seniors. During the summit, students heard from other Breakthrough college students about their first year in college, connected with representatives from universities around Texas, and engaged in workshops around financial literacy, healthy choices, growth

mindset and what it means to be a first-generation college student. Advisors provided guidance to confirm housing, tuition, books, and transportation.

“College can be a difficult time for anyone and as first-generation college students, these students do not know what to expect,” says Marissa Peña, AmeriCorps Leader of the Breakthrough Central Texas College Completion Team. “These students are essentially walking into uncharted territory and there can be a lot of roadblocks they can encounter along the way to their degree including academic, financial, socio-emotional, and administrative issues. Breakthrough's support during this time is important to keep students enrolled in school no matter the challenges they face.”

As classes resume in Central Texas and around the country, 91 percent of Breakthrough high school graduates from the Class of 2020 enter college, virtually and in-person, at more than 40 institutions around the nation. Each of these 151 students takes the next step in their journey to become the first in their family to earn a college degree.

“Our role has always been to get students to and through college – to help them navigate the multitude of barriers to get there. The pandemic has layered on inequities around education, health, access to technology and more that has helped us see the bigger picture of our role.” says Griffith. “As our students and families and education system face an uncertain fall with virtual learning, it is our responsibility to ensure students can access their course work, study groups, and one-on-one time with their Breakthrough advisors.”

As classes resume, Breakthrough Central Texas will continue to offer advising to more than 2,000 students. The organization also prepares to expand as a result of its successful \$10 million Breakthrough Challenge campaign, which launched on September 12, 2019 with a goal to double the number of Central Texas college graduates from underserved communities.

To serve more students, Breakthrough Central Texas will launch its Schoolwide Postsecondary Advising Program this fall. The innovative program will allow the organization to serve all 150 11<sup>th</sup> grade students at Manor New Technology High School. Students will receive Breakthrough services, including advising and college readiness programs, through their freshman year of college. More details to come.

Visit [breakthroughctx.org](http://breakthroughctx.org) for more information on Breakthrough Central Texas, its students and services.

#### **ABOUT BREAKTHROUGH CENTRAL TEXAS**

Breakthrough Central Texas is a nonprofit that creates a path to and through college for students from under-resourced communities. From sixth grade through to college, the organization offers out-of-school learning experiences, leadership skills, and comprehensive advising to students. The organization makes a 12-year commitment to students and their families to guide them through the process of preparing for, enrolling in and completing college. The long-term model ensures the success of students and families from middle school to high school graduation to college diploma and beyond. Join the conversation on Twitter [@BreakthroughCTX](https://twitter.com/BreakthroughCTX), Instagram [@BreakthroughCTX](https://www.instagram.com/BreakthroughCTX) and at [Facebook.com/BreakthroughCTX](https://www.facebook.com/BreakthroughCTX). To learn more, visit [www.breakthroughctx.org](http://www.breakthroughctx.org).

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