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Education agencies 'blitz' church in after between services

By Grace Schneider

If he's heard it once, Dantrell Bell has heard it a thousand times from his parents — education, education, education. It's the path to his future.

And his mother and father haven't just talked about *his* life after high school. They've returned to college and earned degrees, the Southern High School junior said, "so it's more personal for me."

"They have instilled in me (that) it's never too early to begin thinking about college, and it's never too late" to finish, he said.

He and a few friends stopped in after services at Bates Memorial Baptist Church on Sunday morning for Super Sunday, a college fair and educational outreach focused on African-American congregations across Kentucky, coordinated by the Kentucky Community and Technical College System.

Inside the church's fellowship hall, middle and high school students and several adults talked with representatives from Jefferson Community and Technical College, the University of Louisville, and the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, which parked its College Info Road Show vehicle in front of the church on Lampton Street.

The mobile classroom is outfitted with computer stations for students to learn more about attending college and to check on amounts they could qualify for in Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship money, which is awarded based on grades and ACT entrance-exam scores.

It was the second year for the blitz, held in conjunction with predominantly black churches across Kentucky. It's also aligned with a public-private partnership called 55,000 Degrees that aims to boost educational attainment, said Emily Belwood, a marketing specialist with JCTC.

The response at Bates was strong. Leaders at the church of 5,000 in Louisville's Smoketown neighborhood estimated that more than 500 students and adults stopped in after the three Sunday services to learn about applying for college and financial aid, and to pick up brochures on academic programs.

Several men and women over age 30 came to explore giving college another try. A few asked about ways to restart their educations despite being in default on student loans.

One was Lawanda Martin, 40, who attended a year at each of two Ohio colleges and a third year of study at ITT Tech, a for-profit technical institute. She was laid off from a minimum-wage job last November at a packaging factory and would like to upgrade her skills. "I'm trying to go back to school" to study computer-aided design, she said.

But a big obstacle, Martin said, is the \$3,000 she owes in principal and interest. She learned while visiting the road show trailer that if she works out a payment plan and makes a good dent in the balance for 12 months, she'll be eligible for additional aid.

"Three thousand dollars is a drop in the bucket," Mark Hoover, the road show coordinator, told Martin.

For Dantrell Bell, plans are still falling into place. An A student and president of his junior class, he plays varsity basketball and has thought about studying sports marketing or becoming an athletic trainer. A church youth group trip to see colleges in Florida and the Atlanta area was an "eye-opening

experience for me," he said, so he's more excited than ever about the next step.

Tracey Washington, the mother of an eighth-grader and a 20-year-old U of L sophomore, said she's glad Bates is reinforcing a message. "These events are really good because they remind kids there's things beyond high school. They need to take advantage of what's out there," she said, "and really concentrate on the GPA."
