EducateNKY Landscape Assessment Report

C Squared STRATEGIES

EDUCATENKY™
Rethinking learning.

EducateNKY Landscape Assessment
Final Report

By **Cheye Calvo**
C Squared Strategies
May 2024

Table of Contents

Introduction

Economic prosperity in NKY historically has propelled above average academic outcomes among the region's students, but steep declines over the last decade have outpaced downturns at the state and national levels and now threaten the region's long-standing competitive advantage. Key to this situation is an education system from early childhood through high school that does not meet the realities and needs of society today, especially for economically disadvantaged and historically marginalized students and families. In many ways, the system is built for another time and based on the false premise that the typical student enters kindergarten academically and socially ready for school and then receives one year of learning for every grade level through graduation, at which time they will be prepared to successfully transition to postsecondary life. In fact, despite two decades of dedicated effort in the region on kindergarten readiness, only 52 percent of NKY's students meet the state's benchmark when they begin school, down from 55 percent when the state began tracking the metric in 2014. The region's students make nominal progress in elementary school before experiencing a significant dropoff in middle school, leading to about a quarter of the region's young people either dropping out of high school or failing to achieve the state's standard of post-secondary readiness upon high school graduation.

Kindergarten Readiness

	2014		2023
State	49.0	⇨	46.2
NKY	54.9	⇨	52.3
River City Districts	42.3	⇨	36.4

Grade 8 Avg Combined Reading and Math Proficiency, 2013 v. 2023

	2013		2023	Change
State	48.8	⇨	40.0	*(8.8)*
NKY	55.9	⇨	43.4	*(12.5)*
River City Districts	35.8	⇨	22.0	*(13.7)*

The disconnect between system design and reality creates a paradox. The region shares a common belief that education should provide equal opportunity for all students while tolerating an education system that reinforces inequality. This situation is driven structurally by Kentucky's regressive system of school finance and school boundaries that formalize the region's patterns of significant economic and racial segregation. The economic vibrancy that in recent years has been a boon at the macro-level has fallen unevenly on its residents, boosting the fortunes of the educated and affluent, but driving up the cost of living, especially housing, as to strain those in the middle and push many community members already on the economic margins into outright crisis. The socioeconomic impacts coupled with the effects of a mental health crisis among young people converge on schools. Educators for years have struggled with a system unprepared for the societal forces that are thrust upon them. These conditions have been compounded in recent years by the pandemic and other factors. Non-academic indicators nationally and in NKY are flashing red: chronic absenteeism, transience, and school safety events have risen to alarming new heights. Meanwhile, the

NKY Graduation and Postsecondary Readiness (PSR) Rates, 2023

	Grads	5-Year Grad Rate	Post-Secondary Readiness
State	44,599	92.5	79.1
NKY	4,010	95.4	80.3
River City Districts	418	*89.8*	*66.3*

teaching profession is at an inflection point where many experienced educators are leaving the profession and the pipeline for talent is weaker than it has ever been.

Despite the adverse trendlines, the region continues to lead the state and retains significant economic and organizational assets, including the financial resources, collective leadership, and a collaborative spirit that make resetting its educational trajectory possible. Success in this effort will require new approaches in key strategic areas while reshaping the contributing factors that serve to produce and reinforce the system we have. To a large degree, the region's role as an economic engine relies on building a workforce prepared to meet the needs of the future. Reorienting the education system to provide equal opportunity for all aligns with NKY's core values and corresponds with the self-interest of a region that can no longer afford the opportunity costs of lost human potential.

There is something in the spirit of the region that does not settle for the status quo, and NKY in recent years has shown remarkable capacity to come together around collective impact. This effort should begin with an understanding that the current system is well designed to produce the results that it gets. The scale of the challenge is beyond the scope of education leaders, and it is not fair to hold them accountable to fix all of society's ills. On the other hand, schools provide the best platform and opportunity to engage families, especially when children are at the beginning of their educational journey, and deliver on the promise of equal opportunity. The system can be restructured and transformed to meet the needs of today only through deep partnership among education, business, nonprofit, and community leaders who collectively share a stake in creating a system that provides pathways for all young people to learn, grow, and thrive.

Success ultimately will require a committed, sustained, multifaceted effort that will be carried out over many years. This landscape analysis is an effort to trace the legal, political, and financial contours of NKY's education system, unpack reams of publicly available data, and capture and weave together the perspectives, accounts, and insights of more than 100 stakeholders and community members who participated in interviews and focus groups. The central recommendation is the advancement of five strategic priorities – early learning, family partnership, mastery learning, out-of-school time and exposure, and secondary options – that, if developed and implemented, have the potential to serve as catalysts to transform NKY's education system and build a future that aligns to what people say they want to be true about their region's education system in the not too distant future.

Regional Context

Education matters in NKY. Over the course of over 100 interviews and focus groups, stakeholders offered a wide range of perspectives and insights about the system of education that spans the three county region that includes Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties, 37 municipalities, 13 public school districts, three institutions of higher education, and one of the nation's more robust Diocese of Catholic schools.

To different people, education means different things. Some see it as a beacon of opportunity while others as a source of community pride. It is an essential feature to feed a vibrant economy and a prerequisite of an informed citizenry. It is the region's largest government service, an institutional establishment, and a major employer. A vaulted idea and a building up the street. A rite of passage and a life-long endeavor. A practical consideration and a political issue. A classroom. A playground. A teacher. Field trips. Team colors. A place your children go every day. A reduced speed zone. A property tax bill. Childcare. Tuition. Financial aid. School lunch. Hopes. Fears. Memories.

It is clear that the subject of education taps into things deep within us. It is simultaneously rational and tied to dearly held beliefs while tinged with sentiment and emotion. Given the opportunity to articulate a vision for success or describe a version of an education system that they would like to be true in five or ten years, stakeholders went in very different directions, albeit ones that are not mutually exclusive. The largest group of stakeholders presented a system that provides equal opportunity, providing all students a pathway to realize their potential regardless of their circumstances or where they lived. In a world where inequality is ubiquitous, these stakeholders see education as the great equalizer and best hope to enable young people to fulfill their dreams. In contrast to the idealists, another large group of stakeholders focused more on an education system that provides young people with meaningful pathways for success and orients the system to college and career readiness. They want a system that equips graduates with a plan for the future and the skills to make that plan a reality. Where the first two groups orient their visions around the individual, whether in ideal or practical terms, a third group places the premium on outcomes and see education as a critical government service that they want to hold accountable for delivering results. They spoke of metrics, like kindergarten readiness, third grade reading proficiency, eighth grade algebra, and average ACT scores. A final group gives more attention to the process of education and the way the system works. They envision a system marked by collaboration and alignment where stakeholders work together for the good of the system and are aligned to common goals and ways of doing things. These stakeholders tend to be more incremental in their aims, working to make improvements to the system as a means to achieve steady progress. This group is more sensitive to workforce issues and community support.

In addition to broad visions, stakeholders also key on particular components of the education system that they see as key indicators of success. NKY is very attentive to its workforce needs, and stakeholders want an education system that equips young people with essential skills like initiative, communications, critical thinking, problem-solving, and work ethic in addition to

academic mastery. They want to see more innovation and creative approaches that speak to different kinds of learners. There is considerable interest in broadening student exposure and introducing them to opportunities and possibilities that will ignite interest. Stakeholders reference students learning more from experiential and project-based learning that will excite young minds and help them see and understand the practical applications of subject matter. A common theme is the need to engage parents and bring them into the learning process when their students are young, especially in economically disadvantaged communities. Some stakeholders take a much broader view to envision a system where a more robust social safety net and better paying entry-level jobs help families meet basic needs and allow them to prioritize education. Many speak to the need for greater school choice where underprivileged families have a similar ability as more affluent ones to find a school program that meets the particular needs of their child. Other stakeholders spoke of a world where public education quality was not tied so closely to geography, where middle class families could remain in urban areas and attend good schools without tuition and economically and culturally diverse schools would spearhead greater regional integration.

Even with its many, varied visions of a successful and vibrant system of education, NKY is blessed with considerable goodwill and commonality amongst its stakeholders. People share a pride of place in NKY that identifies the region both within the Cincinnati region and within the state of Kentucky. Although there is no question that NKY residents continue to associate with their particular city, town, or local community, the sense of NKY as a region unto itself is growing. To that end, stakeholders align fairly well on the region's strengths – assets and advantages that any meaningful effort must leverage or build on – and its growth areas – regional gaps and barriers that ultimate success must overcome. The following highlights the five of each category cited by the most stakeholders.

First and foremost, when it comes to the region's advantages, NKY knows that it is an economic engine. Its location, infrastructure, and political climate make it a highly attractive place to open or locate a business, and it has organized as a region to strategically protect, guide, and advance its position. Second, the region takes tremendous pride in its sense of community and quality of life. People feel safe and connected to their neighbors and their neighborhoods. They enjoy a small-town sensibility even while maintaining all of the benefits of living in a large metropolitan area with big city sports teams and cultural institutions. Building on the sense of place, NKY stakeholders cite the region's people and culture as a third strength. Locals are friendly, kind, and generous. They greet strangers on the street and help if they can. Although the region is dominated by natives, many with roots going back generations, it welcomes newcomers and diversity. Many stakeholders reference a Catholic German heritage that values a direct, open, hard-working, self-reliant ethos. Next, for as much as people value their local community, they also love the region's geographic diversity and the mix of urban, suburban, and rural. People delight at the idea of walking across the Ohio River to the big city in Cincinnati while, in the other direction, they can quickly find open farms, open spaces, and wildlife and nature that allow them to get away from it all. The mix of cities and towns provides a range of community feels that range from urban chic to Mayberry with all the modern conveniences of suburban life, quick-access highways and interstates, and an international airport that connects

them to anywhere in the world that they want to go. Finally, NKY stakeholders see the region's ability to collaborate and partner as a major asset. The region exudes a sense that it can make a difference and come together to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity. In many ways, this muscle has grown from the region's nature as a collection of counties, towns, and cities rather than a single political entity. Progress in any direction requires working together, and the region is proud of its ability to take collective action.

Of course, there are two sides of any coin, and favorable features offer downsides. The single most cited barrier in NKY is its fragmented nature. This element was commonly referenced in the context of NKY's state influence and the region's inability to speak with one voice in state legislative affairs and with regard to the inefficiency of government services and the region's difficulty achieving operational benefits and economies of scale. These seem, however, to be areas where progress has been made through concerted efforts, with regional presence in Frankfort and through meaningful efforts to coordinate emergency response communication or core government infrastructure like water and sewer. The region benefits from three long-serving, practically-minded judge executives all who work well together and a set of institutions that seek to institutionalize regional thinking. However, fragmentation offers a host of pain-points in day-to-day operations by any group that operates beyond county, city, or school district lines. NKY offers a masters-class in coordination and partnership because it is an inefficient necessity of life and one that takes considerable energy, time, and bandwidth. Although virtually no one advocates for a one-size-fits-all alternative akin to what they see across the river in Cincinnati, almost everyone sees the value in some level of streamlining and simplifying.

A close second among the most-mentioned regional barriers is inequality. NKY has long been economically diverse, but the low-cost of living and its proximity to economic opportunities helped to keep things in balance. However, the region's rising prosperity has sharpened the divide between the haves and have nots. The region suffers from a weak social safety net. It has a poor public transportation system and has insufficiently developed its public infrastructure to support those facing economic hardship, much less acute medical, mental health, addiction, or abusive situations. One non-native stakeholder noted that the region's vaunted friendliness diminishes when the newcomer is poor, non-white, or does not speak English.

A related third barrier is the rising cost of living. In a region already highly segregated by race and class, the urban core is facing significant displacement of economically disadvantaged residents to cheaper outer communities ill-equipped to serve their needs. Moreover, the price of housing throughout the region is pushing traditionally middle income families to the margins and exacerbating other challenges related to individual and societal well-being. Working class wages are not keeping up. The region's housing stock is unbalanced and does not meet the needs of working families with children. Financial stress pervades lives, and the strain follows children to school. The fourth barrier is perhaps the most significant side-effect of the region's prosperity and fragmentation: complacency. Life for most people in NKY – certainly those with resources and influence – is rather good, and there is little urgency for change. Safe in their communities of choice, most people are satisfied with the status quo. Not only do they not see reasons for

meaningful change, they will actively resist it or oppose proposals or leaders who threaten to disrupt their privileges. A final barrier widely seen relates to the region's workforce challenge. The region is not producing or attracting the workers it needs to sustain its economic growth. The distribution centers around the airport are drawing blue collar workers and creating shortages elsewhere in the region in industries that have been unable to match higher hourly wages. Meanwhile, there are large shortages in many skilled professions that require a college degree or advanced education, including teachers.

NKY stakeholders who look to the future see success in the region's ability to overcome its barriers to take advantage of its tremendous opportunities. The vast majority see the region's education system as central to this long-term effort. They know that the region is above average for the state, and they feel good about the region's educational options at the elite levels. However, they do not accept the state average as the appropriate benchmark and sense that their relatively good position is precarious. They are ready for bold, even disruptive, action that will unlock regional potential and create opportunities held back by unfair circumstances. Although some of these stakeholders have developed inclinations about the kind of change that they would like, most recognize that they are not experts and are looking for greater clarity and national best practices to guide the way. They feel a sense of urgency and can be frustrated by complacency and the glacial pace of change.

Education leaders, by contrast, are shaped by the systems that they lead. They carry the burden of operating schools on a daily basis and confronting the multitude of real life challenges in a state that underfunds education and, at the political level, can seem strangely hostile to the profession. Each and every one of them works hard and actively to make the system better within real and ever present limitations, which they understand as well as anyone. Rather than bold or radical change, they tend to focus on incremental improvement. Although school superintendents work together through the regional cooperative and other regional groups and lend time to state advocacy, the nature of their roles focuses them on the operations of their districts and serving the needs of their communities under the governance of their respective school boards. They typically find satisfaction in small victories and become adept at managing the many challenges, twists, turns, if not outright broadsides, that come with assuming leadership in public education.

One thing that everyone agrees upon is the need to improve education to better serve the students, families, and communities of NKY. Amidst the many perspectives, reflections, and insights, this landscape assessment seeks to provide a comprehensive look at the education system to identify priorities areas, feed discussion among stakeholders, and surface ideas that will propel and drive action that has the great potential for meaningful positive impact.

Education Landscape Areas

The Northern Kentucky (NKY) region of Kenton, Boone, and Campbell counties consists of an estimated population of 402,706 residents, an estimated 68,493 or 23.1 percent as of the summer 2023 were under age 18. Of these, 24,360 were under age 5 and 68,493 were between the ages of 5 and 17. The region is overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white, about 87.6 percent of the three county region. The overall labor force participation is relatively high for the state around 68 percent with the female workforce participation rate around 64 percent. Boone County is the wealthiest county of the three with a median household income of $91,697 followed by Kenton at $76,016 and Campbell at $71,979. The region's largest county, Kenton, also has the highest poverty rate of 10.8 percent, followed by Campbell County at 9.5 percent, and Boone at 7.4 percent.

Of the region's 24,360 children under age 5 in 2023, Kentucky's Early Childhood Profile reports that 17,498 – nearly 72 percent – were placed in childcare for at least a portion of the year in some form of childcare.

NKY Student Demographics by District, 2022-2023

District	Total	EcD	EL	Non-White
Beechwood Ind	1,553	17.1%	3.2%	15.5%
Bellevue Ind	682	68.0%	1.8%	22.4%
Boone Co	21,384	43.1%	8.9%	27.2%
Campbell Co	5,491	48.9%	1.5%	11.2%
Covington Ind	4,109	89.5%	16.5%	64.2%
Dayton Ind	924	82.4%	1.3%	16.0%
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	2,629	72.0%	7.8%	37.8%
Fort Thomas Ind	3,194	11.5%	1.1%	10.9%
Kenton Co	14,789	47.4%	3.8%	18.7%
Ludlow Ind	874	67.2%	2.4%	15.9%
Newport Ind	1,756	90.3%	8.5%	52.7%
Southgate Ind	234	86.3%	1.7%	35.5%
Walton-Verona Ind	1,994	40.3%	1.8%	10.6%
State	**687,294**	**61.3%**	**6.4%**	**27.6%**
NKY	**59,613**	**49.5%**	**6.3%**	**25.3%**
County Districts	41,664	45.4%	6.1%	22.1%
River Cities + EE	11,208	81.8%	9.6%	45.3%
Other Ind w/o EE	6,741	21.3%	1.8%	11.9%

The data reported by school districts to the Kentucky Department of Education provides the broadest portrait of the region's children. Of the 68,493 school-aged children, 59,613 or 87 percent were enrolled in one of the region's 13 public school districts during the 2022-2023 school year, but this includes 2,357 students enrolled in district school- or pre-kindergarten. Although numbers are not as exact, approximately 10,000 K-12 students were enrolled in private school or home schooled. Although the region's total population is overwhelmingly white, 87.6 percent, its public schools are more diverse with 25.3 percent of students identifying as something other than non-Hispanic white, slightly less than the Kentucky average. Just under half of the region's public school students qualify for the National School Lunch Program, which requires a household income of up to 185 percent of the federal poverty limit – and are thus classified as economically disadvantaged. The region is considerably below the state average of 61.3 percent of economically disadvantaged students. It is just under the state average with 6.3 percent of its students designated as an "English Learner," which means

that the student is linguistically diverse and has yet to demonstrate a level of English language proficiency so as to meet grade-level content without additional language support.

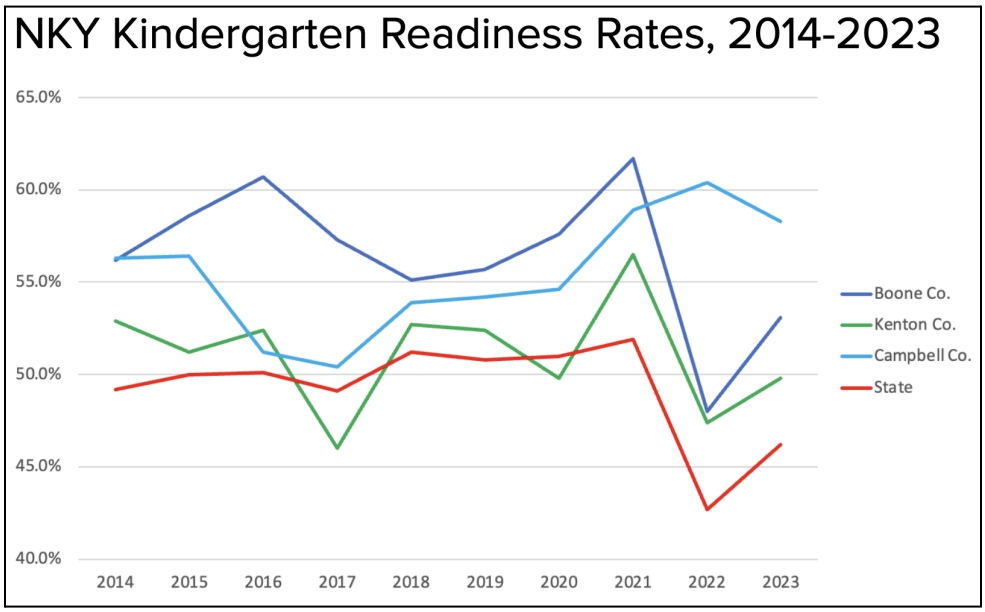
Boone County is the region's largest school district with more than 21,000 students enrolled in 2023 followed by Kenton County with a couple hundred students short of 15,000. Due to their size, Boone and Kenton county districts serve the majority of students in the region, including most students classified as economically disadvantaged. Newport and Covington school districts serve the highest percentages of low-income students – both around 90 percent – followed closely by Southgate at 86 percent and Dayton at 82 percent. Newport and Covington also serve the most diverse populations and are the only two districts with majorities of students who are non-white. Erlanger-Elsmere and Southgate also serve populations that are just over a third non-white while Boone and Kenton county districts have large diverse populations that disproportionately attend a few schools. Covington has the region's largest English Learner population that includes about one in six students.

The Landscape Assessment reviews the region's educational system across five broad areas with an additional section dedicated to some important contributing factors that cut across every element of the educational system.

1. Early Learning
2. Public K-12 Education
    a. School Finance
    b. Family Engagement
    c. State Accountability
    d. Elementary School
    e. Middle School
    f. High School
    g. Data-Driven Instruction
3. Community Partners
4. School Choice
5. Post-Secondary
6. Contributing Factors
    a. Coordination and Cooperation
    b. Governance and Accountability
    c. Talent Capital
    d. Socio-economic Impacts
    e. Mental Health

1. Early Learning

A region-wide focus on early learning for nearly two decades elevated stakeholder attention to early childhood development and increased coordination and resources but has not achieved a meaningful improvement in kindergarten readiness rates, which today remain effectively what they were a decade ago. Although many components of the former efforts remain, they have become more fragmented as reduced philanthropic investments and the end of federal pandemic support have weakened structures and capacity that were key to coordination. Early learning efforts that improve kindergarten readiness offer some of the best returns on investment among all public benefit programs, especially for efforts beginning after birth rather than merely preschool programs. Yet, public and private investment in early learning pales in comparison to K-12 education, which suffers when children begin school insufficiently ready to learn.



NKY's leadership in the early learning arena began in earnest in 2000 during Boone County Judge Executive Gary Moore's first term in office. Although Boone County's data on children's health ranked near the top in the state, Judge Moore was disturbed that far too many children fell below what he considered a standard of success. This insight led to a broad effort over many years to factor children and their families into the county's long-term planning on new development, parks and recreational activities, intermodal connections, and health infrastructure. Judge Moore leveraged his broad executive and appointment authority to bring together the various agencies and entities under the sway of county government that served young children and their families – school districts, libraries, extension services, and other government services. The shared goal was to be more precise, intentional, and disciplined about how programs operated and coordinated in the service of young children. Looking for a partner to coordinate the effort, the county reached out to the United Way of Greater Cincinnati (UWGC), which in 2003 agreed to take the lead as it launched "Success by 6," part of United Way's national effort to improve school readiness. The initiative also extended to Kenton and Campbell counties.

UWGC soon hired a NKY director and fashioned Success by 6 to become NKY's early childhood backbone convener in the region. In addition to working with regional partners to advance a coordinated strategy, build regional infrastructure, and support and incubate programs, Success by 6 worked closely with NKU to take a research-based approach to the issue, establish a common definition of kindergarten readiness, and drive the creation of a measurement system for the entire state. The Kentucky Early Childhood Profile was launched in 2013 and began providing data on kinder-readiness that allowed leaders and the public to measure success and track progress. As part of the Vision 2015 process, it helped set the ambitious regional goal of 85 percent kinder-readiness by 2020. UWGC sustained its early childhood leadership through staffing transitions but, in time, began to regionalize at its Cincinnati headquarters. In 2021, it closed its NKY office. The following year, it announced a strategic shift to a "system-change approach" that allocated investments in six categories aligned to address systemic issues and help families achieve economic well-being. Although one category focused on early learning and care, the new approach shifted UWGC's giving and reflected an overall decline in funding driven by reduced corporate giving that has affected the capacity of key components of the early learning system. Additionally, the global pandemic struck in 2020, severely disrupting the entire education system and especially private childcare providers. Federal pandemic resources helped to fund regional capacity to address an entirely new set of challenges, but the recent sunset of these resources has caused another round of cut-backs. UWGC has installed new leadership in NKY that promises to be part of a new solution, but the region continues to lack a single organizing force for early learning with the capacity and heft to drive collective action. The end result is an early childhood sector that is stretched then and operating in a world of considerable uncertainty.

The common measurement for kindergarten readiness that Kentucky put in place a decade ago is the BRIGANCE Kindergarten Screen III, which provides an assessment of a child's development in five areas based on observation, interviews, and child performance. As part of the measurement system, school district personnel conduct screens of all in-coming kindergarten students within a few weeks before and after the start of each school year. The official readiness rate is based only on the first three indicators – i) academic/cognitive, ii) language development, and iii) physical development – while the latter two indicators – iv) self-help and v) social-emotional development – rely on parent reports and, thus, are not factored into the official "readiness" calculation. Kindergarten students are given an overall readiness score that is based on an average of the three domains, which means that a student who does not reach the threshold in one domain can be deemed "ready" based on overall strength in other domains. This fact matters practically as readiness in the language development domain tends to be much higher than in the academic/cognitive domain. The average between the two domains pulls many students into an overall readiness designation despite not achieving the academic/cognitive threshold. For instance, the statewide overall readiness rate is 46.2 percent while only 31.8 percent of students statewide demonstrate readiness according to the academic/cognitive domain.

Kentucky's Early Childhood Profile database shows conclusively that kindergarten readiness matters for academic achievement. Among all Kentucky students who entered kindergarten in

2019, those who met the kindergarten readiness threshold were three to four times more likely to be proficient in math and 2.5 to three times more likely in 2023 to be proficient in reading by third grade compared to those who fell short of the benchmark in kindergarten. Four years after starting school "not ready," 32 percent of students tested "novice" in math and 26 percent in reading, meaning that they were two steps below proficient and at an enormous disadvantage to ever catch up. An additional 17 percent of these students were held back before reaching third grade.

At a high level, kindergarten readiness rates align with trends related to household income and educational attainment. Across the region, kindergarten readiness averages 52 percent, six points above the state average. All three NKY counties rank top 10 in the state in college attainment while Boone and Campbell counties have the state's second and fourth lowest child poverty rates with Kenton ranked 26. The trend continues down to the school district level with some notable deviations in a couple in smaller districts like Bellevue and Dayton.

NKY Kinder Readiness Rates by District, 2023

District	Overall	Academic	Language	Physical
Beechwood Ind	**77**	58	81	73
Bellevue Ind	**76**	70	82	82
Boone Co	**53**	37	67	46
Campbell Co	**57**	43	78	50
Covington Ind	**32**	19	60	36
Dayton Ind	**58**	45	77	57
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	**29**	18	67	26
Fort Thomas Ind	**78**	56	83	77
Kenton Co	**56**	43	74	51
Ludlow Ind	**43**	27	80	30
Newport Ind	**19**	14	65	25
Southgate Ind	**42**	28	72	45
Walton-Verona Ind	**54**	43	78	50
State	**46**	**32**	**69**	**44**
NKY	**52**	**38**	**71**	**48**
County Districts	55	40	71	48
River City plus EE	35	23	67	36
Other Ind	70	52	81	68

Decades of work in the early childhood arena has helped clarify practices that help prepare young children to start school ready to learn. The Governor's Office of Early Childhood has identified what it calls its "Bright Spots" of eight data-driven initiatives in Kentucky that have demonstrated targeted success with young children: i) home visitation, ii) building vocabulary, iii) developmental screening and monitoring, iv) early literacy, v) high-quality pre-school and Head Start, vi) kindergarten transition strategies, vii) blended funding models, and viii) parent workshops.

Although NKY has many core components that are important to success – a long-standing, region-wide commitment, a standardized metric to measure progress, and a clear set of data-driven best practices – the system does not work to incentivize the outcomes that it most wants, which is kindergarten readiness. The most significant state investment in young children comes in the form of child care through the Kentucky Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which provides support to help families pay for child care. The program received considerable attention during the 2024 legislative session due to the pending expiration of federal pandemic relief that has been used to enhance workers' pay, hire additional staff, and keep centers open.

The loss of hundreds of millions of dollars annually poses a child care crisis for the state that is many times greater than the current-year state appropriation of $40.5 million for child care. To incentivize higher quality child care, the state has established the Kentucky All STARS rating and improvement system for licensed childcare facilities and certified family child care homes that rates child care providers on a scale of 1 to 5. Kentucky identifies licensed facilities and certified homes as “high quality” when they achieve an All STARS rating of 3 or higher. The incentive works by providing progressively higher initial and annual financial awards through CCAP to providers that achieve All STARS ratings above level 1 and enhanced per child monthly subsidies for levels 3 and up. Statewide, 49.8 percent of licensed or certified providers achieve the “high quality” standard. Campbell County has the second highest share – 60.6 percent – of “high quality” programs among Kentucky’s 10 most populous counties while only 34.3 percent of providers in Boone County and 41.6 percent of providers in Kenton County have achieved a 3 All STARS rating or better.

A key shortcoming with the All STARS rating system is that it in no way considers kindergarten readiness. Instead, licensed private providers in good standing are enrolled in the program at level 1 and can achieve higher levels by satisfying standards to compile points that are largely input-based. The system also treats publicly operated centers differently than private centers, effectively starting them at level 3, effectively granting them a “quality” rating at the outset. Every public preschool in NKY except two – Stephen ES in Boone County and Southgate ES in Campbell – have All STARS ratings of 5 and the two exceptions rate 4 and 3 respectively. Some advocates contend that the All STARS rating process is more of an indication of administrative capacity rather than child care quality, as the certification process is cumbersome and the evaluation standards can be subjective for private providers. Many private providers that do not rely on child care subsidies through CCAP do not pursue a higher All STARS rating, which helps to explain the average All STARS ratings in Boone County of 2.3 and Kenton County of 2.5, both below the state average of 2.7 (the Campbell County average is 3.0). Public preschools, on the other hand, have the administrative capacity to achieve a higher level and are more likely to tout the achievement.

Kindergarten Readiness Percent by Pre-School Care, 2023

District	All	EcD	State Funded	Head Start	Child Care	Home	Other
Beechwood Ind	77	-	64	-	91	68	73
Bellevue Ind	76	70	83	-	-	-	-
Boone Co	53	37	39	48	73	35	69
Campbell Co	57	38	50	21	76	47	55
Covington Ind	32	26	34	67	52	23	-
Dayton Ind	58	51	69	-	-	30	-
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	29	26	26	38	40	20	-
Fort Thomas Ind	78	67	73	-	89	75	79
Kenton Co	56	40	42	57	76	44	62
Ludlow Ind	43	40	48	-	-	33	-
Newport Ind	19	12	26	15	24	12	-
Southgate Ind	42	39	-	-	-	-	-
Walton-Verona Ind	54	38	40	-	82	53	73
State	**46**	**37**	**46**	**43**	**67**	**34**	**60**

Unfortunately, although the state reports on ALL STARS ratings by center, it only shares readiness data by school and school district where the student enrolls in kindergarten.

Therefore, it is not possible to clearly identify the relationship between STAR ratings and kindergarten readiness. In fact, the state's comprehensive system of kindergarten readiness operates as a baseline for K-12 education rather than the North Star of the early learning system. Broadly speaking, however, the data shows that the type of care that a child receives prior to school matters for kindergarten readiness. Children in privately licensed or certified child care are significantly more likely to be ready for school versus enter kindergarten students who received state funded preschool. State-funded care offered through school districts is the most available and affordable form of care for many families, but it is restrictive based on income and special needs. Head Start programs produce some of the higher kindergarten readiness rates in areas of concentrated poverty, particularly Covington and Erlanger-Elsmere, but it only has 405 slots for the three county region and currently is not operating at full capacity due to teaching shortages. The data shows that children who connect to some form of support or programming – categorized as "other" – do better than those who do not, but work needs to be done to more clearly track who is accessing what programs and which are the most effective and strong candidates to scale. Much more can be done to understand regionally what programs are contributing to kindergarten readiness and where there are meaningful opportunities for improvement. There also is significant potential to improve the efficacy of kindergarten readiness screening, as the data as reported by some districts, notably Bellevue, clearly have anomalies that should be evaluated and addressed.

What is needed is a reinvigorated and coordinated approach to translate pockets of excellence and exemplars into a comprehensive plan that directs resources to data-driven practices, scales what works, and holds the system accountable to outcomes. The data should be organized and shared broadly to help guide sound decision-making among families about which care is best for their children, funders about where to invest their money, and policymakers about how to craft a system aligned to shared goals and invest public money effectively. The All STAR rating system should be reevaluated to reward outcomes as well as best practices and should consider elements that align with other important priorities, like a more meaningful family engagement component that sets the stage to involve parents more deeply in their child's educational journey at the start. The region has in place many of the right ingredients that are needed to significantly enhance early learning and vastly improve kindergarten readiness. Its challenge is to reorganize the sector to impose greater structure, coordination, and accountability to maximize its impact.

2. Public K-12 Education

NKY has the greatest concentration of school districts in the commonwealth with three county districts and 10 independent school districts. Campbell County's six districts – the county system and five independent districts (Bellevue, Dayton, Fort Thomas, Newport, and Southgate) – is most of any of Kentucky's 120 counties, and Kenton County's five districts – the county plus four independents (Beechwood, Covington, Erlanger-Elsmere, and Ludlow) is a close second. Walton-Verona is Boone County's only independent.

NKY's three county districts are relatively large with Boone County the commonwealth's third largest district in terms of enrollment, Kenton County the sixth largest, and Campbell County the 25th in size. NKY's independent district sizes run the gamut from Covington, which is the second largest independent district in the state next to Bowling Green and the 39th school district overall, to Southgate, which is Kentucky's smallest district of any size. As a whole, NKY's 10 independent districts are slightly above average in size with the average enrollment 1,795 students during the 2022-2023 school year compared to an average of 1,474 students among all 51 independent districts statewide.

a. School Finance

Tax dollars across different levels of government fuel public schools and significantly shape their quality and performance. In the 2022-2024 Biennium Budget of the Kentucky Commonwealth, education comprises 36.9 percent of the state general fund appropriation, the largest share by far, but this represents a decline from its 44.3 percent peak during the 2007-2008 fiscal year. Following the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), the state launched a sustained increased investment in education that lasted nearly two decades and propelled a surge in academic achievement during which Kentucky outpaced the nation and overtook national averages in both fourth and eighth grade performance for a few years. State funding for education began to ebb with the Great Recession after the 2008-2009 school year. Student achievement continued to rise for a few more years, peaking between 2011 and 2015, before beginning a steep decline as education funding shifted increasingly from the state to local taxpayers. ***The decade and a half trend in state school finance has been especially disadvantageous for NKY as the region's schools have absorbed the dual consequences of a school finance system that punishes high property tax assessments and is forced to compete in a talent market with school districts in Ohio, which more generously funds education, especially to urban districts***.

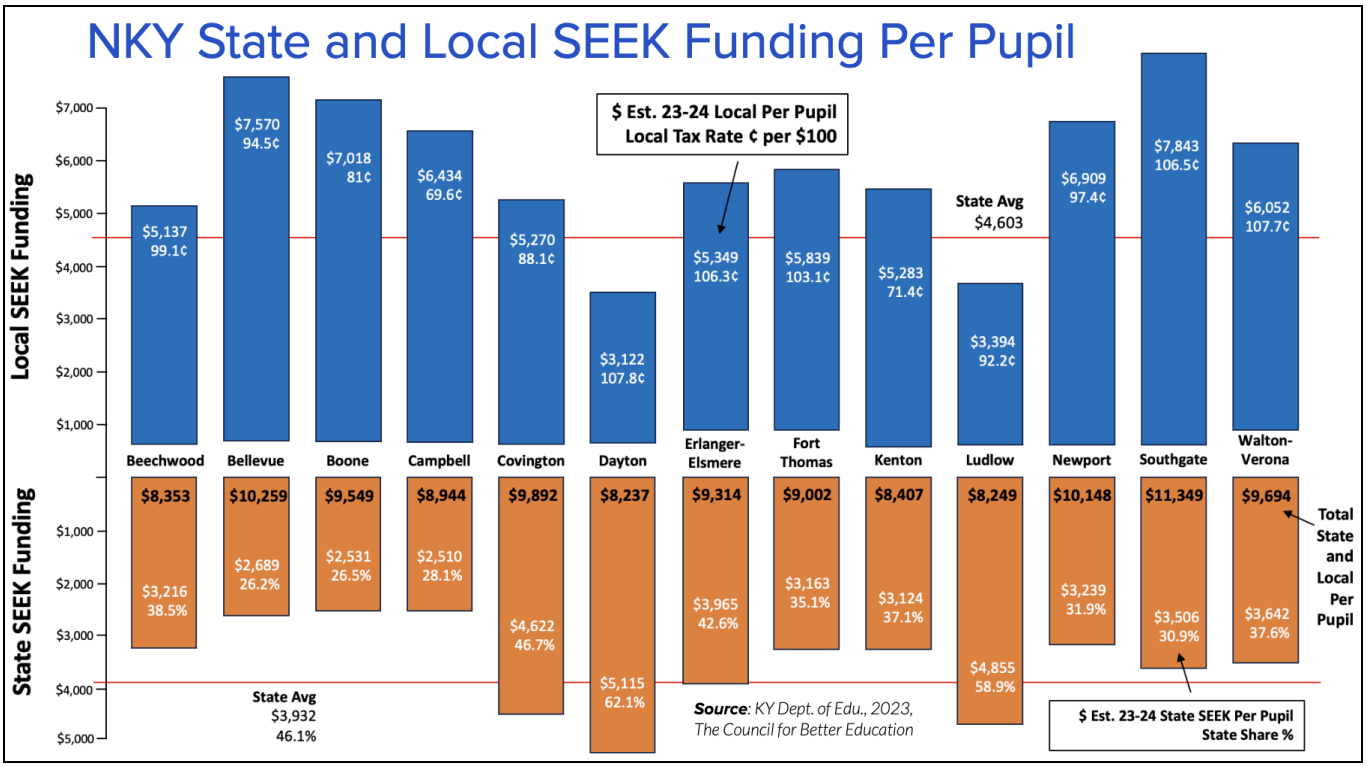
Nationally, school funding is largely a shared responsibility of state and local governments with a smaller portion of federal resources focused more on economically disadvantaged students and those with special needs. The Education Data Initiative, which compiles data from the US Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics, most recently estimated that school districts in the US spend $16,390 per pupil from all sources. The state share averages $7,430 per pupil, with a local portion of $7,230, and the federal contribution $1,730. This works out to an average state share of 45.3 percent, a local share of 44.1 percent, and a federal

portion of 10.6 percent. The same report ranks Kentucky 32nd in elementary and secondary education spending and 34th in funding with a state per pupil that averages $7,230, a local funding average of $4,820, and a relatively higher federal per pupil of $2,250 per pupil. The state figure includes indirect spending on K-12 education, such as contributions to teacher pension plans, which are not included in the funding formula. From all sources, Kentucky's education funding totals $14,300 per pupil, about nearly $2,000 less than the national average.[1]

Of course, absolute funding and spending fail to capture the full story. A 2022 study by the Education Law Center (ELC, *Making the Grade: How Fair is School Funding in Your State*, evaluated school funding systems between 2008 and 2020, from the Great Recession to just before the pandemic, a period particularly relevant to Kentucky. The study used three lens to examine fairness: "level," or cost-adjust, per pupil revenue from state and local sources; "distribution," or the degree to which resources are allocated according to districts with high levels of poverty; and "effort," or funding as a share of the state's economic output. The report gave Kentucky a "D" for level, noting a gap of more than $2,000 from the national average once federal funding is removed from the equation. Ohio, NKY's most relevant out-of-state competitor for talent, received a "B" grade and was $2,000 over the national average. Kentucky also received a "D" grade for distribution with the report showing the state's regressive system of allocation that actually gives about $1,000 more per pupil to low-poverty districts than high-poverty districts. Ohio earned an "A". The report noted that Kentucky was among the bottom group of states that had become more regressive between 2008 and 2020 and dropped in the rankings from 18 to 38. Kentucky did best in the effort category, earning a "C" for being effectively at the national average of 3.6 percent of the state's GDP in 2020 dedicated to K12 education, slightly below its 2008 level and falling from a national rank of 20th to 24th. Ohio fell significantly in the "effort" category during the same years, dropping from an "A" to a "C." Therefore, ***although Kentucky and Ohio spend similar shares of their economic activity on K-12 education funding, the main difference is that the Ohio system of school finance prioritizes high-poverty districts while Kentucky's system has become increasingly regressive.***[2]

Kentucky schools operate in a world defined by KERA, which was enacted in 1990 in response to a Kentucky Supreme Court ruling that the state's system of education finance was unconstitutional. KERA put in place the Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) fund, which aimed to significantly increase funding for schools and even per-pupil expenditures across poor and wealthier districts while creating incentives for poorer districts to contribute local revenues beyond the minimum level. Essentially, the formula works by setting a state base per pupil allocation and adjusting the state per pupil for each district based on various factors, like special population, transportation, property tax assessments, and additional taxing authority subject to voter approval. The SEEK formula proved effective until the global housing crisis in

[1] Hanson, Melanie. "U.S. Public Education Spending Statistics" EducationData.org, September 8, 2023, https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics.
[2] Danielle Farrie, Sciarra, David, "Making the Grade: How Fair is School Funding in Your State," Education Law Center, 2022, https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/Making-the-Grade-2022-Report.pdf.



2008, when state per pupil funding began a long decline in real dollars that has continued through the present. Although the formula enhances district allocations modest amounts based on student factors, like the percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged or those with special needs, it disproportionately weighs property tax assessment. This serves to reward or punish districts based on the wealth of their tax base seemingly independent of the actual needs of the students that the district serves. The system's blunt nature adversely affects NKY, which has seven districts, including Bellevue and Newport, in the bottom 10 percentile of state aid and ten districts in the bottom quartile. Only Dayton among NKY's 13 districts is in the state's upper half of recipients at 59th, followed by Ludlow at 87th, and Covington at 102nd. SEEK greatly favors rural districts where property values are much lower but so is the cost of living. It gives no consideration to the unique challenges of urban districts or expensive talent markets.

This reality has shifted the cost of public education from the state to local taxpayers. NKY dominates the state's list of the highest school district real estate taxes. In 2022, the region had the six highest real property tax rates in the state, and all ten independent school district rates were among the top 15. The county districts, on the other hand, are in the middle of the pack with rankings between 70 and 82nd place. As NKY voters have regularly approved nickel school facilities tax levies and not exercised their right to recall rates that increase revenues by more than four percent, it seems that NKY communities have generally supported the extra expense of maintaining independent school districts, but the current system of finance has taxed that sentiment more than anywhere else in the state.
\]\

b. Family Partnership

Although schools have the responsibility to educate children, families are a far stronger force in academic success. Students bring to school the full spectrum of advantages and disadvantages that they have at home – whether that be financial security, broad exposure, and expectations of high academic attainment or food and housing insecurity, trauma, or a worldview of parents for whom school was not a positive personal experience. Schools struggle to overcome adverse factors and serve all students well. Generally, school performance reflects the communities that a school serves. This is seen most vividly in cross-applying schools' proficiency rates with the percentage of the student population who come from economically disadvantaged households. When graphed, the data nearly always creates a strong diagonal line that correlates higher academic proficiency with lower proportions of economically disadvantaged students. This is true throughout the country and in NKY, especially in middle school where the trendline becomes pronounced. However, demographics do not have to be destiny. It is important to highlight schools that deviate favorably from the trendline and understand what they do differently to defy the odds. The two most common factors cited when asking about outliers like Glenn O. Swing ES in Covington, Conner MS in Boone County, or Ludlow HS are consistent, high-calibrer school leaders and cultures that include strong parent engagement and partnership.

On the whole, ***family engagement is an underdeveloped muscle in NKY and presents one of the best opportunities to meaningfully transform public education, especially for independent school districts serving economically disadvantaged communities.*** School leaders and educators genuinely want parents involved but too often do not build systems and prioritize the work that will lead to meaningful partnerships with parents and families that have the potential to transform education. The broad and significant impact of effective school-family partnerships for students, educators, families, and schools is well researched and documented. Kentucky established the Commissioner's Parent Advisory Council (CPAC) in 1999 to advise KDE in ways that families and communities can support the education system in advancing student achievement. This group, renamed the Family Partnership Council (FPC) in 2022, has captured the research, articulated the benefits, and developed guides and tools to help schools and districts elevate family engagement. FPC is currently preparing new recommendations to the Kentucky Board of Education for later this year that will further encourage schools to improve family partnerships and build state support capacity. Although the FPC recommendations are another positive step forward in a multi-decade effort, the disassociation of the pandemic years paired with ongoing dislocation and disruption calls for a fundamental rethinking of the school-family relationship in many underserved communities. In many ways, parent engagement at most schools remains designed for a middle class norm that is increasingly the exception rather than the rule. In a state where 62 percent of students qualify for free or reduced meals, the region as a whole is relatively affluent with just under half of its student's meeting this threshold. However, over 81 percent of the more than 11,000 students in the River Cities and Erlanger-Elsmere are classified as economically disadvantaged. In these districts during the 2022-2023 school year, more than 30 percent of kindergarteners were

chronically absent, meaning that they missed more than 10 percent of school days, an alarming increase since before the pandemic. Absenteeism of this magnitude among kindergarteners says far more about the family situation than the student and suggests a disconnection that risks carrying through the entire educational journey.

Systems to track parent engagement in Kentucky are weak. They only track students with a parent or guardian who attends at least one teacher conference, parents or guardians who participated in and served on a school-based decision making council, and family volunteer hours. The system reports aggregate numbers by school rather than grade, which makes it difficult to compare broadly across schools with different grade configurations or dig deeper. As it is not a component of the state accountability system, it is difficult to know whether schools report fully and accurately. Still, although the data is mixed and filled with exceptions, it shows a correlation between teacher conference attendance and school performance. Teacher conference attendance regionally stands at just higher than 75 percent for elementary schools before declining to 51 percent for middle schools and 49 percent for high schools. Among the districts with larger shares of low-income households, Dayton and Ludlow standout in teacher conference attendance at all levels. Covington is low across the board in elementary school, plummeting to under 8 percent at Holmes MS, before rebounding to 48 percent at Holmes HS. Newport is interesting due to its unique grade configurations with 64 percent teacher conference attendance at the primary school, which ends at grade 2, declining to 35 percent at the grades 3-6 Intermediate School, then falling further to 15 percent at Newport HS, which starts at grade 7. In parent volunteer hours, only Grandview ES in Bellevue distinguishes itself with parents on average giving nearly 7 hours of time per student followed only by Covington's Sixth District ES with an average of more than 4 volunteer hours per student. No other school with more than two-thirds of students from economically disadvantaged households averages more than an hour per year. Parent volunteering is much less common at the secondary level throughout the region with only a couple schools reporting significant parent participation.

Outside the state reporting system, districts tout a range of parent engagement practices. Dayton dedicates two school days to parent-teacher meetings to give teachers more time during the day for meaningful conversations. Bellevue has developed an outreach program to parents of infants and toddlers and holds monthly open houses to build relationships before they reach school age. Newport schedules an annual "home visit" day when teachers visit homes to meet families and deliver materials. Covington Partners offers a range of education and leadership opportunities for family members. Ludlow's Mary A. Goetz ES was named a "Family Friendly" certified school by the Prichard Committee's Collaborative for Families & Schools, and Prichard has included Covington and Dayton in their Kentucky Community School Initiative, which includes resources for a dedicated staff person. School leaders who serve underprivileged communities discussed strategies to introduce parents to data and align with them at a deeper level on their student's academics. All schools plan events to welcome and engage families, showcase student performances, and build their sense of community. Many schools conduct annual parent surveys to take their pulse and gather input and feedback. School leaders regularly hold coffees with parents or meet with parents in groups. Schools commonly partner

with nonprofits to connect families to resources and services to help with basic needs, provide counseling, or navigate crises.

School leaders regularly express frustration with the low levels of parent participation and the cultural and socio-economic barriers that inhibit their ability to get more parents and family members involved. The solution needs to begin with a sober understanding of the challenge. All River City districts and Erlanger-Elsmere serve a student population who are at least two-thirds from low-income households while Covington, Newport, and Southgate are from 84 to 90 percent economically disadvantaged. The county districts are about half and Walton-Verona about 40 percent while the affluent Beechwood and Fort Thomas are in the teens. However, low household income does not capture the depth of the issue. About one in five Covington student's last year met the federal definition of homeless, which is defined as children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The River City districts serve more homeless students than the three much larger county districts combined and includes more than 1 in 7 students. The situation is most concentrated at the younger grades where it captures more than 18 percent of kindergarten and first grade students. By comparison, the county districts average a 2.5 percent homeless population. The three more affluent independent districts of Beechwood, Fort Thomas, and Walton-Verona have a combined homeless population of 0.2 percent.

Family-Related At-Risk Factors, 22-23

District	Transcience Rate	Homeless Rate	Kinder Chronic Absenteeism
Beechwood Ind	3.0%	0.1%	9.1%
Bellevue Ind	17.0%	5.7%	16.7%
Boone Co	7.7%	1.0%	19.5%
Campbell Co	10.3%	5.3%	15.9%
Covington Ind	24.5%	19.8%	28.1%
Dayton Ind	11.7%	10.0%	40.0%
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	13.5%	11.1%	32.5%
Fort Thomas Ind	3.8%	0.2%	7.2%
Kenton Co	6.4%	3.6%	14.5%
Ludlow Ind	11.8%	0.3%	37.1%
Newport Ind	32.3%	13.6%	26.7%
Southgate Ind	27.2%	16.2%	34.9%
Walton-Verona Ind	11.0%	0.5%	21.7%
State	8.3%	2.9%	34.8%
NKY	**9.5%**	**4.3%**	**19.3%**
County Districts	7.6%	2.5%	17.2%
River City Dist plus EE	20.3%	13.5%	30.4%
Other Ind Districts	5.6%	0.2%	12.2%

Closely related to homelessness is the issue of transience. It is possible to calculate a transience rate by comparing the shear count of student students who enrolled in or attended a school or district during the year with the school or district's end-of-year official enrollment. Broadly speaking, NKY transient rate of 9.5 percent is 14 percent higher than the state average, but transience in some districts – namely, Newport, Covington, and Southgate – are around three times the regional average and five to six times the turnover faced by more affluent schools in more stable communities. Students who move regularly or lack a fixed bed to sleep, much less a desk at which to do homework, struggle academically. These students and their families have very different needs than those who consistently live in one place and state and finish each school year at the same school. These changes are not only hard on the students, but constant entries and exits of

children makes it difficult for classes to settle into rhythms and achieve academic gains. Parents are much more focused on the bottom layers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Need over other important but less urgent matters like engaging their children's teachers and attending school events. Widespread disconnection breeds social isolation, which further compounds financial and mental strain.

For all of the difficulties, ***public schools provide the single best opportunity to connect families to the wider community and expand a sense of belonging***. This is especially true during that formative period when children are young and parents are forging routines and are more open to partnership. Making the most of this window requires a fundamental shift to see family partnership as a core tenet of the public school experience rather than as an add-on. An important element of this shift requires meeting parents where they are, both literally and figuratively. This means that schools need to proactively reach out to parents well before children reach school age both to demonstrate to them that they matter and engage them in practices that will better prepare their children for school. Efforts need to be authentic, enticing, and persistent. They should focus on building relationships and trust, understanding that, for many parents, schooling was not a positive personal experience and can be very intimidating. Schools need to remove barriers to parent engagement and participation, creating spaces where parents feel welcome, encouraged, and valued. Of course, it is not fair to place this burden fully on schools, which require greater support from other levels of government and stronger nonprofit and private partnerships to rethink how they operate. Just as important, however, this new approach is not possible with the committed leadership of superintendents and principals who are uniquely positioned to bring out this transformation. Moreover, this approach seems ideally suited for smaller independent school districts that are closely tied to their communities and operate at a very human scale. In many ways, deeply personalized engagement with families, students, and communities seems like one of the most compelling rationales for smaller independent school districts.

c. State Accountability System

The state of Kentucky introduced a new more dynamic accountability structure in 2023 that rates schools and school districts based on absolute performance and, for the first time, takes into consideration changes from the previous year. The system is composed of two parts: i) an overall numeric performance "score" between 0 and 100 that is derived by aggregating and weighting four separate indicators for elementary and middle school plus two additional indicators for high school, and ii) a color-coded overall performance "rating": blue for very high, green for high, yellow for medium, orange for low, and red for very low.

The new accountability structure has various layers and complications. Each of the six indicators are determined separately from unique sets of data and given a "status indicator" and color-coded "status rating." "Status" is the term assigned to reflect unadjusted current year performance. A "change score" then is calculated based on the status score compared to the previous year score and assigned its own color "change rating" ranging from declined significantly (red), to declined (orange), to maintained (yellow), to increased (green), to

significantly increased). The change score next is added to finalize indicator score and the indicator performance rating established. Finally, the various “indicator scores” are aggregated through formulas that vary at the elementary, middle, and high school levels to determine an overall “indicator score” and “indicator level’, which capture each school and district's overall performance for the year. The “state score” results from the complicated calculation and should not be confused with the state assessment or test scores. At all levels, a strong majority of the overall score reflects student performance on state assessments, 91 percent of the formula for elementary and middle schools and 65 percent for high schools. Moreover, in elementary and high school, the reading and math tests are given more weight than the science, social studies, and combined writing assessments, while they are virtually equal in middle school. At schools and districts with too few English Learners to earn a rating, the EL proficiency component is factored out of the formula. The following table outlines the formulas for each level.

	State Assessments		**Progress on English Language Proficiency**	**Quality of School Climate & Safety Survey**	**Post-secondary Readiness**	**Graduation Rates**
Level	Results Reading and Math	Results: Science, Social Studies, & Combined Writing				
Elementary	51%	46%	45%	4%	-	-
Middle	40%	45%	20%	4%	-	-
High	45%	20%	5%	4%	20%	6%

The color-coded performance rating system provides a quick and easy way for parents and other stakeholders to gauge a school or school district’s performance quickly without unpacking the formula and calculations. However, the new change element can meaningfully adjust indicator ratings up or down depending on fluctuations in state assessments and other data from one year to the next. The adjacent chart captures the intersection between “status ratings” and “change ratings” to produce the respective indicator ratings.

	Change Declined Significantly	Change Declined	Change Maintained	Change Increased	Change Increased Significantly
Very High Status in current year	Yellow	Green	Blue	Blue	Blue
High Status in current year	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green	Blue
Medium Status in current year	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green
Low Status in current year	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Very Low Status in current year	Red	Red	Red	Orange	Yellow

A school or district that reaches very high “blue” status in the current year can be downgraded to medium “yellow” status if an indicator’s performance declines significantly from the previous year. Similarly, very low “red” status can be upgraded to “yellow” if its performance increases significantly. This feature adds a dynamic to the system

that rewards schools and school districts for positive movement and holds them accountable for decline. However, it is important to stress that the new system focuses on “change” rather than “growth.” The system operates to compare indicators produced by one group of students in one year to the same indicator produced by different students from the previous year. This introduces a level of randomness to the system, as grade cohorts can differ markedly from one year to the next in demographics and performance. A “growth” measure, on the other hand, would reflect the academic improvement or decline of the same group of students from one year to another. This is possible using the state assessment between grades 4 and 8 when all students were subject to the state assessment the year before, but it has complications for students in grades 3 and 10 when, the year before, in grades 2 and 9, were not tested.

Kentucky School District Accountability Ratings for NKY, 2023

Overall Performance Score and Rating

Arrows Indicate Reading and Math Assessments Change Rating (2023 from 2022)

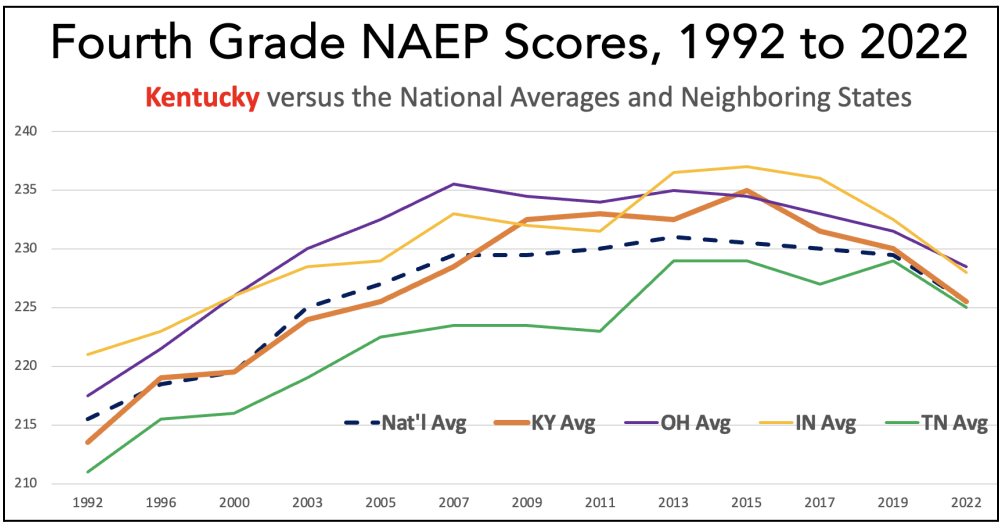
District	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Beechwood Ind	82.1	82.3	88.5
Bellevue Ind	40.6	51.5	49.8
Boone Co	78.2	64.0	66.0
Campbell Co	72.2	59.5	66.0
Covington Ind	66.0	42.3	40.5
Dayton Ind	65.6	44.5	65.4
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	53.7	40.9	53.8
Fort Thomas Ind	86.0	71.0	78.8
Kenton Co	77.5	61.0	62.0
Ludlow Ind	51.8	52.1	75.5
Newport Ind	45.3	35.1	46.2
Southgate Ind	61.0	84.2	-
Walton-Verona Ind	63.8	73.2	74.9
Kenkucky	67.1	56.1	63.1

For the purpose of this landscape assessment, green and blue ratings are considered meeting and exceeding expectations while the other three ratings indicate different levels of substandard performance. The state classifies a yellow status as “medium” performance. However, the scores actually translate to below average proficiency in the 30th and 40th percentiles. Medium “yellow” status can shift to green “high” overall performance with positive change scores. A yellow change rating may be termed “maintaining,” but actually translates to modest negative change up to 2 percent. Any positive change – no matter how small – earns a green “high” change rating and can help move a yellow status to a green overall performance rating. The clear conclusion from the accountability system is that green and blue represent positive ratings while red, orange, and yellow do not meet expectations and indicate need for improvement.

d. Elementary School

The NKY region generally has a favorable impression of its public schools, and this impression remains strongest at the elementary school level. This perspective derives in part from the general nature of primary school and the fact that NKY’s relative prosperity compared to the state as a whole has helped to consistently produce above average academic performance. It also rests on local disparities where most stakeholders and affluent residents send their children

to private schools and higher performing public schools in more prosperous areas that stand in stark contrast to schools served disproportionately by families with greater socioeconomic disadvantage. In reality, reputations can develop beyond data-driven rationales and can evolve into forces in their own right.



The "relative" case for NKY compared to the state as a whole is well-founded, but it can be a precarious construct. In the quarter century following the passage of KERA, average results of Kentucky fourth and eighth grader students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) improved steadily, outpacing the national average, which also increased over two-decades. Kentucky's elementary NAEP results and proficiency rates peaked around 2015. In 2015, average fourth grader combined reading and math proficiency on the state's assessment was 50.4 percent. Among NKY fourth graders, the rate was 55.2 percent, nearly 5 points higher. Both NAEP scores and state proficiency rates have declined significantly since 2015, but less severely in NKY. The state's combined fourth grade proficiency in 2023 was 45 percent, down more than five points, while NKY's students have only fallen two points to 53.2 percent, largely on the strength of the county districts, Boone County in particular. Academic performance among nearly all independent districts was down more sharply.

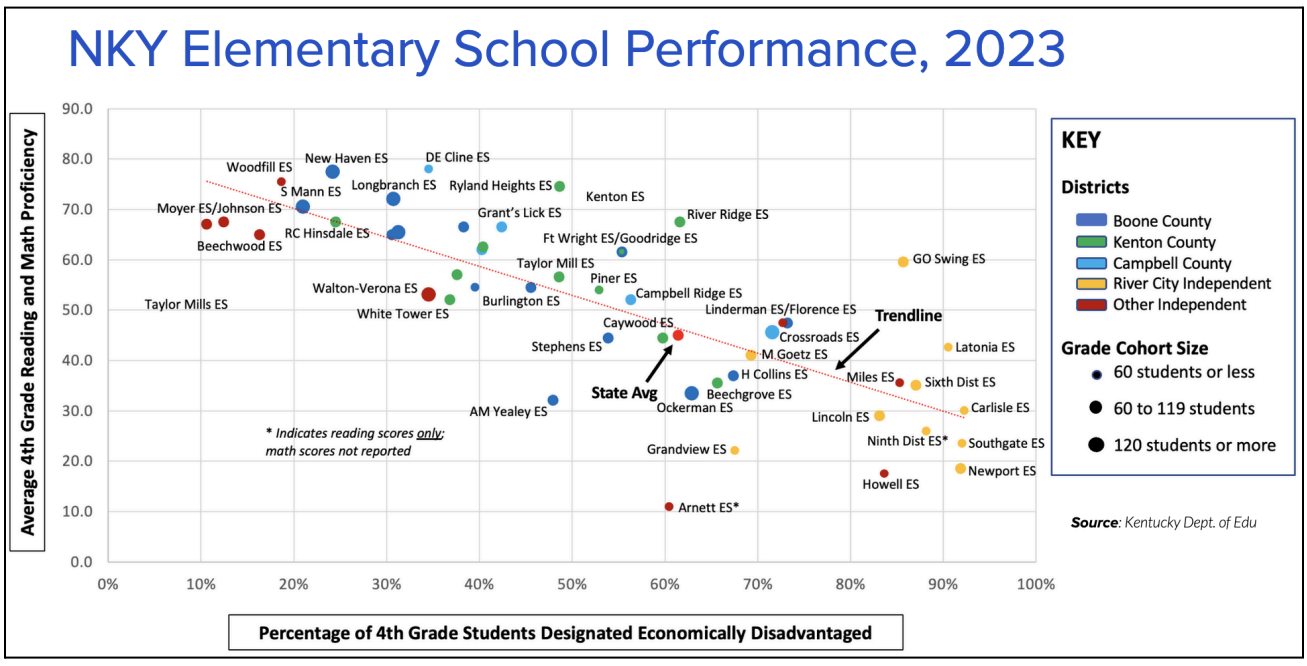
Grade 4 Average Combined Reading and Math Proficiency, 2015 v. 2023

District	2015	2023	Change
Beechwood Ind	66.7	64.0	*(2.7)*
Bellevue Ind	40.2	22.0	*(18.2)*
Boone Co	55.4	57.5	*2.2*
Campbell Co	59.3	58.5	*(0.8)*
Covington Ind	41.5	39.0	*(2.5)*
Dayton Ind	47.3	26.0	*(21.3)*
Erlanger-Elsmere In	39.9	29.0	*(10.9)*
Fort Thomas Ind	78.2	69.5	*(8.7)*
Kenton Co	59.1	57.5	*(1.6)*
Ludlow Ind	42.3	41.0	*(1.3)*
Newport Ind	31.5	18.5	*(13.0)*
Southgate Ind	66.7	23.5	*(43.2)*
Walton-Verona Ind	58.1	53.0	*(5.1)*
State	**50.4**	**45.0**	***(5.4)***
NKY	**55.2**	**53.2**	***(2.0)***
Counties	57.2	57.6	*0.4*
River Cities + EE	40.7	31.9	*(8.8)*
Other Ind - EE	70.7	62.7	*(8.0)*

Moveover, exceeding the state average, which again trails the nation, is a dubious distinction and distracts from a reality that more than two in five students who complete elementary school do not meet grade level standards as they enter middle school where catching up becomes increasingly difficult. Every school district with the exception of Boone County lags behind where it stood in 2015, and no district – including the relatively affluent Beechwood and Fort Thomas districts where more than 80 percent of students begin kindergarten

designated as “ready” – reaches a minimum average combined fourth grade reading and math proficiency rate of 70 percent. In 2015, only fourth graders in Silver Grove (since consolidated with Campbell County) reported fourth grade proficiency averages below 30 percent. In 2023, five districts did not clear this threshold. Covington and Ludlow were a step above the other River City districts with Covington at 39 percent and Ludlow at 41 percent in 2023, both just a point or two below where they were in 2015.

Elementary school performance in NKY – as in the nation generally – closely tracks household income. The three more affluent independent school districts of Beechwood, Fort Thomas, and Walton-Verona have a combined economically disadvantaged fourth grade population of 21.3 percent and post an average combined proficiency rate of 62.7 percent. The three county districts report 46.7 percent of their fourth graders as economically disadvantaged and yield an average combined proficiency rate of 57.6 percent. In the River Cities plus Erlanger-Elsmere, 82.9 percent of fourth graders are classified as economically disadvantaged with a combined average proficiency rate of 31.8 percent. What is notable are the deviations from expectations. Campbell County’s Donald E. Cline ES has the highest fourth grade average combined proficiency in NKY at 78 percent even with an economically disadvantaged population of 34.5 percent, higher than 10 other schools. Fourth graders at Ryland Heights ES, Kenton ES, John W. Reiley ES, and GO Swing ES all significantly out-performed demographic expectations. On the other hand, fourth grade performance at AM Yealey ES, Grandview ES, Howell ES, and especially Arnett ES fell well below the bell curve.



At the district level, even with significant advantages and widespread affluence, about a quarter of their fourth graders in Beechwood and Fort Thomas do not demonstrate proficiency in reading or math. Although a relatively small share of the student population – a mere 21 students – economically disadvantaged fourth graders in Beechwood have reading and math

proficiency rates below the state average. In fact, economically disadvantaged fourth graders across Covington's five elementary schools comprising an 87.3 percent share of the cohort outperform their disadvantaged peers in Beechwood, narrowly in math (33 percent to 32 percent) and significantly in reading (46 percent to 26 percent). In contrast with its reputation, Covington is a standout in reading proficiency among NKY's seven districts where most students are classified as economically disadvantaged, including Ludlow and Bellevue where economically disadvantaged students are below 70 percent. Ludlow leads these same districts in fourth grade math with its 44 percent proficiency rate, more than 10 points higher than any other district. Something that Covington and Ludlow have in common in their respective strengths is that their economically disadvantaged fourth graders in those subjects outperform their non-economically disadvantaged peers, meaning that they do not have an income-based achievement gap. Ludlow, however, has an achievement gap of another sort. Fourth grade girls outperform boys in math and their proficiency rates in reading are greater than 2 to 1.

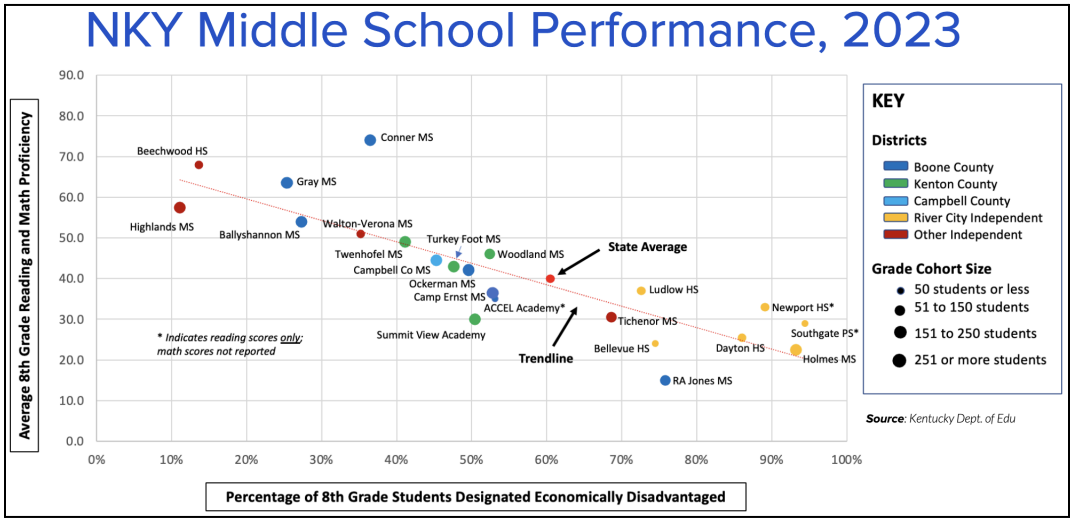
Kentucky's accountability for NKY tells a similar story to the proficiency data while offering some nuances that add depth. At a high level, the region's elementary school system is above average for the state with Fort Thomas achieving a blue "very high" rating and Beechwood and the three county districts reaching a green "high" mark. Four districts – Covington, Dayton, Southgate, and Walton-Verona – achieved a yellow "medium" rating while four others – Bellevue, Erlanger-Elsmere, Ludlow, and Newport – are categorized as orange "low". The "change" dynamic helped move a few districts up and down. Very high improvement on the reading and math indicator helped propel Southgate to yellow from orange and similar gains on the social studies, science, and combined writing indicator did the same for Dayton. Significant decline in reading and math pushed Beechwood to green overall while declines across both state assessments indicators pulled Walton-Verona into yellow, just below the cut score for green. Bellevue was the region's lowest rated elementary district with an overall performance score of 40.6, a couple points above the cut-score for red.

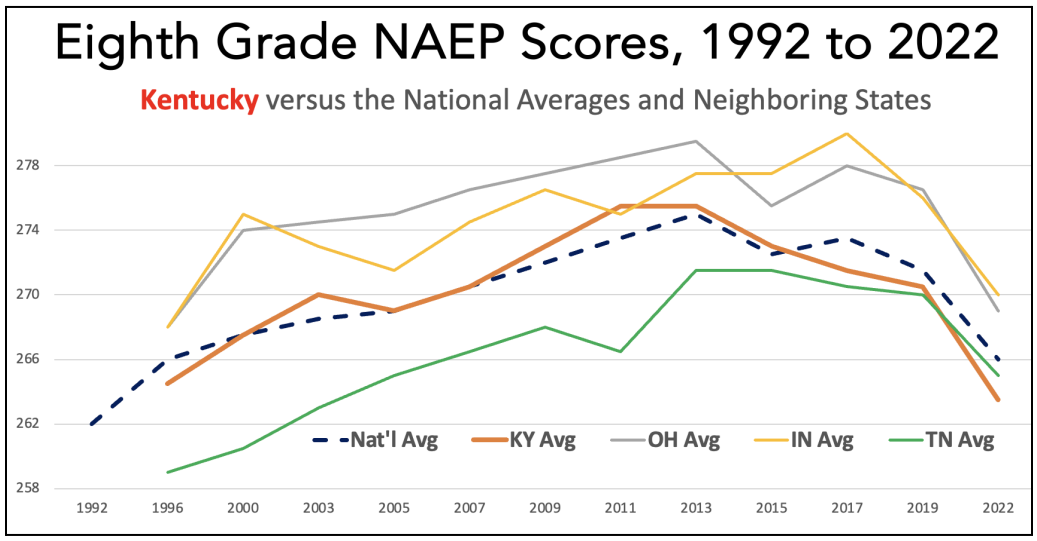
At a school level, 31 of the region's 49 rated elementary schools achieved blue or green status. Boone County SD led the pack with seven of its 14 rated elementary schools rating blue, including the top two rated schools, Mann and North Pointe. Four of Kenton County SD's 11 schools hit the highest mark as did two of Campbell County SD's five elementary schools. All three Fort Thomas elementary schools and Beechwood ES also achieved blue. Covington's GO Swing also achieved blue while two of its other schools – Latonia and JO Carlisle – reached green ratings, in the latter two cases propelled by positive change scores. Other than Covington schools, no school in the River Cities or Erlanger-Elsmere achieved a green or blue rating. Just like the district, positive change pushed elementary schools in Dayton and Southgate to yellow. Boone Co SD had three schools with yellow ratings and two with orange. Kenton and Campbell County SDs had one school each – Beechgrove and Crossroads – with an orange overall performance rating, both driven down by significant drops in the science, social studies, and combined writing indicator. The other two Covington elementary schools – Sixth District and Ninth District – were rated orange as were single schools in Bellevue, Ludlow, and Newport. Erlanger-Elsmere had the most schools in the bottom ratings, with two schools in orange and

Arnett ES with the lowest overall performance score and only red-rated elementary school in the region.

e. Middle School

Where elementary school remains the clear strength of NKY's education system, ***the transition to secondary school suggests a major breakpoint***. Academic performance at the middle school level is notably below its elementary school counterparts. The region's 22 rated middle schools demonstrate proficiencies that correlate tightly with the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, meaning that few schools distinguish themselves academically. At the individual student level, average combined reading and math proficiency scores in NKY continue to outpace the state, but by a significantly smaller percentage. Among fourth graders, the region's average combined proficiency is 53.2 percent compared with the state average of 45 percent – a margin of more than 8 points. In eighth grade, the delta shrinks to 3.4 percent with average combined reading and math proficiency rates merely 43.4 percent compared to the state average of 40 percent.





Some have suggested that the difference can be attributed to the nature of middle school, which is certainly a time of transition for young people in more ways than one. However, recent history makes clear that this is not the case. Just as it did in elementary school, Kentucky's eighth grade NAEP performance improved steadily following the passage of KERA in 1990, surpassing the national average between 2009 and 2013 before beginning to decline in 2015. On the state assessment, NKY eighth grader results peaked in 2013 with average combined reading and math proficiency reaching 55.9 percent, more than 6 points higher than the state average and 12.5 percent higher than it was in 2023.

Although state standards and assessment have evolved over the last decade, blunting pure apples to apples comparison, the decline in state proficiency follows the trend on NAEP. The region's 12.5 drop over the last decade is nearly 50 percent more pronounced than the state's 8.8 point decline from 48.8 to 40 percent in 2023. The trend is fairly consistent across the great majority of districts. County districts fell the most, down 13.1 points from 59 percent to 45.9 percent. River City districts plus Erlanger-Elsmere actually declined the least. The other independents declined the least, but this figure is bolstered by Beechwood, which was the only district to defy the trend. Fort Thomas declined more than any district, falling 18.7 points from 76.2 percent in 2013 to 57.5 percent last year.

Grade 8 Average Combined Reading and Math Proficiency, 2013 v. 2023

District	2013	2023	Change
Beechwood Ind	66.0	66.5	*0.5*
Bellevue Ind	37.1	24.0	*(13.1)*
Boone Co	60.9	49.0	*(11.9)*
Campbell Co	60.8	44.5	*(16.3)*
Covington Ind	30.5	21.5	*(9.0)*
Dayton Ind	38.8	22.5	*(16.3)*
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	30.9	29.0	*(1.9)*
Fort Thomas Ind	76.2	57.5	*(18.7)*
Kenton Co	55.8	42.0	*(13.8)*
Ludlow Ind	44.7	37.0	*(7.7)*
Newport Ind	34.2	32.0	*(2.2)*
Southgate Ind	44.1	29.0	*(15.1)*
Walton-Verona Ind	61.6	51.0	*(10.6)*
State	**48.8**	**40.0**	***(8.8)***
NKY	**55.9**	**43.4**	***(12.5)***
County Districts	59.0	45.9	*(13.1)*
River Cities + EE	33.1	23.7	*(9.4)*
Other Inds w/o EE	69.5	58.0	*(11.5)*

The 2023 accountability system for middle school both underscores challenges at the intermediate level. An important headline is that two of the county districts – Kenton and Campbell – rated yellow on overall performance while Boone squeaked into green with the minimum possible overall performance score for the category. The highest rated middle school district was actually Southgate, which registered massive change rates in state assessment indicators to propel its yellow status in reading and math and green status in science, social studies, and combined writing to an overall blue "very high" performance rating, nudging out Beechwood, which was also blue based on strong overall performance. Both Fort Thomas and Walton-Verona achieved blue status on the two indicators based on state assessments, but were dragged down to green by negative change levels, which were significant enough in Fort Thomas to earn an orange change rating. Bellevue and Ludlow secured yellow ratings, both on the strength of stronger science, social studies, and combined writing indicator scores. Covington, Dayton, and Erlanger-Elsmere all fell into the "low" orange performance rating category due to low scores on the state assessment indicators. Newport was one step further down in the red-rated "very low" bracket, which is telling because

the district had too few students take the test so that the state did not report assessment data for multiple grades.

Individual school ratings further show how middle school quality is one or two steps down from elementary school. Where a solid majority of elementary schools achieved a high or very high rating, only nine of the region's 21 rated middle schools made the grade. Although some middle schools in the River Cities and Erlanger-Elsmere posted some positive change scores, notably Southgate and Holmes, none – including Southgate with its blue overall rating – reached a status on the reading and math indicator above yellow and five out of the seven were orange or red. However, it is again county middle school performance that showcases the regional trend. Boone registered three blue middle schools, including Conner MS, which yielded the region's strongest performance across the board even with an economically disadvantaged population much higher than its higher performing peers. Hidden amongst Boone County's overall performance is RA Jones MS, which posted a red "very low" rating and an overall performance score barely higher than Newport, which has a meaningfully higher percentage of disadvantaged students. Two other Boone county middle schools – Camp Ernst MS and Ockerman MS – rated yellow along with Woodland MS, Turkey Foot MS, and Summit View MS in Kenton County and Campbell County MS. An important difference at the middle school level relates to English Learners (ELs). Although most schools do not have enough ELs to trigger the EL component of the accountability system, in elementary school, those that do saw the EL element boost scores, as EL students scored relatively well and contribute positive change scores. In middle school, the opposite is true, as EL performance pulled down overall performance ratings, especially at Jones and Erlanger-Elsmeres's Tichenor MS, which rated in the red. This suggests that EL students who are not reclassified (successfully excited out of EL status) before reaching middle school are more likely to struggle, and the region's middle

NKY Middle School Accountability System Performance Scores, Ratings, Indicators, and Change Factors, 2023

School Information	Overall	Read/Math	S, SS, CW	EL Progress	Climate/Safety
Southgate PS	84.2	60.7	66.1		72.2
Conner MS	83.4	86.1	76.9		70.1
Beechwood HS	82.6	86.6	76		69.8
Gray MS	77.6	81.6	73.8		70.7
Ballyshannon MS	75.5	73.3	69.2		67.2
Twenhofel MS	75	71.6	65		73.8
Highlands MS	71	80.9	71.6		71
Walton-Verona MS	68.6	72.1	66.9		70.2
Woodland MS	65.9	66.7	63.6		68.9
Camp Ernst MS	62.8	62.5	56		64.3
Campbell County MS	59.6	62.4	55		67.8
Turkey Foot MS	58.3	65.2	59.7	25.6	67.2
Ludlow HS	54	54.6	49.3		66
Ockerman MS	52.3	64.5	50.4	16.8	62.1
Summit View Academy	52	58.7	52.2		68.2
Bellevue HS	51.5	45.9	49.6		58.8
Holmes MS	42.8	41.2	36.8	25.6	62.4
Dayton HS	42	39.3	42.1		63.3
Tichenor MS	41	44	38.8	5.1	65.2
Rector A. Jones MS	34.3	40.3	31.5	12.8	61
Newport HS	33.7	34.5	29.2		61.7

schools are not prepared for the rising share of students who approach English as a second language.

Quantitative insight into the middle school experience is difficult to come by, but two other indicators speak to a detachment that manifests in the intermediate grades. First, chronic absenteeism shows a meaningful jump beginning in grade 6 and continues to rise each year as students approach high school. Although the trend is not new and chronic absenteeism is up 42 percent across all grades since before the pandemic, the grade over grade increase is most steep in sixth grade and drives NKY's chronic absenteeism rate to above 20 percent by grade 8.

NKY Chronic Absenteeism and School Safety Events by Grade, 2022-2023 School Year

	All Grades	K	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9	G10	G11	G12
Chronic Absenteeism	**16.8%**	19.3%	15.3%	13.0%	10.3%	11.3%	11.0%	15.8%	17.3%	20.7%	23.1%	23.8%	21.4%	22.7%
School Safety Events per 100 Students	**11.3**	1.5	3.1	2.6	3.8	5.3	7.5	16.4	20.2	20.9	23.8	19.5	14.1	10.3

Districts with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students have higher absentee rates, but the increase in the county districts are actually greater. Interestingly, the middle school jump in absenteeism is not as pronounced in Beechwood and Fort Thomas where students have considerably higher rates of academic proficiency. The second factor that suggests a significant change at the middle school level is school safety behavior events, which capture incidents and resolutions reported in the Kentucky Student Information System (KSIS). These events are virtually nonexistent in kindergarten and tick up during elementary school to a level of about 8 events annually per 100 students in fifth grade. Safety incidents then surge regionally to 17 annually per 100 students in grade 6 and then above 20 in seventh and eighth grade before peaking in ninth grade. Again, although rates are higher in urban districts, the pattern cuts across all districts and is only muted where academic proficiency is more widespread. The thesis is clear: ***students who enter middle school academically behind face much higher risk of absenteeism and behavioral challenges, and the region's middle schools need to explore and implement new approaches that enliven instruction and excite learning to safeguard students against very real perils***.

f. High School

The transition to high school comes with the introduction of new indicators that makes the new accountability system more complicated but one that shows a high school system stuck in mediocrity. Although the more affluent independent districts and Ludlow offer some bright spots, all three county districts received overall yellow ratings in 2023 while the bulk of the urban independent districts were classified as orange and red. State assessments matter considerably less at the high school level, as they only apply to tenth graders in reading and math and eleventh graders in science, social studies, and other subjects, but state tests continue to make up nearly two-thirds of the overall rating. Quality of school climate and safety status continue to make up four percent of scores and English Learners five percent for the three school districts

and four high schools with sufficient populations. The most significant new indicator is the application of college and career readiness, which takes up 20 percent of the formula, with graduation rates assuming a six percent share.

Similar to middle school, state assessments in reading and math tell a story of an above average region heading in the wrong direction. The absence of comparable tenth grade national benchmark assessment and changes to Kentucky's high school assessments over the last decade make historic high school comparisons more difficult. The short-term trend, however, shows decline across the commonwealth and even greater decline in NKY. Kentucky's tenth grade average combined reading and math proficiency dropped from 41.5 percent in 2022 to 40 percent in 2023. The NKY average drop was more severe, plummeting 3.9 points from 48.4 percent to 44.5 percent. As is typically the case, there were positive developments amidst an overall tough year. Beechwood HS saw its combined average increase 2 points to 66.5 percent to fall just a single point behind Highland HS for the highest combined average in the region. Larry A. Ryle HS grew 2.5 points to a combined average of 56.5 percent despite a significant increase in the share of tenth graders classified as economically disadvantaged. More broadly, however, the one-year changes were negative. Several schools saw large to massive year-over-year declines in their combined reading and math average proficiency rates: Ludlow (-14 points);, Walton-Verona (-14 points), Scott HS (-10 points), Highlands HS (-9 points), Campbell HS (-7.5 points), Dixie Heights HS (-6 points), Holmes HS (-5 points), Randall K. Cooper HS (-4 points), Boone HS (-3.5 points), and Newport HS (-3 points). No high school in the region achieved an average combined proficiency score of two-thirds. Highlands HS led the region with a combined proficiency of 67.5 percent despite an economically disadvantaged rate of only 16.2 percent while Beechwood HS was just behind it at 66.5 percent proficiency with a low income population of less than one-fifth. At the other end of the spectrum, Newport HS posted a combined proficiency rate of 21 percent with an economically disadvantaged population of 84 percent while Holmes HS had the region's lowest combined proficiency of 13 percent and highest low-income population of 88 percent. Only 8 percent of Holmes HS tenth graders were proficient in math.

The introduction of post-secondary readiness to the accountability system at the high school level adds a dynamic feature that incorporates several variables into the equation. The components aim to measure school districts and high schools according to two different pathways – academic and career – and provide a range of opportunities for graduating students to demonstrate that they are prepared to meet the challenges of postsecondary life. The academic pathway is the most straightforward and gives students three ways of meeting the threshold: i) achieving a benchmark score on college admission or placement exams like the ACT, ii) earning approved college-level dual credits, or iii) achieving a benchmark score on an Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or Cambridge Advanced International (CAI) exam. When it comes to career readiness, the state has developed a range of additional pathways for students to demonstrate preparation for work and professional life. These include achieving a valid industry certification, licensure, or credential from a list approved by the NKY Workforce Investment Board and KDE, demonstration of knowledge, skills, and competencies through a care and technical education (CTE) end-of-program

assessment for articulated credit, one approved CTE dual credit course with a “C” or higher letter grade, complication of a registered apprenticeship program, cooperative education program in a business or industrial establishment, or an internship that provides on-the-job training with one employer. Schools are measured based on the percentage of graduating students and non-graduating students who start grade 12 who meet one or more of the academic and career readiness benchmarks.

The most direct way to demonstrate postsecondary readiness is through the ACT college entrance exam. ACT scores are a valuable way to measure academic achievement levels on the back-end of high school for individual students and among schools and different demographic groups. Average ACT scores in 2023 track with state assessment results even though they measure different cohorts of students. Highland HS’s average composite score of 23.2 edged out Beechwood HS’s average score of 23 to top the region with Walton-Verona HS averaging the third highest with 21.2. The national average ACT score was 19.5 in 2023, but Kentucky is one of only 17 states where graduating students are required to take it. Generally speaking, states with higher participation rates do less well than states with low participation rates. This makes national comparisons difficult. In 2022, among the 14 states with a participation rate of 90 percent or higher, Kentucky’s average score of 18.6 ranked ninth, generally behind Midwest and mountain states while better than southern states other than Arkansas. In 2023, the state’s average score ticked down to 18.5. Average scores with some subgroups also provide some telling insights. Economically disadvantaged students at Beechwood HS averaged 21.1, higher than any overall score at any other high score except Highland HS. Among high schools that beat the state average, the average gap between economically disadvantaged students and the school overall was 2.3 points compared to 1.7 statewide.

ACT Average Composite Score and Academic Readiness, 2023

School	District	Avg ACT Composite Score	Percent of Achieving Academic Readiness Benchmark via ACT		
			Reading (18)	*English (20)*	*Math (19)*
Highlands HS	Fort Thomas Ind	**23.2**	79	74	74
Beechwood HS	Beechwood Ind	**23.0**	85	68	73
Walton-Verona HS	Walton-Verona Ind	**21.2**	69	65	53
Larry A. Ryle HS	Boone Co	**20.7**	66	62	53
Randall K. Cooper HS	Boone Co	**20.6**	63	57	49
Campbell County HS	Campbell Co	**20.1**	63	53	47
Ludlow HS	Ludlow Ind	**19.9**	74	55	49
Conner HS	Boone Co	**19.6**	51	50	46
Dixie Heights HS	Kenton Co	**19.6**	57	53	41
Simon Kenton HS	Kenton Co	**19.4**	58	54	40
Scott HS	Kenton Co	**18.6**	50	48	37
Boone County HS	Boone Co	**18.4**	47	43	33
Lloyd HS	Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	**17.5**	49	35	20
Dayton HS	Dayton Ind	**17.3**	33	37	24
Bellevue HS	Bellevue Ind	**16.8**	43	23	27
Newport HS	Newport Ind	**16.7**	37	23	19
Holmes HS	Covington Ind	**15.4**	19	21	11
State Avg		**18.5**	**47**	**44**	**33**

Ludlow HS had the lowest achievement gap of only 0.6 points while Highlands HS had the largest at 4.3 points. Among schools with enough students to report results, Randall K. Cooper HS reported the highest average score – 18.5 – among African American students while Beechwood HS had the highest average score – 20.4 – among Hispanic students. Larry A. Ryle HS had the largest white-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps in the region with average scores diverging by 5.8 and 4.7 points, respectively, significantly higher than the average disparities of 3.5 and 2.5 points.

What matters for the accountability measure, however, is not the average score but the percent of a school's graduates who met state benchmarks, thus satisfying the standard for academic readiness. To achieve this measure on the ACT, a student needed to achieve a score of 18 on the English (Writing) test, a 20 on the Reading test, or a 19 on the Math (Quantitative Reasoning) test. A few districts further strengthened graduating student academic readiness through AP classes, most notably Beechwood and Fort Thomas, which had 1.62 and 1.6 qualifying AP test scores for every graduate. Campbell County led among county districts with 0.77 qualifying AP test results for every graduate while Boone County had 0.37 and Kenton County 0.20 for every graduating senior. AP classes were either limited or not offered in the other districts. Erlanger-Elsmere had 13 students achieve qualifying test results on AP tests, Covington had 6, Walton-Verona 5, and classes were offered or completed in Bellevue, Dayton, Ludlow, or Newport. Most River City districts lend more heavily on dual credit and saw many more students demonstrate academic readiness through this vehicle with Bellevue, Dayton, Ludlow, and Walton-Verona all achieving more qualifying dual credits awarded than graduating seniors. Looking across NKY, all districts except Erlanger-Elsmere and Newport successfully used some combination of AP classes and dual credits to significantly increase their share of students deemed academically ready. In addition to academic readiness, 47.4 percent of NKY graduates in 2023 also satisfied the standard for career readiness, slightly lower than the state average of 52.1 percent. This occurred mostly through completion of an industry certification (20.6 percent), CTE end-of-program assessment (22.4 percent), and dual credit (24 percent) with 12.9 percent of students achieving more than one indicator. Walton-Verona led the region with 71.1 percent of graduates demonstrating career readiness followed by Fort Thomas (66 percent), Dayton (63.8 percent), and Campbell County (63.7 percent). Erlanger-Elsmere and Ludlow had the lowest rates of career readiness with only 17.3 and 14.3 percent of graduates meeting this standard.

In the final analysis, 80.3 percent of NKY graduates in 2023 met the standard for postsecondary readiness, slightly higher than the state average of 79.1 percent. Statewide, economically disadvantaged students trailed non-economically disadvantaged in readiness by about 17 points, and this gap was similar in NKY, but not uniformly. It was only 5 points in Beechwood and 8 points in Walton-Verona. Economically disadvantaged students also did much better in Campbell County than they did in Boone and Kenton. Economically disadvantaged students were least likely to achieve postsecondary readiness in Erlanger-Elsmere where only 45 percent met the benchmark. Additionally, Hispanic students particularly struggled in Covington and Erlanger-Elsmere where only 36 to 37 percent of graduates met the standard. The accountability system, which gives a bonus for students who achieve both academic and career

readiness, granted a blue status for postsecondary readiness to Fort Thomas, Walton-Verona, Beechwood, and Campbell County. There were no greens. Newport was orange and Erlanger-Elsmere and Covington were red while the rest were yellow. Positive change from 2022 helped boost everyone except Bellevue and Newport so, in the end on the overall postsecondary readiness indicator, the blue status districts stayed blue, the yellow status districts moved to green, Covington and Erlanger-Elsmere moved to orange while Newport fell to red.

NKY Graduation and Postsecondary Readiness (PSR) Rates, 2023

District	Graduates	5-Year Graduation Rate	Post-Secondary Readiness Rate
Beechwood Ind	121	100.0	98.3
Bellevue Ind	45	95.8	82.2
Boone Co	1,499	95.3	78.7
Campbell Co	344	97.8	92.4
Covington Ind	183	81.7	49.7
Dayton Ind	58	100.0	84.5
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	169	98.2	52.4
Fort Thomas Ind	235	98.5	94.9
Kenton Co	1,103	94.7	81.3
Ludlow Ind	56	94.5	82.1
Newport Ind	76	94.6	71.1
Walton-Verona Ind	121	99.4	96.7
State	**44,599**	**92.5**	**79.1**
NKY	**4,010**	**95.4**	**80.3**

Perhaps most striking is the comparison between the region's postsecondary readiness levels and graduation rates. Eleven of 12 districts with high school have 5-year graduation rates over 94 percent, and five have rates above 98 percent. This is true for school districts with high postsecondary readiness rates, but also those that do not. Covington and Erlanger-Elsmere, in particular, stand out for their low levels of high school graduates who did not achieve the benchmark for post-secondary readiness. The end result is a system of schools where high school diplomas seem somewhat disconnected from preparation for academic and career success.

A meaningful factor in the deterioration in high school academic performance since the pandemic relates to a reality that more students are missing many days of school, especially at the high school level. Kentucky defines a student as chronically absent when he or she misses 18 days of school or 10 percent of school days in a single year. In the 2022-2023 school year, chronic absenteeism statewide was up to 29.8 percent of all students from 17.8 percent of students during the 2018-2019 school year, the last full-year before the pandemic. This 70 statewide percent increase in chronic absenteeism represents a full-scale crisis that is more pronounced among some students. Rates for economically disadvantaged students surged to 37.1 percent, African American students – 35 percent, special education students – 35.7 percent, and homeless students who face housing insecurity – 50.1 percent. As in many other categories, the rate among NKY school districts is better than the state average – only 16.8 percent of students rather than 29.8 percent – but the increase from pre-pandemic was about the same. Similar to other statistics, county districts tend to be about the regional average or slightly better, 16.2 percent; affluent independent districts do much better, 9.3 percent, while the River City districts and Erlanger-Elsmere face a more serious challenge with an average chronic truancy rate of 23.3 percent. At the grade level, the challenge is most serious in early

elementary school and first grade, when it tempers, and then surges as students approach high school. Regionally in 2022-2023, high school chronic truancy was epidemic: 23.1 percent of ninth graders, 23.8 percent of tenth graders, 21.4 percent of eleventh graders, and 22.7 percent of seniors. The affluent independent districts experienced rates in the high teens, the county districts were in the 20s, and the River City districts and Erlanger-Elsmere were in the 30s. Put simply, students who do not attend school struggle to learn, and their attendance rates do not bode well for their long-term success in college and career.

The state accountability system in 2023 awarded an overall performance rating of blue to only one NKY high school district – Beechwood – which separated itself from other high schools in the region with its overall strength and positive growth to achieve the fifth highest overall combined performance score in the state. The region yielded three green-rated districts. Fort Thomas placed second to Beechwood with individual status figures that scored in the blue pulled down by sizable negative change scores on both state assessment indicators. Ludlow edged-out Walton-Verona to place third with solid academic performance and especially strong

NKY High School Accountability System Performance Scores, Ratings, Indicators, and Change Factors, 2023

School Information		Overall	Read/Math	S, SS, CW	Graduation	EL Progress	Climate/Safety	Postsecondary
School	**District**							
Beechwood HS	Beechwood Ind	88.5	86.2	69.1	99.6		72.7	98.8
Highlands HS	Fort Thomas Ind	79	83	71.9	98		68.6	101
Ludlow HS	Ludlow Ind	75.5	72.1	74.9	94.7		69.9	84.4
Walton-Verona HS	Walton-Verona Ind	74.9	65.8	71.6	99		70.1	99.6
Larry A. Ryle HS	Boone Co	74.2	73.7	61.7	95.7	20.9	66.2	85.2
Simon Kenton HS	Kenton Co	68.2	63.5	54.1	96.2		66.4	85.2
Conner HS	Boone Co	67.4	68.7	51.7	98.8	19.4	64.5	88.7
Campbell County HS	Campbell Co	66.8	62.4	57.3	97.5		65.5	95.8
Randall K. Cooper HS	Boone Co	65.8	66.6	49	96.6		64.6	87.4
Dayton HS	Dayton Ind	65.4	58.7	39	97.6		61.7	87.1
Scott HS	Kenton Co	62.4	56.4	52.3	90.9		62.7	85.4
Dixie Heights HS	Kenton Co	58.4	56.2	50.9	97	37.4	66.4	78.6
Boone County HS	Boone Co	57.5	53.5	47.1	92.1	29.9	62.2	71.8
Lloyd HS	Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	54.4	54.1	46.2	98.1		60.8	54.5
Newport HS	Newport Ind	51.2	40.8	36.3	92.2		57.2	80.4
Bellevue HS	Bellevue Ind	49.8	40.9	43.2	97.9		62.3	84.4
Holmes HS	Covington Ind	42	29.4	28.9	84.3	25.5	57	55.3

postsecondary readiness that it was able to withstand a very large change score reduction that resulted from an extraordinarily high state tenth grade reading and math assessment results the year before. Walton-Verona was also very solid broadly and withstood a very large negative change score in reading and math assessments. All three county districts and Dayton rated yellow with mixed state assessment results and change scores putting Campbell, Boone, and Dayton squarely in the middle of the yellow rating range while Kenton's overall score was about one point above the cut. Erlanger-Elsmere and Bellevue received orange overall performance ratings with Erlanger-Elsmere's score more in the middle of the range while Bellevue was within

0.8 points of the cut score. Finally, Newport and Covington received overall ratings of red. Newport was held down by particularly weak reading and math assessment indicators, poor postsecondary readiness, and negative assessment change scores while Covington's low overall state assessment indicator scores were too significant to be helped by relatively positive change scores. Among individual high schools, five schools rated blue or green while 12 rated yellow, orange, or red.

g. Data-Driven Instruction

Data-driven instruction captures an ongoing educational practice that focuses on assessing student learning, analyzing and interpreting data, and implementing targeted changes in instruction to address specific areas of needs revealed by the data analysis. Teachers have always used data in instruction, but it has grown in importance over the last few decades to transform classroom strategies. The federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 signed by President George W. Bush established a national framework of accountability for schools that relied heavily on annual state assessments, and subsequent major federal initiatives like the Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act pushed schools and school districts to use data to improve school performance and find ways to make data more practical and user-friendly. Data has long since moved beyond state assessments, which are more evaluative in nature and not particularly helpful to educators in guiding instruction. Educators now rely on suites of programs and tools that provide valuable forms of data. These include formative, interim, and summative assessments. Schools typically use programs that assign students reading levels. They administer skills tests and writing assessments. English learners are evaluated for language proficiency in addition to subject matter mastery. Schools also commonly inventory social and emotional skills and issue well-being surveys. Additionally, adaptive online programs continuously provide data that can help pin-point specific skills where students are stuck, struggling, or need more time and attention.

The challenge for educators is making use of these reams of information to meet students' needs and produce improved student outcomes. If done well, data-driven instruction unlocks personalized learning, helping to deliver the right content to each student at the optimal time. It also enables differentiated instruction, which is the process whereby teachers organize student arrangements, learning environments, teaching methods, and resources and supports to simultaneously meet the diverse needs and interests of a cohort of students. This is especially important at schools with wide gaps in the achievement levels of students in the same grade. A differentiated approach involves intentionally planned blocks of time that integrate whole group instruction, small groups, learning stations, independent work, one-on-one tutoring, online programs, social-emotional learning, enrichments, and group and project-based activities. A data-driven approach allows teachers to tailor the schedule and rotation of every student based on the highest leverage learning techniques according to individualized goals and priorities. There are many models of data-driven instructional approaches, and successful models include four essential components.

1. **Strategic clarity**: school leaders who set clear vision and goals, prioritize and monitor improvement, and customize supports,
2. **Systems and structure**: durable systems that seamlessly assess students and provide easy to access to data through easy to use platforms,
3. **Skills and training**: robust professional development that includes practical training, classroom-based coaching, and professional learning communities, and
4. **School culture**: positive school cultures that emphasize a growth mindset, solicit stakeholder feedback, and engage families with the data.

Every school district in NKY continues to build their systems to strengthen data-driven instruction. All districts use some form of internal screening and progress-monitoring assessment. Most schools administer these assessments in the fall to establish a start-of-school benchmark, again mid-year to measure progress, and finally in the spring as an end-of-year summative assessment and to capture progress over the course of the school year. Although schools and school districts are rated and evaluated based on state assessments, these tests are not particularly helpful in the educational process. Schools instead use their internal assessments to set goals, guide student learning, and assess growth. The majority of school districts and all 38 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Covington use NWEA MAP (Measures of Academic Progress), a suite of adaptive, online assessments that measure achievement and growth in K–12 math, reading, language usage, and science. MAP is a widely-trusted nationally-normed assessment used by some of the nation's highest performing and innovative programs. Multiple NKY superintendents cite their intentional use of NWEA MAP as an important factor in recent growth, but they also acknowledge the need for improved systems to drive the intentionality, which sometimes has not been consistent through leadership changes.

There are meaningful disparities in the strategies, structures, and skills that districts have developed to propel data-driven instruction. Traditional teaching colleges often do not prepare teachers effectively for the role that data plays in education today, and this reality shifts the burden of orienting new teachers and developing this capacity to districts. Districts, in turn, vary widely in their internal bandwidth to develop systems, train and coach teachers, and support schools. Teachers often feel overwhelmed and unsupported in making use of available information to serve their students most effectively and, consequently, can resist change, especially when the district does not have a great track record of supporting regimes already in place. Greater alignment among districts creates opportunities, especially for smaller districts, to build larger communities of practice, share resources, and even leverage greater scale to better serve students, more and build collective capacity. There have been efforts in NKY to encourage school districts to use NWEA MAP and share and collaborate more widely on data systems to develop a more deeply connected learning community and foster greater collaboration. Each district makes decisions regarding their interim assessments and data systems after considerable thought about the options that make the most sense for them. Still, ***greater alignment on assessments among districts would strengthen data-driven instruction and academic rigor across the region and help maintain continuity and academic progress when students transfer from one district to another, especially midyear, which is a frequent occurrence among the concentrated urban districts***.

3. Community Partners

NKY is home to a wide array of nonprofit organizations and partners that take part, support, serve, and provide resources to the educational system. These entities range in size from St. Elizabeth's Healthcare, the region's dominant healthcare provider and largest employer, to an assortment of "friends of" support groups and foundations that are closely associated with virtually every school and school district in the region to raise money – some modestly and some more significantly – to supplement core revenues and programming. The collective effort paints a picture of a charitable and caring community that gives generously to support the healthy development and education of children, among other causes, and expresses its value through the allocation of financial resources. ***The region would benefit from more nonprofit partners that act as change agents, setting higher standards for collective impact, advocating for innovative approaches, challenging the establishment to change, holding it accountable, and sustaining momentum over time and through leadership transitions***.

Although they share a common form of federal tax-exempt status, different kinds of nonprofit organizations play very different roles within the education system. Many nonprofits are foundations with the primary purpose of grantmaking. Whether a private foundation with an endowed corpus, a family foundation, a charitable trust, or a community foundation like Horizon Community Funds that aggregate charitable contributions from a geographic region, these entities focus on providing resources to mission-driven efforts that provide public benefits. Many of the larger nonprofit organizations are broad-based service providers. The most commonly known nonprofits run a range of public programs largely through state, local, and federal contracts. In NKY, this includes the Brighton Center, which runs dozens of government projects and receives a majority of its resources from public sources, most notably the NKY Workforce Investment Board; the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission, which also operates several programs, with most of its revenue coming as the region's provider of Head Start and Early Head Start; and the Children's Home of Northern Kentucky, which provides largely government-funded behavioral health services. Although these organizations may have large budgets and significant resources, public programs almost always come with clear guidelines and limited flexibility.

Nonprofits that rely more on private foundations and individual donors typically have more flexibility and discretion to pursue their missions, which also tend to be more tightly focused. The Life Learning Center, for instance, provides a holistic approach to help our 'at-risk' adults achieve self-sufficiency. Its broad-based, largely non-public funding base allows it to be nimble and innovative in meeting the needs of its clients. However, most nonprofit organizations that rely on private or discretionary funding tend to be small and dependent on shifting community priorities.

Another important category of community partners is support associations, which exist to serve a particular group or interest. The most significant NKY organization in this space is the Northern Kentucky Cooperative for Educational Services (NKCES), which is one of eight educational cooperatives in the state. It operates as an extension of the school districts in a

region. They serve superintendents and district schools through collaborative programming, networking, and advocacy. Other organizations and foundations exist throughout the region that closely align with a particular school district, public school, or private school. These largely act to raise money to supplement core revenues but also can be political forces when the interests of that particular school or group are in play.

4. School Choice

The idea of “school choice” is one that evokes strong reactions in NKY despite broad disagreement and confusion about the term’s meaning, much less its merits and practical and public policy implications. Broadly speaking, “school choice” conceptually speaks to the ability of families and students to decide where and how they educate their children. Public education in the United States is administered largely by the nation’s 13,318 regular school districts, and about 73 percent of the 47.2 million public elementary and secondary school students attend the school assigned by their school district. Therefore, the principal choice that families make regarding where to educate their children derives from their decision about where to live, one steep in matters related to economic opportunity and housing availability and affordability. Just under seven million students or about 12.8 percent of the population of K-12 aged students attend private school, thus opting out of the public education system altogether.

As a matter of public policy, “school choice” refers to mechanisms that allow families to decide to send their children to schools other than their geographically designated schools by allowing public education funds to follow the student. The idea is to instill agency into the school selection process by allowing families and students a say in the school selection process other than by discriminating purely on geography and assigned school boundaries. Across the United States, virtually every state allows some form of school choice, which vary widely but generally fall into four broad categories. These include i) intradistrict choice and magnet schools, ii) inter-district choice, iii) public charter schools, and iv) private school choice.

Intra-district choice is an area of considerable innovation. Many districts nationally have established open enrollment policies that allow students to attend other schools within the district based on various criteria. As the average school district only has about a half-dozen schools today, this is much more common in large, urban school districts where there are schools in close proximity to one another. Magnet schools emerged in the wake of school desegregation as a way to encourage families and students to voluntarily select a diverse school, typically through the offering of special programming, like STEM, performing arts, or language immersion. Specialty schools run by districts sometimes have selective or competitive admissions policies while some do not and simply award enrollment based on a random lottery of applicants. Beyond magnet schools, many districts have created policies that allow some students to attend district schools other than their assigned school either for a set reason, like a parent works at or near the school, and sometimes simply based on availability. Some innovative districts have opened up the school enrollment process completely, effectively permitting students to attend school that they prefer, with slots granted based on district-wide lottery if the school is oversubscribed. This approach is typically aligned with some form of school-based budgeting where public funds follow the student to the school and school budgets are set based on enrollment. Within this framework, district schools compete with one another for students with the idea that competition drives quality and innovation. A key variable in open enrollment systems is transportation. It is common for school districts to offer transportation for magnets and specialty schools, but most open enrollment systems require families who select a school outside their assigned zone to get there on their own. This is less of an issue in urban

areas with robust public transportation systems. For instance, cities like New York or Washington, DC, which have adopted open enrollment approaches, also allow students and parents (in the case of elementary school children), to ride free on public transportation during commuting hours.

Inter-district choice is similar to intra-district enrollment, but extends the principle to another district in the state or a defined geographic boundary. What makes it different is the transfer between or across government entities, which necessarily involves a transfer of public funds. As a result, it typically happens as a product of state legislation or inter-district agreement. This is easier in states where per pupil expenditures are closely aligned with the student. In California, for instance, families may appeal to county boards of education for an inter-district transfer. If approved, the state has an administrative process to ensure that the receiving district receives the full per pupil cost of educating that student, including allocation of the local share. Kentucky's non-resident student policy established by HB 563 in 2021 certainly fits into the category of inter-district school choice. The law requires all school districts to adopt non-resident student policies and to receive state SEEK dollars for enrolled nonresident students without an agreement with the student's resident district. District policy may impose eligibility criteria and grant a superintendent discretion to admit or deny enrollment accordingly. Although it is common for state funding for nonresident students to follow a student to another district, what is unusual about Kentucky law is the provision that specifically authorizes districts to charge private tuition to nonresident students under a provision that predates HB 563. The end result is a tiered system where high-demand, privileged school districts can charge tuition and admit students based on a selective criteria and other, often urban districts charge no or a nominal tuition and broadly take nonresident students.

Charter schools are free, independently run public schools that are not run by traditional school districts. They were first established in 1991 and have grown to serve about 3.7 million students or 7.4 percent public school students in 43 states, Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, and Guam. They are public schools operated largely by private nonprofit organizations. Charter schools were conceived with the idea of infusing choice and innovation into public education where educators could operate with more autonomy and flexibility in exchange for strong accountability, as a school's authorization to operate (called "charters") must be renewed periodically and can be denied more easily if they fail to perform. In reality, charter schools in most states adhere to the same or similar laws as other public schools, but are less likely to be unionized and, thus, not operate within the parameters of collective bargaining agreements that impose another layer of requirements on traditional school districts.

Research shows that charter schools on the whole outperform traditional public schools. The third national charter school study by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), released in 2023, concluded that, while charter schools serve "more diverse and academically challenged students than local traditional public schools," they gain 16 more days of learning on average in reading and 6 more days in math per year compared to their matched peers at traditional public schools." The academic achievement results were much more pronounced – 23 extra days of reading and 27 more days of math – at charter

schools operated by experienced charter management organizations (CMOs) with greater resources and experience to produce and scale quality at multiple schools. The study identified more than 1,000 charter schools nationally that produced what it called “gap-busting” results with “equitable progress across minority, poverty, and English language learner students.” One area where charter schools did not perform as well was among special education students, who experienced larger gains at traditional district schools.

Although the Kentucky General Assembly has attempted to authorize charter schools, the legislation has encountered judicial challenges. The most recent charter school legislation, HB-9, enacted in 2022, was stuck down by a Circuit Court ruling in December 2023 that hinged on the legislation’s attempt to establish charter schools within the state’s peculiar definition of a “common school,” which is the exclusive system for public education established in the Kentucky Constitution. As the court decision points out, the definition of common schools as set in statute includes four elements: i) receipt of public taxation, ii) employment of certified teachers, iii) prescribed minimum school terms, and iv) the eligibility of every student in the district to attend the school. Therefore, it is the final element that a charter school established under HB-9 violates by allowing it to limit enrollment, explicitly states that “a primary characteristic of the common schools is that they must ‘take all comers,’ and educate each child regardless of poverty, language barriers, disability, health or addiction problems at home, or any other obstacle to learning.” It is not clear how this standard would apply to district operated schools that use selective criteria or also limit enrollment due to capacity. The decision continues to raise other issues with the legislation, as enacted, including its broad exemption from state laws, selective admissions, and concerns about oversight and application of public safeguards. Although other states have been able to address the secondary issues, it is unclear whether the legislation can be rewritten to fit within constitutional parameters. What is clear is that any legislative action on charter schools short of changing the constitution will face judicial action and is unlikely to be resolved quickly.

The final school choice category involves private options, including school vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax-credit scholarships. More than a dozen states have established private voucher programs, which work as a government funded credit in a specific amount that can be applied as tuition to a private school. They are typically limited by household income or geographic location with the goal of serving disadvantaged students or places where access to higher performing schools are limited. State laws vary regarding requirements on private schools receiving vouchers. Many states require participating private schools to administer state assessments and prohibit the charging of tuition in addition to the voucher. Education savings accounts (ESAs) differ from vouchers in that public money goes to parents in the form of a deposit into a restricted account that can be used for educational expenses. Some even allow funds to carry over to pay for college tuition. Eleven states have ESA programs, including a few new ones without any household income restrictions. A final category is tax-credit scholarship programs that are funded through voluntary contributions from individuals or corporations to a scholarship granting program, which distributes scholarships to students to pay tuition to private schools. These programs are generally restricted by household income. Kentucky established a

tax-credit program as part of HB 563 that was ruled unconstitutional by the Kentucky Supreme Court in 2022.

Families and students in NKY show a meaningful interest in school choice in the limited forms that it exists. Broadly, perceptions of school quality play a significant role in family decisions about where to live and purchase homes. Home prices and rents are markedly enhanced by communities like Fort Thomas, Fort Mitchell, and the parts of the county districts where the neighborhood schools enjoy strong reputations and high Great School scores. This dynamic is visible within Covington where some elementary schools enjoy strong reputations, supported by higher levels of academic performance, while secondary schools have struggled. An enrollment trends analysis of the recent school years shows that the district's grade level enrollment remains stable through third grade but then veins to decline. Over six years, grade level enrollment declines an average of 21.2 percent or 77 students between third grade and sixth grade, when middle school begins. This loss represents an enrollment loss of about one and a quarter of a grade school cohort withdrawing from the system every year as families who have options exercise "choice," whether it is to relocate, enroll in district schools elsewhere, or exercise private or home schooling options.

To this end, NKY has a robust Catholic school culture with 28 elementary schools and nine high schools serving about 9,100 students across the three counties. Although enrollment figures for all private schools are difficult to determine, the Diocese of Covington (subtracting to two parish elementary schools not in the three county region) constitutes the region's third largest school district behind Boone and Kenton county districts and educates more than 15 percent of elementary and high school students. This share well exceeds the national private school enrollment average of 12.8 percent and a state estimate of around 11.2 percent.

When it comes to school choice as a matter of public policy, NKY families have two significant options, the Ignite Institute and non-resident enrollment under HB 563.

The Ignite Institute is one of the more innovative features of the NKY education landscape. The high-tech high school opened in 2019 through an initial partnership between Boone County School District and Toyota, which donated a 22-acre, 183,000 square-foot facility to the school when it relocated its NKY plant to make the vision possible. Kenton County joined the partnership in 2018, thus making the project a broader regional effort. The school serves around 1,000 students a year across five "colleges" or fields of study: Engineering, Computer Science, Biomedical and Health, Design, and Education. The school is selective, accepting about 300 students a year from a pool of around 1,000 applicants from the two county districts and participating independent districts, which include Covington and Ludlow. The school offers a blended learning experience and significantly incorporates project-based learning. Teachers operate more like facilitators and mentors to students who often drive their own work and get the chance to collaborate with industry partners. The program offers significant college credit, and students have the opportunity to graduate high school with an associate's degree. The program has students enroll jointly at their home district high schools where they may participate in extracurricular activities. The program's academic achievement is reported to be

strong, but the state does include the program in its school report card system because individual test scores revert back to the student district high school. Despite its major capital investment that made the school possible, the program operates solely on state SEEK funding and does not receive a local share from participating districts. The budget only works due to relatively high student to faculty ratios. The high ratios are workable due to the selective nature of the program and the fact that all students who attend Ignite choose to be there, showcasing an agency that is evident in talking to students when visiting the school. Even without a local share, some districts decline to participate so as not to share state SEED dollars. Erlanger-Elsmere, which is immediately adjacent to the school, does not permit its students to attend, and Walton-Verona recently made the decision to withdraw from participation due to financial reasons.

Across the three counties in 2022, 1,743 students enrolled as non-resident students, only about 3.2 percent of the total K-12 population. However, in the River Cities, where districts charge little to no tuition and other options exist in close proximity, 9.3 percent or one in eleven students cross district boundaries each day for school. Some school systems have become meaningful districts of choice for neighboring residents. Bellevue leads the way with 30.8 percent of its students enrolled as non-residents with the largest share coming from Newport (64) and Southgate (50). Ludlow is next with just over a quarter of its students coming from outside with nearly half (92) coming from Covington and a significant share (65) from Kenton County. Beechwood also had a significant positive flow with 14.1 percent of its enrolled students coming as non-residents, mostly from Kenton County (136) with a significant share from Boone County (46) mostly from Kenton County was the largest participant in non-resident enrollment with 439 students transferring in and 389 leaving, for a modest positive net of tuition-paying non-resident students. In terms of numbers, Covington had the largest net loss with 247 more students transferring out than coming in, a 7.2 percent loss in its overall enrollment. Southgate led the region as a share of enrollment leaving the district with nearly two-thirds (65.2 percent) of its district residents enrolled elsewhere explained in part by the district's lack of a high school. Newport was one of the more active participants in non-resident transfers, with 11.4 percent of its students coming as non-residents (mostly from Covington and Southgate) and 9.8 percent of its residents going elsewhere (the vast majority paying tuition to Beechwood and Fort Thomas) for a net-positive transfer of 1.5 percent. Erlanger-Elsmere also experienced relatively high transfers with 6.9 percent of district residents enrolling elsewhere and a net loss of 3.9 percent. Walton-Verona and Fort Thomas also have positive net positive non-resident enrollment of 8.6 percent and 5.3 percent while Boone and Campbell county districts have a net outflows of 1.2 percent and 3 percent, respectively.

State data only provides raw numbers regarding students who live in one district and enroll in another. So it is not possible to assess greater understanding through grade levels or demographic information. Tuition in Beechwood and Fort Thomas is higher – about $3,800 – than in the county districts where it is about $2,000. It is reasonable to conclude that tuition paying non-resident students are more likely to be more affluent than the families who transfer among the River City districts where little to no tuition is required and where most students are classified as economically disadvantaged. The transfers set-up an odd dynamic where two

districts – Bellevue and Ludlow – that serve a disproportionately low-income population – provide education at a discounted rate – only receiving state SEEK funds – for families who live and pay taxes in other districts that retain the funds that would otherwise go to educate their students.

5. Post-Secondary

NKY's strong complement of colleges and universities and robust economy filled with employers eager to hire and develop new entrants to the job market with demonstrated skills and motivation provide a wide array of opportunities for post-secondary success. Data on postsecondary education and occupation is limited. The Kentucky Department of Education produces two relevant reports, one that tracks each school year's graduating class to determine which ones are working, enrolled in college (in-state and out-of-state), enrolled in technical training or serving in the military and another that looks at those who enrolled in college in Kentucky within six months. Both reports focus on the period within the six months following graduation.

The Transition to Adult Life report presents a picture of the NKY region that varies from the commonwealth as a whole in some important ways and shows some meaningful differences among graduates depending on the graduating district. The most surprising aspect is that NKY reports a smaller share of graduates who report principally attending college – 14 percent to 16.5 percent of graduates statewide – and a larger percentage who report balancing work with school – 40.3 percent to the state average of 34.8. The portion that report work as their principal occupation is about the same – 30.7 percent regionally compared to 30.4 percent statewide. Although the sample size of the districts makes hard figures difficult, it seems that the less than 1 percent of graduates who pursue technical training is more common regionally than statewide while a smaller share of NKY graduates go into the military than the state average, which is 2.3 percent. The region's share of "other," which captures graduates who are not engaged in any meaningful postsecondary activity, is 12.7 percent, below the statewide average of 15.4 percent. When grouped into three categories – affluent independent district, county districts, and River City districts and Erlanger-Elsmere – distinct patterns emerge among the groups. The affluent independents show much higher percentages of full-time college attendees – 27.1 percent while showing an equally robust share – 48.7 percent – of those balancing work and school. This group has the smallest share of graduates who principally work (16.1 percent) and who report other (7.4 percent). The county districts more closely resemble the regional averages but with some differences among them. Campbell County has a greater proportion of full-time college students and fewer full-time workers. Boone County has the largest share of students balancing work and school while Kenton County has a larger share of full-time workers and fewer graduates in school. Whereas most graduates in the state and the region pursue postsecondary educational opportunities, this is not the case for most graduates from the River City districts and Erlanger-Elsmere where only 9 percent report being principally enrolled in college and another 28 percent balancing work and school (and these figures include Bellevue and Ludlow who have stronger college only and work and school figures, 61.4 percent and 51.9 respectively). A larger share of graduates from those seven districts – 39.4 percent – are reported to principally work while 22.7 percent "other" suggests that a significantly larger share from these districts are not engaged in meaningful postsecondary opportunities.

The data suggests that the trends that begin in high school that relate to academic and career readiness carry forward as high school graduates transition into postsecondary success. NKY

school districts and partners have shown considerable innovation providing a wide array of opportunities for young people who are engaged and motivated in their futures. Conversations with stakeholders make clear that these developments did not happen naturally but evolved through extensive collaboration and partnership over many years among district and private school administrators, higher education leaders, and the business community. The region's strong cadre of business leaders who are motivated for qualified workers has made them especially eager partners to develop talent pipelines and has led to creative approaches that both work wholesale and that serve specific needs. The region is fortunate to have a wonderful balance of high education partners that can match the full array of needs presented by students while still in high school, immediately after graduation, or later in life after they have gained work and life experience. Partnerships between high schools and Northern Kentucky University through the Young Scholars Academy and Gateway Community and Technical College to create dual credits options has increased significantly. About 40 percent of Gateway's enrollment is now high school students. Workforce initiatives like GROW NKY (recently reconstituted as NKY Works) are focusing on increasing relevant work-based opportunities in the "high demand" industries in the region. The region's school districts and innovative nonprofit programs like NaviGo offer students mentoring, counseling, and coaching to help make college and career planning more manageable. Moreover, efforts like YouScience through Learning Grove work to diminish gaps betweens student aptitude and interest across career sectors starting in middle school.

In many ways, the postsecondary component of NKY's educational system already has in place systemic forces that drive innovation and collaboration. Although there certainly is more to do and further efforts should be encouraged, postsecondary success will be aided most by strengthening the system downstream to grow the share of advancing students who are prepared academically, engaged socially and emotionally, and motivated to learn, develop, and unlock their full potential.

6. Contributing Factors

The education landscape does not exist in a vacuum. It is relatively easy to identify challenges and shortcomings and even to suggest areas of improvement and new ideas. However, achieving meaningful impact requires a deep understanding of the contributing factors that help shape and, in many ways, sustain and reinforce the current system that has evolved over 150 years. Thousands of smart and capable people of goodwill within the system everyday serve the young people of NKY, and they inherited the system from people who came before them. Although the system benefits from new ideas and approaches to make it better, change is most likely to be implemented and prove successful if implemented with a healthy respect for and deep understanding of the forces that have shaped and guided the system to this point.

Contributing forces are underlying conditions that cut across all areas of the education landscape to affect strategies, leadership, system operations, and individual behavior. Although they can be dynamic and change over time, they are active players that are and should be taken into account in the development, implementation, and evaluation of any new approach or effort. This report focuses on five contributing forces that seem particularly relevant to the NKY education landscape, but the list is not exhaustive, and other factors exist and may apply.

Coordination and Cooperation

> *The degree to which community stakeholders and institutions work together to further and accomplish common goals and objectives*

NKY institutions work together effectively both as a necessity of the fragmented governmental reality and as a community expectation. However, the act of continuously coordinating and cooperating can be a tax on operational efficiency and effectiveness if it doesn't lead to clear ends and ultimately lead to tangible benefits. The NKY educational landscape offers many opportunities for more significant partnership and cooperation, especially among concentrated independent districts that face pressure to find programmatic enhancements and collective impact.

To a large degree, coordination and cooperation is a muscle that the region has built over time to counter the regular obstacles presented by its fragmentation. Stakeholders value NKY's deep sense of community pride while broadly seeing its provincial nature as its chief barrier to achieving their vision of success. Some stakeholders reflexively favor consolidation as the answer. They would quickly fold some or all independent school districts into each other or into county systems as the obvious solution, but not many have actually seriously considered the strategic and practical repercussions of such an action. It should begin with the reality that every independent district governing board has within its authority the right to dissolve itself by a simple majority vote and merge with the county district. This happened most recently when Silver Grove dissolved in 2019 and merged with Campbell County that fall. Silver Grove was the smallest and lowest performing district in NKY. It also had the highest levied equivalent and real estate tax rates. Its dissolution took profound courage on the part of local elected officials who

executed the action against significant backlash. Silver Grove is one of Kentucky's five school district consolidations that have occurred in the last quarter century, and the reasons were largely financial rather than strategic: small districts reached the limit of voters' willingness to sustain higher taxes to support small independent operations.

While a historic legacy, independent districts represent an ongoing decision by local voters to pay more in local taxes in the service of local control over their public schools. Taxpayers in NKY's independent districts pay the highest tax rates in the state applied to assessments per pupil that, with the exception of Dayton and Ludlow, all rank in the top quartile among the commonwealth's 171 school districts. Campbell County was able to absorb Silver Grove's less than 200 students without experiencing a broad financial impact, but it is unlikely that a county could absorb a typically sized independent school district without a meaningful increase in its comparatively low tax rate. In the event that school districts were strategic in thinking about consolidation, a better option might be to merge with another contiguous independent, which current law allows with concurrent action of two or more respective school boards. This idea is raised regarding Bellevue and Dayton, which have similar demographics, if widely different property tax assessments and state funding allocations, and Southgate, which already has a huge share of students who attend schools in Newport and Bellevue and does not have a high school that its students attend by right. It is worth noting that four of Kentucky's 51 independent districts serve multiple counties, including one – Caverna – that serves two adjoining cities in different counties. So it is even possible for independent districts to merge across county lines.

There are, however, far more options for coordination and collaboration than merely consolidation. This begins with an understanding that independent school districts have special advantages that county consolidation would endanger. First and foremost is the placement of the school in their community. In the dissolution of Silver Grove, the community lost its community school and students were transferred to existing Campbell County district schools. A neighborhood school is something that local residents see as a key rationale for a higher tax rate, as long as the school delivers on academic quality. Independent districts are better positioned to foster deep connections with the community, proactively engage parents, both before they reach school age and certainly once enrolled, and partner with city governments, which share similar vantage points and serve the same people. Independent school boards are also more likely to be responsive to unique community needs that are more likely to be overlooked in a county system. On the other hand, scale unquestionably limits independent districts and higher per pupil administrative costs consume resources that otherwise could serve students and families. In this way, the close proximity of independent schools in NKY creates vast opportunities for collaboration. There is tremendous potential to share administrative functions, like finance, human resources, and procurement, and to join forces on vendor contracts on various support services to secure better deals. With greater program alignment, it would be possible to support common data systems and academic supports that individual districts either may not be able to afford on their own or to secure resources more efficiently. ***Perhaps the greatest opportunity, however, is for independent districts to band together to create more options and choice for students and families. The region lacks many programs that are common elsewhere because the options cannot be supported***

considering the size of districts. As a result, students lack access and exposure to experiences that could unlock their imaginations and excite their learning, whether as part of the core curriculum or through after-school, summer, and special programming.

A barrier to cooperation is often control. The region has lots of collaborative efforts where one district permits students from other districts to participate, and access to various supports and services are available through the NKY Cooperative for Educational Services. Although these efforts are valuable, they are either one-off efforts, like the Ignite Institute, or lack a design that targets the needs of specific independents. Of particular interest is developing shared governance models and interlocal agreements that would allow two or more districts to share in the ownership and decision-making of innovative efforts. In addition to enabling specific collaborative efforts, these types of agreements can further propel collaboration by building trust and showcasing what is possible when districts team up in more fundamental ways. Such arrangements can be even more powerful if designed as public-private partnerships that incorporate business or nonprofit interests and leverage external resources and thus expanding the impact and value to the districts and better serve students and families.

Governance and Accountability

> *Decision-making and management structures and the processes for monitoring, analyzing, and improving the performance of individuals and institutions to achieve positive outcomes*

The provincial nature of education in NKY emerges from its system of governance. By design, public education in the United States is locally-controlled within the parameters of state and federal law. In NKY, the concentration of small independent school districts helps promote a governance structure that is hyper-local. Although this orientation promotes a strong sense of community and tradition, which is a strength of independent districts, it also overemphasizes jurisdictional lines in a world in which families and students frequently move from one district to another and live their lives on a daily basis with little thought to where one government entity ends and another begins. It also can create a situation where myopic considerations overwhelm broader concerns that are relevant to the wider region..

School boards are populated by elected leaders who tend to have deep roots in the community. Many are products of the local schools that they govern or are former or current educators. All school board positions are part-time, which means members either have regular jobs, are retired, or have spouses or household incomes that help make their service possible. Board service is a meaningful commitment, whether the school district has a few hundred students or thousands. In addition to regular meetings, typically in the evening, board members must make time to review agenda packets, visit schools, talk to constituents, attend conferences, network with other elected officials, and undergo annual service training, and this does not include the time-consuming process of running for public office. It is common for smaller communities to struggle to populate boards, to experience vacancies that must be filled by appointment, or

elections to go uncontested, all variables that undermine the democratic process that stands at the heart of a publicly elected school board.

People who serve on local school boards typically find that they conform to the system more than they change it. School systems operate according to well-defined cycles, and there exist multitudes of reasons for doing things the way that they are done. Change is nearly always incremental if it exists at all, institutional resistance is constant, and it takes extraordinary effort to bring about change over the objections of a superintendent. All board members are required by state law to receive four to 12 hours of annual training, including one to three hours a year specifically related to school finance, ethics, and superintendent evaluation, requirements that can be met through participation in the Kentucky School Boards Association (KSBA). However, this training typically covers basic operations and reinforces the way things are generally done. The principal education of board members takes place over the course of their service as they attend regular board meetings and undergo the act of governing. The principal teacher is the superintendent and senior staff with whom board members interact consistently. Superintendents typically control the information that board members receive, and information sharing practices vary widely. Some boards play an active role in creating and driving information sharing and use that information to set meaningful goals and track processes against objective benchmarks, but that can be the exception rather than the rule. More often than not, school boards engage in the act of overseeing a government agency than they actively supervise educational delivery. Change oriented school board members often become frustrated and tend to have shorter tenures, and the role has become more difficult in recent years as school boards have confronted difficult social and cultural issues and been infused with contentious politics. The most effective school board members are those who adapt to the system, master the levers of board power (school budgets, long-term strategic plans, superintendent performance reviews, contract negotiations, and community leadership) and use those levers to wield influence. These school board members are often the ones who serve longest and tend to be the strongest defenders of local privilege and a provincial orientation.

The most important job of any school board is to select the superintendent who serves as the board's executive agent and leads the district. State law guides the process by requiring school boards to form a screening committee that includes teacher, principal, parent, and non-classified employee representation and receive non-binding recommendations before making an appointment. It also requires that all superintendents demonstrate and maintain a valid superintendent certification from the Education Professional Standards Board of Kentucky while they serve in their role. Superintendents may be appointed for terms of up to four years. Once appointed, state law prescribes that school boards must delegate day to day operations to the superintendent and limits their responsibilities to the enactment of rolling three-year strategic plans, annual adoption of the district budget including tax revenues, approval of contracts of more than $250,000, and overseeing the annual financial audit and review of the superintendent's performance. The state also places meaningful restrictions on a school board's authority to remove a superintendent for cause, requiring a four-fifth's supermajority and approval by the state commissioner of education following an investigation of charges and review of the superintendent's overall performance during a 30-day process.

Superintendents are powerful figures in NKY. They generally have the support of their school boards and benefit from high public satisfaction with public schools and relatively weak to nonexistent collective bargaining units. They also all enjoy the benefit of being the leader of one of the largest employers in their respective communities. Although the state has improved its accountability system for education, the system is cumbersome and is not widely understood. Moreover, the process of accountability used by individual districts to establish goals and hold leaders accountable to achievement is unclear. Therefore, superintendents largely control the public education narrative and feed a sense that things are okay. Effective superintendents tend to be very adept at reading and serving the will and expectations of their boards, especially the long serving members who shape local politics and wield the greatest influence in the community. The region would benefit from broader engagement in the education space to help build a better system of checks and balances and ensure greater accountability according to objective and transparent benchmarks of academic outcomes.

Talent Capital

> *The recruitment, development, motivation, and retention of quality educators, leaders, and support personnel, especially in high need areas*

NKY is facing an acute teacher shortage that affects every district and lands most heavily on independent school districts in the urban core that serve higher shares of at-risk students. The situation presents a constant challenge for general teaching positions and is especially dire in STEM fields and other specialty subjects. The talent situation also seems to have a cascading effect on school leadership, as many of the most underperforming schools face leadership challenges and transitions. When it comes to pay and benefits, the region is at a competitive disadvantage for talent with districts in southeast Ohio. Although the county and some of the independent districts have other advantages that they use effectively to manage the talent situation, independent districts in the urban core struggle to attract and retain teachers who are actively recruited by other districts in the region. The teacher shortage is compounded by various other factors, including a political environment where teachers feel under attack, more diverse student populations with different needs, an inadequate talent pool that is not representative of changing demographics, and a regional university with a school of education that remains steeped in more traditional instruction and resists change.

Despite the crisis situation, the region seems without a coordinated response. Districts instead are doubling down on existing efforts to recruit talent individually while working to retain their existing teaching force. This works best in the county districts that benefit from size, a higher pay scale, lower costs of living, and more opportunities for faculty and staff to transfer internally and work in communities where they live. Beechwood and Fort Thomas continue to leverage their elite reputations to help them attract and retain quality talent. Ludlow has used its strong sense of community to hire and keep its people, including a remarkable share of teachers who grew up locally and retain strong ties to the small town. The situation is most acute in Covington and Newport, which compete most directly for talent interested in urban education with

Cincinnati Public Schools, where starting salaries offer thousands of dollars more per year. Their talent pools are also attractive targets for other districts who covet teachers with three to five years of experience who have honed the craft of teaching and are receptive to better pay in less challenging environments. Smaller independents like Bellevue, Dayton, and Southgate have similar issues but at a smaller scale and have had to be creative in plugging holes, filling vacancies, and pouring energy into new hires to coach them up to meet their needs. Districts like Erlanger-Elsmere, Walton-Verona, and even Boone and Kenton counties face a reality of teaching forces that lack the diversity to reflect and address the changing demographics of their students. The mindsets and skills of the current workforce have to change to properly serve students and families from varying backgrounds with different needs. The situation is most acute at the teacher level, but also is visible in the pipeline of school leaders. Virtually every underperforming school in the region connects directly with issues related to leadership challenges or transitions. Superintendents seem more focused on leadership issues and have proven quicker to make changes as needed. However, the current talent crisis portends a shortage of quality school leaders in the years to come.

Teacher Demographics and Experience, 2023

District	Teachers	Female	White (non-Hispanic)	Avg Years Experience
Beechwood Ind	86	77.9%	98.8%	13.7
Bellevue Ind	48	72.9%	97.9%	10.3
Boone Co	1,343	80.9%	97.6%	13.0
Campbell Co	324	77.2%	99.1%	12.2
Covington Ind	259	73.0%	89.6%	8.6
Dayton Ind	69	72.5%	97.1%	11.3
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind	162	77.2%	96.3%	10.2
Fort Thomas Ind	187	77.5%	98.4%	15.7
Kenton Co	787	79.9%	98.3%	12.6
Ludlow Ind	58	72.4%	100.0%	13.2
Newport Ind	139	77.7%	94.2%	11.1
Southgate Ind	18	83.3%	100.0%	11.0
Walton-Verona Ind	120	80.8%	99.2%	12.8
State	**43,169**	**77.2%**	**94.7%**	**12.1**
NKY	**3,600**	**78.8%**	**97.3%**	**12.5**
County Districts	2,454	80.1%	98.0%	12.8
River Cities plus EE	753	74.9%	94.2%	10.2
Other Ind w/o EE	393	78.6%	98.7%	14.4

The broad responses to the challenge are to bring more people into the teaching profession, retain current faculty and staff longer, and create greater incentives to attract more talent to higher need areas. Money is a key variant regardless of the response. Teacher salaries in Kentucky generally and NKY specifically are not adequately competitive to pull existing educators from elsewhere and attractive enough to draw people to the profession. Moreover, changes to the retirement system in recent years have undermined the deal that attracted many educators to accept lower pay in exchange for job security and more generous benefits. Many educators say that they would not advise others to enter the profession. At the same time, teacher salary schedules allow very little room to recognize quality, being based solely on years of service and educational attainment. Although state law allows some room for the use of stipends, the current regime does not permit any consideration of performance pay or incentives for student achievement. The teaching profession also includes many barriers to entry. In

addition to a bachelor's degree, teachers must meet requirements to obtain and maintain a teaching certificate, which can be onerous even with the various alternative certification requirements that have been created over the years. There is no question that the region would benefit from a robust regional effort to entice and incentivize more people into the teaching profession and support them through the process, especially candidates who would help diversify the teaching force and better reflect students served. There is also potential for coordinated efforts to develop and support teachers to better serve students with greater and more diverse needs. Although money plays a role, teachers who feel supported and successful show greater job satisfaction and are much more likely to stay where they believe they are making a meaningful difference. Finally, there are many opportunities to create incentives to attract teachers where they are needed most. The most obvious way would be to make state aid more progressive by increasing education funding and bolstering and targeting the at-risk component of the SEEK funding formula. On a more targeted basis, programs could be established to offer stipends or student loan forgiveness to attract teachers to certain schools or the state could offer school districts greater flexibility in compensation to attract or retain teachers who demonstrate results with certain populations of students. What is clear is that the issue of talent capital is nearing crisis level and will provide a negative countervailing force to all efforts to improve the system. Although there are not quick and easy solutions, different approaches are required to reverse the long-term trend and begin addressing the education workforce challenge.

Socioeconomic Impacts

> *The consequences of disparities in income, educational attainment, financial security, and social status that affect the well-being, academic achievement, mental health, and career prospects of children*

Academic outcomes in NKY, both good and bad, emerge largely from socio-economic conditions. Every metric of note – whether kindergarten-readiness, academic performance, college and career preparedness, and postsecondary success – correlate closely with social and economic advantage and disadvantage. Although the data analysis in this report does not constantly focus on disparities based on income, race, ethnicity, home language, and other demographic factors, they are ever-present and overpowering. The gaps are most narrow at kindergarten readiness and continue to widen as students move through the education system. They are at their most significant when it comes to postsecondary readiness. In fact, in this bottom-line indicator of what the education system is supposed to be about, in just about every NKY school district that reports data, African American's significantly lag behind the state average for the subgroup, suggesting racial barriers in NKY that may be greater than in the state as a whole. Other subgroups similarly trail the state with various exceptions (Kenton County does better with Hispanic students and those designated as homeless, Campbell County and Fort Thomas with students with special needs). The group that fairs the worst are English Learners, showing the NKY is a very difficult place to get an education for those without basic English fluency.

Although it should be self-evident, it is worth stating explicitly that lower academic outcomes among these subgroups has nothing to do with their inherent potential to learn and succeed and entirely are a product of environment and circumstances. Despite the widespread aspiration of stakeholders for an education system that provides equal opportunity to every student, socioeconomic impacts and the forces of inequality regularly overwhelm the system. This construct is the standard in America. It is common, including throughout this report, to use demographic norms to rationalize inequities. However, NKY's economic vibrancy and changing demographics make the situation more pronounced. Schools are beginning to play a more active role in addressing these forces directly through afterschool and summer programing, stronger partnerships with social service and nonprofit agencies, and other supplemental efforts. Moreover, 21st Century and Community Schools grants are good examples of federal forces at work in NKY that are encouraging greater movement in that direction, and there is great opportunity at the state and local levels to leverage schools to counter socioeconomic forces, if not transform schools into vibrant community hubs. Greater help is needed to rethink early learning and assist public schools in confronting socioeconomic forces more directly and in a comprehensive way.

Of course, socioeconomic impacts run much deeper than academic outcomes. NKY is highly segregated along well established class and racial lines. The River Cities have historically lagged the counties and outer cities in median household income, but most of them have historically been just as overwhelmingly white as the counties and suburban cities while African Americans remain largely concentrated in sections of Covington and Newport with demarcations by neighborhood. In recent years, the region has seen a significant influx of immigrant populations from Central and South America, Middle Eastern countries, and Africa that first went to the cities and now is seeing increasing numbers move toward the airport in and around Erlanger, Elsmere, and Florence. The delineations that emerge from these differences translate to power dynamics that go beyond economic considerations related to housing, child care, transportation, and other basic needs. They create paradigms where people on one side – white, affluent, educated, English speakers – establish the norms and make the rules while others – low-income, non-white, undereducated, non-English speakers – can feel isolated and even unwelcome. The effects are disempowering and act to reinforce segregation, too often removing subgroups from view or even consideration by the majority.

These forces converge in our public schools, which are institutions that pull together broad cross-sections of a community. Yet, schools too often fail to recognize their power to affirm and reinforce or dismantle and disrupt cultural and societal barriers. Schools are paternalistic and hierarchical in nature, charged as they are serving and managing hundreds of children and young people each day. They are run by highly educated leaders who were ingrained in a system through years of training and practice. Structure facilitates safety, regulates behavior, and creates a space conducive to learning. However, the tendency toward hierarchy involves power dynamics that can be very off-putting to families from marginalized communities who do not share the educational construct. These parents and family members are likely to read far more into tone and nonverbal cues than the substance of communications and take less well to many forms of communication and interaction, like emails and lecture-style assemblies, that are

the hallmark of schools. School personnel in NKY generally do not match the diversity of their student populations, which creates a significant initial barrier. All but 2.7 percent of the region's teachers are non-Hispanic white, well below the state average of 5.3 percent and far removed from a student demographic that is a quarter non-white. Although diversifying the talent pool is an imperative, schools in the meantime must find ways of not only welcoming families and students but vesting them in the school community and building the capacity of families to play a leadership role in their children's education.

This strategic shift has occurred at many high performing district and charter schools across the nation that serve low-income and minority communities. These schools intentionally and proactively reach out to families to establish deep relationships, change the power dynamic, and create meaningful opportunities to engage parents in academic achievement, school community, and advocacy. They ingrain family engagement into the role of every team member and find ways to meet families where and as they are, showing them what true partnership looks like rather than tell them in words that can fall on muted ears. This includes principal and teacher interactions, but also administrative and support staff. It means making schools accessible and welcoming for families before, during, and after the school day. It includes having in place translation services and multilingual signage so parents know it is available. It involves instituting friendly procedures to easily enroll students midyear. It means hiring diverse non-classified staff, including those who only speak languages other than English, and having parent volunteers on-hand throughout the school day where they might interact with other parents to create the sort of community that can be transformative in the school culture. Relationships with families translate to their students, and schools that make families feel a part of the school community forge much deeper ties with students, who engage more readily in learning. Many schools are building partnerships with external agencies and nonprofits to make schools hubs for families to access and receive services, and these efforts have great promise to benefit families in meaningful ways. However, it is important to incorporate parent voice and active involvement in community school efforts to ensure that family members are seen as active agents in the process and prevent schools from taking on the feel of social welfare offices, which can be cold and impersonal. Although socioeconomic factors present challenges, underserved groups also desire and support institutions that value them as assets and allow space for them to bring their whole selves and build community.

Mental Health

> *The condition of one's emotional, psychological, and social well-being that affects how people think, feel, and act and helps determine how people handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices*

Much has been made over many years of Kentucky's poor health status due to a confluence of indicators that has led the United Health Foundation to rank the state's health 43rd in America. Among the many indicators that drive down Kentucky's health ranking are adults who have had three or more chronic health conditions, children who have suffered two or more adverse childhood experiences, incidents of premature death, adults who smoke, and rates of teen

births. Broader recognition of the importance of mental health is a more recent phenomenon, and new research is increasingly demonstrating important ways that it intersects with academic outcomes. In 1999, Kentucky began assessing adolescent use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs through the regular Kentucky Incentives for Prevention (KIP) survey, and only added questions related to psychological distress in 2012. In its most recent survey in 2021 of students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 during the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 3 participating students reported poor mental health. The percent of students who shared that they had experienced severe psychological distress in the past 30 days hit an all time high of 22 percent, up 57 percent since 2014 with the greatest increase among sixth graders. Also hitting new highs were students who reported suicidal ideation (14 percent), suicidal planning (11 percent), and actual suicide attempts (8 percent). Adverse reports were more than two times higher among girls as boys, three to four times higher for gay, lesbian, and questioning students, and five to seven fold for students who identified outside the gender binary. Higher rates of severe psychological distress correlated to students who vaped, smoked cigarettes, used cannabis, and binge drank alcohol.

Mental health stressors manifest at both the epidemiological and individual levels. Broadly speaking, children absorb the anxieties and stress of their parents and families, even when parents attempt to shield them. Housing and food insecurity are real and present forces in many families as well as the regular challenge of making routine schedules work, whether they involve getting students to and from school every day and coordinating unforgiving work schedules, much less any irregularities like illness or a car problem. Layered on top of financial considerations are additional strains that emerge from family dynamics, health and medical conditions, and drug and alcohol abuse. The social pressures and anxieties that have been rites of passage for adolescents have been supercharged by social media and the speed and nature of information in the digital age. Moreover, the pandemic disrupted lives and bred social isolation in ways that we do not yet fully understand. These factors all reveal themselves in indicators like poor school attendance, chronic absenteeism, and behavior incidents and speak to real life situations that require time, relationships, and personal interactions to understand, unpack, and address. This, of course, is before getting to the clinical level where the need and demand for mental health services across the spectrum is growing rapidly and already has outstripped supply. An estimated one in seven young people under age 17 in Kentucky are wrestling with anxiety and depression, and depression diagnoses have doubled in NKY since 1999. Mental health disorders disproportionately begin in the teenage years and lead to devastating consequences for youths if they are not addressed.

With about 47 percent of Kentucky children covered by Medicaid or the Children Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and a majority of children with special needs, the responsibility for mental health services falls on a public system that is woefully unprepared for the crisis. Schools broadly, and especially those with concentrated need, are overwhelmed by the demand for basic mental health counseling, much less more acute situations, and are desperate to develop and strengthen partnerships to meet the moment. Some organizations, like Interact for Health and NKYCES, are working to bring people together to advance regional approaches and offering grants to help provide mental health counselors and train teachers on mental health best practices. Additionally, the Children’s Home of Northern Kentucky is launching an effort to

build regional infrastructure that will require greater state investment. Although the issue transcends education, the mental health of NKY's young people is a major force that is impacting the education system and one that needs to be considered in the process of designing solutions and charting the path forward.

Strategic Priorities

The education landscape is vast, and meaningful positive impact is most likely to result from concentrated attention in key areas of strategic significance with the potential to compound results and propel momentum. As EducateNKY seeks to take action as a facilitator – galvanizing urgency, concentrating attention, dedicating resources, and leveraging influence – rather than a direct operator, its priorities should be positioned for collaboration and partnership and focused on instituting systemic forces and building regional capacity that will bring about systemic change over time.

This landscape assessment identifies five priorities of strategic significance with the potential to catalytic transformation. These areas are intentionally broad and conceptual, and more work is required to clearly focus efforts and translate a general direction or approach into a multiyear strategic plan.

Emerging Priority 1: Early Learning

Early learning continues to provide NKY with its best opportunity to significantly improve learning outcomes in the long-term and requires a reinvigorated and coordinated approach to make this long-standing goal a reality. Specifically, the region needs a “backbone” entity that works across counties and government jurisdictions to catalyze resources in the early learning arena, to propel and support a range of research and data-based solutions, and hold partners accountable to meet goals for kindergarten readiness.

Emerging Priority 2: Family Partnership

Strong family partnership in the education process is a proven vehicle to transform the educational experience and academic outcomes, especially in communities with larger proportions of students with economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it is schools in these communities that often struggle the most to reduce barriers to parental engagement and support their families in becoming champions of their student’s educational journey. In 2024, the Kentucky State Board of Education is considering new recommendations from the Family Partnership Council to elevate family engagement throughout the state both in the years before children begin school and during the K-12 experience. The region should develop a strategy to catalyze innovative approaches among schools, districts, and groups to ignite parents' involvement and action in early learning and elementary education related to academic achievement, school community and activities, and education advocacy.

Emerging Priority 3: Mastery Learning

Mastery learning is an educational philosophy that focuses on students achieving a command of academic content before moving on to subsequent material. It is about ensuring that all children have what they need to achieve subject mastery before advancing to more complex material. It requires a much more personalized approach to instruction that gives all students the time,

support, and strategies that they need to fully understand the same content. In many ways, mastery learning is an approach that speaks to building a strong foundation for learning in the early grades and eliminating the gaps that can emerge early and widen over time making it increasingly difficult for a student to catch up. Although broad in scope, this priority should center around elevating the regional conversation regarding school quality and results and advancing partnerships with schools and districts to instill a growth mindset, develop data-driven instruction, leverage common platforms and strategies to eliminate gaps, implement and scale personalized learning, and significantly increase the share of regional students who have mastered foundational material in elementary school.

Emerging Priority 4: Exposure and Out-of-School Time

Learning does not end with the school day, and students in NKY face wide disparities in access to experiences and opportunities that enrich their imaginations and interests and expose them to ideas and the world that will expand their minds. Exposure and out-of-school time is an area of the education system that is ripe for partnership and collaboration across schools and districts to ensure that all students receive extra time afterschool, on weekends, and during the summer to enrich their learning experiences. The goal should be to build capacity of one or more nonprofit organizations to serve and incentivize River City districts and others with a significant share of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to enhance extra-time programming, activate hands-on learning, expand exposure and enrichments, and help students see the larger world while imagining what is possible for them in it.

Emerging Priority 5: Secondary Options

Although NKY offers many different school public and private school choices, the choices are fairly traditional, and there are few innovative options or models other than the Ignite Institute that speak to particular interests or learning styles. The limitations are especially acute in River City districts and at the middle school level, which is the particular place in the educational system when academic performance undergoes manifest decline. The region would benefit from one or two innovative programs or special offers that both provide meaningful choice to students at the secondary level with at least one serving the middle grades. Community input and interest should play a role in the selection of special programming, which should be aimed to infuse energy and innovation in the system and excite and active learners. A goal should be to locate the new schools or programs centrally in the urban core but serving students and families across geographic lines. New program should operate under a shared governance model that encourages collaboration and partnership rather than single-district control and allows at least some portion of local funding to follow the student. Enrollment in programs should be open rather than selective. New programs should aim to serve a diverse student population who exercise agency in the decision to attend the program.