

UNITED WE LEARN:

*Hearing Kentucky's Voices on
the Future of Education*

Executive Summary



Investing in Kentucky's Future, One Student at a Time



Kentucky Department of

EDUCATION

Context and Origins of this Report

In the spring of 2021, Jason E. Glass, Ed.D., Kentucky’s commissioner of education and chief learner, staged a series of stakeholder engagement efforts that led to the formation of the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education (KCAE). The coalition is a diverse group of stakeholders that includes families, students, teachers, school and district leaders and community members from across the state. This group was charged with:

1. Coming together as an inclusive group, building relationships with one another, inquiring together and working together to lay the foundation for statewide learning and innovation.
2. Creating the ***United We Learn: Hearing Kentucky’s Voices on the Future of Education report*** that captures themes from the “Keep, Stop, Start” survey (also known as the Kentucky Education Feedback Survey) of stakeholders, the Commissioner’s Virtual Listening Tour and the coalition’s own empathy interviews, as well as the collective imagination about where education can and should go in the future.
3. Defining a set of questions that local districts can use to guide their learning and innovation as they try to move closer to the future state. These questions are gathered in a document called the ***KCAE Learning Agenda***.
4. Creating a ***Co-Creation Guidebook*** that captures the lessons KCAE members learned about being on this especially inclusive design team. This will provide guidance to local school districts about how to co-create with students, their families and the community.

The *United We Learn: Hearing Kentucky’s Voices on the Future of Education* report is one of the key deliverables of the coalition. However, the process of the coalition is just as critical as what the coalition learned. Therefore, this summary will describe not only the report’s key findings, but also answer key questions about the coalition’s process:

- How was the coalition set up for success?
- How was the coalition formed?
- How did the coalition do its work?
- How will the products of the coalition be used?

As a coalition representing the diversity of the Commonwealth, we hope readers connect not only with the insights on education, but also the process by which those insights were generated.

How was the coalition set up for success?

From the outset of his tenure, Glass has oriented the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) toward listening and learning. KDE conducted a series of listening tour events across the Commonwealth and launched a survey that asked educators what the department might “Keep, Stop, Start.” The tour and survey asked people across the state to reflect on and offer insights across a range of areas. In reviewing the data, it is clear there are some themes in people’s experiences with education in Kentucky. People are concerned about:

- Communication and relationship-building;
- Celebration of and attention to diversity, equity and inclusion of different cultures;
- Partnership, trusting relationships and engagement with families;
- Connection with students and individualized and personalized learning experiences;
- Mechanisms that provide timely and constructive feedback; and
- Standardized testing.

How was the coalition formed?

The coalition was composed using an inclusive model – a third of members appointed directly by the department, a third of the members through an open application and a third of members through a random selection of citizens across Kentucky. The coalition believes this approach generated a representative selection of key stakeholders. The coalition’s membership is more racially diverse than Kentucky as a whole, and represents students, families, teachers and school, district and community leaders.

How did the coalition do its work?

The coalition used an inclusive thinking process that started with empathizing with different stakeholders in the education system. The focus areas identified during the listening tour and survey helped the coalition develop questions they used when they conducted empathy interviews. The empathy interviews allowed members to hear the stories of stakeholders so they could better understand their key needs and insights about what is working and what is not. In an empathy interview, rather than asking people what they think the right solution is to the problems coalition members identified, questions were asked to help members learn about what people experience, how they feel and what they see as the root cause of problems. Questions were asked such as:

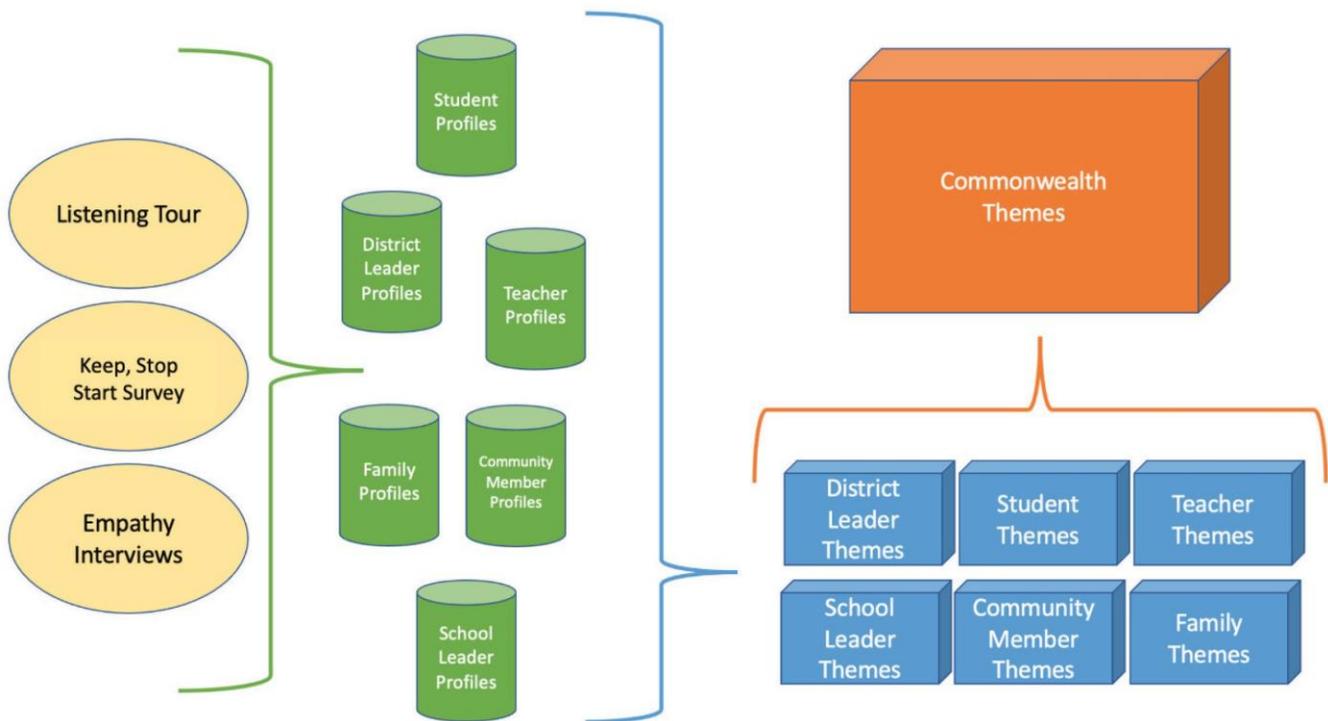
- “Tell me about the time when you felt the school really knew you as a parent and/or knew your child well and it made learning better?”
- “Tell me about a time when the partnership between you and your teacher really wasn’t working? What was happening, and why do you think it played out that way?”

The coalition made a special effort to reach out to students and families who may have less access to opportunities or public processes due to work constraints, geographic location or discomfort with schools. The coalition also periodically worked in stakeholder-alike groups so family members could take the lead on describing what coalition members heard from families, students could take the lead on describing what members heard from students, and so on.

Ultimately, the coalition created stakeholder profiles to capture key themes and insights from the perspective of students, families, teachers, school and district leaders and community members. The coalition then used a consensus model that required 90% agreement to determine which set of profiles to include in this report. There were no circumstances in which 10% or more of the total group felt a profile was not accurate.

There were, however, some differing perspectives about specific components of profiles as the coalition worked. In those cases, the group deferred to the stakeholder-alike coalition members on whether to make a targeted revision. So, for example, if a district leader felt a specific component of a family profile should be reworded, the members of the coalition who were family members were asked whether they wished to accept or reject that suggestion. The group went with their decision and then presented the complete profile back to the full coalition to see if there was 90% consensus that the profile accurately portrayed data collected through the various processes.

This visual helps explain how the data collection methods, profiles and themes relate to one another in this report.



How will the products of the coalition be used?

The coalition as a whole feels these sets of profiles represent the experiences, views, needs and insights of people from across the Commonwealth. These profiles are the basis of the current state descriptions in this report. The coalition used the profiles to identify themes for each stakeholder group and themes from across the Commonwealth. The future state portion of the report considers these themes and paints a picture of what the ideal system of education in Kentucky would look like if we responded to them.

A team of coalition members also developed a Learning Agenda, a set of questions the state and local communities need to explore in order to get from current circumstances to the future vision. To support these Local Laboratories of Learning teams, the coalition also created a Co-Creation Guidebook that will help them through the process of inclusive design. The Partnership Guide uses the insights from the current state, the aspirations of the future state, and the questions from the Learning Agenda to guide the design process.

KDE will learn alongside districts, capture and share local insights and connect districts to one another to deepen learning and evaluate how the current state system supports the scaling of potential innovations.

Commonwealth Current State Themes and A Vision for the Future

These are themes that surfaced across stakeholder groups and have significant implications for what we need to learn, where we might innovate and how we should work together as we design the future of education in Kentucky. We call these statewide insights Commonwealth Themes and for each theme, the coalition has utilized the insight to describe a vision for the future state of education.

What will we observe and experience in the ideal future state if we build on these strengths or address these issues?

Learners in the Commonwealth will thrive if we:

Stakeholders believe that everyone is trying and everyone is working hard. Students are trying, teachers are trying, families and communities are trying. School and district leaders and KDE all are working hard on behalf of Kentucky's students. There is a reverence for education and educators in Kentucky.

Go from perceptions of “random acts of improvement” to common visions, deep partnerships and shared responsibility.

We envision all stakeholders, representing the incredible diversity of Kentucky, feeling more satisfied by their hard work. Educators, district leaders, families, students and communities have had the challenging conversations required to name a set of common aims and coordinate their shared efforts.

Schools are a hub of community and they could do more to expand relational trust and public trust more globally.

Replace transactional relationships with reciprocal connections between communities and schools.

We envision the school building as a place for people to learn together, gather and celebrate. School is viewed as “ours” not “mine” across lines of culture, language and ability. Each school houses a network of trusting relationships that work together to support the success of students and families. This network has mechanisms for genuine accountability for the creation of a trusting, sustaining and effective culture of partnership. Educators and community members alike understand their shared responsibility for creating a culture of trust.

The culture of schooling does not sufficiently welcome, foster or facilitate the kind of collaboration that might expand trust. The commitment to efficiency, impartiality and authority get in the way of authentic, learner-centered and community-centered collaboration and partnership.

Move from “command and control” to “systems of trust and partnership.”

We envision education institutions that close the distance between layers of educational hierarchy and foster true partnerships across the community. All members of the community use leadership practices that foster authentic collaboration and group work among diverse stakeholders in ways that are productive and culturally responsive. Individual strengths and differences are valued as essential to effective collaboration. People closest to the work are empowered to create equitable solutions. All levels of the system take on the responsibility of learning from and scaling great ideas and approaches.

Inequities in opportunities and outcomes persist, despite the efforts of students, families, educators, system leaders and communities. These inequities exist along lines of geography, identity, language and ability. It is important to learn more about the root causes of these inequities.

Respond to inequity with a system that responds to the uniqueness of people and places.

We envision a Commonwealth where all members of the community understand that every child and family has a unique story, that each story has both strengths and vulnerabilities, and these stories do not define everything about who they are and what they are capable of. Communities understand the stories of students and families and acknowledge the tremendous challenges that families and students overcome and the strengths they bring to their work. They all work together to expand opportunity and eliminate the barriers that have inhibited equitable outcomes.

The system doesn't really know, see or value each stakeholder as an individual. This was as true for students and families as it was teachers and leaders. There are similar feelings from communities that the system doesn't adequately see, know or value the aspirations, assets and challenges of their community.

Know people as more than statistics and involve them in inquiry about inequities.

We envision hallways and classrooms where young people, teachers and families feel comfortable being themselves, being curious and taking some intellectual risks. Communities, local educators and state officials all maintain persistent curiosity about the root causes of gaps in opportunity and achievement. They continue to learn about the felt experience of inequitable access and update their vision of what the pursuit of equity means. They make ongoing investments of time and other resources to keep learning and devising and testing new approaches with families, educators and innovators from around the Commonwealth and beyond.

While there are significant efforts made to communicate and provide students and their families with data that promotes continued learning, few stakeholders feel that communication and feedback are currently promoting shared understanding, mutual trust and partnership.

Share information that builds partners in improvement, rather than targets for “shaming and blaming.”

We envision a shift from a system that tabulates, classifies and blames to a system that uses evidence of learning to foster improvement and shared learning at every level. Districts, schools and teachers feel accountable to students and families for student learning. Families and students receive feedback that is accurate and useful, in modes and languages that meet their needs. They trust the information they receive and see local and state educators as trusted partners.

The current approach to state and federal accountability and assessment sends a message of distrust, breeds competition and plays a powerful role in making stakeholders feel like numbers or cogs in a machine that is ultimately accountable to state and federal entities.

Create conditions where everyone feels safe to take intellectual risks, make mistakes and improve by learning from one another, instead of competing.

We envision a future where teachers use valuable data sources to support each other to improve, with a sharp lens towards disparities in outcomes. We envision teachers who feel trusted enough to be vulnerable with students and families. Teachers invite students and families into conversation about the data and then into partnership where they learn from one another about the best way to support each young person. Schools examine their data, in partnership with other schools, with the same critical eye toward disparities and the same partnership around solutions. Districts partner with other districts and invite families and communities into creative problem solving about how to better serve students' needs. The state and federal systems support these local efforts and lead the Commonwealth's equity-focused agenda by facilitating the spread of good ideas, good work and productive partnerships.

There is a hunger for schools to help students pursue and feel valued in pursuing a broader range of pathways toward professional, civic, financial and personal independence.

Go beyond a narrow set of subjects and create pathways that facilitate individual fulfillment AND collective prosperity.

We envision a future where students, schools and communities understand that individual fulfillment is a component of collective prosperity. Schools regularly partner with communities to support a broad range of professional, civic, cultural and financial learning opportunities that contribute to personal independence and community prosperity.

There is a hunger for local accountability and assessment systems that see a fuller picture of each student, and value the investment teachers, school leaders and local boards make in providing relevant, personal and joyful learning opportunities to each young person in their community.

Make assessments go beyond a snapshot of a child to reflect what communities need to cultivate learning.

We envision a future where communities have developed a vision for student success and community prosperity that expands the pathways to success made visible to students and their families, and inspires deep partnership and a shared responsibility for improvement. Assessment systems help students, communities and schools feel known in their full context and valued for their full range of assets and capabilities. Assessments help educators maintain a deep focus on improving outcomes for those who have been least served without constraining the outcomes we value to those we can most easily measure by standardized tests. The statewide system cultivates and honors local visions for success and local processes for improvement, and supports communities learning from each other in meaningful ways. The citizens of Kentucky understand the connection and value of the educational system to generating prosperity, and the current strength of that relationship.

The hardship of COVID has created a strong appetite among stakeholders to reflect on what we have been doing and imagine and move toward a better future.

Don't go "back to normal" -embrace the hard questions and answer them as united communities.

We envision a future where communities have asked the hard questions and included all stakeholders in answering them. They have moved forward, and not back. Moreover, they have practiced collaborating with their community and are becoming fluent at the practices of ongoing collaboration and co-creation with the communities they serve.

In the full report, the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education shares the set of stakeholder profiles members created to synthesize the range of empathy data collected, describe what members heard from each stakeholder group (student, parent, teacher, school leader, district leader and community member) and the current themes and future vision from the perspective of each stakeholder group.

Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education Members

- **Hussein Almosawi:** Student at Butler Traditional High School (Jefferson County)
- **Kasia Antle:** Teacher at Central High School (Jefferson County)
- **Houston Barber:** Frankfort Independent Superintendent
- **Deshae Barnhorst:** Teacher at Collins Elementary (Boone County)
- **Wallace Caleb Bates:** A recent graduate of Breathitt County High School and former member of KDE's Commissioner's Student Advisory Council
- **Brigitte Blom:** Fayette County, Executive Director of The Prichard Committee
- **Judith Bradley:** Founder and board chair of Jack Be Nimble, a special education advocacy nonprofit, and a member of the KDE's Commissioner's Parents Advisory Council
- **Zhanine Brooks:** Parent, Fayette County
- **Travis Burton:** Director of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce
- **Heather Butcher:** Johnson County Schools Instructional Supervisor
- **Elijah Campbell:** Student at Paul G. Blazer High School (Ashland Independent)
- **Penny Christian:** Fayette County, 16th District PTA member
- **Mark Daniels:** Corbin Independent Director of Pupil Personnel
- **Alfonso De Torres Núñez:** Teacher at Bloom Elementary (Jefferson County)
- **Arnav Dharmagadda:** Student at Russell High School (Russell Independent)
- **Dena Dossett:** Jefferson County Public Schools Chief of Accountability, Research and Improvement
- **Kimber Doyle:** Student at Warren Central High School (Warren County)
- **Susan Dugle:** Shelby County Public Schools Chief Academic Officer
- **Robbie Fletcher:** Lawrence County Schools Superintendent
- **Stacie Gamble:** Principal of Liberty High School (Jefferson County)
- **Audrey Gilbert:** Student at Frankfort High School (Frankfort Independent)
- **Terra Greenwell:** Principal of Ramsey Middle School (Jefferson County)
- **Abby Griffy:** Marshall County Schools Instructional Supervisor

- **Melissa Hagans:** Retired Fayette County Educator
- **Travis Hamby:** Allen County Schools Superintendent
- **Diane Hatchett:** Berea Independent Schools Superintendent
- **Michelle Hunt:** Fleming County Schools Chief Academic Officer
- **Jennifer Jacobs:** Program Director of the Rise STEM Academy for Girls (Fayette County)
- **Faneshia Jones:** Education Recovery Leader with KDE
- **Jack Jones:** Student at Murray High School (Murray Independent)
- **Michelle Lisby:** Teacher at Southside Elementary (Shelby County)
- **Brenda Martin:** Parent, Greenup County
- **Rep. Ed Massey:** Boone County
- **Sherri Matthews:** Teacher at LeGrande Elementary (Hart County)
- **Susan McAdam:** Parent, Jefferson County
- **Cristina Menchaca:** Parent, Woodford County High School
- **Traysea Moresea:** Greenup County Schools Superintendent
- **Lyndsay Nottingham:** Teacher at Robert D. Campbell and Henry E. Baker Intermediate School (Clark County)
- **Contessa Orr:** Logan County Schools Chief Academic Officer
- **Julie Osborne:** Principal of Whitley County High School
- **Phoenix Peeler:** Parent, Child Aware
- **Sergio Pena:** Student, Jefferson County Schools
- **Rhondalyn Randolph:** Daviess County Community Leader
- **Noraa Ransey:** Teacher at North Calloway Elementary (Calloway County)
- **Kesha Richardson:** Community Action Council for Lexington-Fayette, Bourbon, Harrison and Nicholas Counties
- **Rick Ross:** Mason County Schools Superintendent
- **Rayne Sheppard:** Student at Bell County High School and member of the Kentucky Student Voice Team

- **Matt Shirley:** Metcalfe County Schools Director of Digital Learning
- **Matthew Turner:** Boone County Schools Superintendent
- **Adrienne Usher:** Bullitt County Schools Assistant Superintendent
- **Michelle Walden:** Christian County Public Schools Instructional Supervisor
- **Renita Wilburn:** Teacher at Frederick Douglass High School (Fayette County)
- **Lu Young:** Jessamine County, Chair of the Kentucky Board of Education

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