

A graphic of a spotlight shining down from the top center of the page, creating a yellow cone of light that illuminates the main title and the school's name.

Spotlight School

J. Graham Brown School *Jefferson County*

GRADES SERVED: K-12

The J. Graham Brown School, established in 1972 as the Original Magnet School, is a district-wide Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) magnet serving approximately 800 K-12 students who excel in a Self-Directed Learning (SDL) environment. As a K-12 public school and the nation's only public school focused on Self-Directed Learning, J. Graham Brown remains at the forefront of educational innovation.

Its mission centers on the four dispositions of SDL, which is to foster independence, cultivate empathy, ignite innovation and empower advocacy within a culturally responsive learning environment. Through a college preparatory liberal arts curriculum aligned with these dispositions, students develop critical thinking, creativity and open-mindedness while embracing cultural diversity and community engagement. Success at J. Graham Brown requires academic readiness and age-appropriate social skills within its informal, student-driven learning environment.

DEMOGRAPHICS

35.3% Economically Disadvantaged

4.9% Students with Disabilities

0.7% English Learner Students

PRINCIPAL AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

Angela Parsons angela.parsons@jefferson.kyschools.us

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS SCHOOL:

- 1.** Why a strong mission and vision for your school is a top priority
- 2.** How they adapted the self-directed learning model through an intentional framework
- 3.** Their approach to implementing student-led conferences for K-12 students

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS SCHOOL CONTINUED:

4. How to incorporate science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) at all grade levels
5. Strategies for maximizing the impact of professional learning communities (PLCs) for singletons (one teacher per grade level or subject)
6. How they designed a centralized, user-friendly website to streamline teacher resources
7. The process of developing a K-12 master schedule that integrates intervention services without disrupting Tier I instruction

SERVICES AND STRATEGIES USED TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS

The J. Graham Brown School aligns its curriculum with the Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS), guided by the Curriculum and Instruction Committee and the school-based decision-making (SBDM) council through the comprehensive school improvement planning process. Instruction follows a guaranteed and viable curriculum selected by JCPS, ensuring alignment with culturally relevant pedagogy and district curriculum maps.

Originally developed in 2016 and revised in 2023-2024 to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy, the SDL Framework focuses on four key dispositions: Independence, Empathy, Innovation, and Advocacy. The framework includes developmentally appropriate indicators across grade bands and incorporates Student-Led Conferences, Project-Based Learning, and public showcases of student work, such as the annual SDL Showcase, Multicultural Fair and Black History Program.

The Ursa Innovation Lab, a makerspace named after the Ursa Major constellation, provides students with hands-on learning opportunities in 3D printing, laser cutting, podcasting, embroidery and virtual reality. This space fosters creativity and collaboration, supporting project-based learning across all grade levels.

Teachers receive training in evidence-based literacy and math strategies, including Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), Math Recovery, and the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI). The school offers Extended School Services (ESS), tutoring and multilingual and special education support. A strong multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework helps identify and assist struggling students, with a focus on increasing Black/African American enrollment in advanced coursework. Programs such as LEXIA Learning enhance literacy development in grades K-6, and the school provides multiple pathways for gifted and talented students.

The school collaborates with parents, businesses and higher education institutions to support student learning and career readiness. Stakeholders engage in decision-making through committees that report to the SBDM Council. Virtual attendance options are provided to increase parent participation as well. A College Access Teacher coordinates career and college transition programs, while partnerships with local businesses, historically black colleges and universities, and organizations such as United Parcel Service (UPS) provide employment, dual credit and work-based learning opportunities.

Social-emotional learning is integrated through Character Strong, restorative practices, peer mediation, and trauma-informed care. Recognized for excellence in positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), the school offers structured counseling services, a Quiet Room for self-regulation, and a tiered behavior support system. A School Climate Committee monitors student well-being and implements initiatives to enhance belonging and positive behavior.

Students have access to a variety of extracurricular activities, including sports, arts, humanities and social justice clubs. These opportunities foster engagement beyond the classroom and reinforce the school's commitment to developing self-directed lifelong learners.

WHAT DATA SUPPORTS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICES AND STRATEGIES OFFERED?

Elementary Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) Scores (Growth from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024):

- Reading: Increased from 59% to 64% Proficient/Distinguished
- Math: Increased from 21% to 41% Proficient/Distinguished
- Social Studies: Increased from 52% to 68% Proficient/Distinguished
- Writing: Increased from 40% to 57% Proficient/Distinguished

Middle School KSA Scores:

- Math: Increased from 60.3% 2020-2021 to 66% Proficient/Distinguished in 2023-2024
- Writing: Increased from 68% in 2021-2022 to 91% Proficient/Distinguished in 2023-2024

High School KSA Scores and Postsecondary Readiness:

- Reading: 87% Proficient/Distinguished
- Math: 81% Proficient/Distinguished
- Graduation rate: 100%

National and Statewide Recognitions:

- Earned National Certification through Magnet Schools of America (MSA)
- Received College Success Award from GreatSchools.org
- Ranked #2 high school and #3 middle school in Kentucky by U.S. News and World Report (2024)

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Recognition:

- Bronze Level Status- November 2023
- Silver Level Status- November 2024

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS THE SCHOOL FACED? HOW WERE THEY OVERCOME?

Implementing effective professional learning communities (PLCs) has been challenging due to the small size of each grade level, resulting in many teachers serving as singletons. This has made it difficult to apply the PLC Framework and Four Questions effectively. For instance, the high school math PLC consists of only two teachers, each responsible for multiple courses. In response, the school undertook a complete revamp of its PLC organization and processes, incorporating coaches at each meeting to help teams overcome barriers and focus on essential skills and standards for collaboration. As a result, teachers have made significant progress in their PLC work.

Prior to 2016, the school lacked a unified vision and instructional coherence regarding self-directed learning (SDL), leading to inconsistent implementation across classrooms and differing stakeholder interpretations. To address this, the school engaged in extensive research, including an analysis of primary source documents and writings from its founder, to define its founding purpose. This process led to the development of a clear vision, which now serves as a guiding principle. A mission statement was then created through a literature review and a self-study of effective practices over the past 40 years, with input from parents, students, alumni and staff. The SDL Framework was established by the Instructional Leadership Team and has undergone two revisions since its implementation, ensuring alignment with the school's vision and instructional goals.

WHAT ADVICE DOES THIS SCHOOL SUGGEST TO SCHOOLS ON THEIR JOURNEY TO SUSTAINED ACHIEVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION?

- Create systems for stakeholder and student self-sufficiency.
- Implement the science of reading.
- Don't pull students from enriching activities for remediation.
- Offer innovative learning opportunities.
- Foster core memory-making experiences for students, families and staff.
- Build strong relationships with families, treating them as long-term partners.
- Involve teachers in decision-making and value their feedback.
- Principals should conduct 10-minute check-ins and Stay Interviews for deeper insights.
- Praise and reinforce effective practices.
- Limit communication to essential updates and emergencies; avoid over-communication.



OFFICE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND SUPPORT