



Onward & Upward
Groundswell in Action
From Pilots to Partnerships

IN MEMORY OF DR. JAMES VOTRUBA

2025 report from
The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

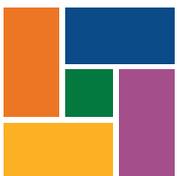
Onward and Upward

A Report of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

In memory of Dr. James Votruba

Groundswell in Action: From Pilots to Partnerships

Executive Summary	1
A Letter From Brigitte Blom.....	2
Executive Summary	3
I. Introduction – Kentucky at a Crossroads: What Kentuckians Expect	4
II. What Kentuckians Are Asking For.....	4
A. A Strong Start for Every Child	4
B. Diplomas that Guarantee Readiness for College, Career, and Citizenship.....	5
C. Sustainable Teacher Pipeline and Support	6
D. Trust, Community, and Family Partnership	6
III. Barriers to Progress.....	7
IV. Groundswell in Action – Proof and Lessons from Communities	8
A. Early Childhood – Coalition Mobilization	8
B. Family–School Partnerships.....	8
C. Community and School Partnerships for Integrated Supports.....	9
D. Workforce and Economic Partnerships – Bridges Beyond School.....	9
E. Transparency and Data to Drive Shared Accountability	10
V. From Local Impact to Statewide Scale	11
A. Codifying Local Leadership Structures.....	11
B. Creating State–Local Alignment	12
C. Institutionalizing Shared Tools.....	12
D. Support for Community Accountability	13
E. Sustaining Partnerships Through Shared Investment.....	13
VI. Next Steps – Advancing Groundswell on Two Tracks.....	14
A. Track 1: Local Communities Lead Now	14
B. Track 2: The State Creates the Scaffold.....	15
VII. What Kentuckians Expect, Kentucky Can Deliver	15



The Prichard Committee

Building a Groundswell for a Big Bold Future

Dear Friends and Partners,

Kentucky stands once again at a defining moment in education—one where we are positioned to go from Good to Great. Thanks to the collective work of families, communities, educators, business leaders, and policymakers, we are entering this moment with real progress and momentum at our back.

Working alongside the Kentucky General Assembly, Kentuckians secured \$812 million in new annual education funding, achieving nearly 80% of the ambitious six-year Big Bold Ask. Those investments support all-day kindergarten, effective teaching, student transportation, and access to higher education. Thereby strengthening early learning outcomes, reading and math proficiency, local district budgeting, and postsecondary attainment.

Community members are taking accountability for their role in supporting the next generation of learners, and parents are taking seats at decision-making tables. Schools participating in the Kentucky Community Schools Initiative saw a 46% increase in active community partnerships and improved reading and mathematics scores are starting to show. Business leaders are helping ensure meaningful partnership for success of students after high school—from Warren County to McCracken County and beyond. In Owensboro, the Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development (GOPED) is helping ensure a locally designed, high quality early childhood ecosystem that supports little learners, families, and the workforce. Communities are taking their seats at the table in new and innovative ways with deep, lasting partnership in mind.

This progress is not the finish line, it's the launch pad. That's where *Onward and Upward* begins.

This report captures what we heard from more than 1,000 Kentuckians at the Annual Groundswell Summit and Regional meetings, as well as through community conversations hosted in school districts. Across those discussions, four shared priorities emerged:

- Stronger early childhood supports that prepare every child for school.
- Diplomas that guarantee readiness for college, career, and civic life.
- A sustainable teacher pipeline that attracts, respects, and retains talent.
- Trustworthy partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

As *Onward and Upward* makes clear, **progress endures when partnership becomes infrastructure** and when collaboration is no longer an initiative, but the operating system of our schools and communities. To sustain that progress, Kentucky must move on two coordinated tracks: communities leading with trust and transparency at the forefront, and a backbone system of scaffolded support of public and private leadership that makes progress durable.

The context of our current environment creates the **urgency of now**. Kentucky rests at 4th from the bottom of the nation in poverty and has never risen above 6th in the nation. Kentuckians want a bright and economically mobile future for the next generation—and community mobilization can make that happen. We also sit at the advent of an Artificial Intelligence economy. Kentuckians understand the need for skills in critical thinking and academic preparedness to meet that future. They also overwhelmingly share a commitment to ensuring we meet the challenges and opportunities AI presents with strong human relationships at the forefront. Kentucky's long tradition of citizen-driven reform meets the will to act boldly once again through deepened community mobilization and commitment to progress. This will be our competitive advantage.

These reasons and more are why this report is dedicated to the memory of Dr. James Votruba, a visionary leader in Kentucky. As the former president of Northern Kentucky University and a longtime member of the Prichard Committee, Jim encouraged us all to tap into the power of local, collective action in moving our communities and our state forward. It is in his memory that we build on recent momentum—and on our history of progress as a state through collaboration. Kentucky has done this before. Together, we can do it again. *Onward & Upward!*

With gratitude and abiding determination,



Brigitte Blom
President & CEO
The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

Executive Summary

Kentucky stands once again at a decisive moment in its long history of citizen-driven education reform. Families and communities—joined by educators—are voicing urgent expectations that converge across four priorities:

- Stronger early childhood supports that prepare every child for school.
- Diplomas that guarantee readiness for college, career, and civic life.
- A sustainable teacher pipeline that attracts, respects, and retains talent.
- Trustworthy partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

These findings are grounded in statewide listening and engagement through the [The Groundswell Initiative](#), supported by the Prichard Committee. They reflect voices gathered through the 2025 Groundswell Summit, regional meetings across Kentucky, and community conversations in forty community schools sites. Together, those engagements represent over 1,000 Kentuckians—families, educators, employers, and local leaders—who are shaping a shared vision for the state's next step in education reform. The report speaks with the collective authority of an organization rooted in Kentucky's communities and committed to amplifying their voice in shaping policy.

And these are not abstract ideals. Across Kentucky, communities engaged through the Prichard Committee's [Kentucky Community Schools Initiative](#) are already showing what is possible. Over the past year, forty schools across twenty districts have seen chronic absenteeism fall by 7–9 percentage points and measurable gains in math and reading proficiency. Families report renewed trust in schools, and employers are co-designing student pathways while parents take seats at decision-making tables.

These results share a common thread: progress endures when partnership is treated not as a program, but as infrastructure.

Kentucky's education system is also being reshaped by the accelerating influence of artificial intelligence and automation. These technologies are transforming how students learn, how teachers teach, and how employers define readiness. For Kentucky, AI is not a distant future but a present reality — one that connects directly to the state's long-term goal of economic mobility. It compels us to align academic mastery, durable

skills, and community partnerships so that every learner can thrive in an AI-enabled economy.

To realize that vision over the next three to five years, Kentucky must focus on strengthening the systems that make partnership durable — shared leadership structures, usable data, and aligned support from state and local levels.

Kentuckians also identified the barriers that stall momentum: shortages of teachers and support staff, fragmented delivery systems, inequities in access to services, gaps in trust between families and institutions, and the absence of real-time data communities can use. These challenges cut across every priority and cannot be solved by isolated policy tweaks. They demand a systemic response that connects local leadership with with a backbone system of support.

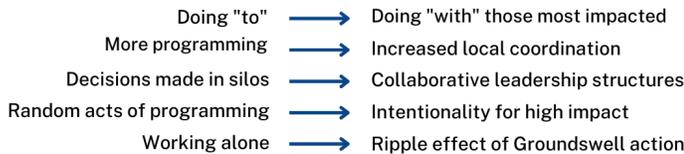
The case is clear: Kentucky can meet the expectations of its people if partnership becomes the operating system of its education system. At both local and state levels, that partnership depends on predictable tables where leaders from government, education, business, and civil society share responsibility for results. That means communities co-owning decisions, data, and results with educators and state leaders who align funding, policy, and data to make local leadership possible. The state's vision is to ensure that every Kentucky student can compete and contribute in a changing economy, and that local innovation adds up to statewide progress. Kentuckians invest through their taxes not just in local schools, but in a system that guarantees equity and excellence, coherence, and shared accountability across the Commonwealth.

To achieve this vision, Kentucky must advance on two coordinated tracks: local communities leading now, and the state building the scaffold for long-term success.

- **Track 1: Communities Lead and Track.** Communities should sustain leadership tables, apply shared tools, review progress transparently, and tell their stories. These moves build credibility and momentum today.
- **Track 2: Scaffold System of Support.** Public and private leaders must align supports across agencies, provide backbone functions, institutionalize proven tools, sustain investment, and make usable data accessible. This ensures local leadership is not fragile and fragmented but durable.

The promise of [Groundswell](#) is not another round of temporary initiatives. It is a new way of doing business: embedding partnership into Kentucky's education infrastructure so that readiness, trust, teacher sustainability, and workforce connection become standard practice. The demand from Kentuckians is unmistakable. The proof is visible. What remains is whether Kentucky will seize this moment and act with the clarity and commitment that its legacy of reform requires. Meeting this moment will not only strengthen Kentucky's schools but raise the floor of opportunity across every community.

MAKE "THE 5 BIG SHIFTS", FROM...



I. Introduction – Kentucky at a Crossroads: What Kentuckians Expect

Across every region, Kentuckians are sending a consistent message: education reform must be locally driven, visibly accountable, and responsive to community priorities. Families and community members—joined by educators—engaged through surveys, Teacher Voice Letters, regional [Groundswell](#) meetings, and the annual Groundswell Summit described not just new programs they hope to see, but new structures that allow them to co-own decisions and track progress. Trust in the education system, they argue, will only take root when it is transparent, participatory, and accountable to the people it serves.

This call has precedent in Kentucky's citizen-led reform legacy. The Prichard Committee emerged from a state council in 1980 and helped galvanize the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990, which modernized funding, curriculum, accountability, and site-based councils. That era of reform laid a strong foundation; however, today's work builds on it as part of a shared continuous improvement. Kentuckians today are united around four priorities that define what "system change" must deliver:

1. Stronger early childhood and family supports

Equitable access to affordable, high-quality child care, preschool, and health services, supported by a stable early-childhood workforce.

2. Diplomas that guarantee readiness

Credentials that signal genuine preparation for postsecondary study, meaningful work, and engaged citizenship.

3. A sustainable teacher pipeline

- Professional respect, compensation, and conditions that attract and retain a diverse, talented workforce.

4. Partnership as a standard

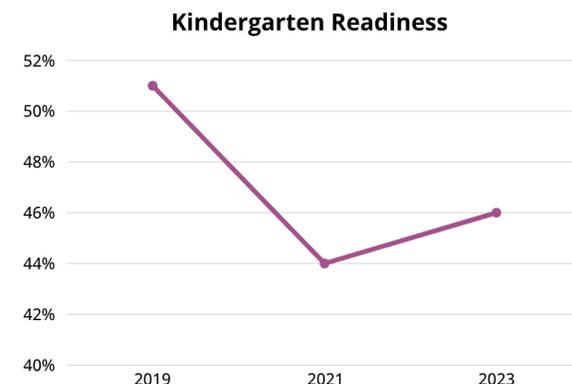
- Schools operating as hubs where families and communities are co-creators of solutions, not peripheral participants.

This report responds to those expectations. It documents what Kentuckians are asking for, identifies barriers to progress, highlights proof from communities, and outlines how the state can scale local momentum into a durable system of shared accountability.

II. What Kentuckians Are Asking For

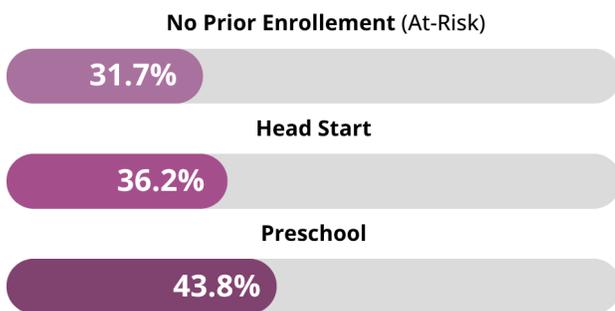
A. A Strong Start for Every Child

Kentuckians consistently voiced that every child deserves a strong start. Families asked for more affordable, high-quality preschool and child care options, paired with developmental screenings, early interventions, mental-health supports, home visiting, and family literacy programs. They emphasized that access must be equitable across rural and urban communities and responsive to diverse cultures. Parents also called for clear, seamless navigation of services, while early-childhood providers urged competitive pay, professional development, and support to stabilize the workforce. Advocates pressed for sustained regional collaborations, like those piloted under the Preschool Development Grant (PDG), to align agencies and elevate family voice. These conversations consistently affirmed Kentucky's mixed-delivery early childhood system—a structure that values public schools, private centers, Head Start, and faith-based providers as partners in one statewide network. Families made clear that quality and access matter more than setting, and that real progress depends on connecting all parts of this mixed system through shared standards, data, and funding stability.



Their concerns are grounded in the realities of Kentucky's data. The state's kindergarten readiness rate fell to 46% in 2023, down from over 50% before the pandemic, and forecasts show it will remain flat or decline without significant system change. These early gaps persist into elementary grades, where only 43% of Kentucky third graders are proficient in math and 47% in reading—outcomes closely correlated with the readiness levels of the same cohort three years earlier. Readiness disparities are especially stark for children without access to formal early learning; just 32% of at-risk children with no prior early childhood experience enter school prepared, compared to 44% of those in state preschool.

Kindergarten Readiness by Prior Enrollement



[Readiness disparities are especially stark](#) for children without access to formal early learning; just 32% of at-risk children with no prior early childhood experience enter school prepared, compared to 46% of those in state preschool.

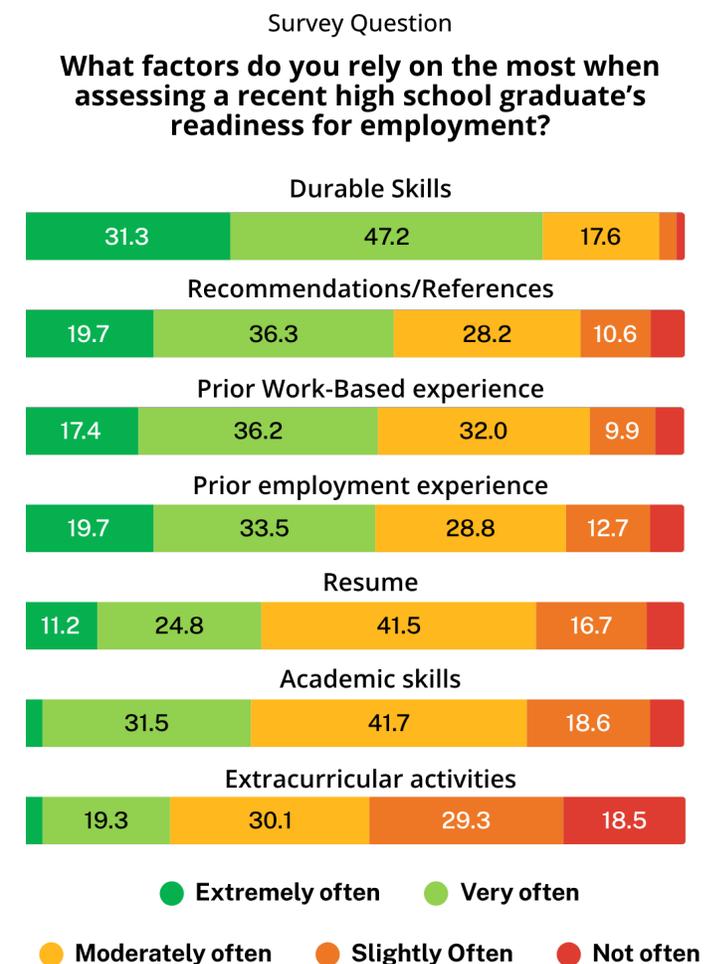
The challenge is not only access but quality. In 2023, fewer than half of Kentucky's early care and education programs meet high-quality standards (All STARS 3+), with an average rating of just 2.7 out of 5 statewide. Families know that quality matters: children in strong programs build the literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills that set them on track for lifelong success. Educators also know that when young children arrive ready to learn, classrooms can focus on building knowledge rather than remediating gaps.

B. Diplomas that Guarantee Readiness for College, Career, and Citizenship

Kentuckians insisted that diplomas must mean more than seat-time. Communities want graduation credentials that guarantee readiness for postsecondary learning, employment, and civic life. Kentucky's graduation rate remains high—91% in 2023—but questions remain about whether graduates are fully prepared for life after high school. The state's accountability system

reports that 79.1% of graduates were designated “postsecondary ready,” a measure that combines academic indicators (like ACT benchmarks and dual credit) with career indicators (like industry certifications). Yet, too many students still struggle to make successful transitions, with only about half enrolling in postsecondary education or meaningful work within a year. This gap between graduation and true readiness underscores concerns that diplomas may certify completion more than preparation.

Stakeholders across the state emphasize career-aligned pathways that combine academic and technical learning. Families want transparency on requirements and early indicators so they can intervene before it is too late. Employers highlight “durable skills”—communication, reliability, teamwork, and problem-solving—as essential and call for curricula that teach and assess them credibly. The [Prichard Committee's 2024–25 Employer and Industry Survey](#) confirms this, with more than 70% of Kentucky employers reporting difficulty finding workers with these skills.



Recent policy and innovation illustrate both progress and unfinished work. Advanced coursework access has expanded under [HB 190 \(2025\)](#), which requires districts to adopt policies for advanced

courses and automatically enroll eligible students. This is designed to close longstanding gaps in who takes rigorous courses. At the same time, competency-based learning is being tested through Kentucky's [United We Learn](#) "Local Laboratories of Learning," where districts are piloting mastery-based demonstrations rather than seat-time accumulation. Though still limited, these pilots signal Kentucky's shift toward a system where readiness is measured by what students can demonstrate, not merely the credits they earn.

Kentuckians also insist that the diploma's value must extend beyond the school walls. Students need consistent opportunities to apply learning in real-world contexts: internships, apprenticeships, dual credit, mentoring, and summer work experiences. Employers are eager to co-design curricula, but sustaining these partnerships requires dedicated staff and system support. Teachers and principals cannot carry this load alone, and without reliable transportation and scheduling flexibility, access to such opportunities remains uneven.

C. Sustainable Teacher Pipeline and Support

Teachers are at the heart of Kentucky's education system, yet many feel unsupported and overburdened. Through the [Teacher Voice Fellows program](#), the Prichard Committee selected twelve teachers to host local initiatives and produce the *Letter from Kentucky Teachers 2.0*. In the 2021 open letter, teacher fellows called for high-quality instruction, mental-health services for students, reimagining time and autonomy, fostering partnerships among families, businesses and communities, and redesigning professional learning. They emphasized that teaching must be a sustainable career that attracts diverse, talented candidates.

[Kentucky's 2023–24 data](#) show persistent educator and support-staff vacancies, with acute shortages in special education, early childhood, and rural districts, and flat or declining candidate pipelines.

This instability undermines student support and drives burnout. To address this, teachers and families suggested multiple solutions:

- increasing compensation and benefits to attract and retain educators,
- investing in "grow-your-own" programs and para-to-teacher pipelines to diversify the profession,
- reducing bureaucratic burdens so educators can focus on instruction,
- providing mental-health support for teachers themselves, and
- expanding residency models that embed teacher candidates in classrooms under expert mentors.

D. Trust, Community, and Family Partnership

Kentuckians consistently emphasized that schools cannot succeed alone. Families want to be genuine partners in decision-making, not just invited to events. Community members, employers, and civic leaders likewise called for schools to serve as hubs where resources and relationships converge to support student success. Parents described the difference when schools communicate transparently, respect family knowledge, and provide clear ways to engage. Employers noted that strong partnerships create pathways for students into local jobs and civic life.

This demand reflects a strong body of evidence. National studies have long shown that meaningful family-school partnerships improve attendance, academic achievement, graduation rates, and postsecondary enrollment, regardless of income or background. In Kentucky, that need is urgent: chronic absenteeism has climbed statewide, and many districts report challenges engaging families

Key Findings: Kentucky Public School Employee Staffing Shortages

Open Teaching Positions (start of SY 2023)	277 positions statewide (260% increase from 77 in 2019)
Exceptional Child (Special Ed) Vacancies	Nearly one-third (27.8%) of open positions in 2023 were Exceptional Child teachers
Elementary & Preschool Vacancies	19.5% of open positions
Early Childhood (Preschool) Shortage Regions	Identified in 7 regions in 2024 (up from 6 in 2020)
Teacher Turnover	10.9% statewide in 2023 (highest in 10 years); 16.7% did not return to their district; 20% did not return to their school
Teacher Pipeline – Preparation Program Completers	Decreased across every subject area 2013–2022; especially low in physics, chemistry, high school math, special ed, and world languages
Alternative Certification Growth	Option 6 certificates nearly doubled: 1,608 (2020) 3,101 (2023)

consistently. Strengthening partnerships is one of the most effective ways to improve these outcomes.

Emerging results from Kentucky confirm the impact. In recent years, 40 schools across 20 districts have established local leadership teams and advisory councils, bringing parents, educators, and community partners together to co-develop school action plans. These teams have met hundreds of times statewide. Advisory councils connected to Family Resource and Youth Services Centers (FRYSCs) now function in every participating school, creating durable structures for family input into decisions about attendance, behavior, and learning. Likewise, schools pursuing the [Family Friendly Schools](#) certification have documented stronger parent trust, improved two-way communication, and greater family involvement in school improvement efforts.

Importantly, stronger partnership is already tied to measurable outcomes. Schools with active family and community engagement have seen reductions in chronic absenteeism, improvements in school climate, and increased student participation in afterschool and enrichment opportunities. These gains demonstrate that partnership is not a “soft” add-on but a practical driver of academic and behavioral improvement.



III. Barriers to Progress

Across regional forums and the Groundswell Summit, Kentuckians named not just their aspirations, but the barriers that prevent schools from delivering on them. Families, educators, and community leaders identified five recurring challenges that cut across local contexts:

A Workforce Stretched Thin

Parents and teachers alike described shortages of teachers, bus drivers, counselors, and support staff that leave schools unable to meet student needs.

7 Vacancies are concentrated in high-need areas like special education and early child-

hood, while existing staff are overloaded with roles far beyond instruction — serving as case managers, nurses, and counselors without added support. Educators in regional sessions emphasized that this overload drives burnout and turnover, undermining stability for students.

Fragmented and Unstable Systems

Kentucky’s support systems for children and families remain scattered across multiple agencies, programs, and funding streams that rarely connect. Education, health, workforce, and human-services initiatives often operate in parallel rather than in partnership, leaving local leaders to braid resources on their own. This fragmentation forces communities to spend valuable time navigating bureaucracy instead of delivering solutions. A statewide effort to align and simplify supports—beginning with shared data and coordinated funding guidance—would free educators and partners to focus on results.

Barriers to Access and Equity

Participants described transportation and child-care shortages as daily obstacles that prevent students and families from fully participating. Rural communities noted limited preschool seats and mental-health providers, while urban families cited safety concerns and language barriers. State data show the impact: chronic absenteeism climbed to nearly 30%, and only 46% of children enter kindergarten ready to learn, with rates even lower for at-risk children.

Trust and Engagement Gaps

Families across regions said that constant superintendent turnover, lack of transparency, and negative media narratives erode public confidence. Parents in Louisville and Somerset alike said they feel shut out of decisions or only brought in after the fact. Community leaders stressed that without authentic, ongoing engagement, reforms risk being seen as “done to” communities rather than “built with” them.

Data Blind Spots

Families and local leaders said they “cannot improve what they cannot see.” Communities lack accessible, real-time data on early childhood enrollment, absenteeism, mental-health referrals, or family engagement. At the Summit, participants urged development of dashboards that allow schools and families alike to monitor progress and hold systems accountable, noting that current measures over-emphasize test scores while ignoring readiness, engagement, and broader outcomes.

These are not isolated problems, but interconnected barriers that weaken every priority Kentuckians identified. Workforce shortages are compounded by fragmented systems; inequities are magnified by transportation, child-care, and broadband gaps; trust is undermined by leadership churn and poor data visibility. Families and educators noted that no single program or policy tweak can solve these challenges. They require communities and state leaders working side by side, with aligned structures, shared accountability, and durable partnerships. Kentucky is fertile ground for a [Groundswell](#) — a systemic shift that mobilizes local voice, integrates supports across agencies, and creates the conditions where aspirations for readiness, meaningful diplomas, sustainable teaching, and authentic family partnership can finally be fulfilled.

IV. Groundswell in Action – Proof and Lessons from Communities

Where fragmentation and short-term programs have left families without stability, [Groundswell](#) builds durable local structures. Where accountability has felt top-down and disconnected, [Groundswell](#) equips communities to take ownership of outcomes. Launched by the Prichard Committee in 2018, the [Groundswell Initiative](#) mobilizes families, communities, and educators around shared results and community accountability. Unlike a single program, [Groundswell](#) is a movement: it shows up wherever schools and communities share decision-making, use common tools, and accept responsibility for outcomes. It also supports statewide efforts. [Kentucky's Portrait of a Learner](#), adopted in 2022, invites every district to define and measure the skills and dispositions students need for success. The [United We Learn](#) initiative is redesigning assessment and accountability so that communities drive the measurement of student learning. This shift moves the center of power from top-down mandates to local design and recognizes that when communities build their own systems, they value and hold themselves accountable to them. [Groundswell](#) provides the community-level tools that make these aspirations tangible.

A. Early Childhood – Coalition Mobilization

Kentucky's future depends on a strong start. Families consistently asked for affordable preschool and child care, health and developmental supports, and seamless navigation of services — and communities are beginning to deliver through coalition

mobilization.

In Owensboro, the [Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development \(GOPED\)](#) convened more than 30 partners — schools, child-care providers, employers, agencies, and philanthropy — to design a five-year plan grounded in local data. With a \$4 million pledge from the [Public Life Foundation](#), the plan builds workforce pipelines for child-care teachers, helps families navigate subsidies, and improves program quality, signaling broad community buy-in. Together, these partnerships reflect Kentucky's mixed-delivery early childhood system—public schools, private providers, Head Start, and faith-based centers working side by side to expand access and quality for families.

In Rowan County, working with Gateway Community Action, the community integrated vision, dental, and hearing screenings into preschool and earned the state's highest All [STARS quality rating](#). Family Resource and Youth Services Centers (FRYSCs) connected families to nutrition and mental-health services, showing how trusted local structures can knit together fragmented supports into one system.

In Hopkins County, after catastrophic floods, local leaders mobilized providers--FRYSCs, and mental-health partners—to keep child care open, provide trauma supports, and create safe spaces for young children. This resilience illustrates the Groundswell principle: communities taking collective responsibility to ensure continuity of care and learning even in crisis.

At the state level, the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) is giving regional councils the tools to make this work permanent. Families, providers, and schools are coming together to streamline enrollment, create shared resource hubs, and build regional professional development networks. While early, these councils are proof that Kentucky can align local voice with state infrastructure.

B. Family–School Partnerships

[Groundswell](#) treats families as co-designers, not audiences. Through [Family Friendly Schools](#) certification and Local Leadership Teams (LLTs)/FRYSC advisory councils, schools assemble mixed teams to self-assess, set priorities, and track improvements. To date, 72 schools statewide have earned certification (10 at gold). Across 40 pilot schools in 2024, LLTs convened 351 meetings and 92 working groups, with surveys showing 100% of participants felt their voices were valued and over 90% reported stronger connections among families, schools, and community partners.

In Rowan County, families on LLTs and FRYSC councils directly reviewed attendance and behavior data and helped shape action plans to address chronic absenteeism. This ensured that strategies were not only school-driven but grounded in community priorities. In Jefferson County, the R.I.S.E. initiative convened families, educators, and partners in co-design sessions on discipline, climate, and cultural representation. Parents described the process as a turning point, noting stronger trust when their lived experience shaped policies.

These examples are reinforced by broader tools that make partnership consistent across schools. The Prichard Committee's Engagement Continuum charts progress from outreach to co-design and accountability, while the FFS rubric and playbook give schools a clear, replicable framework. Together, these resources make partnership visible, measurable, and durable — embedding it as a standard of school quality rather than an optional add-on.

C. Community and School Partnerships for Integrated Supports

Communities in the Kentucky Community Schools Initiative are turning a list of services into an integrated support system so students' non-academic needs are met without piling more on teachers. Local leadership teams, FRYSCs, health partners, and youth-serving groups coordinate around short-cycle indicators (attendance, behavior, and course performance – ABCs) and adjust supports in real time.

In Rowan County, health services were integrated directly into the school day. More than 200 students received in-school vision exams through a university partnership, paired with new student success and SEL coaches to address both academic and behavioral needs.

In Hopkins County, partners aligned around mental-health, enrichment, and postsecondary transitions. An "Expect More for Your Future" series offered 18 events on college and career options, while a countywide Day of Caring engaged over 130 students in nonprofit service, leading to new summer job opportunities.

In Jefferson County, the Shawnee and McFerran school communities combined skill-building and community events to strengthen climate and trust. Conflict-resolution training reached middle-grade students, and a R.I.S.E. community hub event drew more than 150 families and 40 organizations together.

In Owensboro, families stepped into leadership roles through a Parent Leadership Academy. Parents co-designed outreach strategies and supported school transitions, strengthening the governance side of integrated supports.

Across these examples, community partners are not just service providers—they are part of the leadership table itself. Each successful site treats partnership as community accountability in action: families, schools, and local organizations co-own data, decisions, and results. When community members share responsibility for outcomes, integrated supports become both more responsive and more sustainable. That shared accountability is what allows the next layer of partnership to take shape—linking the people who support students with the systems that shape their learning, showing how partnership becomes the mechanism that unites academic and non-academic supports into one coherent system.

A shared leadership table, braided resources, a coordinator to drive follow-through, and short-cycle data reviews keep efforts focused. This structure produces earlier interventions (on-site screenings), richer enrichment (arts, mentoring, service), and clearer pathways (college and career events)—without asking teachers to act as case managers.

D. Workforce and Economic Partnerships – Bridges Beyond School

Readiness becomes real when schools, families, and employers co-design pathways tied to the local economy and remove barriers so every student can participate. Kentucky's statewide [Portrait of a Learner](#) — adopted in 2022 under the [United We Learn](#) initiative — gives communities a shared language for the skills employers call "[durable.](#)" Districts are beginning to anchor their partnerships to this portrait, ensuring that family engagement, coursework, and employer pathways all reinforce the same competencies.

Kentucky's economic challenge is clear: the state continues to rank among the bottom five nationally in median household income. For Groundswell communities, workforce partnerships are not simply about employability, they are about economic mobility. Each local partnership, from high school to career pathway, is a strategy for moving Kentuckians from economic survival to economic stability and growth.

Toyota Driving Possibilities illustrates how this alignment works in practice. The Toyota USA Foundation committed up to \$5.7 million in Scott

and Fayette Counties to expand literacy supports, strengthen school-industry partnerships, and address transportation barriers. The 4T Academy provides juniors and seniors with hands-on learning in a simulated manufacturing environment; seniors earn ~\$18/hour alongside industry mentors while completing a state-approved curriculum that explicitly connects coursework, durable skills from the Portrait of a Learner, and paid experience in a locally relevant pathway.

In Paducah, a summer work program placed ten Tilghman High students in paid roles with the City of Paducah. Nine completed the program and three secured co-op positions with the city afterward. Partners included the West Kentucky Workforce Board and the Chamber of Commerce, which integrated workforce training with school supports and family assistance. These efforts gave students practical opportunities to demonstrate the Portrait competencies — communication, reliability, teamwork, and problem-solving — in authentic workplace settings.

When employer voice and family partnership meet at the Local Leadership Team (LLT) table and are anchored to the Portrait of a Learner, placements, transportation fixes, and credentials become predictable rather than ad hoc. These partnerships demonstrate that education and economic mobility are inseparable, each reinforcing the other when communities, employers, and families design pathways together.

E. Transparency and Data to Drive Shared Accountability

[Groundswell](#) communities are proving that transparency, paired with locally relevant data, is reshaping accountability. Rather than treating data as a compliance exercise, schools and families are beginning to use it as a shared tool to diagnose needs, test solutions, and hold one another responsible for results. This shift is possible because of an emerging backbone of shared infrastructure — tools and partnerships that make data usable, public, and trusted. Through community-facing platforms like the Kentucky Community Profiles and the Groundswell Asset Map, existing public data are organized and visualized in ways that communities can readily use. Local leaders can see their strengths and gaps alongside peers statewide, translating complex datasets into shared understanding and action. By organizing existing public data into usable, public-facing tools, these resources build shared transparency and accountability. They empower communities and state partners to

collaborate, drive local decisions, and fuel state-wide learning.

In Rowan County, families and FRYSC advisory councils reviewed attendance and behavior data alongside survey findings to shape local action plans. This led to concrete responses, such as integrating in-school health supports (including more than 200 vision exams completed in a single month) and expanding parent outreach to over 300 families monthly. Schools also created new “success coach” positions focused on social-emotional learning and college and career readiness.

Early childhood coalitions are also proving the power of public data. The Governor’s Office of Early Childhood (GOEC) and Strong Start/PDG partners in Owensboro used readiness assessments, childcare workforce data, and family surveys to identify gaps in access. Publishing those findings mobilized new providers and positioned local leaders to be accountable for expanding services — while families were accountable for engaging in enrollment and advocacy.

Across the 40 Kentucky Community Schools Initiative schools, regular public review of short-term ABC indicators — attendance, behavior, and course performance — every 4–6 weeks shifted the culture from “programs added” to “problems solved.” The ABCs are easy for families to understand, actionable for educators, and reliable signals of whether students are engaged and learning. By centering on these measures, communities could quickly see if strategies were working, adjust when they were not, and connect additional supports where needed.

Partnership Schools have produced visible results:

Chronic Absenteeism

During the 2024–25 school year, 94.4% of KCSI schools (34 of 36 reporting) reduced chronic absenteeism. The average rate fell from 28.43% to 20.19%, a drop of 8.24 percentage points in one year—and 9.86 points lower than 2022–23.

Academic Performance

Across KCSI schools, math proficiency increased by an average of 10.79 percentage points and reading by 9.24 points, based on locally selected assessments (e.g., MAP, STAR, i-Ready, CERT). In total, 23 schools showed gains in math and 22 in reading during 2024–25, reflecting the strong alignment between interventions and course-level data.

Partnership engagement

KCSI sites reported a 46% increase in active community partnerships, including new MOUs and co-located services linking schools, FRYSCs, and local nonprofits.

Family Trust

KCSI sites reported a 46% increase in active community partnerships, including new MOUs and co-located services linking schools, FRYSCs, and local nonprofits.

Educator accountability

Teachers and administrators convened 351 Learning Leadership Team meetings and 92 working groups across the pilot year, using short-cycle data reviews to reinforce shared responsibility and continuous improvement.

Local data use and transparency transforms accountability into a reciprocal compact. Schools are accountable for acting on evidence and adapting their practices; families and partners are accountable for sustaining engagement and solutions. By rooting accountability in visible data — from kindergarten readiness to high school performance — Kentucky communities are showing how trust and shared responsibility can take hold locally.

V. From Local Impact to Statewide Scale

A. Codifying Local Leadership Structures

The strongest lesson from Kentucky's community schools is that improvement endures only when there is a stable, structured table for shared leadership. Different names exist — LLTs, FRYSC advisory councils, early childhood coalitions — but the principle is the same: schools succeed when families, educators, and partners have a predictable forum for reviewing evidence and shaping solutions together. This builds on Kentucky's existing governance strengths.

Codifying these structures is not about creating new bodies or prescribing a single format. It is about recognizing, legitimizing, and connecting what already works so that families, schools, and communities know that collaboration is not optional or temporary but a core feature of public education. This codification should be supported not only by government agencies but by the broader network of state-level partners — education, health, workforce, and civic organizations — working in concert with local tables.

Three moves stand out:

Stabilize the Table

Local leadership structures need permanence. Just as every school must have a principal and a school board, every school-community should maintain an LLT (or equivalent) with an explicit charge to review data, set priorities, and track action. Stability prevents progress from evaporating with leadership turnover, grant cycles, or shifting initiatives.

Each table also needs a designated coordinator, an individual responsible for linking partners, tracking commitments, and ensuring that actions align with the community's shared theory of change. This role keeps collaboration organized and continuous, making partnership a predictable part of local governance rather than a temporary initiative.

Connect the Table

Local leadership cannot sit in isolation. LLT work should link vertically to district improvement planning and state priorities, and horizontally across agencies such as KDE, FRYSC, and GOEC. When the state sets policy on readiness, absenteeism, or family engagement, these local tables provide the channel for implementation. And when local leaders surface barriers or bright spots, the state has a defined mechanism for responding.

Legitimize the Table

Families and partners must have more than a courtesy role — they need clear decision rights and responsibilities. Codification should signal that shared leadership is governance, not consultation. Families and communities hold schools accountable for visible progress, and in turn accept responsibility for sustained engagement and alignment of local assets.

By embedding these principles, Kentucky would ensure that the most effective feature of community schools — structured, inclusive governance — is not dependent on local discretion or short-lived projects. It would become part of the state's educational DNA, providing the backbone for transparency, accountability, and trust. This foundation also enables the next step: knitting local structures into a coherent system that connects with district and state leadership, creating alignment across the entire delivery chain.

B. Creating State–Local Alignment

Even the strongest local leadership tables cannot succeed in isolation. Communities have shown that when state agencies work at cross-purposes or deliver supports through fragmented chains, local leaders spend their energy navigating bureaucracy instead of solving problems. Families feel the effects most directly: one agency may offer tutoring, another counseling, another transportation assistance — but without coordination, the burden falls on parents to piece together services. Alignment across agencies should also recognize Kentucky's mixed-delivery early childhood structure, ensuring that public, private, and community providers are supported as part of one system. The Kentucky Community Schools Initiative makes this clear: local leadership flourishes when the state creates coherence so that supports arrive as a system rather than a patchwork.

Scaling local success requires attention to how the state itself creates coherence — ensuring that policies, resources, and supports add up to more than the sum of their parts. Four areas stand out:

Clarity of Roles

Publish a simple map of who does what statewide and locally. When responsibilities are opaque, duplication grows and accountability weakens. A clear, public map makes the contributions of KDE, FRYSC, GOEC, health, and workforce agencies legible to communities so they know who to call on and how to plan.

Policy and Practice

Route state priorities through LLTs so families see and act on them. When the state sets goals on readiness, absenteeism, or family engagement, those priorities should appear in the conversations and planning cycles of local leadership tables. This ensures policies are not just documents in Frankfort but visible commitments families can recognize in their own schools.

Reduce Fragmentation

Align program requirements and reporting into single community-facing cycles. Multiple reporting streams and overlapping initiatives erode trust and overwhelm schools. Streamlined expectations allow communities to experience supports as one coherent system rather than disconnected compliance tasks.

Bridging Functions

Set up two-way channels so local insights inform state decisions and vice versa. Communities need

pathways to elevate barriers and successes, while the state needs mechanisms to translate its strategies into usable local tools. Effective bridges close the loop, making alignment continuous instead of one-directional.

When these elements are in place, local leadership tables do not operate as isolated pilots but as nodes in a coherent statewide system. Families experience supports as integrated rather than fragmented, educators spend less time managing compliance, and the state gains a reliable channel for learning from and reinforcing local work.

C. Institutionalizing Shared Tools

Strong local leadership needs more than good intentions; it needs consistent tools that make partnership visible, practical, and repeatable. Without shared frameworks, every community reinvents the wheel, and the quality of partnership depends too heavily on local personalities or temporary funding. Kentucky has already begun to develop promising instruments through the Prichard Committee's [Groundswell](#) work and [United We Learn](#) pilots. These tools work because they are steward-ed through trusted statewide partnerships that ensure consistency, training, and public access. The next step is to institutionalize these tools statewide so every district and community can work from a common foundation.

Areas of attention include:

Data Dashboards and Profiles

Kentucky already publishes extensive data through [Open House](#), but access is not the same as usability. Families and partners need simplified, community-facing snapshots that combine academic and non-academic indicators — especially the ABCs and pillar data — in forms that can be discussed at a leadership table and acted on in real time. These are not compliance dashboards; they are collaboration tools that help schools, families, and partners see the same picture, track whether strategies are working, and make adjustments together.

Standards for Family and Community Engagement

Tools such as the [Family Friendly Schools](#) certification establish clear expectations for how families should be engaged and provide visible measures of progress. Institutionalizing these standards statewide would ensure that partnership is treated with the same seriousness as academic outcomes, creating comparability across communities and protecting against engagement being left to chance or personality.

Action-Planning Frameworks

Communities benefit from shared templates that guide leadership tables through analyzing data, naming priorities, and documenting strategies. Institutionalizing these frameworks reduces the burden on local teams to design processes from scratch, creates consistency in how plans are developed, and allows learning to flow across districts. For the state, common frameworks also make progress easier to track in comparable ways.

Asset-Mapping Resources

Community-driven asset mapping helps schools and partners identify existing strengths and gaps together. Unlike top-down inventories, shared mapping tools make resources visible to the people closest to the work, ensuring that supports are matched to real needs and that new partnerships build on local assets. When used consistently, asset maps also give the state a clearer picture of where gaps persist and where investments would have the greatest impact.

By institutionalizing shared tools, Kentucky would create a baseline of support for every community. These resources do not prescribe solutions, but they make effective problem-solving possible. But tools alone are not enough. They only create value when used in predictable forums, with equal access to data, and with clear channels between local communities and the state which lays the groundwork for sustained community accountability.

D. Support for Community Accountability

Groundswell work demonstrates that accountability is not a scorecard; it is a relationship in which schools and communities hold one another responsible for progress. Schools are accountable to their communities for being transparent, responsive, and effective. Communities are accountable to their schools for showing up, aligning resources, and sustaining engagement. And the state is accountable to both for creating the conditions that make this compact possible. Shared accountability is not about the existence of dashboards or rubrics; it is about the conditions that make them matter. Families, schools, and partners must be able to act on evidence in structured ways that are visible, reciprocal, and reinforced by the state.

To embed this kind of shared accountability statewide, Kentucky must reinforce several conditions:

Anchor in Local Leadership

Local Leadership Teams — whether through FRY-SC councils, early childhood coalitions, or school-based groups — need a defined role as the place where evidence is reviewed, commitments are tracked, and next steps are agreed upon. Without an anchored table, accountability drifts into informal or uneven practice.

Transparency

True reciprocity depends on everyone seeing the same information. Families, educators, and partners should have access to clear, timely, community-facing data — from ABC indicators to readiness measures — that lets them jointly assess progress, raise concerns, and course correct.

Structures

Communities need consistent, simple formats for sharing evidence and documenting actions. Templates for meeting notes, public data snapshots, and short-cycle reviews turn accountability into a habit rather than a one-off event, and they allow state leaders to see patterns across localities.

With these conditions in place, Kentucky can cultivate an accountability compact that is sharper than compliance systems and more trusted than distant oversight. Schools and communities hold one another responsible, and the state reinforces the structures, transparency, and reciprocity that make it real.

E. Sustaining Partnerships Through Shared Investment

Strong partnerships cannot endure if they depend on short-term grants or temporary goodwill. Shared investment means aligning existing dollars across education, health, and workforce so communities experience supports as a single system. Kentucky's challenge is not only to secure new resources but also to connect what is already being spent so families see coherent support rather than a patchwork of programs. Four strategies are especially important:

Protect Anchor Funding

Preserve foundational supports like FRYSCs, preschool, and transportation that communities already rely on. These programs form the backbone of family and student supports and cannot be left vulnerable to shifting priorities.

Align State Investments

Ensure that new initiatives — from literacy improvement to mental health services — are routed through LLTs so they strengthen local plans rather than adding parallel requirements. When initiatives are aligned, communities see them as part of a single strategy, not a stack of disconnected mandates.

Encourage Local Compacts

Incentivize school districts, employers, chambers of commerce, and nonprofits to co-invest in strategies that expand opportunities for students. Local compacts turn one-time contributions into predictable supports and create stronger accountability across partners.

Guide External Funding

When federal or other outside dollars enter the state, they should be aligned with Kentucky's locally driven system of partnership — routed through LLTs, tied to shared indicators, and reinforcing community priorities rather than advancing separate agendas.

Sustained investment makes partnership durable. Families experience continuity of support, communities see that local and state commitments reinforce one another, and Kentucky positions itself to deliver education, health, and workforce outcomes more efficiently. Shared investment is not only about securing more dollars but about ensuring that every dollar has greater impact by connecting to a common vision of readiness and opportunity.

VI. Next Steps – Advancing Groundswell on Two Tracks

Advancing [Groundswell](#) work requires progress on two fronts at once. Local communities are already proving what partnership can accomplish; they cannot wait for statewide reform to keep moving forward. At the same time, the state must build the durable scaffold that turns local innovation into lasting infrastructure. These tracks—Track 1: Local Communities Lead Now and Track 2: The State Creates the Scaffold—are interdependent: one sustains momentum from the ground up, the other ensures that progress can endure and scale statewide.

A. Track 1: Local Communities Lead Now

The first track is local. Communities are already showing what partnership can achieve and should keep moving without waiting for statewide reform. This track sustains the work where it began—in schools and neighborhoods proving that shared leadership delivers real results.

Keep Partnership Tables Active

Local Leadership Teams, FRYSC advisory councils, and early childhood coalitions must remain the governance tables where families, educators, and partners come together. These groups should not slip into optional meetings or ad hoc check-ins. They are where evidence is reviewed, priorities debated, and commitments tracked in full view of those responsible. When the tables stay active and predictable, communities know where accountability happens and how to bring their concerns forward.

Use Shared Tools

Apply resources already proven to work — asset maps, the Engagement Continuum, [Family Friendly Schools](#) standards, and [Community Profiles](#) — to guide planning, track progress, and strengthen transparency. Shared tools let communities focus on solving problems rather than inventing processes, while also making progress legible to peers and the state.

Practice Community Accountability

Accountability is reciprocal: schools are accountable to communities for openness and responsiveness, and communities are accountable to schools for participation, partnership, and aligning resources. It is practiced when both sides come together at established tables, examine evidence in public, and follow through on commitments. The focus is less on a specific metric or frequency and more on making commitments visible, tracking whether they are honored, and ensuring responsibility is shared. Practicing accountability in this way builds trust and reinforces the idea that progress is a mutual obligation, not a one-sided demand.

Tell the Story

Results and methods cannot remain inside meeting rooms. Communities should actively share their wins, struggles, and processes with peers, local media, and civic groups. Storytelling helps other schools adopt proven practices and strengthens public will by showing that partnership produces visible outcomes. When families hear their own voices reflected in public stories, they gain confidence that their contributions matter.

Kentucky communities can keep building momentum now — strengthening their own partnership systems, demonstrating results, and contributing stories that make the case for scale. While the state works to embed these practices into permanent infrastructure, local leaders can show what is possible and accelerate progress from the ground up.

B. Track 2: The State Creates the Scaffold

The second track is statewide. Local leadership can only carry the work so far if state-level partners—government agencies, education intermediaries, and nonprofit networks—fail to act in coordination. The state’s role is not limited to policy and funding; it is to convene and sustain a state-level partnership table that mirrors the shared-leadership structures thriving in communities. This table connects agencies, NGOs, philanthropy, and business leaders to align resources, remove barriers, and scale what works. Furthermore, as local partnerships require a coordinator, the state-level table needs a dedicated backbone function—an entity or team that maintains alignment across agencies and sectors. This ensures that communication, data, and funding flows stay coherent and that communities receive consistent support rather than fragmented programs.

The role of state-level partners is not to take ownership away from communities, but to create the conditions that make local leadership sustainable, comparable, and scalable. That requires state leaders to act deliberately on four fronts:

Stabilize Structures

Codify Local Leadership Teams, FRYSC councils, and early childhood coalitions as the official venues where evidence is reviewed and priorities set. Without a stable backbone, local partnership depends on temporary projects and personalities. By embedding these structures in state guidance and district improvement planning, Kentucky ensures they persist across changes in leadership and funding.

Align Initiatives

Direct new state programs — whether in literacy, workforce readiness, or mental health — through the local partnership tables. Alignment prevents communities from being whipsawed by overlapping requirements, and it ensures state dollars reinforce rather than fragment local strategies. This makes it possible for families to see state priorities translated into visible action in their schools.

Provide Shared Tools

Deliver usable dashboards, planning templates, engagement standards, and asset maps that give communities consistent ways to track and improve. Tools designed at the state level but used at the local table create comparability across schools while still allowing flexibility for local adaptation. They also give the state a clearer window into what is working, where, and why.

Connect Accountability

Build two-way channels so evidence flows both up and down: local findings shape state action, and state priorities arrive in forms communities can act on. This connection shifts accountability from a one-directional compliance exercise to a reciprocal compact, where the state supports communities in meeting their goals and communities demonstrate results in return.

Taken together, these actions create a state infrastructure that supports rather than supplants local leadership. They ensure that Kentucky’s policy environment reinforces the very practices communities are modeling — shared governance, transparent data use, and continuous improvement — and positions the state to scale those practices consistently.

VII. What Kentuckians Expect, Kentucky Can Deliver

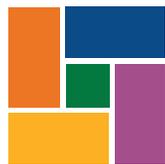
The last several years of [Groundswell](#) work have shown what is possible when families, communities, and schools move together: chronic absenteeism falls, readiness improves, partnerships deepen, and trust begins to rebuild. These are not isolated wins — they are proof that Kentuckians can mobilize around shared priorities, that schools can open their doors wider to partners, and that families are not only willing but eager to lead alongside educators. Yet the question remains: will this progress mark the next chapter in Kentucky’s long legacy of education reform, standing alongside milestones like KERA and the creation of FRYSCs, or will it fade into memory as a promising but short-lived project? The answer depends on whether Kentucky chooses to embed partnership as the permanent operating system of its schools, or whether it allows momentum to scatter once the spotlight shifts.

Groundswell is more than a set of tools or tables. It represents a fundamental shift in how Kentucky does business — moving from an education system managed for communities to one built with them. The difference is not cosmetic; it changes how decisions are made, how resources are aligned, and how accountability is shared. When families see their concerns reflected in school priorities, trust grows and engagement becomes durable. When local employers invest in student pathways, schools become engines of community prosperity, not isolated institutions. When early childhood coalitions connect readiness to economic vitality, education is recognized as part of the state's growth strategy, not just a schoolhouse concern. In each case, Kentuckians experience something they have consistently demanded: a system that is transparent, responsive, and accountable to the people it serves. What they are calling for is not marginal adjustment, but a transformation they can see in their daily lives, feel in their local economies, and trust as the foundation of long-term opportunity.

The opportunity now is to act with clarity. Communities have already shown the way forward: keeping partnership tables active, using shared tools, practicing transparency, and telling their stories. These actions prove that Kentuckians are not waiting for permission — they are already designing the system they expect. But communities cannot shoulder this work alone. The state must meet that urgency with equal resolve, creating the scaffold that ensures these practices are not fragile or uneven but stable, supported, and connected. Alignment across agencies, backbone support for learning and tools,

sustained investment, and integration of usable data are not abstractions — they are the practical conditions that turn dozens of promising sites into a coherent statewide system. If both tracks move together, Kentucky will have built something rare: a public education system that unites local urgency with statewide durability, where community-led problem solving is reinforced — not undermined — by state structures. This is how Kentucky can fulfill its reform legacy not with one more project or pilot, but with a new operating system for education grounded in partnership.

Families, community members, and local leaders— joined by educators— have already demonstrated what is possible: chronic absenteeism can be reduced, readiness can improve, partnerships can unlock new opportunities. The proof is here. The demand is here. What remains is the decision to make this way of working the permanent fabric of Kentucky's education system. Kentuckians are not asking for marginal change; they are asking for a system built with them, accountable to them, and capable of delivering both strong diplomas and real opportunity. Meeting that expectation requires shared commitment: communities continuing to lead with urgency, and the state ensuring their leadership is sustained and scaled. If Kentucky chooses this path, it will not simply add another reform to its history; it will set a new national standard for how education systems can be rebuilt on trust, transparency, and partnership. In doing so, its education system will not only deliver strong diplomas but serve as the engine of the Commonwealth's economic mobility and shared prosperity.



The Prichard Committee

Building a Groundswell
for a Big Bold Future