

GROUNDWELL INITIATIVE

SCHOOLS DEEPEN PARTNERSHIPS TO FUEL ACHIEVEMENT

PADUCAH, Ky. — In a meeting room two blocks from the Ohio River, local school officials hosted business managers connected to the busy waterway for a new round of introductions.

As the first-ever community schools directors for the two local school systems, Marc Mavigliano in McCracken County and Allen Treece in Paducah designed the spring gathering to launch new connections between river-related businesses and local educators and students. The session followed similar gatherings with employers in the skilled trades and the local health care sector.

agencies and employers generated plans for relevant new experiences for students, resources that would support families, and expertise and adult-life opportunities to open new doors for teachers and classrooms.

“Connections are happening to show that schools don’t have to do it alone. Community partnerships are a critical path, and with somebody to keep the conversations rolling, they can be a game changer,” Brooke Gill, director of the Prichard Committee’s Collaborative for Families and Schools, said in the spring.

In Danville last school year, new options for students made community involvement a clear part of their school experience — from enlisting college students as postsecondary mentors for high schoolers to new clubs and after-school options proposed by students.

“We had a lot of community support already, but this is taking us to a different level,” Farmer added.



In districts across Kentucky, local partnerships — often the source of extras like guest speakers, annual field trips, or sponsorship banners in sports venues — expanded significantly under the Kentucky Community Schools Initiative during the 2024-25 school year. Through a federal grant implemented by the Prichard Committee, local education leaders took new approaches to channel existing resources toward tackling school districts’ key strategic goals.

In Paducah and McCracken, the community schools directors became an active presence in local civic groups, social service organizations, and circles of educators, students, and families last school year.

Deeper collaboration with existing

Local school leaders from the 20 Kentucky districts participating in the federal grant said the outreach prompted a surge of interest and input from community groups and businesses — and redefined ties to families and students. The expanded and focused involvement demonstrated new potential to implement schools’ goals to boost student outcomes.

“We’ve been able to improve solutions to issues we’ve struggled with for years because the community is at the table every step of the way,” said Suzanne Farmer, chief academic officer for the Danville school district. The district sought the community schools grant through Prichard because of its ability to energize local backing.

NEW OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES

Participating districts used partnerships to expand opportunities for students, involve families more deeply in schools, and solidify education outreach into communities.

In Simpsonville, the local elementary school teamed with the city parks and recreation department to create a greenhouse in a science-and-technology classroom that raises produce for the community’s weekly Farmers Market. The experience sparked plans for an outdoor greenhouse, a pumpkin patch on the school campus, and a city-run summer gardening camp.

“We’ve always had a good relationship with the schools, but having dedicated staff on both ends allowed us to achieve so much more,” said Chris True-lock, the parks and recreation director for Simpsonville.

In Bracken County, Samantha Wilson, the community schools

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EARLY CHILDHOOD

OWENSBORO TAKES STOCK OF EARLY CHILDHOOD GAINS

A 5-year effort to elevate the importance of expanded and improved early childhood services in Owensboro and Daviess County has achieved its mission and sees momentum for carrying the process forward, leaders said.

Launched in 2021, the Greater Owensboro Partnership for Early Development worked with the Prichard Committee to address early childhood education access, quality, and advocacy issues. The group also promoted stronger services for families and employers as an important community selling point.

As organizers now prepare to measure results of the push and share lessons with other communities, widespread grassroots conversations and strategic efforts to strengthen effective services stand out as key accomplishments. The campaign also assembled a solid array of organizations that now consider the early childhood emphasis a shared priority.

"A lot can happen locally, and Owensboro is going to help other communities see strategies that can work," said Rina Gratz, director of early childhood and primary education policy and practice for the Prichard Committee. "They've shown the importance of bringing a wide range of partners to the table."

Led by the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro, the Partnership identified existing organizations well-positioned to provide added early childhood services. One result: a new vehicle specially outfitted to facilitate collaboration between community-service providers, taking services beyond their walls and reducing transportation barriers to expand access. The mobile unit offers new opportunities for service providers



to connect with parents about available resources like free parent training, literacy materials, and counseling.

"After a lot of conversation, one conclusion we came to was that rather than creating a new project, we should look for organizations in this space doing great work and empower them to do their work even better," said Joe Berry, executive director of the Public Life Foundation.

The early childhood effort also launched an awareness campaign in public spaces across the county. Its

Checkmarks program shares resources and kindergarten readiness skills in spots ranging from parks to restaurants to a free app for parents and family members. The program is designed to increase awareness and discussion about child development.

The early childhood focus also enlisted key organizations in ongoing efforts and planning about early childhood topics and needs. The county library, YMCA, cooperative extension

service, a local museum, parks and recreation department as well as school districts and social service agencies are now more closely connected around early childhood issues.

"There's been significant community engagement from the start," said Erica Wade, executive director of The Center of Owensboro, a social services resource center. "It's been so encouraging to see our school systems working together incorporating involvement from local businesses and organizations that are so eager to support them. It has the feel of setting the community up for success."

MEANINGFUL DIPLOMA

EMPLOYERS REPORT KY GRADUATES NEED STRONGER SKILLS

More than 600 employers representing nearly two dozen industries shared feedback that paints a picture of significant workforce readiness gaps in Kentucky, according to a survey conducted by the Prichard Committee.

While 78% of employers identified durable skills as the factor they rely on most when assessing a high school graduate's readiness for employment, those skills were among the areas where employers had the least confidence in Kentucky graduates.

On professionalism and work ethic, critical thinking and problem solving abilities, communication skills, and self-confidence and ownership, more than half of the employers surveyed reported Kentucky graduates are only "slightly prepared" or "not at all prepared" for the workforce.

More than 70% of employers found graduates "very prepared" or "extremely prepared" on academic skills and knowledge. The report found that employers agree that expanded real-world professional skills, school-business partnerships, and work-based learning would be beneficial.

While Kentucky posts one of the nation's highest high school graduation rates, "deeper analysis reveals concerning gaps between graduation rates and actual student preparedness for life beyond high school," the report noted.

"Ensuring Kentucky's high school diploma is meaningful is about giving every Kentucky student genuine opportunities for economic mobility, strengthening our talent pipeline, and ensuring our state's future prosperity,"

said Brigitte Blom, the Prichard Committee's president and CEO.



DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

Over the past year, we listened to more than 1,000 Kentuckians, from attendees at the Annual Groundswell Summit to participants in regional and school-based conversations. Across geographies, backgrounds, and experiences, 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 Kentuckians made clear, progress endures when partnership becomes infrastructure. When collaboration evolves from a program into the operating system of our schools and communities, students, educators and the entire



Brigitte Blom, President/CEO,
The Prichard Committee

community benefit. You will see examples of that happening successfully across the Commonwealth in the pages of this Perspectives.

Our context demands urgent and bold action. Kentucky remains 4th from the bottom nationally in poverty—a ranking that has not meaningfully shifted in decades. Yet Kentuckians share a clear vision for a brighter, more upwardly mobile future. To meet this moment, we must prepare every learner with the skills, supports, and relationships required for success in a rapidly evolving world.

This commitment is echoed in public sentiment. Recent public polling of parents across political lines shows broad support for accountability, literacy and math excellence, and strong postsecondary pathways; strong opposition to

education funding cuts and strong preferences to protect classroom learning, teacher compensation, and support for students with extra needs; and mixed, but improving, confidence in local schools and student readiness for life beyond graduation.

In short: Kentuckians, and Americans more broadly, expect bold action grounded in partnership, transparency, and academic excellence. Our 2026 legislative agenda reflects those values, including: continued support for effective teaching; ensuring advanced coursework access for all students; and investing where it begins by expanding and strengthening early childhood education.

Kentucky has risen to meet transformative challenges before. We have done it through community voice, bipartisan commitment, and unwavering belief in our young people. And we are ready to do it again. Together, we will build a future where every learner thrives, every community leads, and every Kentuckian benefits from a world-class education system.



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

INSTITUTE AIDS FAMILIES NAVIGATING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Recent sessions of the Prichard Committee's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership that have drawn families of bilingual students are producing new networks committed to spreading education awareness and leadership skills.

Last year's CIPL cohort that was part of Toyota's Driving Possibilities program in Scott and Fayette counties reached more than two dozen parents. Many of those participants wanted to focus their school-improvement efforts on spreading awareness of education expectations and involvement deeper into Hispanic communities.

"Knowing that schools are asking for their help and for them to be involved made parents more comfortable and want to find ways to help more people in their communities," said one of the Scott County CIPL fellows.

"For some people, the first barrier in helping children with education is language and not knowing what teachers want help with," added another Scott County CIPL fellow with a son in elementary school. "Parents want to help their children have more opportunity and become good citizens, and we want our children to see us engaging and participating."

Laura Beard, director of CIPL, said the recent Driving Possibilities institute informed participants how Kentucky schools are organized and operate. In addition, the Toyota effort also focused on changing workforce skills and the importance of science, technology, engineering, and math knowledge.

She said that fellows from the program have become strong advocates for spreading all of those themes to other

parents, many of whom are unfamiliar with Kentucky's education program or local economic forces.

"With each of our CIPL groups where participants have had to be English language learners, the desire to spread leadership skills and knowledge is very strong," Beard said.

Thomas Wilson of the Fayette County school district, who has worked with the Toyota program, said the parents involved in its CIPL training have seized on the power of greater education awareness.

"Parent buy-in is everything, and CIPL trains people in what it takes to be an active school parent," he said. "These parents have taken ownership and are glad to come in, take their part in schools, and help others do the same."

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NEW OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES

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director, said that to students or families, the program showed that schools are becoming more effective, responsive, and welcoming.

"They see that we believe that we all serve as co-creators of student success and school improvement," she said. "And that we all have to contribute to have success."

New K-8 student interest clubs drew 150 students last fall and 90 more in

the spring. The effort built stronger ties with local groups

from the county 4-H program to church groups and provided opportunities to engage community volunteers.

"The access to try new things has made a huge impact," said Samantha Jones, a parent at 450-student Taylor Elementary in Bracken County. "Students want to get engaged, and they see their friends involved in new things and shining in brand new areas."

2025 YEAR-END GIVING

Most of us think of November and December as the "holiday season." Those two months are also the "giving season," with more gifts made to charitable organizations in those months than any other time of the year. This giving season, we hope you include the Prichard Committee on your list of organizations you support. While most of our donors' primary reason for giving is our shared belief that access to educational excellence is the key to a larger life for all Kentuckians, we recognize that tax considerations may play a role in what donors give and when they give it.

Recent legislation that becomes effective in 2026 may give you reason to think about the timing of gifts you make this season. If you itemize your tax deductions, it may be to your benefit to consider accelerating gifts you might have made in 2026 into 2025.

On the other hand, if you will not itemize your deductions because they are less than the standard deduction you can claim, then it might be to your benefit to delay gifts you might have made in 2025 into 2026 to take advantage of the new, limited deductions for non-itemizers starting in 2026. For more information or illustrations, contact Shawn Lyons at shawn@prichardcommittee.org or at 859-227-0987 or visit our website at prichardcommittee.giftplans.org. We also encourage you to consult with your advisor about your personal situation.

Of course, we are grateful for any gift you might make to the Prichard Committee during this "giving season" and thank you in advance.



Shawn Lyons
Vice President
& Director
Philanthropy

SUPPORT THE PRICHARD COMMITTEE

Use this form or the QR code below to make a tax-deductible gift to help the Prichard Committee improve educational outcomes for all Kentucky learners. Please contact Shawn Lyons at 859-227-0987 or at shawn@prichardcommittee.org with any questions.

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ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSEWORK**NEW POLICIES WILL PROMOTE ADVANCED COURSES**

All Kentucky school districts faced a Dec. 1 deadline to adopt new policies explaining how they will promote advanced coursework or accelerated learning in language arts, math, social studies, and science for students in grades 4-12.

The local action implements a bill that was a priority of the Prichard Committee and passed the House and Senate earlier this year with no dissenting votes. District plans were required to include specifics describing strategies and approaches to advanced coursework and delivery options for students.

The bill “represents an important step toward expanding access to challenging learning opportunities for

Kentucky students,” said Brigitte Blom, president and CEO of the Prichard Committee. “When qualified students are overlooked for advanced coursework, they miss out on key learning that will help them succeed post-graduation, and Kentucky’s economy misses out on opportunities to build talent.”

The Prichard Committee backed the advanced coursework bill as a needed pathway for all students to develop critical thinking skills necessary for future success. Proponents said requiring automatic enrollment in challenging courses for qualified students produced positive results in other states and elevated educational opportunities for all students.

Advocates pointed to data showing that by 2040, 75% of U.S. workers will need college degrees or postsecondary credentials for economic prosperity. The approach of the legislation known as House Bill 190 offers local flexibility and encourages assistance like tutoring and mentoring to help students succeed.

“This will ensure that more students are challenged to meet their potential,” said Rep. Robert Duvall of Bowling Green at the signing ceremony for the bill he sponsored. Duvall said he hoped the bill “will create the desire and confidence within students to reach higher than they ever thought possible.”

HIGHER EDUCATION**NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT SUPPORTS LIFT KCTCS**

Wide-ranging supports to help nontraditional students earn credentials and degrees are keeping the Kentucky Community and Technical College System on course to surpass its strategic goals.

Kentucky’s Council on Postsecondary Education 2025 Progress Report noted significant gains in enrollment and graduation rates among public colleges and universities.

The community and technical college system posted top gains in fall 2024 with a 6.8% enrollment increase over fall 2023. Statewide undergraduate enrollment in that period was up 3.9%.

“College is more than a place for education — our colleges are places for transformation,” said KCTCS President Ryan Quarles in remarks to the system’s staff. He added that the system recognizes that it serves as a pivotal bridge to education and opportunity for “students who may never have considered college or who may have thought obtaining a higher education credential wasn’t a possibility.”

To that end, the system’s most

recent strategic plan emphasized the importance of new funding and partnerships to expand wrap-around services for all students in need and to closely monitor performance data to assure students of all ages and backgrounds achieve success.

Such efforts continue to grow. In July, KCTCS announced its first system-wide mental health strategy to connect students with needed resources. On another front, Family Scholar House, which started in Louisville to serve the academic and non-academic needs of student parents, now partners with all 16 KCTCS campuses.

At Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, a 48-apartment Family Scholar House is scheduled to open next fall. The stable housing and support services will join many other campus opportunities for student help, according to Tabitha Kerr, director of student success and tutoring.

Academic assistance, food and snacks, transportation, financial guidance, health services, and career counseling are areas where the

college helps students address major challenges yet still concentrate on reaching academic goals.

“We know that the more value we can add to our students’ lives, the more they are able to contribute to their families and communities,” Kerr said. “Our approach is, ‘If you want to come to college, or come back, we are going to be there to support you.’”

Wrap-around services have an immeasurable effect on students, especially for non-traditional students who may attend college part-time or juggle various family or life challenges, Kerr noted.

For the community college system, creating a responsive campus community stands out as an overarching goal for support staff and faculty as well. The system pointed to effective support as a leading factor behind the record number of KCTCS graduates in 2024-25.

“The help is all across campus,” Kerr said. “It’s truly a collective effort to ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed.”

PRICHARD COMMITTEE ANNUAL MEETING

MICHAEL MATSUDA ENCOURAGES STUDENT INVOLVEMENT



A California superintendent encouraged Kentucky education advocates to involve students in working on solutions to community challenges and issues. Michael Matsuda, leader of the Anaheim Union High School District, which covers two dozen schools and serves more than 27,000 students, has been recognized for advancing career preparedness by encouraging student input and engagement in local issues and concerns. Matsuda shared his experience at the Prichard Committee's Groundswell Summit in Paducah in June. Schools need to develop better ways to connect and communicate with business leaders and focus classrooms on local community challenges, he said. Such efforts bring learning to life and ignite student interest and ownership. "We need to widen a young person's aperture of what the world of work looks like," Matsuda said. "Kids have a lot of energy and imagination. This generation has a lot of potential to propel this country forward." School leaders should encourage teachers to use academic standards to explore local issues and needs and connect students with local businesses and officials to develop solutions, he said. He is author of "Educating for Purposeful Life: A New Conception of Schooling for the 21st Century," which highlights new learning approaches in Anaheim.

JAMES C. VOTRUBA



The Prichard Committee honored longtime member and education leader James C. Votruba with its Award of Excellence. The honor was presented posthumously at the group's Groundswell Summit in Paducah in June. Votruba died in March at his home in Fort Thomas after a battle with cancer. Votruba was recognized for his leadership as a university president and his interest in issues across the spectrum of education. He retired as president of Northern Kentucky University in 2012 after 15 years in that position. He remained involved in civic issues in northern Kentucky and, as signified by his active involvement with the Prichard Committee, remained at the forefront of education advocacy. Votruba was recognized for leading with vision, fostering growth and community engagement.

RAIMONDO AWARD HONORS LEXINGTON LEADER



From right to left: Kathleen "Penny" Christian, Laurel Raimondo Martin, Brigitte Blom.

Kathleen "Penny" Christian of Lexington, a longtime champion of parent involvement in education in Kentucky and at the national level, received the Prichard Committee's annual Beverly Nickell Raimondo Leadership Award. Christian was recognized at the group's Groundswell Summit in Paducah in June.

Christian currently serves on the Fayette County school board following a long tenure as a leader in the Kentucky PTA organization. Christian has also served as chair of the National PTA Family Engagement Committee and currently serves on the group's nominating and leadership recruitment committee.

She is also a fellow of the Prichard Committee's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, and is now a Prichard Committee member.

"Few individuals embody the spirit of family engagement and advocacy with the passion and purpose that Penny Christian brings to every role she undertakes," said Brigitte Blom, president and CEO of the Prichard Committee in presenting the award.

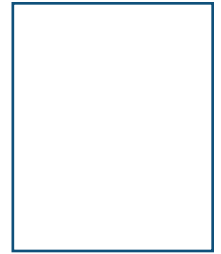
The Raimondo Award honors the late founding director of the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership. It recognizes individuals who exemplify parent leadership in enhancing student achievement. Laurel Raimondo Martin, Bev Raimondo's daughter, was also on hand for the presentation.

PRICHARD COMMITTEE ANNUAL MEETING

2025 Groundswell Summit Showcases Local Action

Parents and educators from across the state shared their work to promote student achievement and community support for education at the Prichard Committee's Groundswell Summit in June in Paducah. The Great Schools Showcase was a popular spot for exchanging ideas. Many of the presenters represented the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership fellows, locations recognized as Family Friendly Schools and Early Care Centers, and districts participating in Prichard's full-service community schools initiative.





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Survey reveals major work-force readiness gaps despite strong graduation rates in Kentucky.

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Kentucky districts adopt new plans to expand access to advanced coursework and challenge students.

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Bilingual families build leadership networks, boosting education awareness and parent engagement across Kentucky communities.

WHO WE ARE

ABOUT THE PRICHARD COMMITTEE

Building a Groundswell

We believe in the power and promise of public education – early childhood through college – to ensure Kentuckians’ economic and social well-being.

We are a citizen-led, bipartisan, non-profit, established in 1983 with a singular mission of realizing a path to a larger life for Kentuckians with education at the core.

We study pressing education issues, help inform the public and policymakers of our findings, and engage communities to celebrate success and to design unique local solutions to our challenges.

We track nation outcomes in education and quality of life. Our focus is to move Kentucky into the top rankings of all states in these areas.

*Open to read more
Perspectives*



**The
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Building a Groundswell
for a Big Bold Future