Deepening Student Learning in Three Kentucky Communities

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About the Aurora Institute

The Aurora Institute's mission is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning through its work in policy advocacy, research, field-building, and convening. With a national and global view of education innovation, we work on systems change in K-12 education, promote best practices, examine policy barriers, and make recommendations for change to yield improved outcomes for students. Aurora envisions a world in which all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

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Introduction

In 2020, Kentucky embarked on a journey to transform teaching and learning in the state through its "United We Learn" initiative. As a result of that work, Kentucky learning communities are making significant strides toward innovative deeper learning practices.

In Aurora Institute's glossary, the term "deeper learning" describes "highly engaging learning experiences in which students apply skills and knowledge and build higher-order skills." The definition is open ended to allow each community to shape its own approach, informed by other examples and research. Education leaders in Kentucky involved in United We Learn simplify the concept even further, using the term "vibrant learning" and defining it as "learning that matters to students."

Ultimately, the goal is for young people to become active learners, to do more than memorize and recall information. To be prepared for the demands of the future, young people must engage with a broader set of complex skills, using creativity and different communication styles.

To facilitate this shift to deeper learning, a majority of Kentucky districts received support as part of a 2022 Kentucky Association of Educational Cooperatives Deeper Learning grant through the Kentucky Department of Education. The three case studies in this report — from Metcalfe County Middle School, Woodford County Public Schools, and Beechwood Independent Schools — aim to provide other systems in Kentucky and beyond with insights on how to make the student experience more relevant and engaging. These three sites — two districts and one middle school — serve as models of community-driven approaches, rather than top-down reform.

Context on Kentucky's Statewide Education Work

Kentucky leadership has emphasized deeper learning statewide for several years. Jason E. Glass became Kentucky's Commissioner of Education in the fall of 2020, during the early days of the pandemic. He launched "United We Learn," an initiative with three ambitions: creating vibrant learning experiences for all students; encouraging innovation in schools, especially around assessments; and collaborating directly with communities. These three pillars aimed to improve schooling for all of Kentucky's young people.

For the Kentucky Department of Education, a key component of this work was creating the state's Portrait of a Learner (PoL, also referred to as a Portrait of a Graduate), a document that codifies what students should know and be able to do when they graduate from high school. Rather than defining academic preparation and success by the number of hours learners spend in a classroom or number of credits they acquire, the Portrait of a Learner names the skills and qualities young people need to thrive in school and adulthood. Defining the PoL is a common starting place for many school systems that have shifted toward competency-based education or other student-centered approaches.

In May 2022, a group of state education leaders convened to define Kentucky's Portrait of a Learner, inspired by a few districts that had already made their own. The state released its version in October 2022, enumerating the competencies that Kentucky high school graduates should be able to demonstrate. But there was no mandate; individual systems were invited to either adopt the state Portrait of a Learner or create their own through a local community process. Notably, Kentucky has experienced "rapid adoption of local PoLs across the state," reflecting the value of flexibility and local autonomy.

An [FAQ document](#) about the Kentucky Portrait of a Learner highlights it as a foundation for future changes: "A benefit to having a statewide PoL — which features the competencies valued most by Kentuckians — is to use it as an anchor for a new, more balanced assessment and accountability system." The Kentucky United We Learn Council and [Local Laboratories of Learning (L3)](#) across the state have been collaborating to create new frameworks for assessment and accountability that balance community-driven measures and high expectations. The promise of this work is that "balancing vibrant learning experiences with rigorous academic content requires intentional alignment with Kentucky Academic Standards and district Portrait of a Learner competencies" ([2025 Regional Town Halls, p.8](#)).

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Additionally, the [United We Learn](#) initiative seeks to "launch an accountability system that is meaningful and useful to all our learners." The initiative is guided by four design elements: co-creation, inclusivity, empathy, and reciprocity. To design the new components of this accountability system, the state has engaged educators, families, students, community members, and business leaders in surveys and focus groups. From those efforts, they [found](#), among other things, that the educators and school/administrative staff prefer to focus on "access" rather than "quality" of learning experiences, and that most community members and education staff support a local accountability system that considers a broader set of indicators, such as engagement and access to opportunities. These findings, and more, will be used to develop a set of policy recommendations for a future accountability system.

Building on the United We Learn vision, education stakeholders in Kentucky are working to enrich student experiences to ensure all children have access to equitable and engaging learning opportunities. Local districts are making significant strides in co-creating local accountability models alongside their communities, aligning closely with Kentucky's United We Learn vision. [David Cook writes](#) that the collaboration among local districts and coalitions, the Kentucky Board of Education, and the Kentucky Department of Education has "led to a longer-term and more rooted vision and goals than any previous large-scale initiative."

In parallel, the state funded a KY Deeper Learning team in July 2022, which was led by Kentucky's eight regional cooperatives. Funds were divided among the eight cooperatives, and each cooperative constructed a team to fit the needs of its region. The cooperatives represent and support groups of regional districts. A member of the Deeper Learning team [explained](#): Kentucky's United We Learn aspirations "fit snugly within the innovations required of our Deeper Learning journey." That summer, the regional education cooperatives received a $25 million grant from the Kentucky Department of Education to support districts moving toward deeper learning. These funds came from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) and were set aside to transform teaching, primarily through teacher stipends.

The three sites highlighted in this report are among 157 of Kentucky's 171 districts that benefited from these Deeper Learning grants, aligned with the statewide vision. Each has pursued ambitious goals in its own way, driven by what mattered to students, families, and local community, often informed by economic goals. This work appears to be particularly successful and durable because it is both supported by resources statewide and grounded in community needs and wisdom. This mix of vision, support, and flexibility offers a model for other states.

Introduction to the Featured Sites

Aurora Institute toured these three sites in 2025 to elevate lessons from past work and to assess progress to date and goals for the future. Using document review, on-the-ground interviews, observation, and existing expertise in deeper learning, each case study aims to authentically tell the story of each system's shift to deeper learning and the way the changes have shaped the student experience.

Metcalfe County Middle School (MCMS) illustrates how one school within a district can become a model and leader, both for others in the district and in the state. MCMS has leveraged training offered by the state and the Green River Regional Education Cooperative (GRREC) to build momentum for deeper learning. In addition to building their school culture and embracing hands-on, project-based learning to increase engagement, MCMS is working toward a systemic competency-based education structure that aligns the learning goals to their Portrait of a Hornet and makes the academic standards transparent and measurable.

Woodford County Public Schools (WCPS) offers an example of a coherent Portrait of a Learner development process that seamlessly bridged from the design phase to a campaign to bring the Portrait to life for students and staff across each school in the district. Woodford County embraced the opportunity to leverage the Portrait of a Learner process to ignite a "green light culture" and attitude of creative innovation. Launched with a large, representative Deeper Learning Team, the district leadership team continues to solicit feedback as it solidifies a set of strategic plans to integrate their Portrait throughout the district's system and align its resources around this vision for learners.

Finally, Beechwood Independent Schools provides a model of a mature deeper learning system that is remaking the student experience to be more active and relevant. Of note is the way they started at the middle grades and worked their way back into elementary grades and forward into the high school years, building a system for learners of all ages. Beechwood's motto, "We are Beechwood" conveys both an established pride and a culture of collaboration. This culture has facilitated the continued evolution of how Beechwood creates learning experiences that help students gain an "EDGE" — "Educational Design Geared toward Experience" — in the world.

Emerging Themes from Kentucky's Deeper Learning Journey

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Analysis of these case studies revealed four key themes. These themes echo the existing body of work of the Aurora Institute, the field of competency-based education, and the education research field more broadly. Understanding the implementation journeys of real schools and districts helps bridge a transformative vision into reality for our young people.

These themes are not intended to serve as a checklist for other schools or districts. Instead, they offer considerations to keep in mind as systems undertake similar journeys. The process can look different across communities, but attention to these themes can support deeper learning implementations that are durable and meaningful and that have real impact on what and how students learn. It is important to take a systematic approach to aligning resources and focus on creating an education system that responds to the current and future demands young people will face going out into our world.

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1. Shared vision unites the community.

In each of the three sites, leaders engaged their community in building a shared vision for student learning and the student experience. In Metcalfe and Woodford, the deeper learning grant directly supported a community process to define their local Portrait of a Learner. At Beechwood, with their trajectory already established, they could continue to bring their vision into reality. The competencies identified in a Portrait of a Learner intentionally set the stage for a broader, multifaceted definition of success, which is also aligned with workforce and civic engagement needs.

From a practical standpoint, each community's Portrait has significant elements in common. However, creating a Portrait with authentic community involvement is itself part of the vision. Forging a shared language through an inclusive community process fosters the community's collective ownership of the Portrait and ensures everyone is going in the same direction. From that shared vision with clear expectations — for districts, schools, and students — systems can begin to make that vision a reality with guidance from examples and models that are customized to local contexts. Metcalfe Director of Instruction Rachel Dial said that "everybody's starting to see what we're trying to do, not to mention with our new accountability system, we're being prepared and we're being proactive, instead of reactive to what's coming."

In each example, intentional communication reinforces the vision, connecting the what, how, and why to help people see and understand the change process and how the day to day builds to the vision. Beechwood Superintendent Dr. Mike Stacy described how their team combined its strategic planning and retreat structures with continued consultation with the stakeholder advisory bodies, which included staff, community, and parents. He reflected: "For most of my time, we had a parent advisory that we really started putting things out in front of, because it was 'different.' And if you're going to change a 'successful school,' how do you start having the conversations around the why and the vision?"

2. Clear expectations enable flexibility.

Deeper learning is not one-size-fits-all for students, nor is it one-size-fits-all for educators and the systems within which they work to educate young people. At the same time, everyone will be better able to move toward a vision when they have a clear sense of what it looks like to achieve that vision.

For students, clear expectations and a way to measure progress and outcomes unlock flexibility in when, where, and how learning happens. Providing options for learning does not lower expectations. In fact, it often ensures that students are meaningfully engaged in that learning. Rigor is more than just being able to handle a high volume of difficult academic content; the true cognitive rigor of deeper learning comes from engagement with and application of knowledge to relevant challenges. One learner from Beechwood shared about their EDGE courses: "[I]n like real classes, of course, those skills are important, but it's more about passing the class. While EDGE is more like growing and becoming more professional and more of a leader." Another shared, "Working with others outside inclines you to not just treat it like another school project, but like something that's actually going to be out there. And that inclines you to give a better outcome."

Each level of the system in Kentucky (state, regional, district, and school) has a parallel dynamic in which leaders provide a balance between a shared vision and flexibility on the implementation approach.

At the state level, the United We Learn initiative identifies a vision for both vibrant learning and a community process that is "mutually beneficial for community, schools, the economy, etc." (Kentucky Portrait of a Learner). Through this approach, flexibility exists by design because each community process unfolds in its own way.

Each regional Educational Cooperative built a team of deeper learning team associates who offered support and connection to other participating districts. Dr. Robb Smith, lead for the grant, explains: "There are eight different cooperatives and eight different approaches to all of this. Our job is to meet every district, [and] every co-op where they were [with] a menu of entry points for deeper learning work." While each educational cooperative took its own approach, they were all grounded in the state's vision for vibrant learning as defined by the United We Learn work, enabling them to draw on a common "why" for their work. Local implementation can vary when everyone has the same trajectory toward deeper — or vibrant — learning.

> *"[W]hen we look at the whole synthesis piece and why we do this, this truly ties up our fifth grade year and everything that we have learned in putting all of these pieces together."*
>
> – Woodford County Educator

Guided by the Deeper Learning grant purpose, each site worked from its vision and from where its community found itself within the change process. At both the school and district levels, building leaders and teachers could choose to experiment with different deeper learning practices. That choice allowed each system to take different approaches to its deeper learning work. At MCMS, every teacher implemented a project, but the size and scope varied. In WCPS, every school created an opportunity for students to connect to their Portrait through an exhibition. In Beechwood, where the change process has been under way for multiple years, educators and leaders have committed to their EDGE challenge format in both academic courses and EDGE courses.

With a learning mindset and a willingness to check and align to clearly defined visions along the way, each system experienced a culture shift toward agency and learning.

3. Student demonstrations unlock authentic applications of knowledge and skills.

Each of the case studies provides examples of how broadening the set of outcomes learners pursue enables those learners to shine in different ways. Portrait of a Learner competencies are designed to transfer across disciplines, creating space for students to demonstrate those essential skills in various contexts. In contrast, education systems focused predominantly on measuring academic content standards — like many existing PK-12 systems do — tend to gauge progress and success through narrow, linear measures, such as large-scale standardized tests. For example, in isolation, a student may struggle with abstract math or science problems in the typical curriculum, but they may shine as a collaborative problem-solver who can apply math or science concepts to an engineering design challenge, while solving a real-world problem.

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Once the community defines its learning goals for young people, it also needs to build opportunities for students to demonstrate that they have met those goals. Local assessment systems enable communities to determine whether learners have met those expectations and help learners understand their strengths and
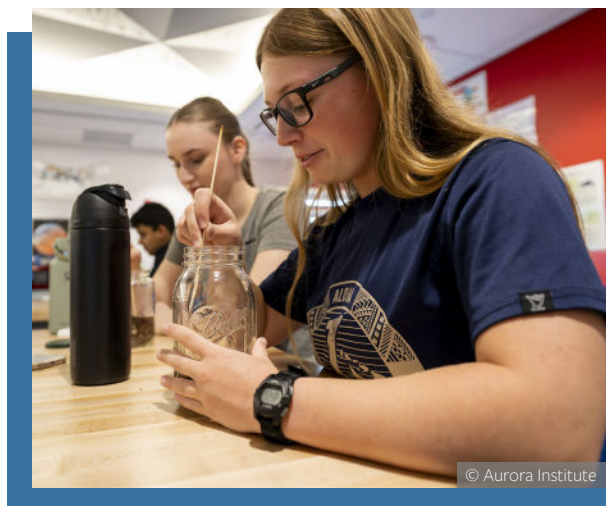
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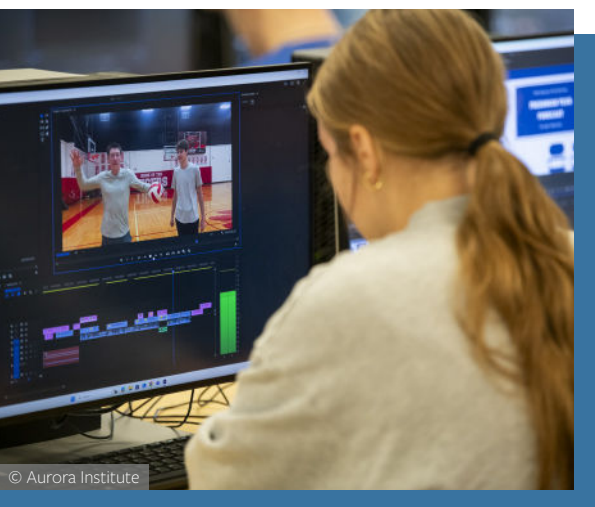
competencies reflected in the Portrait of a Learner. Each of the three districts intentionally focused on student presentations and work for authentic audiences as part of their assessment systems, underscoring the value of practical applications of competencies.

Culminating moments, such as defenses of learning and exhibitions, create opportunities for students to present their learning outcomes and reflect on their learning process in front of the community. For example, MCMS held a formal exhibition evening that focused on the Defense of Learning pilot, where students who had attained and surpassed proficiency expectations explained and defended their learning to the broader community. One learner shared that they were proud that their "school gets involved, involved with other things in our town, and not just doing things at school." Beechwood's Seminar courses connect middle-school learners with local businesses and challenge them to create an authentic deliverable for that business. Woodford County's Saddle Up Days involved students in every grade completing extended projects with a service-learning component. One educator reflected on the experience: "[W]hen we look at the whole synthesis piece and why we do this, this truly ties up our fifth-grade year and everything that we have learned in putting all of these pieces together."

When learners succeed in demonstrating a PoL skill, it can build their confidence in academic learning. It also makes academic learning more relevant as learners apply academic knowledge in authentic ways. By clearly defining learning goals and providing relevant ways for students to demonstrate that they have met those goals, these systems have ensured students know their strengths and are able to leverage them in their desired futures.

4. Opportunities for teacher learning and leadership lay the groundwork for sustainability.

Moving to deeper learning requires teachers to shift their pedagogical practices and take on new roles in the classroom, in the school, and even in the community. To effectively create the learning opportunities described throughout this report and in each case study, teachers had to engage in their own deeper learning journeys. In some cases, teachers were able to see their existing practices through a new lens. In Woodford, for example, teachers were invited to "look" through the Portrait of a Learner lens to find ways to incorporate the competencies. Teacher Rebekah Gooslin reflected: "When I heard deeper learning, [I thought] I've been doing this for 19 years ... and so I'm just glad somebody's put a name to it, right? What you're doing is inspiring students' full engagement."

At each site, educators have had to learn during the transition. First, the Portraits of a Learner presented new learning expectations and accompanying indicators and age-level progressions, rubrics, or scales. Then those shifts required new pedagogical practices, big and small, from project-based learning to thinking maps and reflection skills. Similarly, deeper learning efforts included collaborating with community partners and supporting students in work-based learning.

Having a shared vision and language for talking about deeper learning skills makes them visible and systematic in the learning process. Justin Kaiser, Beechwood director of operations, reflected: "We all got to the point where we all agreed that this was something that was good for Beechwood.... Once you get there, then you've got your early adopters. You get your people who are in different spots." Those early adopters become advocates for the change at hand.

As implementation deepens, these systems also are thoughtfully designing opportunities for teacher leadership. These opportunities both ensure that educator skills expand and create a foundation for longevity for deeper learning efforts. For example, Woodford County has launched a Deeper Learning Academy to train a set of teacher leaders who can build out their deeper learning practice and model for peers. In Beechwood, educators can apply to become EDGE certified by completing a set of activities and challenges and committing to continue learning and leading in the district. Finally, Metcalfe is designing professional learning communities to ensure educators can drive their own learning and expand their capacity.

These themes are interconnected. In the case studies that follow, we will highlight these themes and how they have set each system on the path to durable shifts in teaching and learning.

Echo | Hera

Echo

- She was cursed by Hera to only repeat the last words spoken to her.
- Fell in love with Narcissus.
- Narcissus rejected Echo because she could not speak normally.
- It was said that she married Pan, the God of the Wild and they had a child named Lambe.
- When she was rejected she wasted away, her body fading leaving only the "Echo" behind.

Hera

- She was the Queen of the Gods
- Married to zeus
- Godess of marriage, women, family, and the protector of women during childbirth.
- She had 4 children: Hebe, Elleithyia, Hephaestus, and Ares (Ares was her favorite

The Story

Zeus, the King of the gods was known for his numerous affairs often with Nymphs. Hera was jealous and wanted to catch him in the act. Echo was tasked by Zeus to distract Hera while he was with other Nymphs. She engaged Hera in long conversations, giving Zeus enough time to escape. Hera soon realized Echos deseption and became enraged. So Hera cursed Echo as punishment allowing Echo to only speak the last words of others, silencing her ability to speak her own mind.

Metcalfe County Middle School: Momentum Toward Deeper Learning Systems and Culture

Metcalfe County Middle School | Edmonton, KY

- **Grades:** 6-8
- **Students:** 367
- **Economically disadvantaged:** 74.3% (2023-24)
- **Student race/ethnicity:**
  - White: 95%
  - Hispanic/Latino: 3.5%
  - Black: 0.5%
  - Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.5%
  - American Indian or Alaska Native: 0%
  - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: 0%
  - Students of two or more races: 0.3%

📍 **Edmonton**

Making Learning Visible with the Portrait of a Hornet

Metcalfe County Schools is a rural district with three schools, including Metcalfe County Middle School (MCMS). The district-wide deeper learning journey started in the second half of the 2022-23 school year with a community process to create their Portrait of a Learner, which they call Portrait of a Hornet in honor of the district mascot.

The core competencies captured in the Portrait of a Hornet are Academic Knowledge, Life Skills, Communicator, Collaborator, Character, Integrity, Critical Thinker, and Problem Solver.

Rachel Dial, the district's director of instruction, was pleasantly surprised at the level of community participation in a May 2023 town hall: "We sent out invitations, but then we also did an open invitation on social media, and I was shocked at how many people attended.... [Participants] wrote down what were their things that they needed to see. We had community leaders, we had business leaders, we had parents, and so it was an open forum for us to explain what we were trying to accomplish with our Portrait and establishing those competencies." During that process, communication and presentation skills came up as a priority for attendees.
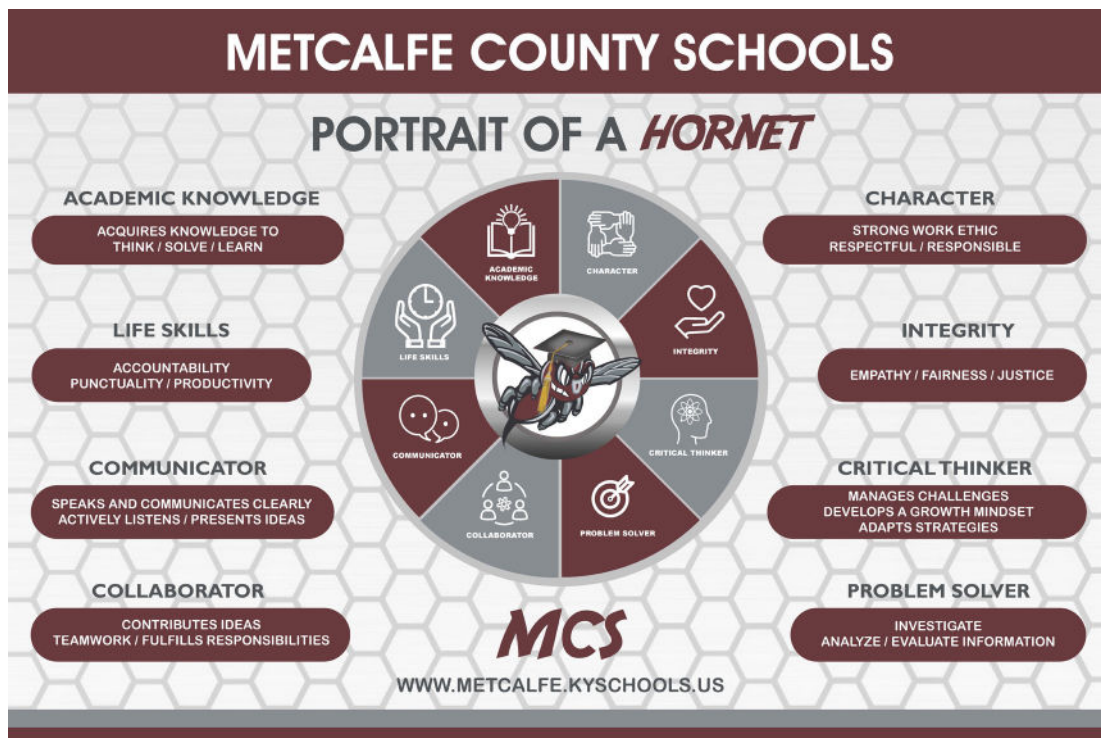
Figure 1: Metcalfe County Schools Portrait of a Hornet

While the elementary and high school are also working to integrate Metcalfe's Portrait of a Hornet, the middle school's deeper learning journey stands out because of how it has embraced project-based learning, with opportunities for every student to present, and a competency-based structure for academics.

Metcalfe County Middle School, perched on a hill next to the county's high school, is several years into a project-based and deeper learning journey. The 2022-23 school year was Metcalfe County Middle School Principal Jenny Stotts-Lundy's second year in the role. After getting to know students and staff and observing classrooms, Stotts-Lundy decided that she would prioritize creating more and deeper student engagement, giving students a chance to be active participants in their own learning. That school year she emphasized building a joyful school culture, or what she calls "Surprise and Delight," borrowed from a neighboring district. Ranging from big, school-wide events, like a 1950s car show inspired by S. E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders,* to smaller classroom dance party breaks, Stotts-Lundy aimed to set the tone for a school learning community where people have fun together: "I know that if the engagement increases, the student learning is going to increase, and then our test scores are going to improve, too."

The work on school culture and active engagement was a natural bridge to address deeper learning and the Portrait of a Hornet. During morning announcements, a student ambassador reads a script about one of the Portrait of a Hornet skills and what it means in student-friendly language. The focus skill rotates each month. In each classroom, a magnetic version of the Portrait of a Hornet graphic on the whiteboard keeps the language of the Hornet competencies front and center. For example, one wedge of the Portrait graphic might be pulled out and connected to the day's learning objective.

Stotts-Lundy shared: "Each day, if you go into a classroom, you'll see they have their task on the board and their learning target…. [For example,] 'today we're working on being a better communicator,' and that's right next to their learning target." Even though the magnet wheel has been around for only one year, middle school math teacher Buddy Brockman has seen the success: "[Students know that the Portrait]

should be on every teacher's board.... They hear it every single day." Brockman added, "My little girl is in third grade, and I hope that by the time she makes it to sixth grade up here, she'll know exactly every single part."

On the day of final presentations, students could name which Portrait of a Hornet skill they used in their project. For example, a sixth grader dressed as Hercules with a Lego display talked about being a creative problem solver when determining how to represent the lion that he would defeat.

An Emphasis on Student Presentations and Choice

MCMS's emphasis on student presentation opportunities came because they saw that communication skills were elevated during district-wide deeper learning community sessions. Following project-based learning training, Stotts-Lundy gave a soft mandate for teachers to do one student project and presentation experience per semester: "I just wanted [teachers] to try ... to identify authentic, real-world audiences for [students'] products and to present their work."

In the first year, the school organized two exhibition days to give students a chance to demonstrate proficiency at milestone moments. The presentation day successfully showcased the importance of communication skills and hands-on learning. Students also appreciate being given a choice on what to present. A seventh grader reflected: "I feel like ... [the] projects helped me develop character and ... become a good communicator with the people around me." Vicky, another student, found that presentations forced her to step out of her comfort zone: "[It] made me be a good communicator ... and ... kind of let me open up."

Project-based learning is at the core of these student presentations. All of the MCMS teachers attended a project-based learning training in the summer of 2023 (and one teacher hired since then is attending in the summer of 2025). PBLWorks facilitated the training, which was organized by the Green River Regional Education Cooperative (GRREC), one of eight cooperatives across the state with the mandate of supporting schools and leading the deeper learning grant implementation. Most of the teaching staff participated in the training, including two teachers who had already been attending GRREC Deeper Learning Team meetings as part of the Kentucky Department of Education grant the year prior.

© Metcalfe County Middle School

Principal Stotts-Lundy and the deeper learning team teachers invited a small group of about a dozen MCMS students to pilot an eighth grade Defense of Learning process in March 2025 in anticipation of expanding it to all eighth-grade students in the future. The students represented an intentional mix of those who excel in traditional academic learning and others who shine more in the Portrait of a Hornet. In their first-ever exhibition night, students presented on areas of their learning where they have demonstrated proficiency and the ways they are growing in the Portrait of a Hornet competencies to an audience of staff, families, community members, and statewide external partners, including representatives from GRREC and the University of Kentucky. In a parallel evening in May, the high school also held a twelfth grade Defense of Learning pilot.

Seventh grader Barrett enjoys the project-based approach to learning: "When you're ... just writing it down, you're kind of just ... droning out, like ... I just need to write this and then it's done. But with projects you ... actually ... learn and take in the information that you need."

Systems of Linear Equations (8 Math) – Customized	
4.0	**The student will:** Develop a strategy to solve a system of linear equations in three variables (for example, reason that because a solution to a system of equations is the solution to each equation in the system it must preserve information from all the equations; apply that reasoning in using the substitution or elimination methods to solve the system of equations $x - y = 2$, $3x + z = 11$, and $y - 2z = -3$).
3.5	In addition to score 3.0 performance, partial success at score 4.0 content
3.0	**The student will:** **SLE1—Estimate the solutions to systems of linear equations from a graph of the equations** (for example, graph a system of linear equations and estimate possible solutions to the system from the graph). **SLE2—Identify systems of linear equations with one solution, no solution, or infinitely many solutions** (for example, inspect or solve the equations in a system of linear equations to identify whether they indicate a consistent or inconsistent system and, if consistent, whether the system is dependent or independent). **SLE3—Solve systems of two linear equations in two variables** (for example, find the values of both x and y in the system of linear equations including $2x + 3y = 12$ and $x + 4y = 11$ using both the elimination and substitution methods).
2.5	In addition to score 3.0 performance, partial success at score 4.0 content

Figure 2: Systems of Linear Equations Proficiency Scale

Shifting to Competency-Based Learning with Proficiency Scales

With the Portrait of a Hornet in place, and student demonstrations and presentations becoming a vibrant part of the school culture, MCMS is now turning toward assessment approaches to support deeper learning in academics. They use proficiency scales to define and measure expectations and make them visible to students, teachers, and families. These assess student competency using a scale to define a transparent progression of learning for a learning goal (which could be a traditional academic standard or a transferable competency).

MCMS's proficiency scales cover both academic outcomes and Portrait of a Hornet outcomes to clearly show what it looks like to have achieved mastery in both domains. In contrast to traditional grading and course structures, which average performance on assignments and assessments, proficiency scales make the required content and skills outcomes transparent: what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do, and what it will look like when they get there. The academic proficiency scales form the basis for what is reported in a student's report card. MCMS currently converts the 4.0 score into a traditional grade, which is more accessible to families. Also, individual student progress toward the Portrait of a Hornet competencies is not currently reported on separately, but it has informed the broader and more tangible definition of success. Each core subject at MCMS has about 10 to 12 priority standards per grade level linked with proficiency scales.

MCMS leaders decided to purchase and use proficiency scales from Marzano Resources and are identifying places for revision and streamlining instead of building their own from scratch. The process has not been without its challenges, as teachers navigate the learning curve of using the scales and work to align their curricular materials and instruction. Even so, teacher Leslie London believes that the use of proficiency scales has helped shift the culture of learning: "My kids had good grades before. Okay. Now we're not focused on the grades…. We're focused on the learning and [questions like:] … Are they comprehending verbal text? Is it written text?… Are they using context clues?… Can they draw conclusions? Can they do inferencing? I'm looking at specific things." Behind the scenes, Green River Regional Educational Cooperative-sponsored educator learning opportunities and a state literacy grant have advanced this work.

After refining the proficiency scales based on the first year of implementation, MCMS will continue to align the existing curriculum and assessments to the proficiency scales and shift instruction accordingly. Teachers are building their own skills around communicating the target proficiency scales at the start of learning so students know where they are and what they are aiming for. Similarly, teachers are adjusting to the increased need to responsively shift instruction based on formative assessments. Teachers and instructional leaders also have discovered a need to redesign some assessments to measure everything required in the proficiency scale.

In addition to the structural and pedagogical elements needed for reporting on proficiencies, which are both still under development, Principal Stotts-Lundy is mindful of how they'll communicate to families, since 0-100 grading is so familiar. As the proficiency scales are refined and made available to families more fully next school year via their website and communication channels, Stotts-Lundy expects confidence and understanding to grow.

© Metcalfe County Middle School

Deepening the Culture of Learning with Student and Educator Leadership

MCMS's culture of care is a foundation for its culture of learning. Reflecting on the March 2025 all-student exhibition day, Principal Stotts-Lundy shared: "I'm proud of our staff. They've just worked so hard with the kids and making sure that they have that option to give their student voice and have that choice." The day shows a milestone in MCMS's deeper learning journey that began nearly three years ago with their school culture and engagement work. After reflecting on the many pep talks and practice runs she supported as students prepared for the exhibition day, school counselor Candi Murphy explained: "We're creating not just students and manufacturing all of that stuff. We're creating learners, lifelong learners, and trying to help our students be the best possible humans that they can be."

Within the school-wide shift toward competency-based and project-based learning, students also have numerous opportunities to contribute to the community while gaining hands-on skills and exposure to possible career paths:

- Around 15 students across grade levels serve on the Student Ambassador Club and get interviewed by the principal. They serve as representatives and guides when guests spend time at MCMS.

- Students in MCMS's Media class learn interviewing, editing, production, and other skills. They are responsible for the morning announcements, including reading the featured Portrait of a Hornet competency of the month, and produce a weekly TV news segment, "the Hornet Buzz."

- A class called Service Learning started as a club but became a class when there were simply too many projects the teachers and students wanted to pursue. The selection process for the class includes recommendations from two teachers, a personal statement, and an interview focused on character and desire to improve MCMS and the broader community. When a large tree fell in a city park, one team proposed building a staircase from the tree rounds. The group leads the school's recycling program, which raises money for field trips, and students have painted rocks around the community with affirming and uplifting messages.

- Students in a sewing group are working to turn old garments into fresh designs for a fashion show in the spring that will also serve as a school-wide "surprise and delight."

Deeper learning lead teachers Brockman and London, who also lead the Service Learning class, have been integral in supporting their peers through training and modeling. While teachers are working through shifts in practice, there is a sense of community and progress. Social studies teacher Jennifer Wright shares: "I love the team I'm on. We all seem to work together and help each other out … and the support of the community is always great around here in a smaller community." Science teacher Randy Murphy brings the focus back to the purpose: "I believe that teachers who have bought in on this can reawaken a student's active consciousness to want to do more…. Last year I got a lot of those [student] aha moments. This year … they're having them more and more frequently, and I think that has a lot to do with what Metcalfe's goals are, what the climate and culture are."

Working with the local community through projects creates personal connections between students and their learning, which then can translate into deeper learning and engagement with the content. In describing a major engineering design project he's developed, Murphy explained: "If I say, do you care about climate change? Do you care about carbon dioxide in the atmosphere?… But if I say that your budget for winterizing your barn is $3,000-$4,000, then they start digging as to how I can lower that cost. Oh, look, these things save you on carbon. They make your life cheaper. See that there's different angles here." Wright agrees that projects help students "to understand the actual content of it through actions, visuals, actually doing things on their own and taking ownership of it, instead of, you know, just kind of sit and get."

> *"We're creating not just students and manufacturing all of that stuff. We're creating learners, lifelong learners, and trying to help our students be the best possible humans that they can be."*
>
> – School Counselor Candi Murphy

The principal, assistant principal, counselor, and two lead Deeper Learning teachers often plan and lead the rollout of deeper learning practices. The team tries to balance consistent progress with making changes bite-sized. Looking forward, Principal Stotts-Lundy is planning training for teachers to become more independent leaders and facilitators of their PLCs (professional learning communities). Stotts-Lundy wants teachers to be able to drive their own learning and planning based on student data, including projects and Defenses of Learning, as well as standardized assessment data.

Expanding the ways students and educators can engage in their learning and lead in their community is a pathway to sustainability at MCMS. After students experience their first success, they are more likely to build the confidence they need to then discover specific passions and interests. Assistant Principal LeAnne Bell shared a story about a student who created and presented a book: "I took his picture because his mom is going to cry when she sees it. I mean, because I know his speech goals, and so to know he was 1) presenting, and 2) he was showing he's met those goals." Momentum is building at Metcalfe Middle School — with students, the staff, and the community — as people see what they are capable of and that they are part of a larger effort to move toward deeper learning for Kentucky learners.

A Day of Presentations and Student Pride

During a busy spring day in 2025, almost every shared space in the MCMS building was filled with students making dynamic presentations of their work to community members and visitors. Two weeks earlier, each student got to choose what to present from among the handful of larger projects they'd completed that year. Grandparents, retired teachers, and partners from a university extension program, among others, volunteered to serve on panels and provide feedback.

In the auditorium, nervous sixth graders dressed as Medusa, Poseidon, and other Greek gods and goddesses, described their character's mythology, and explained their research process and preparations for the day.

In the front hallway, pairs of Algebra 1 students took turns explaining their "Ice Cream Shoppe" math challenge. Earlier in the year, students used mathematical equations to decide which ingredients and toppings to include, balancing cost with anticipated profits. During a week of ice cream sales, high school students and community members purchased sundaes, and the team with the highest profits won. The second place team missed by only one sale, but they also ordered more ice cream than they needed.

© Metcalfe County Middle School

An eighth-grade student explained the autonomy they had in the project: "We got to basically choose how to run a business.... The only thing [the teacher] did was buy our ice cream and stuff for us and we did everything else, so we managed ... all our choices, and we tied that into our linear equation, because we looked at data from how much we sold ice cream."

A different group of Algebra 1 students demonstrated the Barbie bungee-jumping engineering challenge. Using algebra and physics, they calculated the length of bungee cord that Barbie would need to safely enjoy the adrenaline rush of jumping over the rail from the atrium's second floor. On the other side of the second-floor atrium, students who read *Night* by Elie Wiesel set up a Holocaust memorial museum. Students displayed their original work, including sculptures of an arm with a number tattooed, models of concentration camps, and drawings of key people or moments. Accompanying artist statements explained the choices they made and how their work represented the themes of the book, including fear, loss, and hope. In the library, other students presented fantasy football statistics and coding challenges.

Though every student did some kind of project-based learning presentation the prior year, for some sixth graders, it was their first time sharing with an audience beyond their classroom. For everyone, it was a chance to show pride and confidence in what they had done.

> *"We actually get to do hands-on stuff and learn from what we're doing."*
>
> – Metcalfe County Middle School Student

Reflecting on what is different with deeper learning compared to past change efforts, Leslie London, deeper learning lead teacher and Special Education and Service Learning teacher, said: "I have to admit it's a fun way to teach. I mean, I don't come in dreading school, because my kids are having a good time and they're learning. And it's not just about fun. They're *learning*."

Student after student echoed feeling more engaged:

"I like Metcalfe because we do actual hands-on stuff, and not just sitting at a desk and on a computer."

"We do a lot of interactive activities that are focused more towards learning more and really get into details about certain subjects."

"We actually get to do hands-on stuff and learn from what we're doing."

Woodford County Public Schools: Pathways to the Portrait

Woodford County Public Schools | Versailles, KY

- **Schools:** Seven schools, grades PK-12: four PK-5 elementary schools, a 6-8 middle school, a high school, and a small 6-12 alternative program
- **Students:** 4,152
- **Economically disadvantaged:** 50.2%
- **Multilingual learners:** 8.4%
- **Student race/ethnicity:**
  - White: 73.2%
  - Hispanic/Latino: 16.5%
  - Black: 3.6%
  - Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.8%
  - American Indian or Alaska Native: 0.1%
  - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: 0%
  - Students of two or more races: 5.7%

Versailles
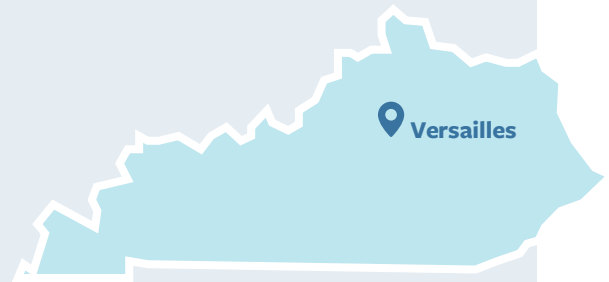
Generating and Integrating the Portrait of a Learner

In 2022, Woodford County Public Schools (WCPS) received a $67K deeper learning grant from the Kentucky Association of Educational Cooperatives. The work started in earnest in November, when the district assembled a Deeper Learning Team of 14 members, including 10 teachers representing each age level, administrators, and community folks who included the mayor and a parent who is also a librarian in the district. The team met for a year with the goal of crafting the district's Portrait of a Learner. A key document explains: "The Portrait of a Learner is a set of five competencies which will serve as the lens through which all curriculum and instruction, as well as student and staff opportunities, will be filtered. The Portrait of a Learner will be both the foundation and the inspiration for educating students in WCPS."

Sessions facilitated by Lu Young, chair of the Kentucky Board of Education and director of the University of Kentucky's Center for Next Generation Leadership and Next Generation Educational Partnerships, helped the team define expectations for learner outcomes. Through community meetings and surveys, staff, students, and families gave input, after which the Deeper Learning Team generated drafts of the PoL. Teachers on the team piloted ways to engage students in learning and demonstrating the PoL competencies in their classrooms before the end of the 2022-23 school year.

The final text and logo were unveiled in August at the opening of the 2023-24 school year. The five core competencies elevated by the working group were: Resilient Learner, Reflective Collaborator, Empathetic

Communicator, Creative Problem-Solver, and Responsible Contributor. The district published deeper explanations of each one, including a video and graphic, on its [website](). Because Woodford County is in the heart of Kentucky's bluegrass and horse farm region, the visual aligns with community themes.

Ryan Asher, WCPS chief academic officer, sees the importance of a shared definition: "[We want people to] understand deeper learning, and that it's not neglecting standards. It takes both the Portrait competencies and academics to get to student success."

All WCPS schools spent the 2023-24 school year doing what Woodford called Learn, Launch, Look:

- *Learn* the competencies and the characteristics of each one.
- *Launch* the language in schools and classrooms.
- *Look* through the PoL lens to find ways to incorporate these competencies, adapt instruction, and align the curriculum to support deeper learning.

Learn took the form of teachers and students getting familiar with the language of the Portrait of a Learner. After hanging posters around every school and in every classroom, teachers and staff members pointed out relevant competencies during in-class and out-of-class time. Allie Buchannan, a fourth-grade teacher at Huntertown Elementary, explained: "At the end of the day, my goal is that [students] have these competencies and these skills that they can take beyond our walls and apply to real-world situations."

Launch built on the first step to help students understand, recognize, and integrate the language of the competencies. At Huntertown Elementary, one teacher even came up with hand signals for each of the five competencies to help students absorb the concepts. One student explained: "If we were talking about being reflective collaborators, we would do the motion [for] reflective collaborators, and we would talk about how it helped us." Pointing out which competency they were practicing really caught on with students, so the practice spread to other campuses — and eventually the whole district.

Figure 3: Woodford County Public Schools Portrait of a Learner

Look invited educators to identify connections and seek opportunities to embed the competencies into day-to-day classroom experiences and instructional strategies. As part of the expectations for their grant-funded stipends, the Deeper Learning Team teachers took the lead in using the Portrait of a Learner competencies in their classrooms and shared with each other as part of their collaborative work. This kick-started inquiry and experimentation and modeled ideas for integrating the Portrait into instruction for other teachers.

In 2024, to continue its investment in teacher learning and leadership, the district launched a Deeper Learning Academy. The goal is to build the cadre of teacher leaders advancing WCPS's deeper learning goals through their own practice and modeling for their peers.
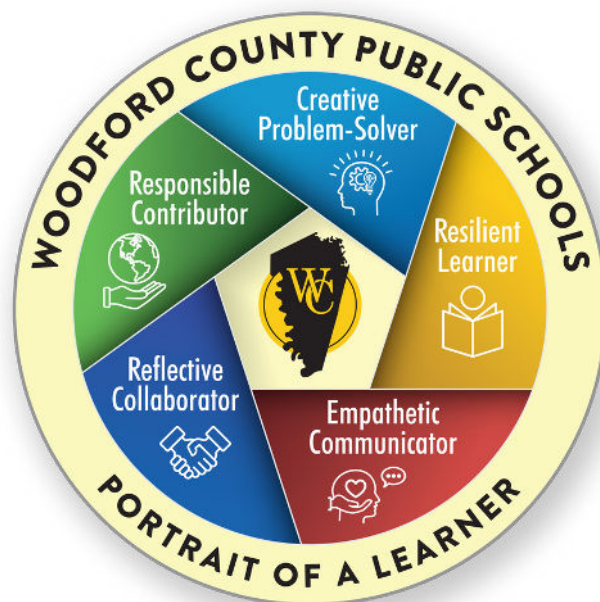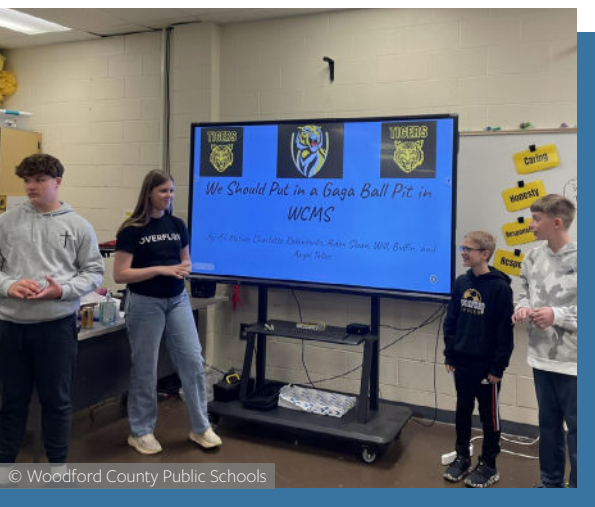
Pathways to the Portrait — For All

With greater fluency school-wide about the Portrait of a Learner, Woodford County Public Schools set the expectation that every teacher across the district's seven schools provide some kind of student exhibition opportunity during the 2024-25 school year. Teachers could decide the format, as long as it gave students a chance to present in front of a real-world audience. "Just try" serves as the motto, which aligns with the district's Green Light Culture.

© Woodford County Public Schools

All students get the chance to do some kind of presentation, whether to an audience of families, a community partner, or students in other grades. The level of formality and quality still vary — sometimes students are reading from the slide, and other times they can confidently speak of their learning — but all get a chance to practice the Portrait of a Learner competencies, even in the early grades. Buchannan proudly explained: "I have a first grader here in the building, and she can communicate at home with her little brothers, 'Okay, let's be a resilient learner, and let's try that again. You got your shoes on the wrong feet.'"

Finding real-world audiences relies on community involvement, so the district convened and hopes to grow a Woodford Wins Community Partner Network. Teachers also help other teachers make connections when there is a need for a group or individual with specific expertise. Connections give students real-world exposure, increase service-learning opportunities, and better unify the school and community under a shared vision.

At Woodford County Middle School, engineering teacher Heather Clontz led a school improvement project as a way to weave the Portrait of a Learner into her coursework. One group of students proposed building a pit for the game GaGa Ball, a form of dodgeball played inside an octagonal shape, which students could use during a weekly Friday activity block. The students planned the materials, researched the costs, identified two local businesses to sponsor the project, and selected a grassy spot outside that wasn't being used. When sharing their work on this project, students reflected on the Portrait of a Learner competencies they had demonstrated: they were Resilient Learners who figured out what was needed; Empathetic Communicators who respectfully interacted with businesses and thoughtfully presented their pitch; and Reflective Collaborators who brainstormed their idea and worked with the custodial staff to construct the GaGa pit after they got permission for their proposal.

The middle school created Portrait Time, a daily class to focus specifically on the competencies. In April 2025, students gave short presentations from their favorite projects. One student proudly explained his handmade cardboard pinball machine. Another student introduced his passion project to spread awareness and knowledge about Naloxone, which can save the life of someone experiencing an opioid overdose. He explained that his desire to build understanding and save lives illustrated the Empathetic Communicator competency.

Eighth-grade students practiced their upcoming Defense of Learning presentations, where they share evidence of their learning and growth and practice career-relevant communication skills. Using a school-provided slide template that each student

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customized, they reflected on how they demonstrated multiple Portrait of a Learner competencies through projects, classes, or extracurricular activities that year. Each presenter named specific goals connected to the competencies, such as improving their patience or organization to be a more Resilient Learner.

After a recent visit to a neighboring district, the middle school will experiment with adding an "Amazing Shake" competition element that will involve community partners. Susan Tracy, director of student achievement, shared, "a lot of these paths are so intertwined because … when [community partners from the Woodford network] see things that they can get excited about, then I hope that they realize 'that's something I want to be a part of.'"

A partnership with the city mayor jump-started community engagement and created Portrait of a Learner opportunities at Northside Elementary School. Scott Hundley, coordinator of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and a parent of a fourth grader, explained: "We had a city council meeting in our gym in front of the entire school, and they basically asked us for help … on giving our community support." During the resulting four "Saddle Up Days," students in each grade worked on an extended project with a service-learning component (the name embraces Woodford County's ties to breeding horses). First graders read *Maddi's Fridge* by Lois Brandt and learned about food insecurity. Fourth graders learned about watersheds and worked with a community organization to fundraise for environmental cleanup at a nearby creek. Each group had to decide the materials they needed, research the costs, and prepare fundraising pitches.

One student talked about how they became more Empathetic Communicators: "We had some struggles, but we figured it out." The service element in some of the projects inspired the staff to expand the community service element into the projects at every grade level next year.

Reflecting on the end-of-year student presentations, Sarah Congleton, a special education teacher for grades 4 and 5, shared: "[S]eeing those kids thrive and learn from this, I can't ask for more as a special ed teacher."

The Golden Horseshoes, a team of student leaders in grades 3 to 5 at Northside, collects data about student opinions to inform school decisions, such as making recommendations for extracurricular clubs. The Horseshoes wanted more events and projects like Saddle Up Days because of the feelings of belonging they gained from working together and the enjoyment they shared from the hands-on learning and opportunity to showcase their learning.

"School before the Portrait of a Learner was kind of just like normal school, but then … as we incorporated it, we got a deeper understanding of what of what we're doing and how it's going to apply to like real life, and how it's going to help my learning."

– Woodford County Student

In general, students across the district appreciate the creative options to demonstrate learning. One student reflected: "School before the Portrait of a Learner was kind of just like normal school, but then … as we incorporated it, we got a deeper understanding of what we're doing and how it's going to apply to like real life, and how it's going to help my learning."

Fifth-grade teacher Rebekah Gooslin appreciates that there is more than one path to exemplify the competencies: "As a child, I struggled in school…. I found my voice through creativity, and that experience became the foundation of how I approach teaching, by recognizing every student's unique strengths

and unlocking their potential through meaningful hands-on learning experiences.... [W]hen you weave in analogies and music and movement and the arts, suddenly something clicks.... [T]rue transformation happens when creativity meets purpose and all students are given the opportunity to shine."

Even as he underscores that Woodford's deeper learning journey is a work in progress, Asher noted: "I can confidently say ... more and more we're seeing [the PoL competencies] grow and grow in truly impacting classroom instruction."
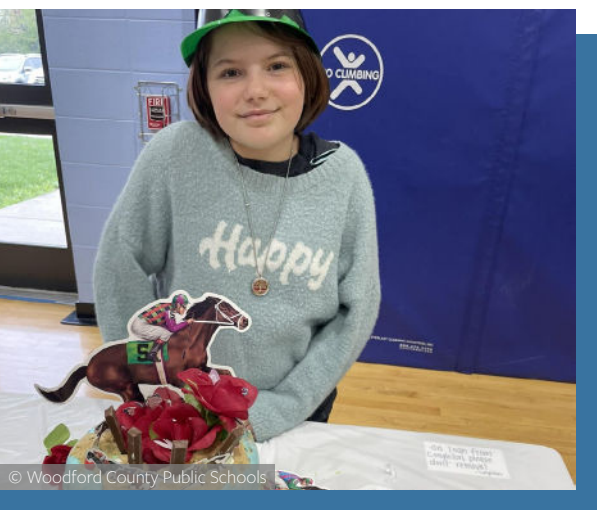
Decorating Cakes for Deeper Learning

In April 2025, Huntertown Elementary School was buzzing with excitement about the second-annual Cake Wars event. Fifth-grade teacher Gooslin happened to be friends with baking legend Timmy Norman, who competes on major TV network shows and owns a cake shop in eastern Tennessee. She tapped him to lead a cake-decorating contest, a creative way for students to practice and present what they'd learned to the school and broader community. Community members were invited to be judges.

In the morning, Norman brought pre-baked cake layers to the gymnasium, which was already lined with tables. Teams of four students executed their selected theme, which they developed over the course of the week. They designed with icing, fondant, and materials sourced from home and shared supplies across groups, including candy, coconut flakes, and props to decorate their table displays. They followed directions on how to bring their plan to life by dyeing the icing different colors and learning how to apply it on the cake with different techniques. Students took on a specific role as either group leader, content creator, timekeeper, or material manager. Each role included a job description and examples of ways the role demonstrates the Portrait of a Learner competencies. This year's 20 teams made cakes with themes like the University of Kentucky, tropical islands, and the Kentucky Derby.

Last year, Gooslin taught students about the "spoons" of effective written synthesis, a metaphor for how to combine background information, evidence, and analysis into a cohesive reflection. Like in baking, where the ingredients need to come together to make a cake, students prepare to combine different sources into a final piece of writing. When making a cake, icing brings the design to the surface. Likewise, writers need to make visible their thinking process and the elements that make up their synthesis. Her students suggested baking an actual cake to make the metaphor complete, and now the school has created an annual tradition. The event fits in nicely with a charge from Woodford County Public Schools that all teachers create at least one student presentation opportunity, known as an exhibition of learning, during the school year.

Teams had two hours to finish icing the cakes, during which they practiced multiple deeper learning skills: teamwork, communication, reading comprehension, and problem-solving. The winning team with a Chicken Little cake also practiced overcoming adversity on the spot: After a table collapsed, they had to salvage their work-in-progress. Audience members voted, including

younger students, school board members, and community visitors, and before announcing the results, Norman praised each team's efforts.

After the event, a student cake decorator reflected on the journey: "We had to use what we learned in the beginning of the year, like our synthesis spoons, our Portrait of a Learner, and apply them to our cake…. We found the process, and we found the steps to make it work together."

Gooslin reflected: "[T]oday is more than just a cake-decorating contest. It's a vibrant learning experience where students collaborate, they create, and they push themselves in ways that matter. They're not just creating or baking, but [they] are building teamwork, critical thinking, and communication [skills] that will serve them for life."

A student echoed the sentiment: "[Deeper learning is] a hard process, and it's a lot of work, but it is definitely worth it."

School Redesign Takes Root — What's Next?

Coherent, consistent leadership that communicates clear expectations, with flexibility for schools and teachers in terms of the details and pace of implementation, has put WCPS on a path toward a transformed deeper learning system.

A teacher from the district's Deeper Learning Team said that for him, the message that resonated most about the WCPS approach to change was "gentle pressure applied consistently." Superintendent Danny Adkins said it more directly: "Compliance and mandates rob us of the authentic work — even if they focus on good practices that are effective, they cause us to veer from the path. This is about shifting the culture of how we work, where every student and educator understands and shares the goals and outcomes. As educators we owe it to every student to allow them to define their own success!"

The deeper learning grant gave the spark of energy for this work. Moving forward, even as the grant funds dry up, district leadership continues to balance encouraging experimentation at the school level with systematically aligning the Portrait of a Learner with other elements of the WCPS education system.

After the Learn, Launch, Look campaign of 2023-24, WCPS is prioritizing a five-year plan for schools to align their learning systems so all learners can create a unique and personalized pathway to Woodford's Portrait of a Learner competencies. This includes a few areas of focus, some supported by district resources and others happening at the school level.

One is adapting instruction to support deeper learning, including reviewing academic and Portrait expectations and aligning the curriculum to those expectations. WCPS worked with a facilitator from Solution Tree to use a REAL protocol — an acronym for Readiness, Endurance, Assessed, Leverage — to

Standards by number	Readiness essential for student to be successful in the next class	Endurance a skill useful beyond a single test or unit	Assessed likely to be assessed on upcoming state or national exams	Leverage knowledge or skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines	Teacher Judgment determined that this skill is essential and should be prioritized	Total Score
RF.3.3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
RF.3.4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
RI.3.1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5

Figure 4: REAL Priority Outcomes

create a process and set of criteria for reviewing standards and deciding which must be taught at the deepest levels. The process aimed to identify 10 to 15 priority outcomes within the Kentucky Academic Standards for each academic discipline and grade level.

> *"What I have seen since Portrait of a Learner and deeper learning has been instituted is the unifying of the entire district around this philosophy…. And you can go to any school, which I do, and hear about how they're being an Empathetic Communicator, and they know what it means."*
>
> – School Board Chair Adam Brickler

Using the protocol will help teachers create sufficient opportunities within the curriculum to learn both academic and Portrait of a Learner competencies.

Another emphasis of the upcoming work is to mirror professional learning to the pedagogical goals of deeper learning. To kick off the 2025-26 school year, teachers will choose from a menu of sessions, each tied to a strand in the Paths to the Portrait strategic plan. Examples include: "Innovative Ways to Utilize Technology for Student Demonstrations of Learning," "Use Microsoft Teams to Monitor Reading Progress of Your Students," and "Performance Assessments." Some of the sessions also connect to cohort learning opportunities to create a community of practice throughout the year.

While all eighth graders did a Defense of Learning presentation at the culmination of the 2024-25 school year, the district aims to expand this to fifth and twelfth grades by the 2027-28 school year. Piloting at the middle school illustrates the feasibility of school-level autonomy to create a path toward district-defined goals. Another example of district leadership alongside school autonomy is ongoing conversations on whether and how to include Portrait of a Learner competencies in the teacher evaluation system. The district's Deeper Learning Team reunited at Cake Wars 2025 to see the work in action and to give input and feedback on the Paths to the Portrait plan. They brought a few concrete ideas about integrating Portrait competencies into teacher evaluations but also listened to local leaders who suggested using competencies in teacher goal setting and keeping it separate from the formal evaluation framework.

Woodford's Portrait of a Learner has become a foundational tool to shape school design. School board chair Adam Brickler shared: "What I have seen since Portrait of a Learner and deeper learning has been instituted is the unifying of the entire district around this philosophy…. And you can go to any school, which I do, and hear about how they're being an Empathetic Communicator, and they know what it means."


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Beechwood Independent Schools: A PK-12 Vision for Learning and Leading in Today's World

Beechwood Independent Schools | Fort Mitchell, KY

- Cincinnati Metropolitan area
- **Schools:** Two traditional schools, Beechwood High School (7-12) and Beechwood Elementary School (PK-6); Guardian Angel School for DCCH orphanage
- **Students:** 1,587
- **Economically disadvantaged:** 14.9%
- **Multilingual learners:** 4.2%
- **Student race/ethnicity:**
  - White: 85.5%
  - Hispanic/Latino: 8%
  - Black: 1.5%
  - Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander: 1.9%
  - American Indian or Alaska Native: 0.1%
  - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: 0.1%
  - Students of two or more races: 3%

Fort Mitchell
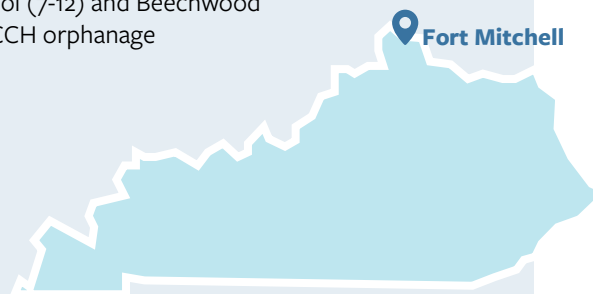
Communities and Schools in Partnership

At both Beechwood High School and Beechwood Elementary School, real-world learning opportunities have been a core part of the learning experience for several years. Even before receiving the deeper learning grant in 2022, their "Educational Design Geared toward Experience" (EDGE) program has centered experiential learning as a way to develop academic and soft skills in all grades.

The two schools are located on the other side of the Ohio River from Cincinnati, part of a large metropolitan area with a global airport hub and many universities, so they have plenty of opportunities for post-secondary and career exposure. In 2015, Beechwood leaders harnessed those resources to ask families, local employers, and nearby universities: "What does Beechwood need to do to create a better graduate?" These conversations yielded the feedback that while students were high performers with strong test scores, stakeholders did not see sufficient development of professional and interpersonal skills like creativity, collaboration, resilience, time management, and teamwork. These needed to become an emphasis of the learning experiences, rather than an afterthought.

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Beechwood took the feedback to heart and launched a robust process to research and define competencies that students need to flourish, whether they go directly to the workforce or to college. Beechwood first published these seven "Core Concepts" (similar to Portrait of a Learner competencies) in the 2016 school year, though they have been further refined since:

- Think Critically and Creatively
- Reflect and Grow
- Sustain Inquiry
- Communicate and Collaborate
- Plan and Be Strategic
- Pursue Excellence of Outcomes
- Research and Analyze Data

Through the EDGE program, Beechwood brings its Core Concepts to life and makes sure students gain transferable skills, industry exposure, and leadership opportunities — all while maintaining academic rigor. Superintendent Dr. Mike Stacy felt the urgency to reinvent learning for the 21st century: "There is absolutely no reason for any kid at any … grade level or ability level to sit in a seat for seven hours a day and listen to another human being. We have to look at how we build in hands-on, experiential, real-life opportunities to help speed up that knowledge and information we need them to have to be successful in today's workforce."

The Deeper Learning grant Beechwood received in 2022 — $12,000 per year over three years — wasn't necessarily a game-changer for Beechwood. Instead, it was an opportunity to build on the many years of smart work and share their approach and successes with other Kentucky districts. Most of the money went to stipends for teachers to revise or update curriculum and create new courses or challenges. Beechwood also created an EDGE-certified teacher program where teachers opt in to a year-long training to become advocates and leaders in the model.

Justin Kaiser, high school principal when the work launched and now director of operations, summarized the EDGE approach with two words: "purposeful alignment, an alignment of what's going on inside and outside the classroom — alignment to the community, alignment to the region's workforce, and alignment to the skills necessary to be successful, regardless of what you do when you leave here."

Purposeful Alignment Across a PK-12 System

The EDGE experience threads throughout the PK-12 curriculum. Sarah Schobel, director of curriculum, explained: "Where many school programs like 'academies' are selective or only for certain students, we were adamant from the beginning that 100% of the students would be a part of the EDGE program. In fact, one of the greatest strengths of the program that we love is that many students who may face challenges in core content classes or school in general get to shine and thrive in this skill- and experience-based curriculum."

Threading EDGE throughout all grades took time and started small, allowing room for teachers and students to build comfort. Kaiser explained: "It's gonna take a while to have a mind shift like this. And so that patience on one end and on the other end, the amount of vision work that happened, whether it be at the leadership district wide, to the building, to departments, it trickled down…. [T]here was never an overhaul…. We did a little bit here. We take two steps forward, one step back."

First, district and building leaders and teachers designed a Seminar course for grades 5-8 to improve a flex time block in the middle school schedule. In Seminar, middle schoolers meet local business professionals,

explore career fields and post-secondary paths, and ultimately decide their focus for high school. The learning happens through 4- to 6-week EDGE challenges that require students to apply the Core Concepts to real-life scenarios. An EDGE Challenge Template guides teachers in the planning process. A well-developed challenge includes a focus on a Core Concept, engagement with an external partner, and opportunities for students to reflect, collaborate, make choices, and use feedback. Challenges include an authentic deliverable, but they also intentionally emphasize process over product.

Once the middle school Seminar was established, Beechwood district leaders, working with their staff, spent the next eight-plus years expanding EDGE into the earlier and later grades. Now, from kindergarten to fourth grade, students learn and internalize the seven Core Concepts through project-based challenges incorporated into the core curriculum.

The "Communicate and Collaborate" Core Concept really comes to life through the challenges, with all students assigned a role in their groups. An eighth-grade student shared that the roles help address conflict: "If someone ever gets off task, you can be that leader and just help them get back on task, just as they may do to you when you get off task as well. I've been here since kindergarten, and that's just been, like, engraved in my mind, that everyone can be a leader and everyone can be a learner as well, that those two things are intertwined."

> "The depth of knowledge that they get from these challenges is far more than giving them a page out of a workbook."
>
> – Fifth-grade science teacher Toby Parton

Alicia Wittmer, assistant principal at the elementary school, sees the challenges as part of a broader "whole child" approach that tackles academic concepts alongside life skills: "[W]atching our younger students learn what it means to work together.... [B]y the time they get to sixth grade, they are truly collaborating. This isn't just a group project that your parents also help you facilitate.... These students are learning ... their strengths and weaknesses collaborating with people. And they're faced with that head on, as opposed to waiting till they have their first job as a grown-up."

Fifth-grade science and Seminar teacher Toby Parton has envisioned an exhibit design challenge that can be paired with different disciplinary content and partners. In science class, students built and designed an exhibit for a new elephant joining the local zoo. They met with an exhibit designer who explained how he tours other zoos to do research when designing for a new animal, including meeting with biologists and zoologists to inform architectural decisions. In social studies, they have visited the Cincinnati Museum Center as research for making their own Indigenous peoples exhibit. Parton reflected: "The depth of knowledge that they get from these challenges is far more than giving them a page out of a workbook."

In Seminar, students also begin to curate a digital EDGE portfolio with evidence of their learning in their Google Drives. This doesn't always have to be evidence of their best work, but rather, evidence of their growth and learning process, tied to each of the Core Concepts. At the end of sixth and eighth grades, students present a Defense of Learning explaining their growth as learners and showing the ways they've demonstrated the Core Concepts. An eighth-grade student reflected: "I think it's great to say how we've grown and not just how great we are, because obviously not everything we do is awesome, and it's nice to know that we've grown from where we came from."

In high school, students choose from nine "minors": Engineering, BioMed, Entrepreneurship, Informatics, Media Design, Culinary, Fine Arts, Performing Arts, and Education. Traditional core content academics are seen as a student's "major," with a continued emphasis on rigor across both their major and their minor. By the time they are in high school, students have met multiple community partners and been exposed to the district's nine minors through Seminar, as a focus for their remaining four years. Students can switch minors if they change their minds, or even select more than one.

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While students are not required to complete a minor for graduation, most do. All minors were designed by the district's leadership team in conjunction with community partners and teachers. They were informed by what Beechwood graduates had been choosing to study in college, the demands of the local job market, and the options available in their community. Beechwood gives tailored attention to students with a range of learning needs through modified Defense of Learning rubrics and by specifically seeking out business partners who may represent a specific student identity or experience. Director of Curriculum Sarah Schobel uses this motto to describe these opportunities for exposure: "If you can see it, you can be it."

The challenge format has generated a specialized curriculum that brings the Core Concepts to life. Multiple universities and over 150 local businesses are plugged in, by giving input on the program structure and content, hosting challenges, or creating internships for seniors. Many partners serve on an annual basis for a challenge they have co-designed, such as bridge design with the Kentucky transportation department, an ethics challenge for the BioMed course with the University of Cincinnati, and a population challenge with Xavier University about issues northern Kentucky faces.

During the 2024-25 school year, 110 of 145 seniors participated in an internship, early college/dual credit experience, or research project. The recently redesigned school building incorporates many windows and glass walls so that students in lower grades can literally see the work happening in the minor pathways. The 2024-25 school year was the first time that all 145 seniors, whether in one of the minors or not, were required to complete another Defense of Learning before they graduate. High school Principal Alan Yanke knew that some teachers were nervous about the lack of grades for the defenses and whether students would still take the requirement seriously. But motivation and engagement was still high, he explained: "[T]hey felt such a sense of purpose and accomplishment. And we explained … how they could then use that for their college applications, for scholarships, to connect to their LinkedIn accounts, … and they felt the true value." After presenting to an audience of community partners, one senior reflected that Senior Defense of Learning was "about selling ourselves and presenting what we have learned…. [I]t felt good, because it was like a proud moment."

A Culture of Feedback Reinforces Job-Ready Skills

An important component of EDGE challenges is that they are ungraded until high school. Students get feedback throughout the process from peers, teachers, and external professionals and learn to adapt their work based on input. That feedback is a core part of the work process and product, rather than a final grade.

There is no traditional homework in middle school Seminar classes, which are also ungraded to encourage students to focus on developing the skills of giving and receiving efficient feedback, learning from failure, and self-reflection for deeper learning.

Beechwood High School had a reputation of being a very competitive school, so this shift has been a way to intentionally build students' ability to practice failing and growing from their mistakes. Eliminating the valedictorian in favor of Latin honors in the 2018-2019 school year was part of the process, and engagement and skills-building are still flourishing even without those external benchmarks. Art teacher Hannah Wolf described it as "building up their ability and … stamina for feedback," contrasting it with her own college experience of getting back a test, looking at the grade, and then filing it away without more thought. A senior student, who is in the Entrepreneurship minor, shared that she has learned to see feedback as "more of like a gift." Elementary Principal Zach Ashley said: "A sixth-grade language arts teacher had never seen so much participation in teaching 'The Giver.'" Given these developments, even hesitant educators are coming around to the approach.

Getting written and verbal feedback at multiple stages and from multiple audiences means that students have ways to demonstrate learning, and that standardized tests are not over-relied on as a measure of performance and mastery. Entrepreneurship teacher Michelle Stamper shared: "[W]hen I was in school with the check-the-box mentality, … where you turn in an assignment, you get a grade, you never look at it again. Or you take a test, you regurgitate all the information that you memorized, [but] you didn't really apply the knowledge. You just circled the right answers. You got a grade, you moved on. [Our challenge approach] really gets them to think … 'Hey, I can always improve this, and it's not dead once it's turned in.'"

Sixth-grade Seminar teacher Jennifer Gasser added that the intentional emphasis on iterative design across all seminars and challenges has helped students learn about "failing forward." Gasser said: "You're not going to finish a project and … have it right the first time. [Y]ou can always go back through the process, test, go back, fix, change, make it better. So I think for us, it's the design process and letting the kids know that it's okay to not get it right the first time."

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Even without grades, students demonstrate excitement and intrinsic motivation to do well and grow from their mistakes. Toby Parton, who does fifth-grade science and Seminar, saw this excitement in action: "[M]y fifth graders were getting ready to do their presentations for a big project we had just completed, and they were giving presentations out in the hall. They were getting feedback from me, getting feedback from their peers in the class. But then … sixth graders started stopping to watch them present and giving them feedback. Nobody asked them to do it. The fifth graders didn't ask them to do it. It's just becoming such a natural thing that they're all just like, 'I want to give you feedback.' And they're like, 'I want to get it. I want to receive what you have to say,' instead of being like, 'don't watch me.'"

Career and Community Connections Bring Academics to Life

Students across every grade level at Beechwood Independent Schools regularly solve real-life challenges in collaboration with community organizations and businesses. Examples from the 2024-25 school year alone demonstrate a range of opportunities for creative learning.

High schoolers in a fine arts class decorated a record player for a prominent local company's contest. They listened to Kentucky bluegrass records, came up with a theme and visual style, presented a mock-up for school-wide voting, delegated portions of the final design based on each student's skill set, and painted images using professional art materials. Although their piece was not selected as the competition winner, it was displayed digitally at the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame & Museum. In partnership with the

Last Mile Food Rescue, eighth graders presented to local restaurants encouraging them to donate surplus food to a nonprofit instead of discarding it. The nonprofit gave students feedback on their pitch, and students gained experience with branding, messaging, communication, and persuasion. Jonah, a participating student, reflected: "It's not just about learning ... math or social studies or science. It's also about learning ... how to work together. It also was nice to know that we were making a difference in the real world and trying to stop food insecurity."

Figure 5: Student designed record player

Second graders participated in a real-world, hands-on learning challenge centered around RoRo's Cookies, a local cookie company. This challenge allowed students to explore entrepreneurship, marketing, and product development through an engaging and age-appropriate experience. After learning directly from the company's founder about how cookies are made, marketed, and sold, students used the design thinking model to create a new cookie product. Working in teams, students brainstormed flavors, logos, packaging, and even marketing slogans to pitch their ideas. Ultimately, RoRo's made and sold the students' proposed cookie, working with the second graders on sales, profits, and marketing.

High school students engaged in a high-impact Biomedical EDGE Challenge focused on population health — the science of improving health outcomes across communities — in partnership with a professor and expert in public health from Xavier University. The professor guided students through an exploration of real-world public health challenges, and students analyzed population health data to identify disparities. Then, they proposed evidence-based solutions for improving community wellness. The challenge helped students see themselves as contributors to public health conversations and empowered them to think like change-makers in their communities.
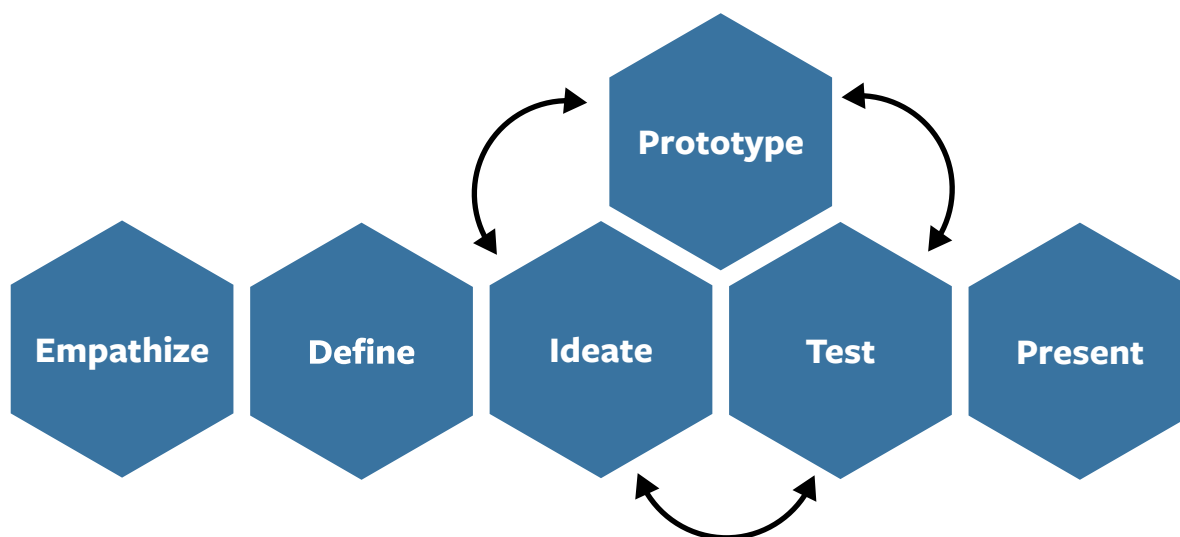

Figure 6: Students engage in design thinking processes

Evolving and Aligning the Vision for the Future

Over the years, the process of designing and teaching through challenges has become part of the Beechwood pedagogical model. While the challenge format initially was concentrated in the grades 5-8 Seminar classes, it now permeates the learning experience from K through 12 in both EDGE and academic spaces. For students and the educators supporting them, going through the EDGE program from the start allows them to show growth in their Core Concepts from sixth grade through their twelfth-grade Defenses of Learning.

As the EDGE program matures, Beechwood leaders continue to steward the evolution of their system and find more opportunities to deepen community and business partnerships. But having a clear North Star provides an anchor for sustainability and consistency. High school Assistant Principal Jana Bromley noted: "The core concepts have been consistent. And so there's ... a very clear vision that was articulated from day one, that's been adhered to even as things have evolved." A few ideas for the future include adding a research component and capstone for each minor during grade 11 or 12. Business/University Liaison Stephanie Layton said: "I would like to see more student-led challenges, where they've come up with a problem, a challenge, an idea, and then who to partner with. I think that not only is giving them some leadership opportunity and skills, but also those soft skills, reaching out to a partner, how to ... mak[e] that contact, mak[e] that ask, all of that."

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>
> – Seminar teacher Amanda Klare

Transforming learning environments and systems also brings up the need for new types of adult roles. A part-time business/university liaison position was created in 2019, and with the need for professional connections, student internships, and partners in the business communities only growing, it was expanded to a full-time staff position in 2022. As of the 2024-25 school year, Beechwood has over 150 business partners, ranging from the financial services industry to city government.

For the past three years, all Beechwood teachers have had the option to pursue an EDGE certification, where they grow as leaders to expand the program. After an application process, selected teachers work through a set of activities and challenges with the support of a district administrative mentor and an EDGE Certified Teacher mentor. Once certified, teachers submit an annual plan for how they'll continue learning and leading, whether by supporting their colleagues or by creating initiatives to expand the EDGE program. Certified teachers get a $1,000 stipend per year and can add the certification as evidence of professional learning and advancement. Kaiser explained: "[W]e're trying to identify ... those targeted individuals who could be the next generation of leaders of this work."

Retiring Superintendent Stacy's belief that "education has to evolve to stay relevant for kids" and that school should not look the same as it did a century ago sparked Beechwood's journey over the past decade. While there are still requirements schools must comply with, Kentucky's shift to deeper, vibrant learning, and its moves to align state assessment and accountability systems, open possibilities for more educators and communities to re-envision what school looks like. Seminar teacher Amanda Klare summed it up: "It's really exciting — the doors that are open for these students because of the connections with businesses and real life learning." Beechwood's transformation shows what deeper learning can look like when a system implements it from kindergarten through to graduation.

Conclusion

Kentucky has made thoughtful investments in supporting education transformation through the United We Learn initiative and its Deeper Learning grants that have put several systems on the path to meaningful shifts in teaching and learning. Local autonomy is at the core of this work, intentionally leaving room for schools, districts, and communities to decide what matters the most to them.

These case studies provide several key lessons learned for other systems looking to undertake similar shifts to deeper learning practices. As discussed in the sections above, those themes include:

- Shared visions unite the community.
- Clear expectations enable flexibility.
- Student demonstrations unlock authentic applications of knowledge and skills.
- Opportunities for teacher learning and leadership lay the groundwork for sustainability.

So what comes next in Kentucky? With greater variation in approaches by design, systems must pay close attention to who is accessing deeper learning and ensure that systems hold high expectations for learners, even if they learn via different pathways. Kentucky's United We Learn assessment and accountability work is rethinking how school quality measures can better reflect local interests and values while cultivating a mindset of learning and continuous improvement. Such accountability systems will create more autonomy to innovate, to enable vibrant/deeper learning and give educators and leaders the data they need to make well-informed decisions in real time.

Making the shift to deeper learning takes time. But practically every system already has bright spots of innovation to build on, from individual classrooms to whole schools that have been engaging in meaningful shifts in teaching and learning. These three Kentucky case studies demonstrate that with thoughtful coordination, deep community engagement, and strategic leadership, many systems can start on the path to education transformation.

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