



PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION

PREPARED FOR THE KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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STUDENT TRANSITIONS AND REENGAGEMENT

OVERVIEW

To improve student persistence to graduation, districts and schools focus on student transitions and reengagement to help students stay in school, progress through school, and graduate. Rumberger et al., offers four evidence-based recommendations for reducing dropout rates in middle and high schools and improving high school graduation rates:

- Monitor progress of all students and intervene if students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.
- Provide intensive individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.
- For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.
- Engage students by offering curricula that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school (2017).

Students are the most susceptible to dropping out of school during transitions. In particular, the transition from middle to high school can be quite daunting for all students and further amplified when youth do not feel like they are supported or have encountered multiple challenges

and setbacks in previous years. Students can experience anxiety, a lack of motivation and have legitimate concerns about overall expectations. Many school districts have developed transition and summer bridge programs as a way to prevent dropping out and heighten student success. Ninth grade is one of the most important years for students, and consequently their academic performance during this year can be an indicator of whether a student will graduate high school or not. High school dropout rates are significantly lower in districts with intentional middle to high school transition programs that include information about curricula, facilities, safety and discipline, and provide detailed logistics and information (Smith, 1997; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Mac Iver, 1990).

Reengaging students who are out-of-school has gained national attention over the past decade, and advocates are attempting to bring awareness to the large cohort of "Opportunity Youth," who represent tremendous untapped potential. Nationally, 1.8 million young adults aged 16–21 are not enrolled in school and have not finished their high school education, and 4.6 million youth (aged 16 to 24) are out of school and not in the labor market. The immediate taxpayer burden for these youth is estimated at \$13,900 per youth per year, and the immediate social burden at \$37,450 per year (2011 dollars) (Rennie, Hill,

Villano, Feist, & Legters, 2014). Reengagement centers, school resources, school attendance outreach efforts, and other coordinated efforts can help to link and connect youth back to education pathways and services.

To support students meeting college and career readiness goals, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) provides various data supports via Infinite Campus (IC) to schools and districts to help monitor student progress and identify students who might be off-track and provide interventions to support students until they earn a diploma, including:

- The **Persistence to Graduation Report** uses live data to assign all students (K-12) a risk score based on attendance, behavior, course performance, and demographics. The path to this report in IC is KY State Reporting / KDE Reports / Persistence to Graduation.
- The **Early Warning System Tool** is a robust interactive data resource which allows district and school personnel to better understand which students are off track towards graduation and what is contributing to each grade 6-12 student's risk of dropping out and therefore what areas of intervention might have the greatest positive impact on their likelihood to graduation. The path to this report in IC is Student Information / Counseling /Early Warning.
- The **Transient Student Report** helps identify students who have high rates of mobility. The report provides summary and detailed information (school and student level) about the number of schools students have attended in the

current school year, the past two years, and the past five years. The path to this report in IC is KY State Reporting / KDE Reports / Transient Population.

- The **Chronic Absenteeism Report** helps district and school level staff identify trends as well as the individual students who are considered chronically absent as well as those who may become chronically absent. The path to this report in IC is KY State Reporting / KDE Reports / Chronic Absenteeism.
- Data visualization tools with a focus in three areas - demographics, attendance, and behavior - provide various views of data such as charts, heat maps, and spreadsheets. The data analysis portal can help district and school administrators obtain useful insights into each data element and can be used to guide system action planning as well as targeting individual students or student groups. The training videos for the portal are available within the [campus community data visualization forum](#).

(Please note that you must be granted access by your district's IC administrator before you will be able to view these reports.)

In addition, Kentucky school districts offer students individualized support to stay and get back on track to graduation through a variety of short- and long-term alternative programs and schools. For a more detailed discussion of the types of alternative programs and schools in Kentucky, as well as the strategies they employ, please see the companion Alternative Education practice brief in this series.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky is dedicated to ensuring each student graduates from high school ready for college and/or career. To this end, Kentucky's accountability system includes a focus on students being "transition ready," which for high school graduates means being able to succeed in entry-level postsecondary courses without remediation or enter the workforce possessing the knowledge and technical skills necessary for employment in their desired career field. For those students who receive English Language Services in high school, this also includes demonstrating English Language proficiency. A growing number of communities across the country have put reengagement strategies in place, including one-stop centers that offer a range of services, including referral to high

school or postsecondary completion options and supports to re-enroll. While the Commonwealth of Kentucky supports many dropout prevention efforts to reengage students who are struggling in school or on the verge of dropping out, Kentucky has no dropout recovery programs to reengage students who have left school. This is a missed opportunity. The Commonwealth recently raised the age of mandatory high school attendance to 18, there are state per-pupil funds available for educating any student without a diploma up to age 21, and there are new funds available to support Kentucky high school students' dual enrollment in postsecondary courses. The policy environment in Kentucky therefore offers exciting opportunities for reengaging youth and young adults who do not have a diploma and are not in school or working.

KEY STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES FOR STUDENT TRANSITION AND REENGAGEMENT

Kentucky schools, programs, and districts utilize a wide range of strategies to support students through key transitions and reengage them when they falter on the path to high school

graduation. In this practice brief we document four strategies and the associated practices in place in three programs and schools across the Commonwealth. These include:

STRATEGY 1: MAINTAINING A POSITIVE VIEW OF STUDENTS AND DESIGNING SYSTEMS TO ENCOURAGE SUCCESS

Those seeking to help students successfully navigate key transition points and to reengage them when they fall off-track are steadfast in their high expectations for students. In particular, they:

- Focus on student assets and high expectations for students;

- Offer students who have fallen off track a "clean slate;" and
- Provide students clear rules and codes of conduct, with consistent enforcement and follow-through.

STRATEGY 2: WILLINGNESS TO BE FLEXIBLE TO MEET STUDENTS' NEEDS

School and programs successfully helping students through key transitions and reengaging students who have fallen off track bend to meet students' needs through offering, for example:

- Flexibility in time, such as open entry and exit, flexibility in scheduling, extended year programming,

and self-paced learning based on competency;

- A small, personalized learning environment;
- Credit recovery or catch-up for students who have fallen behind;
- Blended (computer-based) learning; and
- Enhanced orientation programming.

STRATEGY 3: IDENTIFYING THE NEED FOR AND PROVIDING ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

Successful transition and reengagement programs are especially good at identifying students in need of and providing wrap-around supports. Such programs and initiatives in this practice brief offer:

- Use of an early warning system to identify students in need of additional supports;

- Additional academic supports for students identified as "at-risk;"
- Wrap-around supports for students and their families to address non-academic barriers; and
- On-site mental health support services.

STRATEGY 4: ENCOURAGING STAFF COLLABORATION

Successful transition and reengagement programs make staff collaboration a high priority. This is most evident in situations where:

- Classroom teachers and those providing other services, such as mental health services or juvenile

justice programming, collaborate to offer students a coherent, consistent program; and

- An alternative school or program and a student's home school collaborate to offer students a smooth transition between education programming.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING CENTER

COVINGTON INDEPENDENT PUBLIC SCHOOLS | COVINGTON, KENTUCKY

KEY STRATEGIES HIGHLIGHTED:

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The Transformational Learning Center¹ (TLC or the Center) is an open-entry/open-exit alternative program for Covington Independent Public Schools (CIPS) middle and high school students who have exhibited behavioral problems in their home schools. The Center provides behavioral intervention and counseling to prepare students for a successful return to their home school, while providing continuity in their academic program. The TLC school day consists of six periods, four for core subjects, a fifth for an Intervention Class that offers intensive reading, math, and writing supports on a two-week rotation, and a sixth for a gym class that incorporates team building and social interaction. Small class sizes and the additional Intervention Class provide the opportunity for teachers to differentiate instruction and work one-on-one with students to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners who enter the program at different times and with various skill levels. Students move between classrooms, each of which has one teacher and one instructional assistant.

The TLC has three other programs co-located with its alternative setting: a short-term (one- to ten-day) alternative to suspension program, a computer-based learning program for credit recovery, and an education program for students housed at the Children's Home of Northern Kentucky. These co-located programs offer some flexibility to move students between programs as helpful. For example, students entering the TLC in need of credit recovery may begin with the on-site computer-based learning program before transitioning to regular teacher-led instruction of TLC classrooms.

The TLC takes student transition back to a home school very seriously, spending weeks preparing students for a successful return. The Center has a behavioral level system that students work through to prepare to return to their middle or high school. When students reach the third of four levels, they are asked to reflect on why they were placed at the TLC, what they have changed and learned while at the Center, what they still need to improve, and what supports they will need as they transition back to their home school. When a student reaches the 10th day of Level 4, the school leadership team decides if the student is ready to return to his/her home school. If so, the team sends a Transition Application to the student's home school (and, if

applicable, the court liaison), so that home school staff can learn about the student's progress at the TLC. With everyone on the same page, plans continue for the student to return. For high school students, the next step is a transition meeting for the student with parents, counselors, and the grade level principal to discuss the student's Transition Application, and, finally, return to the

home high school. For middle school students the process is similar, but rather than returning all at once they transition through half-days at their home middle school (and half days at TLC) for the first two weeks, during which time TLC staff can adjust any supports needed to ensure the student's success.

TYPE OF PROGRAM:	6-week to 2-year alternative programs for middle and high school students
POPULATION SERVED:	More than 200 students ages 11 to 18 each year who have exhibited behavioral problems in their home school
BENEFITS TO DISTRICT:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Graduation for students previously not expected to graduate ▪ Improved student behavior as demonstrated by fewer behavioral referrals and improved attendance and grades ▪ Credit recovery option for students who have fallen off-track
FUNDING SOURCE/S:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CIPS Per Pupil Funding
CHALLENGES:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students react very positively to the small, personalized environment of the TLC and while most are initially placed there involuntarily, the vast majority are reluctant to leave when it is time to transition to their home school. ▪ With a small teaching staff, the TLC must focus on core subjects and is not able to offer music and art programs.

CASE EXAMPLE #2

MCDANIEL LEARNING CENTER

LAUREL COUNTY SCHOOLS | LONDON, KENTUCKY

KEY STRATEGIES HIGHLIGHTED:

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The McDaniel Learning Center² (MLC or the Center) is a non-traditional high school program serving up to 60 students from the Laurel County Public Schools' (LCPS) two comprehensive high schools. The program offers students the flexibility of a self-paced curriculum in a small, personalized atmosphere and fosters academic success for students who have fallen off-track to graduate. The Center, which does not carry the stigma of being referred to as an "alternative program" for "problem students," has a family atmosphere and offers four classrooms staffed by highly skilled and engaged teachers who support students one-on-one as they work at their own pace using a computer-based curriculum.

The MLC coordinates extensively with staff of the district's two comprehensive high schools to monitor student data on Infinite Campus using the Early Warning tool and credits that need to be recovered to identify students who are not on track to graduate with their class and for whom MLC might be an appropriate option. Counselors at North and South Laurel High Schools talk with these students and discuss whether MLC would be a good fit. If, after discussing with their school counselor, a student is interested in attending MLC, they complete an application, which includes teacher recommendations.

McDaniel Learning Center is highly successful in reengaging students who were not thriving in a comprehensive high school program. In its ten years of operation, the Center has helped more than 400 students to graduate high school. The Center has a long waiting list and plans to open a "second shift" program in the afternoon/early evening hours to accommodate more students. What is more, the district recognizes the Center's expertise in reengaging struggling students and asked MLC staff to develop a credit recovery program for the district's two comprehensive high schools and train teachers prior to the program's implementation.

TYPE OF PROGRAM:	Voluntary, non-traditional high school program
POPULATION SERVED:	60 students in grades 9-12 from North Laurel and South Laurel High Schools
BENEFITS TO DISTRICT:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An alternative path for students not offered in the traditional high school setting that gives them the opportunity to graduate ▪ Increased graduation rates: in the past nine years the Center has graduated an average of 67 students per year ▪ Credit recovery expertise (which has been extended to the district’s two high schools) ▪ An effective learning environment for students who were not thriving in a traditional high school
FUNDING SOURCE/S:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LCPS Per Pupil Funding
CHALLENGES:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Center wishes it could identify students at an earlier age to offer interventions. ▪ The Center has a long waiting list of students who could benefit from the program if space were available.



JACKSON ACADEMY

WARREN COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS | BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY

KEY STRATEGIES HIGHLIGHTED:

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Jackson Academy³ (the Academy) serves students who have been referred for disciplinary problems by one of the district's elementary, middle, or high schools. Previously more of a traditional disciplinary program—a holding tank for students that did not do much with students in the time they spent there—Jackson Academy has been completely revamped in the past several years. The program has been changed primarily by bringing a group of teachers and staff who really wanted to be there and instituting a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) model with clear expectations related to learning, engaging, and acting responsibly and respectfully. The goal of the Academy is to build positive relationships in order to assist each student in becoming successful academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally.

When a student is referred to Jackson Academy, staff are careful to make sure the student's home school has done everything it can before accepting them. Once at the Academy, the focus is on restoration. Jackson Academy staff members meet with the student, discuss situations that triggered problematic behavior in the past and set up a process with students ahead of time for when they get into trouble while at the Academy. The program is customized to the student, with both academic and behavioral differentiation. Jackson Academy students love the program, which is highly structured, with clear expectations and routines. The small environment, differentiated lessons, and meaningful relationships that Jackson Academy builds with students are not only reflected in their behavioral change but in their academic success as well. Most students rapidly improve academically at the Academy, exhibiting large jumps in reading and math scores and rapidly completing large amounts of coursework. Most Jackson Academy students enter the program with failing grades; however over 98 percent leave passing all of the classes they are enrolled in.

While Jackson Academy staff witnessed students making huge strides in the program; they noticed that when students returned to their home school, they were faltering and ending up back at the Academy. This spurred the Academy to develop a transition plan for students exiting the program that they piloted with one partner middle school during the 2017-18 school year. The pilot was wildly successful: not one student returned to Jackson Academy once they had transitioned back to their

home school. Having seen this tremendous success, other district schools are now eager to engage in the expanded transition programming. Transition planning now begins when the student first enters Jackson Academy. Academy staff members are in communication with the home school counselor to discuss their goals for the student and what they would like Academy staff to work on with the student. The Jackson Academy Coordinator keeps the home school counselor up-to-date on a student's progress during the whole time the student is in the program. As the time for returning to the home school approaches, the school interventionist and counselor are invited to Jackson Academy, where they meet with the Coordinator to develop a plan for academic and behavioral success for the student to return to school. Then home school staff have two weeks to figure out the details of implementing the plan. This often involves further communication with the Jackson Academy Coordinator who helps home school staff to think outside the box. Meanwhile, Academy staff are talking with the parents. One

week before transition, the Jackson Academy Coordinator sits down with the student to discuss the plan and to help the student write a letter to their school about what they have learned and what they want out of their middle or high school experience when they return. When the student is ready to depart, there is a final, student-led meeting with the student, all intervention specialists and counselors, parents, and a person identified by the student as a supporter from their home school. During this meeting the student talks about Jackson Academy and its expectations and they read the letter they wrote to their home school. This is often an incredibly powerful moment for all involved. Then home school staff talk about their plan for the student's success upon reentry. After the student returns to their home school, the Jackson Academy Coordinator continues to remain in communication with the guidance counselor and parents. If the guidance counselor notices a slip, they contact the Jackson Academy Coordinator, who then meets with the student.

TYPE OF PROGRAM:	Alternative program for elementary through high school students who have exhibited behavior problems
POPULATION SERVED:	86 students grades 3-12
BENEFITS TO DISTRICT:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specialized behavior intervention program for the most at-risk, tier 3 students ▪ Intervention expertise to share with traditional schools ▪ Increased student academic and behavioral success demonstrated by improved S.T.A.R. math and reading scores, improved grades, and improved behavior upon return to home school ▪ Credit recovery options to help struggling students who have fallen behind back on track to graduation ▪ Increased graduation rates

FUNDING SOURCE/S:	WCPS Per Pupil Funding
CHALLENGES:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Jackson Academy wants more schools to know their program can be a helpful intervention, rather than a holding tank. They want to be of use to more schools in their district. ▪ Some Jackson Academy students thrive in the program and do not want to return to their home school, and the Academy would like to be able to offer a permanent school program for those students.

CONSIDERATIONS

The above descriptions demonstrate a range of programs and schools in Kentucky to support students through key transitions and reengage them when they falter on the path to high school graduation. We encourage you to learn more about these programs and schools and to consider how your district, school, or classroom can incorporate new strategies to strengthen your support for students to persist to graduation.

Education leaders and practitioners are encouraged to consider how they might implement some of the practices related to each of the four broad strategies highlighted in this brief. Many are no- or low-cost and can be tried on a small-scale to begin. All are worthy of consideration as examples of promising and effective practice across the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

STRATEGY 1: MAINTAINING A POSITIVE VIEW OF STUDENTS AND DESIGNING SYSTEMS TO ENCOURAGE SUCCESS

FOR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ❑ How could you ensure your school/district focuses on student assets rather than deficits?
- ❑ Do you hold the same expectations for college and career readiness for all students, including those who struggle and require transition and reengagement supports?
- ❑ In what ways do/could you ensure students are offered a “clean slate” when they have faltered and need to be helped back on-track to graduation?
- ❑ Are there ways your school/district could ensure straight-forward rules and codes of conduct across classrooms/schools?

FOR EDUCATORS:

- ❑ How could you better focus on your students’ assets, as opposed to their deficits?
- ❑ Do you hold the same expectations for college and career readiness for all of your students, including those who struggle and require transition and reengagement supports?
- ❑ Do you offer your students a “clean slate” when they have faltered and need to be helped back on-track to graduation? When they return to your classroom after spending time in another program?
- ❑ Do you have straight-forward rules and codes of conduct in your classroom that are consistent with expectations in your school/program? Could you work to increase student understanding of these expectations to improve outcomes for them?



STRATEGY 2: WILLINGNESS TO BE FLEXIBLE TO MEET STUDENTS' NEEDS**FOR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEADERS:**

- Do or could you offer students programs/schools that are flexible with time (e.g., open-entry and exit, extended year programming, etc.)?
- Does or could your school/district offer students ways to obtain course credit by demonstrating competency rather than time-in-seat?
- Does or could your school/district accommodate students who require a small, personalized learning environment?
- Does or could your school/district offer students who have fallen behind ways to recover credits or otherwise “catch up” and get back on-track to graduation?
- Does or could your school/district offer blended (computer-based) learning opportunities?

FOR EDUCATORS:

- How could you better support students who enter your classroom in the middle of the school year?
- Are there ways for your students to complete course material at their own pace?
- How could you better assist students who fall behind to catch up with their peers?
- Are there blended (computer-based) learning opportunities you could offer to help provide a more flexible learning environment for your students?

FOR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEADERS:

- Does/could your school/district use early warning indicators to identify students in need of additional supports to stay on-track to graduation?
- How could your school/district increase on-site support services (e.g., mental health counseling, healthcare, social services) offered to students and their families?
- How could your school/district increase staff knowledge and use of trauma-informed practices?
- How could your school/district improve the smooth transition of students between programs and schools?

FOR EDUCATORS:

- Do/could you use early warning indicators to identify students in need of additional supports to stay on-track to graduation?
- How could you increase your knowledge of available on-site services to improve wrap-around supports for your students and their families?
- How could you increase your knowledge and use of trauma-informed practices in your classroom?
- How could you improve smooth transitions for your students when they move between programs and schools?

STRATEGY 4: ENCOURAGING STAFF COLLABORATION

FOR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ❑ How could you encourage greater collaboration among classroom teachers and those providing other services (e.g., mental health) to provide students with a more coherent and consistent education program?
- ❑ How could you encourage greater collaboration between alternative programs/schools and students' home schools to smooth the transition between programming?

FOR EDUCATORS:

- ❑ How could you increase your collaboration with other teachers and support staff in your building to provide your students with the most coherent and consistent educational experience possible?
- ❑ How could you increase your collaboration with staff from other schools/programs who also work with your students?

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Information for this case example obtained from telephone interview with Lorie Duffy (2018, September 5) and site visit to Transformational Learning Center. (2018, November 15).
- 2 Information for this case example obtained from site visit to McDaniel Learning Center. (2018, November 14).
- 3 Information for this case example obtained from telephone interviews with Eric Wilson and Leslie Miller (2018, August 30 and 2019, February 13).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Samaura Stone is a Senior Policy Associate at the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) in Washington, DC. She oversees AYPF's work focused on informing policymakers on ways to increase education and workforce outcomes for youth involved in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Previously, Samaura was a Policy Analyst at the Aspen Institute where she worked with states on implementing a coordinated, systems-level approach to increase economic security for youth and families. She has also worked on education and youth policies for two U.S. Senators and with Portland Public Schools. Samaura brings more than a decade of passion and experience in the non-profit and government sectors, with a keen focus on elevating youth voice, improving equity, and aligning policy with practice

Nancy Martin draws on more than 20 years of experience in education and workforce development to help organizations document, perfect, and share their efforts to improve young people's lives. Nancy's specialties include building organizational and system capacity, facilitating learning across communities and systems for youth program quality improvement, documenting alternative pathways to high school graduation and postsecondary success, and conducting insightful and sensitive site visits. Previously, Nancy was Director of Capacity Building Initiatives at the National Youth Employment Coalition, where she oversaw NYEC's education and PEPNet quality standard initiatives to expand high-quality education and employment options for youth.





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