

# Student-Centered Policy Implementation in Kentucky

## *A Summary of Current Inquiry*

### Introduction

Kentucky is engaged in an ambitious statewide effort to reimagine education. Inspired by a growing network of visionary local leaders, state leaders have invested time and resources to create meaningful space for districts to build student-centered and vibrant learning systems. Across the Commonwealth, districts are pursuing innovative approaches to teaching and learning while also navigating the complexities of interpreting and implementing evolving policy opportunities.

Kentucky has established important policy flexibilities to support student-centered learning, including Performance-Based Credit in 2006 based on the Kentucky Academic Standards, Districts of Innovation in 2012 and Schools of Innovation in 2025 with additional changes to assessment and accountability this past session through HB 257 (2026). These policies create opportunities for districts and schools to rethink traditional approaches to credit, instruction, staffing, scheduling and learning pathways.

Kentucky's broader vision for vibrant learning, personalized instruction and continuous improvement signals the state's commitment to transforming learning experiences for every student. Still, policy flexibility alone does not guarantee meaningful implementation. To prepare for deeper implementation, the Kentucky Department of Education is working to better understand the district experience of current implementation efforts to improve its systems of support.

---

This report details the findings from an initial inquiry process conducted with a small, but representative sample of districts through the first half of 2026. The inquiry was conducted by the Kentucky Department of Education in partnership with KnowledgeWorks. The purpose of the inquiry is to develop a working hypothesis of the current district experience of Kentucky's student-centered learning policy environment and opportunities to further improve state support.

---

### Findings <sup>1</sup>

The following themes represent the initial findings from Kentucky's policy implementation inquiry process, synthesizing evidence from a focus group, district survey and follow-up interviews with district leaders. Together, these data provide an initial understanding of how districts are leveraging existing policy flexibilities to advance student-centered learning, the barriers they encounter in implementation and the supports they believe are most critical moving forward. While the focus group and survey identified broad patterns across participating districts, the interviews added context and nuance by illustrating how these challenges and opportunities are experienced in practice. The first section details five themes that outline trends across districts' experience, while the second section represents additional supports districts need to deepen

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for details on the inquiry process.

implementation.

## Current District Experience <sup>2</sup>

### **THEME 1: KENTUCKY'S VISION AND POLICIES FOR STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING ARE STRONG**

Among the most impactful and promising themes across both data sources is that Kentucky districts are aligned around the state's vision for student-centered learning. District leaders consistently described using Kentucky's strategic priorities to justify local innovation and reported broad support for existing policy flexibilities.

District leaders also described utilizing Kentucky's United We Learn strategic vision, including vibrant learning, personalized instruction and accountability priorities, as the primary framework for communicating innovation locally. Districts noted that the statewide goals often provide more practical direction than individual statutes or waiver language alone.

Districts are seeking an implementation environment where policies, funding structures, accountability systems, technology platforms and technical assistance all reinforce the vision for student-centered learning.

### **THEME 2: DISTRICTS NEED A COHERENT IMPLEMENTATION SYSTEM**

Kentucky districts generally believe current state policies provide sufficient flexibility to support student-centered learning. However, they also acknowledged that implementation remains difficult without aligned operational systems and confidence that innovation and supporting systems will endure throughout the implementation process.

Rather than requesting additional policies, district leaders consistently described the need for stronger implementation supports that help translate policy into practice. Districts emphasized that successful implementation requires practical guidance, leadership development, technical assistance and examples of how policies have been successfully implemented in other contexts. Many described uncertainty about how to implement learner-centered policies confidently and with quality.

### **THEME 3: OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS HAVE NOT KEPT PACE WITH POLICY**

Although Kentucky policy enables innovation, districts described operational systems that reinforce traditional educational structures. Technology platforms, attendance systems, reporting requirements, funding mechanisms, scheduling structures, grading practices and accountability expectations were all cited as limiting districts' ability to fully leverage policy flexibilities.

Interview participants repeatedly identified Infinite Campus as an example of this disconnect, describing manual scheduling processes and challenges implementing competency-based grading when reporting systems are built around traditional seat-time assumptions. Survey respondents similarly cited staffing limitations, administrative burden, funding constraints and compliance requirements as significant implementation barriers. One interview also highlighted a broader policy consideration: performance-based credits recorded as Pass/Fail may unintentionally disadvantage students in GPA calculations and college admissions, illustrating how operational systems can undermine otherwise flexible policy.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B for detailed examples from the survey and district deep dives.

#### **THEME 4: DISTRICTS SEEK MORE COORDINATED STATE SUPPORT**

Districts engaged in the inquiry process generally reported receiving regular communication from the Kentucky Department of Education but consistently noted that available implementation resources are difficult to interpret, and the tools that are needed most either do not exist or are applied inconsistently across departments. Rather than requesting additional communication, districts described needing:

- Practical implementation tools, such as templates, checklists, planning guides and sample documents.
- Examples of how other districts have successfully put policies into practice.
- Consistent guidance and interpretation of policies across offices.
- Technical assistance that helps leaders make day-to-day decisions about staffing, scheduling, budgeting and operations.

Interview participants suggested that a more coordinated state implementation strategy, including an expansion of dedicated innovation supports and clear cross-department coordinating structure would reduce implementation barriers. Districts also expressed interest in stronger avenues for two-way communication with both state agency leaders and legislators so that implementation experiences can help inform future policy development and refinement.

#### **THEME 5: LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POWER INNOVATION**

Across both the survey and interviews, districts consistently described innovation as fundamentally local. Examples cited during the inquiry process illustrated that successful implementation depends on strong district leadership, sustained community engagement and partnerships with local business and industry. Policy flexibility creates opportunity, but local vision and community ownership determine whether innovation succeeds.

Districts emphasized the importance of leadership coaching, peer learning networks and opportunities to learn from other districts. Interview participants described deep partnerships with local Chambers of Commerce, employers and community organizations that shaped career pathways, mentorship opportunities and broader strategic planning. Many also highlighted Portraits of a Graduate and digital portfolios as important tools for communicating innovation beyond traditional accountability measures.

## Six Supports Districts Want Next

Across the inquiry process districts identified a wide range of supports that would strengthen implementation of Kentucky's student-centered learning policies. District leaders engaged in this inquiry process most frequently requested:

1. **Implementation-focused resources** that translate policy into practical district action through examples, templates, implementation roadmaps and technical assistance.
2. **Leadership development and coaching** to build local capacity for managing systems change and sustaining innovation over time.
3. **Peer learning opportunities** that allow districts to learn from successful implementation efforts across Kentucky.
4. **Dedicated funding and staffing supports** that provide districts with the time, personnel, technology and planning capacity necessary to redesign learning systems.
5. **Cross-department coordination within the Kentucky Department of Education** to ensure consistent communication, coherent implementation resources and efficient resolution of operational barriers.
6. **Ongoing district engagement in policymaking** through advisory groups, implementation feedback loops and opportunities to share implementation experiences that can inform future policy development and refinement.

## Conclusion

Kentucky has established a strong policy foundation for advancing student-centered learning. District leaders involved in the inquiry process consistently indicated that the state policy environment provides meaningful opportunities to redesign learning experiences around students' needs. The inquiry suggests that Kentucky's next opportunity is not expanding policy flexibility but strengthening policy implementation. As the state develops a plan for policy implementation, it may benefit from pressure testing the themes highlighted in this summary through ongoing engagement with an expanded sample of district leaders from across the state.

Districts are asking for practical implementation supports, aligned operational systems, coherent innovation resources and sustained partnerships that enable innovation to move from policy to everyday practice. Ultimately, successful policy implementation depends on creating the conditions that allow districts to innovate confidently, consistently and sustainably. By pairing existing policy flexibilities with coordinated implementation, Kentucky can strengthen the connection between policy intent and classroom practice, ensuring that student-centered learning becomes a scalable and enduring reality across the Commonwealth.

## Appendix A – Inquiry Process

From January to June 2026, surveys and district interviews were conducted to better understand how Kentucky districts are leveraging existing state policy to advance student-centered learning, what barriers inhibit implementation and what additional supports would enable stronger implementation.

1. A focus group which represented six districts from across the state was conducted to identify areas of inquiry. Roles engaged included superintendents, district staff, and school leaders (n=6).
2. An in-depth survey was distributed to Kentucky school districts from across the state to dig into the areas of focus, resulting in 12 district responses (responses were anonymous, n=12).
3. Follow-up interviews and document reviews were conducted with leaders from three districts to explore implementation experiences in greater depth, particularly around the state's priority policy flexibilities (Performance-based credit and District/School of Innovation waivers). The interviews provided additional context about how districts interpret policy, navigate implementation challenges and leverage policy to support local innovation (n=3).

The findings from the surveys and interviews were synthesized into five overarching themes that reflect the most consistent patterns across both data sources. Districts represent a mix of rural, suburban and urban contexts as well as the geographic diversity of the state.

## Appendix B – Thematic Examples

### THEME 1: KENTUCKY'S VISION AND POLICIES FOR STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING ARE STRONG

Districts appear to be motivated less by individual statutes or waivers and more by Kentucky's broader vision for student-centered learning. Leaders frequently described using statewide goals, strategic priorities and broad policy direction to legitimize local innovation while relying on local decision-making to determine implementation strategies.

#### Examples from survey

- Alignment with district strategic priorities was one of the strongest influences on implementation decisions.
- Districts generally viewed state policy positively as a lever for student-centered learning.
- Schools of innovation distinction was the policy most cited as useful by districts.
- Respondents expressed interest in continuing collaboration with policymakers.

#### Examples from district interviews

- Districts explicitly used Kentucky Board of Education strategic goals as justification for local innovation.
- Portrait of a Graduate frameworks aligned local work with statewide vision.
- Occupation-based certification policies supported pathway development.
- Broad policy vision was viewed as more useful than navigating complex regulatory language.
- Leaders described using state goals as "cover" to build local support for innovation.

### THEME 2: DISTRICTS NEED A COHERENT IMPLEMENTATION SYSTEM

District leaders generally believe Kentucky's existing policies provide enough flexibility to support student-centered learning. The challenge is not the absence of policy, but translating policy into sustainable local implementation. Districts consistently described needing practical implementation supports, examples, coaching and technical assistance to move from policy to classroom practice.

#### Examples from survey

- Districts requested implementation planning, technical assistance and leadership coaching.
- Respondents wanted practical "how-to" guidance, compliance clarification and implementation examples.
- Capacity constraints (staffing, funding, time) were cited more frequently than policy limitations.
- Districts sought support operationalizing innovation waivers and competency-based learning.

#### Examples from district interviews

- Districts described uncertainty about implementing policies "the right way."
- Leaders noted a lack of examples or blueprints for Districts/Schools of Innovation.
- Districts wanted successful models before taking on implementation risk.
- Participants described needing educator capacity-building support more than simply permission to innovate.

### **THEME 3: OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS HAVE NOT KEPT PACE WITH POLICY**

While policy often enables innovation, the operational systems that districts depend on including technology platforms, accountability structures, funding mechanisms, scheduling systems, grading practices and reporting requirements, remain largely designed for traditional educational models. This disconnect creates significant implementation barriers and discourages districts from fully utilizing available policy flexibilities.

#### **Examples from survey**

- Compliance concerns discouraged districts from attempting to leverage current policy.
- Respondents cited attendance requirements as a barrier to performance-based crediting and out-of-school learning opportunities.
- Application and reporting expectations associated with the waiver process were cited as a barrier to participation.
- Districts identified staffing, technology and administrative burden as factors that impacted implementation decisions.

#### **Examples from district interviews**

- Infinite Campus was repeatedly described as incompatible with competency-based grading and flexible scheduling.
- Districts developed manual workarounds for attendance and scheduling.
- Performance-based credits created GPA concerns for college admissions.
- Performance-based credit funding tied to credits earned hinders broad adoption, since schools often cannot wait a year to receive funding for the entire student population.
- State accountability expectations created hesitation around innovation.
- Districts described policy flexibility without corresponding operational flexibility.

### **THEME 4: DISTRICTS SEEK MORE COORDINATED STATE SUPPORT**

Districts generally believe communication from KDE reaches the appropriate people within the district, but they consistently described a need for resources that interpret implications of state policy for local systems (rather than legislative guidance alone), more consistent implementation resources, and stronger cross-department coordination. Rather than simply receiving more communication, districts want state leadership that helps translate policy into practice while reducing ambiguity across initiatives.

#### **Examples from survey**

- Frequent legislative changes were one of the most cited implementation challenges.
- Districts requested more technical guidance and policy interpretation.
- Respondents described challenges getting answers to complex implementation questions when guidance and support were spread across multiple departments.
- Districts wanted stronger opportunities to inform policy through advisory groups and feedback structures to both the state agency and legislature.

#### **Examples from district interviews**

- Districts involved in the inquiry process called for an expanded, dedicated state innovation team with collaborative authority to lead cross-functional work across the agency.
- Districts encountered cross-office coordination challenges that made it difficult to determine where to seek assistance, noting they often needed to call several offices and synthesize guidance from multiple sources.
- Leaders requested a clear process they could follow to identify and resolve systemic

implementation barriers with a dedicated state agency support person to help them navigate instances when policy and operational systems do not align.

- Districts desired assurances that innovation efforts would not immediately trigger accountability consequences.

## **THEME 5: LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POWER INNOVATION**

Successful implementation of student-centered learning policies depends heavily on district leadership, community engagement and local partnerships rather than state policy alone.

Districts consistently described innovation as requiring strategic leadership, business partnerships, community ownership and local vision before policy flexibilities can translate into meaningful change. Local leaders also wanted avenues to share their feedback on state policy change with both legislators and state agency staff.

### **Examples from survey**

- Leadership coaching for district and school leaders emerged as one of the most requested supports.
- Respondents identified current peer learning networks as a key place they receive support and would welcome more opportunities to learn with peers.
- Districts want support on how to engage families and communities.
- Vibrant and real-world learning were among the highest-priority implementation areas.

### **Examples from district interviews**

- Chambers of Commerce and employers were described as essential partners.
- Community leaders helped shape district strategic planning.
- Portraits of a Graduate and digital portfolios helped communicate innovation locally.
- Business partnerships drove pathway development and workforce initiatives.
- Districts relied on local advocacy and relationships to sustain innovation.
- District leaders want avenues to provide feedback for technical fixes to state policy.
- One district noted that a work group to recommend updates to the performance-based crediting policy would be valuable.