



Our L3 Journey: Building Local Accountability through Community and the Profile of a Patriot

The Moment That Sparked a Movement

Our journey toward local accountability began with a simple question on a front porch. In the spring of 2020, during the height of the pandemic, we visited the home of every graduating senior. We wanted each student to know they were seen, valued, and celebrated. What we didn't expect was how their answers would shape our future.

When we asked, "What are your plans after graduation?" too many students hesitated. Some shrugged. Others said, "I'm not sure." In that moment, it became clear that our students were leaving us without a clear sense of purpose or direction.

That realization was our turning point. We knew we needed to do more than prepare students for tests; we needed to prepare them for life. That moment of honesty from our seniors became the spark that ignited a new vision for Allen County Schools.

Listening to Our Community

We began by listening.

Before we drafted a plan or set a goal, we asked our students, families, and community what mattered most. Through community conversations, empathy interviews, and school-based forums, we heard a message that resonated across every group: *our students are more than test scores*.

People wanted an education system that equipped young people to solve real problems, pursue their passions, and contribute meaningfully to the world around them. They wanted schools that not only measured academic growth but also cultivated resilience, creativity, and compassion.

Those conversations reminded us that real accountability begins with listening — and that the answers we needed were already in our community.

Defining Who We Want Our Students to Be

From those conversations, our community helped us define the kind of graduates we hoped to send into the world.

This work began during our districtwide visioning process in 2020, when Allen County Schools brought together students, staff, families, and community members to ask a pivotal question: What skills do students in Allen County need to be successful in a global economy? To spark thinking, we hosted multiple screenings of the documentary *Most Likely to Succeed* with staff, middle and high school students, and with our broader community. Each showing ended with a discussion about what learning should look like if we truly want our students to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

The ideas that emerged from those conversations became the foundation for what we now call the Profile of a Patriot — five core competencies that capture the heart of an Allen County education:

- **Resilient Learner**
- **Effective Communicator**
- **Creative Problem Solver**
- **Engaged Global Citizen**
- **Accountable Collaborator**

The Profile of a Patriot became our north star. It describes not only what students should know, but who they should become. It connects classroom learning to life beyond school and helps teachers design experiences that build both skills and character while connecting to content.

It's more than a list of traits . . . it's a promise we make to every student and family in Allen County.

Joining the Local Laboratories of Learning

In 2021, Allen County Schools joined the **first cohort of Kentucky's Local Laboratories of Learning (L3)**, a statewide effort under the *United We Learn* initiative to rethink assessment and accountability. Seventeen districts from across Kentucky came together to design new ways to measure student success that reflect local values and community aspirations.

For us, joining L3 wasn't just about compliance with a new program. It was about collaboration. We wanted to build a local accountability system that could honor both state expectations and community hopes. Our guiding question became:

How can we measure and communicate student success in ways that reflect Allen County's values and our Profile of a Patriot?

That question has guided us ever since.

Co-Creating with Our Coalition

To answer it, we created the **Allen County L3 Coalition**, about thirty members representing teachers, students, families, business leaders, and community partners. We worked side by side to envision what meaningful accountability could look like for our schools.

Coalition members conducted empathy interviews across the county, listening to parents, students, teachers, community alumni, and local employers about what they valued in graduates. Those conversations uncovered a key challenge: we had defined what success looks like, but how could we show the community that students were growing toward it?

Together, we began exploring new ways for students to demonstrate learning, not through another standardized test, but through authentic demonstrations of what they could do and who they were becoming.

Defining the Problem Together

As our coalition listened to students, families, teachers, and community members through dozens of empathy interviews, a common theme began to surface. Everyone agreed that our current accountability system measured only a fraction of what truly matters for our young people. Our community wanted schools that not only prepare students academically but also equip them to strengthen the economic, social, and workforce foundation of Allen County.

Through this process of deep listening and collaboration, guided by the Habits of Systems Transformation: inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity, our coalition crafted a shared Problem Statement:

The Allen County community wants an educational system that prepares students to address and improve the economic, social, and workforce challenges of our community. However, the current system only assesses mastery of a narrow set of academic standards and doesn't address our obligation to develop students' skills, passions, and interests.

From that statement, we formed the guiding questions that continue to drive our work today:

- *How might we empower our students with the skills and dispositions they need to pursue their passions and address community needs?*
- *How might we assess students' growth in these skills and dispositions and measure growth over time?*
- *How might we communicate this growth to our community and increase understanding of what authentic learning looks like?*

These questions led to the creation of our Storyboard, a visual roadmap for what learning and accountability could look like when designed with, not for, our community. The storyboard outlined the key experiences we envisioned for every student: project-based learning connected to real-world problems, opportunities for feedback and reflection, and authentic demonstrations of growth through **Defenses of Learning**.

It became the bridge between our community's aspirations and our system's design — the foundation upon which our local accountability system now stands.

With a shared vision and a clear problem to solve, our coalition turned its focus from design to action, exploring what authentic assessment could look like in Allen County.

Designing Meaningful Assessments

That exploration led to one of our most powerful innovations → **Defenses of Learning**.

Instead of taking a test, students would present their learning to a panel of teachers, peers, and community members, explaining how their projects and experiences connected to the Profile of a Patriot. They would share their work, reflect on their growth, and demonstrate their learning in their own voice.

A Defense of Learning is both a celebration and an assessment. It's a moment when a student steps forward to answer a simple but profound question: *"What have I learned, and how can I show it?"* Students curate evidence from their portfolios (e.g., projects, writings, reflections, and artifacts) that demonstrate growth in the five Profile of a Patriot competencies. They organize their presentation, share their process, and respond to audience questions. The Defense culminates in feedback that helps the student reflect, set goals, and take pride in their progress.

These authentic experiences allow students to connect classroom learning with real-world skills such as communication, critical thinking, and self-reflection. They also give families and community members a firsthand look at the meaningful learning happening in our schools.

During the 2022–2023 school year, we partnered with Envision Learning Partners to help a design team of Allen County teachers build performance assessments. These assessments focused on key competencies within each grade span, from kindergarten through high school, so that every student would have opportunities to show mastery of essential skills.

The shift was about more than new assessments. **It was about redefining success so that every student could be seen as capable, creative, and growing.**

Making Learning Visible

As our coalition's work evolved, another question emerged: *How will we share this story with the community?*

We knew our families and neighbors wanted to see evidence of learning — not just numbers, but faces, stories, and progress. The empathy interviews and design sessions had made one thing clear: our community wanted to understand what learning looks like in Allen County, not just how it's scored.

That desire inspired the creation of our Storyboard, a living plan that translated our community's hopes into a clear vision for authentic, student-centered learning. It illustrated what classrooms could look like when guided by the *Profile of a Patriot* — students engaging in project-based learning, showcasing their growth through *Defenses of Learning*, and demonstrating mastery through reflection, feedback, and revision. The storyboard helped us imagine how learning could become visible, measurable, and meaningful for everyone.

From that foundation, our L3 Accountability Metrics, developed collaboratively through the Allen County L3 Coalition, transformed the storyboard into action, identifying how we would measure progress in the areas that matter most to our community. Today, they anchor our work across four key domains:

- **Profile of a Patriot** - measuring how students grow as Resilient Learners, Effective Communicators, Creative Problem Solvers, Engaged Global Citizens, and Accountable Collaborators.
- **Foundational Elements** - tracking authentic and mastery-based learning that ensures students meet essential academic standards while developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- **Student Well-Being** - emphasizing emotional health, school culture, and meaningful relationships that allow every student to thrive.
- **College and Career Readiness** - supporting students as they explore passions, develop real-world skills, and prepare for life after graduation through pathways, dual-credit opportunities, work-based learning, and personalized postsecondary plans.

While all four domains are now included in our accountability metrics, the visualization of the College and Career Readiness domain on our public dashboard is still under development. Once complete, the dashboard will fully reflect the system our coalition first envisioned, one that honors every stage of student growth, from learning to life readiness.

To make this learning visible to the broader community, we began designing a Community-Facing Accountability Dashboard in partnership with the University of Kentucky's Center for Next Generation Leadership and Diehl Consulting Group. The dashboard integrates state data with these locally defined measures, creating a transparent window into our progress.

The dashboards will be accessible on a newly developed website dedicated to Allen County Local Accountability, created in collaboration with the University of Kentucky's Next Generation

Leadership and The Alchemy Collaborative. This website will serve as a hub where our community can explore data, celebrate growth, and stay connected to our shared journey.

As these dashboards continue to take shape, they reflect our shared journey, one rooted in listening, empathy, and co-creation. Together, they tell the story of a community that chose to define success on its own terms and measure what truly matters.

Research and Reflection

Throughout this work, we've been intentional about learning alongside our partners. We've collaborated with the **University of Kentucky** and the **Center for Innovation in Education** to document our process and reflect on what it means to build systems *with* people, not *for* them.

This partnership has helped us pause and ask deeper questions:

- Are the voices of all students and families represented?
- How are we building trust and ownership, not just awareness?
- What does it look like when accountability strengthens connection rather than compliance?

These reflections keep us grounded in our purpose and ensure that our progress always stays aligned with our values.

Habits of System Transformation: The Way We Work

From the beginning, we've relied on what we call the Habits of Systems Transformation: *Inclusion, Empathy, Co-Creation, and Reciprocity*.

These habits guide how we approach every decision, every partnership, and every conversation. They remind us to listen before leading, to design with others rather than for them, and to give back as much as we receive.

They've also helped us navigate what systems thinkers call "*the water of systems change*" — the unseen currents of relationships, power dynamics, and mental models that determine whether true transformation can take hold. When we attend to those deeper layers, change becomes sustainable rather than situational.

In Allen County, these habits aren't a project checklist; they've become part of our culture. They shape how we collaborate, teach, and connect with our community.

The Road Ahead

Our L3 journey is still unfolding. Each year, we take another step toward aligning what we value, what we measure, and what we celebrate.

With our community-facing accountability dashboard now live, our focus is on using the data to deepen understanding, strengthen implementation, and support continuous improvement. We will continue expanding student Defenses of Learning, strengthening authentic and project-based learning experiences across grade levels, and refining how we measure and communicate student growth in the areas that matter most to our community.

We remain committed to creating joyful, authentic, and meaningful learning experiences that prepare students not only for success, but for significance.

This journey has taught us that accountability isn't about compliance; it's about connection. It's about our shared responsibility to nurture the potential in every student and ensure our schools reflect the hopes of the community they serve.

There is still important work ahead, but the foundation is firmly in place. We will continue to learn, grow, and co-create as a community—using evidence of student learning and progress to strengthen the system we have built together.