



## **Teaching Matters Most** Student Success in the Early Grades

## INTRODUCTION

Investments in the early years of education build the foundation in reading and mathematics that students need to succeed throughout their years of education and in life. Students must be ready to learn as soon as they enter kindergarten, and learning must continue at a high level through the early grades to ensure continued academic achievement.

But too many Kentucky students begin school underprepared and struggle to become proficient – achieving a high degree of competence – in reading and math by the end of the third grade. Clearly, we are failing to deliver on the promise of an excellent education for each and every public school student. Changing that reality will require a renewed and sustained focus on the element that is of paramount importance to student outcomes: teacher preparation and professional learning.

Overcoming the challenges that persist in ensuring students get the strongest possible start in the early grades, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence convened the Task Force on Educator Preparation and Professional Learning: Literacy and Numeracy for Primary Grades. Its focus: to study and recommend policy changes and supports for Kentucky’s teacher preparation and professional development programs.

The creation of the Task Force followed discussions in the 2020 General Assembly session about the need for such a review. Its participants included legislators, teachers and principals, students, postsecondary and state education leaders and Prichard Committee members (a full list can be found at the end of the report).

The work was structured around research and presentations from program leaders and subject-matter experts who shared data on current challenges and insights into effective practices. The expertise of the Task Force members, who submitted written feedback as did members of the Prichard Committee’s Teacher Fellows group, was instrumental in the development of the report’s recommendations.

Those recommendations are presented in four sections:

- A Focus on Equity: Family Engagement, Cultural Competency and Teacher Diversity
- Professional Learning
- Teacher Preparation
- Funding

The recommendations reflect the need for systemic change and support for good teaching practice and professional learning that is practical, evidence-based and successful in improving student outcomes. Many will require additional financial support at the state level to ensure their success.

The goal is the implementation of the recommendations across the Commonwealth. However, the current fiscal and programmatic challenges facing Kentucky’s education system make it probable that districts could be positioned to take action at different times. The Task Force encourages all educators to begin working to make these recommendations a reality in their districts as soon as local circumstances permit.

### Teaching for Kentucky’s Future

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence believes education is critical to the economic and social well being of Kentucky, requiring an ambitious agenda that ensures educational success for every Kentuckian.

The committee has an ongoing commitment to and involvement in efforts to support quality teaching in every classroom across the Commonwealth. Through its nearly four decades as an independent, nonprofit organization of citizens, the Prichard Committee has focused on quality teaching initiatives through study, policy research and the task force work of educators, content-matter experts, thought leaders and policymakers.

Among the committee’s reports on this key issue was the 2004 “Quality Teaching Initiatives in Kentucky: A Progress Report” that was prepared for the National Commission on Teaching for America’s Future. This passage in that report reflects the committee’s longstanding emphasis on this critical area.

***“Teacher quality is the neglected child of school reform in Kentucky. Failure to deal with it will mean failure to achieve the grand vision established for this Commonwealth in 1990 – reaching each and every child with high quality education regardless of where he or she lives.”***

*Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence  
1999*



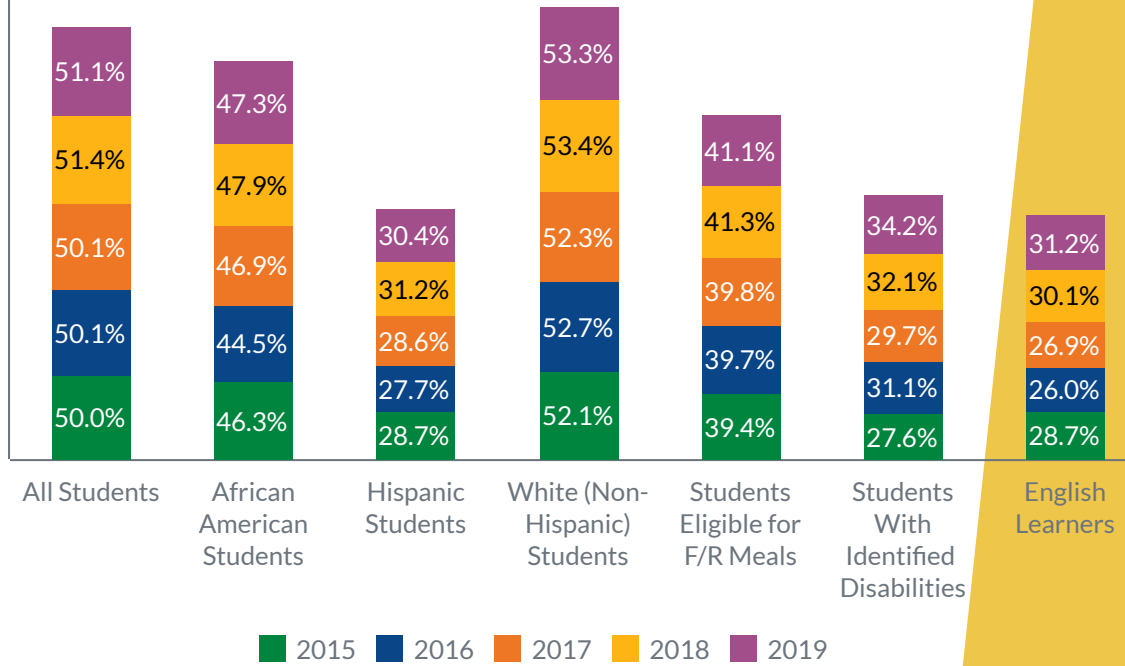
## WHY EARLY LEARNING MATTERS

The reality of the academic performance of Kentucky's young students today reveals the need for greater attention to ensuring their early success. The consequences are great.

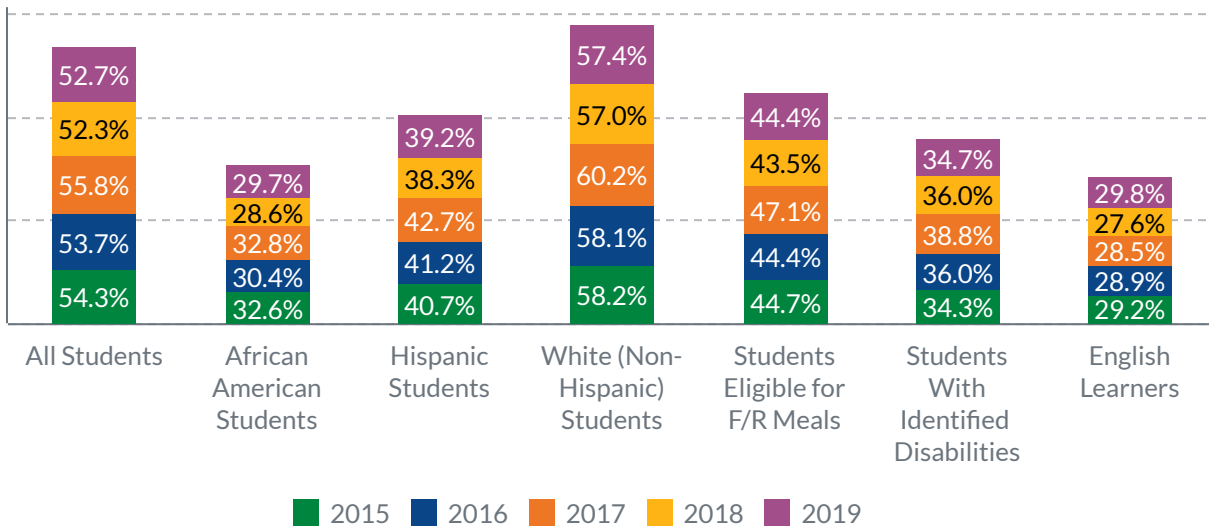
In 2019, 49% of Kentucky's children started school behind as measured by the state kindergarten readiness screener, and the indicator of readiness has been essentially flat for years.

Kindergarten readiness correlates with greater proficiency in the third grade. The lack of preparation for early learning as measured on the kindergarten readiness screener was reflected in the fact that only 52.7% of all Kentucky third-grade students scored proficient or better on the 2019 state reading test. Only 47.4% scored proficient or better on the state math test.

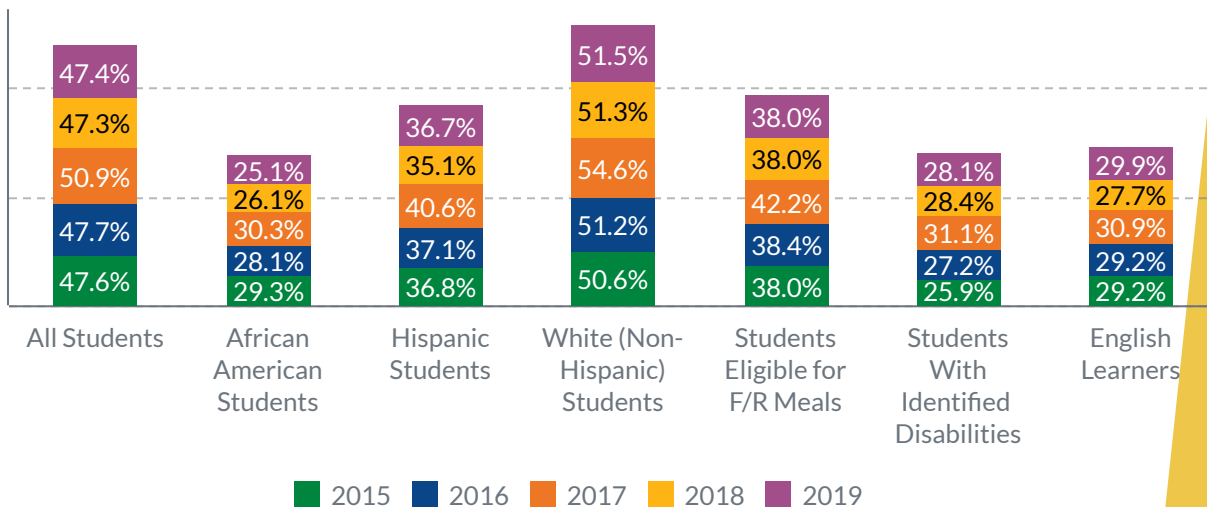
### Kindergarten Readiness 2015-19



### 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency Rates 2015-19



### 3rd Grade Math Proficiency Rates 2015-19



The impact is long lasting. For example, 16% of students not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time. That is four times the rate of those who are proficient. The rate rises to 26% for students who live in poverty, 25% for African American and Hispanic students and nearly 33% for African American and Hispanic students who live in poverty.

The performance of Kentucky's students has also declined relative to the nation. Only 35% of public school fourth graders scored proficient or above on the 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). That put Kentucky's ranking at 26th among the 50 states, a decline from 17th in 2018.

In addition to the negative impact on later learning, failing to deliver early academic success for students has a lasting economic impact on individuals, communities and the state.

More Kentuckians with an excellent education will improve nearly every aspect of the state's quality of life, but it is particularly important to building and sustaining a strong workforce.

On the scale of state revenue, the impact would be significant. Dr. Eric Hanushek and his colleagues at the Stanford University Hoover Institution calculated in a 2016 study that \$335 billion would be added to Kentucky's GDP if all students achieved at the basic level or higher on NAEP.

"Our measures of the knowledge capital in each state directly link the productive skills of the workforce to the quality of schools in the state," the researchers wrote. "From this, using our state growth results, we project the economic value of improving schools in each state. Our results suggest that feasible quality improvements are associated with very large economic returns that could exceed the total spending on K-12 education in each state."

On an individual level, students who have a strong foundation in early learning, leading to their taking more advanced courses in high school, are more likely to enroll in college, complete a bachelor's degree, have greater labor market returns and higher job satisfaction.

And every student who doesn't complete high school costs society an estimated \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes and productivity.

An increasing percentage of jobs will require some postsecondary education in the coming years. Moreover, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and Workforce, 11.5 million of the 11.6 million jobs created during the recovery following the 2008 recession went to people with at least some postsecondary education.

And higher education leads to higher incomes. The University of Kentucky's Annual Economic Report notes that family income for individuals with a bachelor's degree is \$25,000 more than those with a high school diploma and \$12,500 more than those with an associate degree.



»»» [Source: Economic Gains for U.S. States from Educational Reform, Eric A. Hanushek, Jens Ruhose, and Ludger Woessman, Hoover Institution Economics Working Papers, Stanford University, April 2016.](#)

»»» [Source: Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters, Annie E. Casey Foundation, January 2010.](#)

## EQUITY, FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, CULTURAL COMPETENCY & TEACHER DIVERSITY

Research has long since established the important, positive impact of parental involvement on student learning. When parents are involved, students get better grades, score higher on tests, have better attendance records, drop out less often and have higher aspirations and more positive attitudes toward school and homework.

But chronic absenteeism is a significant problem in Kentucky and a critical factor in the likelihood of academic success. From kindergarten through fifth grade, 10% of Kentucky students are chronically absent, with much higher rates in kindergarten and first grade. Proficiency rates on the state assessment are substantially lower for chronically absent students. That is because time in class is predictive of grade-level achievement in reading, mathematics and general knowledge, and the impact is even greater on children from low-income families.

Research also has shown that diversity among educators leads to greater outcomes for students of color. According to this research, Black students with Black teachers are more likely to graduate from high school and consider college and experience less exclusionary discipline in school. Students of color also believe teachers of the same race hold them to higher expectations and are more culturally sensitive than their white counterparts.

Kentucky's demographics show the need to increase diversity in the teaching profession.

- 10.6% of Kentucky students are African American
- 7.6% are Hispanic
- 4.8% of teachers are minority

There is a growing awareness in Kentucky and across the nation of the importance of ensuring cultural competency among teachers. The National Education Association notes that cultural competence “means understanding your own culture, other’s culture, and the role of culture in education. Using students’ culture as a basis for learning, communicating high expectations, and reshaping curriculum to reflect students’ diversity leads to better educational outcomes.”



»»» Source: [University of Wisconsin-Madison Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars](#)

»»» Source: [Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence](#)

»»» Sources: [The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers](#)  
[Exposure to Same-Race Teachers and Disciplinary Outcomes for Black Students in North Carolina](#)

[The Importance of Minority Teachers: Student Perceptions of Minority Versus White Teachers](#)

»»» Source: [Kentucky Education Facts, Kentucky Department of Education](#)

### To engage more families and ensure greater equity, teacher diversity and cultural competency, the Task Force recommends the following:

- The Council on Postsecondary Education, the Department of Education, and the Education Professional Standards Board should be required to include parent and family engagement in educator preparation, professional learning and student-level intervention including home-based strategies to improve literacy and numeracy.
- The Council on Postsecondary Education, the Department of Education, and the Education Professional Standards Board should be required to include sustained cultural competency training in educator preparation and professional learning strategies to improve literacy and numeracy. The training should include an evaluation component and metrics to assess outcomes and program impact.
- The Council on Postsecondary Education, the Department of Education, and the Education Professional Standards Board should collaborate on a strategic plan to increase diversity in the teacher workforce with a report and recommendations to the Interim Joint Committee on Education by December 1, 2021.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Two key points from recent research emphasize the importance of quality teaching:

- High-quality teachers get an extra year of learning from their students compared to low-quality teachers, according to Dr. Eric Hanushek of Stanford University.
- The RAND corporation notes that research shows a teacher has two to three times the impact of any other school factor on student achievement.

Preparation is a critical element of ensuring quality teaching, but meaningful and effective professional learning is key to sustaining that quality in the classroom.

Kentucky teachers are required to participate in a minimum of four days of professional learning each year. Critical elements of the process include alignment with students' learning needs, the state's academic standards and local goals for student achievement; collaboration and shared accountability; and a job-embedded framework.

But several issues and concerns about Kentucky's system have been identified by educators and education officials. These include:

- A lack of alignment with students' learning needs and expected student outcomes under the academic standards
- A lack of an understanding of how the process should be implemented
- A lack of funding and of coordinated use of funds to address professional learning needs

Concerns about the quality of professional learning opportunities are not limited to Kentucky. As a Center for American Progress report noted:

*"...(T)he evidence suggests that most teacher professional development has little if any impact. ... It is a travesty that despite districts spending thousands of dollars per teacher each year on professional development, these dollars are most often spent on models that are known to be ineffective."*

»»» [Teaching Children Well: New Evidence-Based Approaches to Teacher Professional Development and Training, Robert C. Pianta, Center for American Progress, November 2011.](#)

Effective professional learning programs share seven features, according to a report from the Learning Policy Institute. Such programs:

- Are content focused
- Incorporate active learning
- Support collaboration
- Use models of effective practice
- Provide coaching and expert support
- Offer feedback and reflection
- Are of sustained duration

»»» [Effective Teacher Professional Development, Linda Darling-Hammond, Maria E. Hylar, and Madelyn Gardner, with assistance from Danny Espinoza, Learning Policy Institute, June 2017.](#)

*One Task Force member commented in a survey of the group:*

***"It's vital for the state to require targeted continuing education. In addition, curriculum leaders and decision makers in P-12 need to be well versed in research around professional learning.***

***One-time seminars or PD sessions don't create real change."***

### To ensure the quality and positive impact of professional learning in support of Kentucky teachers, the Task Force recommends the following:

- The Legislative Research Commission should direct an independent evaluation of current professional learning programs, practices, and supports for early literacy and mathematics at the state and district level – including, but not limited to, the requirements and expectations in KRS 156.095, KRS 158.840, KRS 164.0207, and KRS 164.525 – to assess alignment with recognized best and/or evidence-based practice and make recommendations to support continuous improvement. Results of the evaluation should be reported to the Interim Joint Committee on Education, the Kentucky Board of Education, and the Council on Postsecondary Education by December 1, 2021.
- The Department of Education should implement a statewide professional development program for early literacy and mathematics instruction for all early childhood and elementary school teachers and elementary school principals. Consideration should be given to models that are job-embedded, peer-supported, and develop feedback to focus on critical needs. Program development should include outcomes and metrics to assess program impact.
- The Department of Education should train and deploy literacy and mathematics coaches to the state's lowest performing schools in third grade reading and mathematics. The coaching program should include measures of consistency and quality and include statewide coaches, as well as regional and locally based coaches supported in their home school, district or regional cooperative.
- The Department of Education should evaluate and provide a catalogue of high-quality instructional resources, to support Tier 1 instruction, from which educators, schools and districts can select to support classroom instruction.

## EDUCATOR PREPARATION

Programs that prepare educators for the critical role they play in Kentucky's schools must meet standards established by the Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB).

Under state law, the EPSB sets the standards for and approves and evaluates college, university and school districts programs for the preparation of teachers and other school professionals. To be approved, a program must be part of a regionally accredited college or university and accredited by the EPSB or the national Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. Accreditation must be renewed every seven years.

According to the Kentucky Department of Education, 17,759 individuals entered educator preparation programs from 2015 to 2020, and 14,307 completed the programs.

Ensuring the quality of educator preparation programs begins with accreditation. Whether an individual teacher is adequately prepared for the classroom and eligible for certification is determined by his/her performance on Praxis tests that measure academic skills and subject content knowledge.

But there are questions about whether such standardized objective tests truly predict a teacher's effectiveness, accurately assess content that is actually taught in classroom and are equitable. These questions emerge due to the fact that educator preparation programs vary by institution and mission, and their approach to training differs within programs. How teacher candidates are trained in content differs by institution, and the preparation programs use their own assessments that are not common among institutions.

*One Task Force member commented in a survey: "While student teaching helps pre-service teachers see what classroom life is like, when you are solo in your first classroom it can be very different. New teachers need a strong residency program where they are under the supervision of a coach or mentor teacher to help them move through difficult times, refine teaching practices, and develop the soft skills that are needed to be a successful teacher."*

## NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFICATION

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards administers a highly regarded certification program for teachers already in the classroom. Teachers who achieve board certification must demonstrate "that their teaching meets the profession's standards for accomplished practice through a rigorous, peer-reviewed and performance-based process. ... In achieving Board certification, teachers prove their ability to advance student learning and achievement."

More than a [decade of research](#) has confirmed that students taught by board-certified teachers learn more than students taught by other teachers. These students demonstrate evidence of deeper learning nearly three times more frequently than their peers and gain one to two months of additional learning compared to their peers.

More than 4,000 Kentucky teachers have achieved national certification, and the state was fifth in the nation in the number (218) certified in 2019. National board certified teachers in Kentucky receive an annual \$2,000 salary bonus for the life of their certificate.

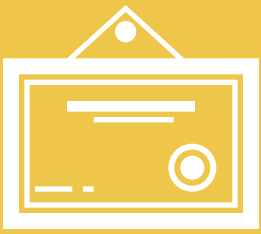
## ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION

In addition to attaining certification by completing an approved preparation program, educators can be certified through eight alternative routes:

- Exceptional work experience
- Local district teacher preparation
- A professional from a postsecondary institution
- An adjunct instructor
- Military veteran
- University alternative route
- Summer teacher institute
- Teach for America

## To ensure teacher candidates receive the preparation and support they need to succeed in the classroom, the Task Force recommends the following:

- New teacher candidates in early childhood and elementary education should be required to demonstrate foundational capacities in early literacy and mathematics in manner(s) approved as effective evaluations of instructional knowledge and skills by the Education Professional Standards Board. Demonstration requirements should include a minimum number of classroom teaching hours.
- The Education Professional Standards Board and the Council on Postsecondary Education, pursuant to KRS 158.840(5), should cooperate to certify that educator preparation programs in early childhood and elementary education include sufficient, evidence-based instructional programming in reading and mathematics related to administration of assessments, use of assessment data, monitoring student performance, and differentiated instructional strategies. Reading programming should include instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.
- The Department for Education, the Education Professional Standards Board, and the Council on Postsecondary Education – in consultation with educator preparation programs, principals and in-service teachers – should design and support high-quality early service teacher induction programming that includes a focus on equity, multi-year residency and mentorship for early childhood and elementary educators. Design should include a framework for program evaluation including metrics and outcomes.



## MISSISSIPPI BEST PRACTICES

The state of Mississippi has focused on improving early literacy and mathematics proficiency through a series of steps that have improved students' performance on state and national assessments. The elements include:

- Two new laws passed in 2013. The Early Learning Collaborative Act established the first state-funded pre-K program; the Literacy-Based Promotion Act made reading instruction a major focus in K-3.
- Requiring elementary education candidates to pass a rigorous test of scientifically research-based reading instruction and intervention
- Requiring candidates to pass the Foundations of Reading Assessment
- Training educators to be more effective reading teachers
- Deploying literacy coaches to the lowest-performing schools to support teachers
- Requiring schools to engage and communicate regularly with parents
- Adding a third-grade reading test for students to qualify for promotion to fourth grade
- Funding to local communities to establish or expand high-quality early childhood education programs
- Free professional development for all early childhood providers

The changes led to significant student gains on reading and math tests. The percentage of fourth-grade students scoring proficient or above in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) increased from 22% in 2009 to 32% in 2019; in fourth-grade math, the proficiency performance improved from 22% in 2009 to 39% in 2019. The performance earned Mississippi a No. 1 national ranking in the gains made in both subjects between 2017 and 2019.

Mississippi is now moving to strengthen its educator preparation programs by, among other initiatives, requiring professional learning and testing for program faculty who teach early literacy; requiring additional clinical experiences for candidates; and requiring all programs to embed culturally and linguistically responsive teaching methods and practices.





## FUNDING

Investments are critical to providing each and every child with an equal opportunity to have an adequate education. And investments in education show a strong return for individuals, communities and the state as a whole.

As noted in the University of Kentucky's Center for Business and Economic Research 2018 Kentucky Annual Economic Report:

**“There is one factor that is more important than all the others, and that is education. By investing in it, we can improve household incomes, individual health, and our overall quality of life. The key to Kentucky’s economic future lies in its human capital.”**

Other research has shown a return of \$5 for every \$1 invested in early childhood. And, for every \$1,000 in per-pupil investment, Kentucky students perform better than is to be expected given such other obstacles as poverty, poor health, disabilities or parents with low educational attainment.

But Kentucky’s investments in education fall short of what is needed to fulfill the promise of a quality education for each and every child:

- Per-pupil K-12 funding is 38th in the nation at \$10,000.
- The per-pupil funding gap between the wealthiest and poorest districts was \$1,400 in 2016, compared to \$1,500 in 1990.
- Programs that support teaching have been slashed in the state budget, as reflected in funding levels for 2021 compared to 2018
  - Teacher Internship Program
    - FY 2018 – \$3,244,700
    - FY 2021 – 0
  - Professional Development Program
    - FY 2018 – \$11,927,700
    - FY 2021 – 0
  - Professional Growth Fund
    - FY 2018 – \$720,300
    - FY 2021 – 0
  - Teacher Academies
    - FY 2018 – \$1,400,800
    - FY 2021 – 0
  - Teacher Recruitment & Retention – Educator Quality & Diversity
    - FY 2018 – \$1,338,200
    - FY 2021 – 0



Source: [Kentucky Office of State Budget Director](#)

## ROSE V. COUNCIL FOR BETTER EDUCATION

“Each child, every child, in this Commonwealth must be provided with an equal opportunity to have an adequate education. Equality is the key word here. The children of the poor and the children of the rich, the children who live in the poor districts and the children who live in the rich districts must be given the same opportunity and access to an adequate education. This obligation cannot be shifted to local counties and local school districts.”

1989 Kentucky Supreme Court Ruling

Preparing young students to achieve reading and math proficiency by the end of the third grade will require a comprehensive agenda that includes more student learning time, knowledge-rich curricula, more support for quality professional learning and early interventions for struggling students.

**All of these will require more resources.**

## To ensure state investments are sufficient to deliver on the promise of educational excellence for all students by strengthening their early learning, the Task Force recommends the following:

- The General Assembly should fully fund statewide professional development and coaching programs based on budget requirements and funding needs provided by the Department of Education. Programs should be designed on a multi-year basis to ensure sustainability and the evaluation of outcomes.
- The General Assembly should fully fund and increase the stipend for National Board-Certified teachers – beginning with certifications specific to literacy and numeracy in the primary grades.
- The General Assembly should incentivize partnerships among postsecondary institutions, school districts and education cooperatives to strengthen collaboration, partnerships, and student success initiatives focused on early literacy and numeracy and feedback between clinical teaching and educator preparation.
- The General Assembly should consider creating a “Fund for Teaching Excellence” through which appropriations for professional learning, coaching, teacher incentives, and innovative practices can be allocated.
- The General Assembly should invest in the Kentucky Early Entry Initiative, a three-year, \$3 million pilot program with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. Through candidacy, certification, and first years, early career teachers will have access to experiences that will strengthen teacher effectiveness and retention, with some of the professional learning supports beginning during teacher preparation.

## CONCLUSION

Kentuckians are facing multiple challenges during the coronavirus pandemic that is throwing their lives and, in many cases, their livelihoods into disarray. Our schools, their students and the teachers who educate them are experiencing an unprecedented disruption in the process of teaching and learning. But there is no doubt that Kentucky educators remain committed to providing the best possible instruction and experience for their students, whatever the obstacles.

As Kentucky and the nation emerge from the pandemic, it will be critical that support for our teachers and the vital work they do becomes even stronger. We must be more focused on – and willing to make adequate investments in – quality preparation and professional learning programs. We must take deliberate, productive steps to ensure equity in our classrooms, greater diversity among our teacher workforce and meaningful family engagement in the education of their children. This is the path we must follow if we are to make early learning success a reality for each and every child.



### TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Representative James Tipton (R-Taylorsville)

Senator Stephen West (R-Paris)

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Building a Groundswell  
for a Big, Bold Future

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