



# Kentucky Community Schools Initiative (KCSI) Community Conversations:

## The Case for a Meaningful High School Diploma

### What does Kentucky's High School Diploma mean today?

In the 2018-2019 school year, data from the [Kentucky School Report Card](#), published annually by the Kentucky Department of Education, indicates 52% of graduates transitioned from high school directly to some form of postsecondary education, while 21% of students transitioned directly into the workforce, and 8% transitioned to a work-school combination.<sup>1</sup> **But those numbers are trending very different today.** [For the 2022-2023 school year](#), only 16.5% of students transitioned directly to college, 30.4% directly into the workforce, and 35% pursued a work-school combination.<sup>2</sup> Kentucky high schools should be equipping students with the academic knowledge and skills needed to pursue their chosen pathway - as soon as they graduate.

In the [2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress Report Card](#) (NAEP)<sup>3</sup>, Kentucky trailed significantly compared to other states in many key areas:

- 29th in grade 4 reading proficiency at 31% (KY's lowest rank since 50 state NAEP participation began)
- 41st in grade 8 mathematics proficiency at 21%
- 43rd children above 200% of poverty
- 38th preschool participation
- 41st postsecondary enrollment
- 43rd overall associate degree or higher attainment
- 44th median household income

<sup>1</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Transition to Adult Life*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition\\_readiness/transition\\_to\\_adult\\_life/transition?year=2019](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition_readiness/transition_to_adult_life/transition?year=2019)

<sup>2</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Transition to Adult Life*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition\\_readiness/transition\\_to\\_adult\\_life/transition?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition_readiness/transition_to_adult_life/transition?year=2023)

<sup>3</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Kentucky Summary Statements*. The Nation's Report Card. [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/KY?cti=PgTab\\_Findings&chart=1&sub=MAT&sj=KY&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&sfj=NP](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/KY?cti=PgTab_Findings&chart=1&sub=MAT&sj=KY&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&sfj=NP)



Although Kentucky ranks 3rd nationally in high school graduation rate at 91.4%<sup>4</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> in two-year postsecondary graduations<sup>5</sup>, proficiency data suggest that Kentucky’s high school students are not adequately being prepared with the academic knowledge and career preparation needed that empower young people to persist to and through postsecondary education to sustainable career experiences.

As noted above, most high school students in Kentucky are graduating, and a strong majority (79.1%) of those students that graduate do so with the designation of being postsecondary ready<sup>6</sup> as defined by [Kentucky’s Postsecondary Readiness legislation](#)<sup>7</sup> – meaning they are hitting at least one of ten academic or career indicators in addition to meeting the minimum requirements for high school graduation.

WAYS KENTUCKY STUDENTS CAN DEMONSTRATE POSTSECONDARY READINESS	
FIVE ACADEMIC READINESS OPTIONS	FIVE CAREER READINESS OPTIONS
Dual credit course	CTE dual credit course
Advanced Placement course and exam	Industry certification
International Baccalaureate exam	Apprenticeship
Cambridge Advanced International exam	Internships (Cooperative or internship)
College admission/placement exam	CTE End-of-Program Assessment (for postsecondary articulated credit)
<i>Source: 703 KAR 5:270, the regulation establishing Kentucky's accountability system and Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence</i>	

Kentucky’s most recent School Report Card data shows that more students are meeting **some** of the fundamental academic and career benchmarks that help prepare them for success beyond high school. For instance:

- 31.5% of high school graduates in the 2022-2023 school year received an industry certification, up from 11.9% in 2021-2022. <sup>8</sup>
- Also worth noting is the increase in students completing a career readiness dual credit course - 8.5% in 2021-2022 to 27.1% in 2022-2023. <sup>9</sup>

While postsecondary readiness as a whole is hitting high marks, certain key indicators like meeting benchmark scores on college admissions or college placement exams (2022-2023 ACT English -

<sup>4</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *2022-2023 Graduation Rate*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/school\\_accountability/graduation\\_rate/high\\_school\\_graduation?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/school_accountability/graduation_rate/high_school_graduation?year=2023)

<sup>5</sup> *Big Bold Future Rankings Report Sources List for 2022 Report*. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. <https://prichardcommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/BBF-RankingSources.2022.Amended-1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Postsecondary Readiness*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/school\\_accountability/postsecondary\\_readiness/acct\\_post\\_secondary?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/school_accountability/postsecondary_readiness/acct_post_secondary?year=2023)

<sup>7</sup> 703 KAR 5:270. *Kentucky's Accountability System*. Kentucky General Assembly. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/law/kar/titles/703/005/270/>

<sup>8</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Career Readiness*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition\\_readiness/career\\_readiness/career\\_readiness\\_score?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition_readiness/career_readiness/career_readiness_score?year=2023)

<sup>9</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Career Readiness*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition\\_readiness/career\\_readiness/career\\_readiness\\_score?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/transition_readiness/career_readiness/career_readiness_score?year=2023)



47%, ACT Reading - 44%, ACT Mathematics - 33%)<sup>10</sup> are below the national average and are more closely aligned to Kentucky's 10th grade math and reading proficiency scores of 34% and 36%, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

In 2022, 55.1% of Kentucky residents ages 25-64 held postsecondary credentials, including certificates, certifications, associate and bachelor's degrees, and graduate/professional degrees, according to data from the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education<sup>12</sup>: on track for CPE's goal of 60% postsecondary attainment among Kentuckians ages 25-64 by the year 2030. While this is a bright spot to celebrate, fall 2021 undergraduate enrollment in Kentucky public universities and the Kentucky Community and Technical College system was 11% lower than Fall 2016<sup>13</sup> – a concerning threat to continued attainment growth.

Kentucky's current academic rankings, postsecondary enrollment & attainment data, workforce shortages, and student perceptions about the value of their experiences, suggests a disconnect between the real world and the systems designed to prepare students for it.

## Why Does a Meaningful Kentucky High School Diploma Matter?

**Students have concerns.** National [survey data](#) show young people have mixed opinions on K-12 education as it currently stands, with 38% stating K-12 schools are on the right track, 40% stating they are on the wrong track, and 22% unsure. The areas they say need greatest improvement are providing career or job skills.<sup>14</sup> Worse, [fewer than half of students](#) say they received the most fundamental information they need to understand if they are meeting the basic standards for success in high school, let alone to make decisions about their futures<sup>15</sup>, and the workforce participation numbers in Kentucky reflect this reality.

**Students are not the only ones with concerns.** According to recent Prichard Committee polling data, only 42% of KY voters and parents surveyed are satisfied with the way the education system in Kentucky is working today. Among the same group, over three quarters believe the purpose of K-12 education in Kentucky is for students to think critically to problem solve and make decisions, and over 90% believe it is very important that students can demonstrate basic reading, writing, and arithmetic.

**The purpose of K-12 education.** Further supporting the views of students, Kentucky voters and parents, key findings from Populace Insights' [Purpose of Education Index](#)<sup>16</sup>, a multi-year, nationally

<sup>10</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Academic Performance Assessment Results*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/academic\\_performance/assessment\\_performance/act?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/academic_performance/assessment_performance/act?year=2023)

<sup>11</sup> Kentucky Department of Education. *Academic Performance Assessment Results*. Kentucky School Report Card. [https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/academic\\_performance/assessment\\_performance/state\\_assessments\\_enrollment?year=2023](https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/academic_performance/assessment_performance/state_assessments_enrollment?year=2023)

<sup>12</sup> Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. *Overall educational attainment continues to grow, largest gains in adults with baccalaureate, graduate and professional degrees*. CPE Interactive Data Center Infographics. [http://cpe.ky.gov/\\_resources/images/weeklyinfographics/infographic-011824.png](http://cpe.ky.gov/_resources/images/weeklyinfographics/infographic-011824.png)

<sup>13</sup> Weston, S. P. *Higher Education Progress and Challenges*. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. <https://www.prichardcommittee.org/higher-education-progress-and-challenges/>

<sup>14</sup> *Millennials and Generation Z: Agents of Change*. Echelon Insights and Walton Family Foundation. <https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/learning/millennials-and-generation-z-agents-of-change>

<sup>15</sup> *Students Want Access and Support to Use Their Own Data to Navigate Their Futures*. Data Quality Campaign and Kentucky Student Voice Team. [https://assets-global.website-files.com/630e58db6406d5a8f8a3ab90/633f602040abd32fe977fb7\\_DQC\\_KSVT%20Student%20Polling%202022%2009142022.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/630e58db6406d5a8f8a3ab90/633f602040abd32fe977fb7_DQC_KSVT%20Student%20Polling%202022%2009142022.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Populace. *Populace Insights: Purpose of Education Index*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59153be0e6f2e109b2a85cbc/t/63e96b44a0e46d79a10ecf26/1676241761790/Purpose+of+Education+Index.pdf>



representative study designed to understand the American people's priorities for K-12 education today, reflect the reality that K-12 education needs to change. Before COVID, respondents ranked being prepared to enroll in a college or university as their 10th highest priority for K-12 education. Now, respondents highly ranked priorities include:

- developing practical skills (#1),
- reading, writing, and arithmetic (#4),
- being prepared for a career (#6),
- effectively planning and prioritizing to achieve a goal (#11),
- being prepared to do work that is personally meaningful and fulfilling (#14), and
- having skills to be competitive in the local and global job market (#12 and #16, respectively).

**Kentucky employers demand durable skills.** Among the 885,000 Kentucky job postings and labor market information analyzed by America Succeeds in 2020 and 2021, [74% of Kentucky jobs demanded durable skills](#).<sup>17</sup> Also known as 'soft skills', durable skills are skills we use to share what we know, like critical thinking, collaboration, or communication, as well as character skills like fortitude and leadership. And those skills are needed, more and more, directly out of high school.

**Bridging education to workforce transitions.** According to a 2023 survey of 300 Kentucky business and nonprofit leaders [by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce](#), workforce challenges emerged as major key economic and public policy issues. A total of 80% of Kentucky employers say there is **not** an ample supply of workers in their local area, and 70% have difficulties filling open positions. Finding skilled and semi-skilled workers to fill open positions is the most difficult (64 and 62%, respectively), while only 36% reported difficulties recruiting unskilled workers.<sup>18</sup>

**Economic competitiveness.** Since 2010, Kentucky has experienced a modest population increase of 3.7%, but the average number of job openings each month – 151,000 in January 2023 – indicate a lack of qualified workers to fill jobs. This provides some insight into Kentucky's workforce participation rate of 58%, [which ranks](#) 44th nationally.<sup>19</sup>

**Academic proficiency and upward economic mobility.** Studies, such as those conducted by the [Brookings Institution](#), emphasize the role of academic proficiency in promoting economic and social mobility. Proficient students often have greater opportunities for upward economic/social mobility and are more engaged in civic activities and community involvement.<sup>20</sup>

**Transition to adult life.** According to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study, students who undergo structured career exploration programs or receive career guidance in high school exhibit improved decision-making skills related to their future careers. They tend to make more informed choices about their educational paths and career options.

<sup>17</sup> America Succeeds. *The High Demand for Durable Skills*. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. <https://www.prichardcommittee.org/durable-skills-report-2022/>

<sup>18</sup> Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. *New survey data shows Kentucky employers' views on the economy, public policy, and business challenges*. Kentucky Chamber Bottom Line. <https://kychamberbottomline.com/2023/10/25/new-survey-data-shows-kentucky-employers-views-on-the-economy-public-policy-and-business-challenges/>

<sup>19</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. *Labor Force Participation Rate*. Federal Reserve Economic Data. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=446&cid=784070#snid=784141>

<sup>20</sup> Brookings Institute. *Education and Economic Mobility*. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/02\\_economic\\_mobility\\_sawhill\\_ch8.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/02_economic_mobility_sawhill_ch8.pdf)



The study also **suggests** work-based learning is linked to improved academic performance and greater motivation, engagement, and success in pursuing relevant academic pathways.<sup>21</sup>

## What Must a Kentucky High School Diploma Mean?

Almost every young person needs a postsecondary credential and work experience in order to start a career, but too few have access to the early learning opportunities and supports that are the critical onramps needed for a meaningful K-12 experience - one that equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are necessary for postsecondary and career readiness and success. While academic knowledge and achievement are important indicators for how well a young person is prepared to persist from education to career, often the student experience seems like a broken road that does not connect what and how you learn to “how will I use this in the future”.

K-12 academic experiences must be coherent with postsecondary and career opportunities so that students are prepared for, and understand their choices in, pathways from education to career.

**For the student**, a Kentucky high school diploma must mean:

- They have access to a wide array of postsecondary opportunities and can participate in those opportunities without the added time and expense of remediation.
- It must mean they are marketable to postsecondary institutions and employers, because they possess the skills, knowledge, and foundational experiences valued by postsecondary and employers.
- It must mean they are more likely to earn a living wage, because they can engage in career pathways of their choice.
- It must mean they have multiple onramps to a path of economic and social mobility and long-term well-being.

**For families and communities**, a Kentucky high school diploma must mean:

- Breaking cycles of poverty.
- It must mean families have the potential to build generational wealth.
- It must mean children are equipped to position their own future children to succeed.
- It must mean a more robust entrepreneurial ecosystem that increases the availability of goods and services.
- It must mean the standard of living in the community increases.
- It must mean families and communities have a voice in supporting local innovation and collaboration to meet the unique needs of each and every student.

**For postsecondary**, a Kentucky high school diploma must mean:

- Improved enrollment, retention and graduation rates.
- It must mean an increased pool of qualified applicants.

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<sup>21</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Teenagers' Career Aspirations and the Future of Work*. <https://www.oecd.org/berlin/publikationen/Dream-Jobs.pdf>



- It must mean postsecondary institutions can admit students based not only on traditional academic metrics but also on their demonstrated skills and readiness for higher education.
- It must mean less investment in remediation services.
- It must mean greater performance-based outcomes for Kentucky's public universities and community and technical colleges.
- It must mean postsecondary has a voice in ensuring the certificates, credentials, and degrees that students possess align with and benefit the needs of Kentucky's economy.

**For the business community**, a Kentucky high school diploma must mean:

- The hiring process is more efficient and effective because the diploma is a reliable indicator of a graduate's readiness for employment.
- It must mean employers have a larger pool of applicants who possess the necessary skills and competencies to do the job.
- It must mean less investment in training and onboarding, and an improvement in overall productivity.
- It must mean the business community has a voice in ensuring Kentucky's future talent pipeline is well-prepared and aligned with their needs.

**For Kentucky**, a Kentucky high school diploma must mean:

- More students are proficient in core academic subjects like reading, math, science, and civics.
- It must mean Kentucky is a national leader in postsecondary attainment and workforce participation.
- It must mean Kentucky is well positioned to attract new businesses and industries to the state.
- It must mean the standard of living increases for all communities across the state.

So, what **must** a Kentucky high school diploma mean? It must be **a signal to post-secondary institutions and the employer community** that the student is **equipped to transition and succeed** in their **chosen pathway**, and the experiences required to attain it must give students **ownership** and **confidence** in the **quality** of their preparation. It must indicate students have not only **mastered academic subjects**, but that they have the **durable skills and transferable knowledge** needed to **actively participate** in the **democratic process**, **make informed decisions about their economic future**, and **engage meaningfully in their communities**. It must feed Kentucky's **talent pipeline** and serve as Kentucky's promise of the opportunity for **economic mobility to all** who attain it.

## Resources:



# The Prichard Committee

Building a Groundswell for a Big Bold Future

[Prichard Committee Meaningful Diploma Series](#) <sup>22</sup>

[What are Durable Skills and Why Do They Matter?](#) <sup>23</sup>

[Kentucky Durable Skills Report](#) <sup>24</sup>

[Durable Skills Advantage Framework](#)<sup>25</sup>

[Kentucky Students' Right to Know Toolkit](#) <sup>26</sup>

[Kentucky Portrait of a Learner](#) <sup>27</sup>

[Unlocking Career Success](#) <sup>28</sup>

[Let's Streamline the Transition from High School to College and Careers](#) <sup>29</sup>

[The Uncertain Pathway from Youth to a Good Job](#) <sup>30</sup>

[An Argument for Erasing the Boundaries Between High School, College, and Careers](#) <sup>31</sup>

[The Value of Education and Training After High School](#) <sup>32</sup>

[Youth.gov Youth Topics](#) <sup>33</sup>

[Boosting Your Bottom Line: Why Employers Should Support Education Modernization](#) <sup>34</sup>

[Report: Young People Want to Get to Work Sooner](#) <sup>35</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> (2023, May 11). *Prichard Committee Releases Meaningful Diploma Series*. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. <https://www.prichardcommittee.org/prichard-committee-releases-meaningful-diploma-series/>

<sup>23</sup> *Durable Skills in Action*. Durable Skills by America Succeeds. <https://durableskills.org>

<sup>24</sup> *Kentucky Durable Skills Report 2022*. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. <https://www.prichardcommittee.org/durable-skills-report-2022/>

<sup>25</sup> *Unlocking Career Success with the Durable Skills Advantage Framework*. Durable Skills Advantage by America Succeeds and CompTIA. <https://www.durableskillsadvantage.org>

<sup>26</sup> *Students Right to Know Toolkit*. Kentucky Higher Education Matters. <http://kyhigheredmatters.org/students.html>

<sup>27</sup> *Portrait of a Learner*. Kentucky Department of Education. <https://www.education.ky.gov/school/innov/Pages/Portrait-of-a-Learner.aspx>

<sup>28</sup> *Unlocking Career Success*. CTE Raise the Bar. <https://cte.ed.gov/unlocking-career-success/home>

<sup>29</sup> (2021, July 20). *Let's Streamline the Transition From High School to College and Careers*. Jobs for the Future. <https://www.jff.org/lets-streamline-the-transition-from-high-school-to-college-and-careers/>

<sup>30</sup> *The Uncertain Pathway from Youth to a Good Job*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/pathway/>

<sup>31</sup> (2021, July 20). *The Big Blur: An Argument for Erasing the Boundaries Between High School, College, and Careers - and Creating One New System That Works for Everyone*. Jobs for the Future. <https://www.jff.org/idea/the-big-blur-an-argument-for-erasing-the-boundaries-between-high-school-college-and-careers-and-creating-one-new-system-that-works-for-everyone/>

<sup>32</sup> (2022, February 16). *The Value of Education and Training After High School*. Rand. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA1100/PEA1141-9/RAND\\_PEA1141-9.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA1100/PEA1141-9/RAND_PEA1141-9.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> *Youth Topics*. Youth.gov. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics>

<sup>34</sup> (2023, December 12). *Boosting Your Bottom Line: Why Businesses Should Support Education Modernization*. America Succeeds. <https://americasucceeds.org/why-businesses-should-support-education-modernization>

<sup>35</sup> (2023, November 2). *Report: Young People Want to Get to Work Sooner*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2023/11/02/high-schoolers-skip-college-gain-job-experience>