Kentucky’s Legislative Efforts To Lower Dropout Rates
Condensed from Samaura Stone, Senior Policy Associate at American Youth Policy Forum, and Nancy Martin.

With graduation rates now above 80 percent in Kentucky, it might be hard to believe the Commonwealth once ranked 50th in the nation in the percentage of adults with a high school diploma and 49th in percentage of college graduates. The Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990 was sweeping legislation that restructured and redefined the way the state designed, delivered, governed and financed education. Kentucky continued to adopt multiple education reform laws to aggressively tackle the high school “dropout crisis” and track holistic interventions throughout the state to increase high school graduation rates. Kentucky created a strategy to address school dropout problems by the Department by providing technical assistance, grants, and disseminating information to school districts and school level personnel. A link to the new Practice Briefs appears at the end of this article.

To implement the Commonwealth’s focus on high school graduation, the Kentucky Department of Education created The Persistence to Graduation Initiative in 2015. This initiative provides a variety of supports to schools and districts to identify students who may be off-track for and provide interventions to support students until they earn a diploma. The work has evolved to include an emphasis on equity because, as graduation rates in Kentucky increase over all, graduation rates for students of color, students in alternative settings, migrant and immigrant populations, youth in foster care, rural settings, low-income neighborhoods, and students with disabilities continue to lag behind. Kentucky benefits from having a single student information system that is used for all schools and districts in the Commonwealth, allowing for robust use of data at the school, district, and state levels. The Early Warning tool allows school and district staff to have a complete understanding of the many factors that are contributing to students dropping out and to determine which interventions will be the most successful in helping the student get back on track. Every student in grades 6-12 is provided with a GRAD (Graduation-Related Analytic Data) Score based on various data points such as attendance, behavior, grades, enrollment history, demographics, test scores, household demographics, school type, and more. The Early Warning tool uses machine learning to improve its accuracy over time. The Persistence to Graduation report is available for all grade levels and assigns each student a risk score based on attendance, behavior, course performance, and demographics using live data each time the report is run.
Kentucky has made considerable efforts to raise awareness of promising and successful practices throughout the commonwealth that are in alignment with Kentucky’s dropout prevention goals. The Persistence to Graduation Summit is an annual gathering hosted by the Kentucky Department of Education every summer that provides participants with the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of dropout prevention and reengagement strategies. Many of Kentucky’s Persistence to Graduation efforts are focused promoting and sharing best practices within four focus areas: Alternative Education, Community Partnerships, Culture and Climate, and Student Transitions and Reengagement. Districts and schools are encouraged to apply these practices using a holistic approach. The four focus areas are further explored in a series of accompanying practice briefs that highlight the importance of each and feature schools and programs from across the state. Inequitable access and income inequality continue to shape the current education system and pose a serious threat to future gains. There is much work to be done, and the practice briefs can serve as a guide for educators throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky who seek to improve outcomes for students and families. The Kentucky Department of Education hopes these four practice briefs will be beneficial to educators and practitioners of all types. Examples represent successful practices in rural, suburban, and urban programs, schools, and districts, as well with various student populations in traditional and alternative settings with both small and large class sizes.

The Kentucky Department of Education has released a publication entitled Persistence to Graduation, co-written by Samaura Stone, Senior Policy Associate at AYPF, and Nancy Martin, Consultant. The publication consists of a full report and four individual practice briefs in the areas of: Alternative Education, Community Partnerships, Culture and Climate, and Student Transitions and Reengagement.

More information is available at: https://education.ky.gov/school/Pages/Persistence-to-Graduation.aspx