

Berea College's newest graduate is ... a nonprofit?

Berea College has been graduating students for more than 150 years, people who have made a positive difference in health care, engineering, government, and the arts around the world. But in May of 2022, the college graduated something entirely new – a nonprofit that supports the educational success of more than 50,000 students a year across Appalachian Kentucky.

Launching Partners for Rural Impact (formerly Partners for Education at Berea College) will empower it to collaborate with other rural communities and build a national movement to support educational success.

Commencement

Unlike many new nonprofits, Partner for Rural Impact (PRI) will launch with more than 25 years of experience in developing cradle-to-career initiatives and a staff of approximately 350.

PRI originated as a pilot program designed by Berea's faculty to build students' educational aspirations in the Appalachian region. The underlying purpose was not to find more students for Berea but to partner with school districts to ensure ample opportunities for the region's youth.

While PRI began by serving a single county, it now supports young people and their communities in 31 counties in Appalachian Kentucky.

“Launching this new organization is rooted in support for the work and mission of PRI and will enable it to expand its reach in ways that would not have been possible as part of the college,” said Teri Thompson, the college's vice president for strategic initiatives.

As it moves forward, PRI will expand its cradle-to-career model in Kentucky. Providing wrap-around services to meet students' social and emotional needs has a demonstrated impact on educational outcomes.

Ultimately, the goal is to expand educational opportunities in all of rural America. PRI's leadership will reach beyond Appalachia to develop and nurture the relationships needed to create a broad-based, diverse set of partners dedicated to ensuring all rural students succeed.

The Work

The foundation of PRI's work is embedding local people in the schools to build educational aspirations and competencies. Together with its partners in Eastern Kentucky, it developed a successful place-based framework that will be shared with rural areas across the nation.

An example of a successful partnership can be seen in the Letcher County School District, which has a long-standing relationship with PRI. Superintendent Denise Yonts says, “Our district has 2600 students in 8 schools and a small central office. We don't have the staff to write grants on our own, so the fact that PRI takes care of some of the heavy lifting is priceless.”

Letcher County has received substantial funding for small group learning opportunities and after-school tutoring through the partnership. PRI has enabled the school to provide weekend supplies for food-insecure students and gas cards for families to pick up students from after-school tutoring. “This seems minor but is really a big deal, particularly in rural areas like Letcher County where there is no public transportation,” says Yonts. “It is making a long-lasting impact.”

VP of Place-based Partnerships for PRI Mike Hogg says in reaching out to new rural areas, they will collaborate with local leaders to design locally appropriate solutions within PRI's established framework, which includes six indicators of success, for example improving kindergarten readiness, 3rd-grade reading competency, and high school graduation. But understanding the barriers to success and how to overcome them will be generated by local residents.

"The people in a place have solutions for that place," said Hogg. "We make space for conversations for communities to tap into the vein of concern for each other."

The Future

According to founder and President Dreama Gentry, developing a national rural agenda is critical. "In the education world of a cradle-to-career focus, no one else is talking about rural places and schools," she said. "We realized we could step onto the national stage and help others get into that space."

PRI's interest in a national movement ultimately springs from their work in eastern Kentucky. Gentry knows that developing a unified rural voice will influence the federal policies that impact Appalachia and create better ways to serve its students.

Gentry believes that by advocating for the needs of rural students, policies will ultimately help all communities – urban, suburban and rural. This is why PRI has been engaged with national thought partners like Geoffrey Canada, founder and President of the Harlem Children's Zone. "This is the moment, and we are the generals, the lieutenants and foot soldiers who have to go out there and save America's children," said Canada. "[Covid-19 is] the worst crisis we've ever faced. And we need to be honest about needing to come up with new strategies and working together, which is why I'm so proud of the work that Dreama and her team are doing, bringing folks together for this effort."

PRI's leadership has a deep appreciation for its grounding in Berea College and the way its values are in the organization's DNA, values like equity and a commitment to critical thinking. "Everything we've done is based on things we learned at Berea," said Gentry. "The college gave us the platform to enter in and make commitments to these communities over the long-term. We were given the opportunity to be entrepreneurial by fostering curiosity around a problem, imagining innovative solutions, and having the capacity to find the investment to implement them."

As PRI moves out on its own, both entities want a smooth transition for employees and partners. They are looking at ways to continue collaborating and supporting the other's work.

"This is bittersweet. Partners for Rural Impact has been an integral part of the college, and working together has been so positive, but it is a reaction to their success in a most positive way," says Thompson, who will serve as PRI's first board chair. "The college looks forward to continuing our relationship with PRI as an independent, thriving new entity. It is time to let them fly."