



MARCH 2026

Full Service Community Schools: Jenkins-Letcher

Partners for Rural Impact Annual Report (2025)

The U.S. Department of Education awarded Partners for Rural Impact (PRI) a Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) grant to supports all 10 schools in two Eastern Kentucky school districts: **Jenkins Independent Schools (JIS)** and **Letcher County Public Schools (LCPS)**. In these districts, FSCS launched in a context in which schools were, in many ways, already serving as resource hubs for the community. Immediately after the catastrophic floods in late July 2022, schools and their communities came together to support families who had lost everything. During the ongoing recovery, schools across Letcher County have supported each other, including by sharing space and resources ranging from busses to staff. In conjunction with the Promise Neighborhood (PN) grant, which also launched a few months after the flood, FSCS first prioritized the solidification and expansion of partnerships with community organizations to ensure the basic needs of students and families were met.

About this Report

This report synthesizes data Policy Studies Associates (PSA) has collected this year in Letcher County. These data include needs assessments, surveys of principals and school coordinators, and site visit interviews and observations. The data point to several potential next steps and recommendations for PRI's consideration. In particular, this brief reports on ways in which the grant is:

- Supporting early childhood education and kindergarten readiness
- Engaging youth and families to combat chronic absenteeism
- Advancing postsecondary success
- Strengthening lasting community partnerships
- Working strategically to ensure long-term progress

Context

PRI's Jenkins-Letcher FSCS grant supports a gamut of activities in Letcher County from purchasing needed material, curricular, and capital resources to capacity building to community-wide strategic systems thinking. This report briefly overviews several of the key strategic areas addressed by the grant. As context for the main findings of this report, it is worth noting the academic gains made in Letcher County since the start of the grant. In both reading and mathematics, both JIS and LCPS have improved more across all grades than Kentucky as a whole. Exhibits 1 and 2 display the data for reading and mathematics, respectively. Each chart shows the change in proficiency (that is students scoring at or above proficient) on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA). For reading, 44% of Letcher County students (grades 3-8) scored at or above proficient in 2024-2025 compared with 40% at the start of the grant. Statewide, improvement was half as much. In mathematics, Letcher County improved from 28% to 35% and statewide the improvement was one-third as much. Grades 4 and 8 reading, and grades 4 and 5 mathematics, however showed notable declines, dramatically so in grade 4 reading. Overall proficiency rates, while improving faster than the state, remain far below acceptable levels.

Exhibit 1: KSA Reading Proficiency

All Grades		3.8%	1.9%
Grade 3		7.3%	1.0%
Grade 4		-10.3%	2.0%
Grade 5		2.8%	2.0%
Grade 6		7.9%	5.0%
Grade 7		16.4%	3.0%
Grade 8		-1.3%	-2.0%

Exhibit reads: Reading proficiency rates In Jenkins-Letcher have increased an average of 3.8% since the start of the grant in 2022-23. Across other Kentucky districts, the increase was 1.9%.
Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Exhibit 2: KSA Mathematics Proficiency

All Grades		6.3%	1.9%
Grade 3		12.2%	0.0%
Grade 4		-4.2%	2.9%
Grade 5		-1.8%	2.0%
Grade 6		5.6%	3.0%
Grade 7		18.8%	6.0%
Grade 8		6.5%	4.0%

Exhibit reads: Mathematics proficiency rates In Jenkins-Letcher have increased an average of 6.3% since the start of the grant in 2022-23. Across other Kentucky districts, the increase was 1.9%.
Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Evaluation Findings

Supporting early childhood education and Kindergarten readiness

Letcher County has faced for more than five years a persistently and disturbingly low rate of kindergarten readiness, as measured by the Brigance assessment and displayed in Exhibit 3. Between 2020 and 2021, in particular, the rate plummeted from 25% to 14% where it has remained. At face value, the data in Exhibit 3 suggest that long-standing approaches are failing to prepare children for

kindergarten. It is difficult to view these data without a sense of alarm. At the same time, however, Exhibit 3 points to practical steps for improvement.

The Brigance assessment is comprised of several domains. Exhibit 3 shows that on the social emotional and language domains, children in Jenkins-Letcher are much better prepared than the overall score would indicate. While the gap between performance on the Social Emotional and Language domains and the Academic Cognitive and Motor Skills domains predates the Covid-19 pandemic, performance on the latter two domains has declined precipitously since 2020.

Exhibit 3: Kindergarten Readiness

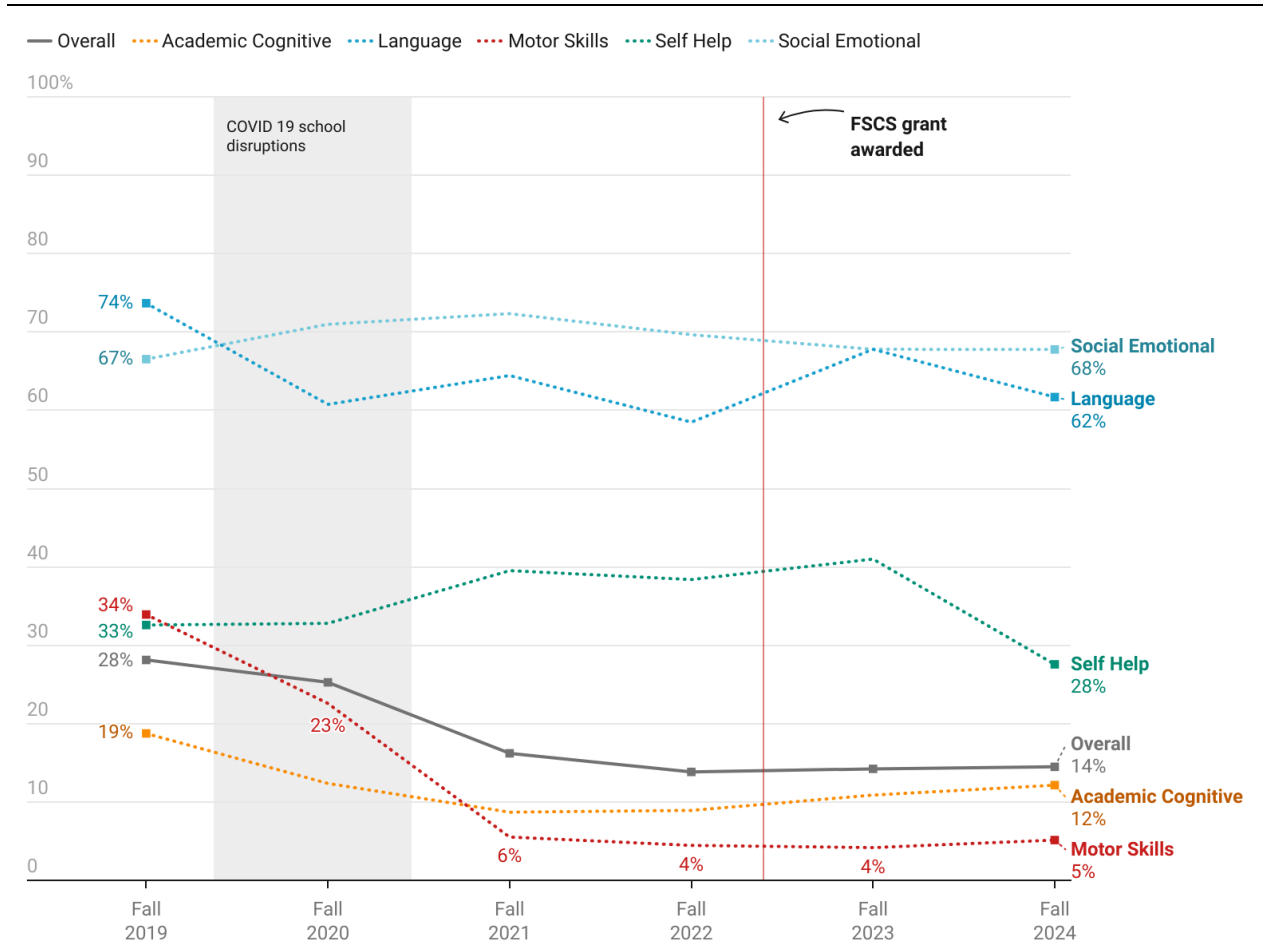


Exhibit reads: Kindergarten readiness rates in Jenkins-Letcher have remained steady at 14% from fall 2022, shortly before the start of the FSCS grant, to fall 2024.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

In Jenkins, PRI and the elementary school jointly developed a set of classroom activities aligned with the Brigance domains. The pre-K classroom uses the activities in stations set up around the room once a week for short blocks of time. School staff report seeing a difference in readiness between students who went to pre-K at the school and those who came into kindergarten from other pre-K settings. As with other schools and across grade levels, PRI has provided abundant classroom and school supplies and materials.

One likely cause of the low levels of kindergarten readiness in Letcher County is the near total absence of private childcare providers. PRI has worked closely with KidsKave to help them expand and grow their presence in Letcher County. KidsKave began as in-home child care. With PRI’s support, it has now moved from the home to a standalone childcare center. KidsKave provides care for 40 children from infants to 5-year-olds. PRI has supported KidsKave’s growth through supplies, materials, and, notably, providing Brigrance assessment materials for the center’s use. KidsKave is the only private, out-of-home childcare in Letcher County.

Engaging youth and families to combat chronic absenteeism

Letcher County’s chronic absenteeism rate has fallen for the last three years (see Exhibit 4). Both JIS and LCPS have surpassed the average decline statewide. Chronic absenteeism, nonetheless, remains unacceptably high at 37% for JIS and 48% for LCPS. To tackle this seemingly intractable problem, last year, the FSCS team participated in an Attendance Summit where they mapped out strategies to increase student and family engagement and attendance. Among the short-term strategies identified was prioritizing communication to families through local media about the importance of school attendance. The FSCS team has made progress on this by sponsoring public service announcements on radio and through their robust social media work on Facebook. The social media team—comprising school coordinators—posts not just school and community events but also highlights individual students’ successes.

Exhibit 4: Chronic Absenteeism Rates

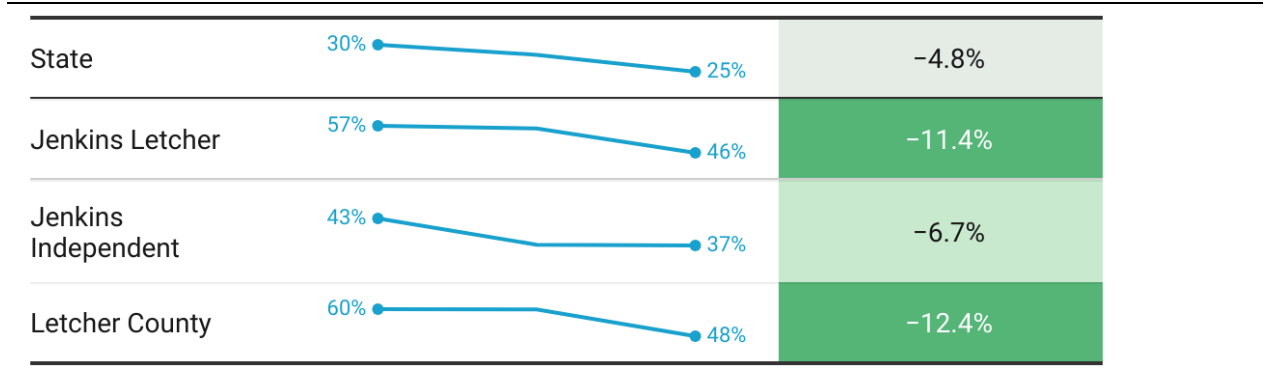


Exhibit reads: Chronic absenteeism rates have decreased an average of 11.4% in Jenkins Letcher since the start of the grant during the 2022-23 school year, a faster rate of decline than across other Kentucky districts in which the average decline was 4.8%.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

PRI has continued its investments in making school itself more intrinsically engaging, building on instructional resources and associated professional development purchased in prior years. Of particular note are the college and career activities discussed next.

Advancing postsecondary success

Kentucky defines five indicators of postsecondary readiness:

- Earning industry certification
- Completing a CTE end-of program assessment
- Completing an internship
- Completing dual credit
- Completing a substantive work-based learning experience

The percentage of Jenkins-Letcher graduates completing one or more of these has improved slightly from 2021-2025, as shown by the blue line in Exhibit 5, from 57% to 72%. This slightly outpaces the statewide trend, shown in gray, (46% to 63%).

Exhibit 5: Percent of Graduates Completing One or More Postsecondary Readiness Indicators

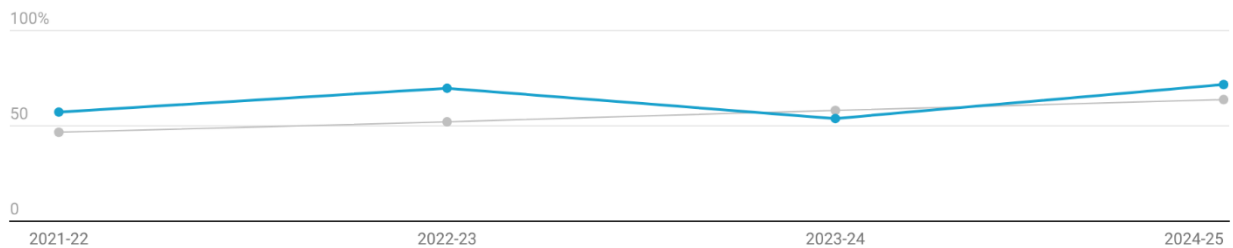


Exhibit reads: Since 2021-22, the number of Jenkins Letcher graduates who have completed one or more postsecondary readiness indicators (e.g., dual credit, apprenticeship) has increased by 5%, from 57% to 72% (blue line) compared with an increase of 7% statewide.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Exhibit 6 presents the percentage of graduates earning an industry certification. The percent of Jenkins Letcher graduates earning an industry certification was 44% in 2022 and 52% in 2025. Statewide, only 12% of graduates in 2022 earned an industry certification and 33% in 2025.

Exhibit 6: Percent of Graduates Earning an Industry Certification

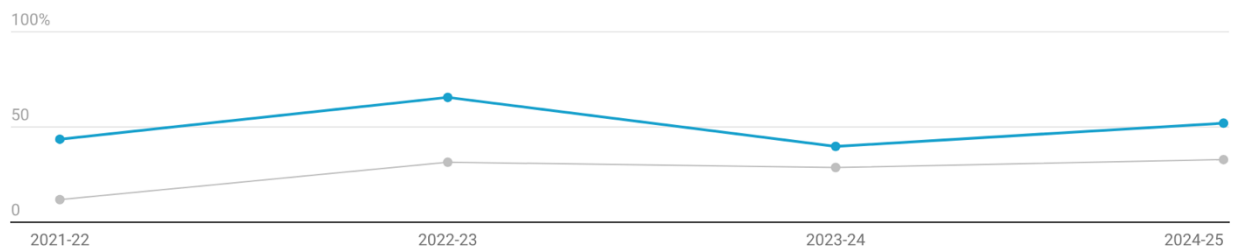


Exhibit reads: Since 2021-22, the number of Jenkins Letcher graduates who earned an industry certification has increased by 8%, from 44% to 52% (blue line) compared with an increase of 21% statewide.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

The percentage of students in Jenkins Letcher earning dual credit shows a starkly different pattern (Exhibit 7). In 2021 virtually no students statewide earned dual credit. By 2025, just under half of Jenkins Letcher graduates had earned dual credit (49%); statewide, one-third (33%) of graduates had earned dual credit in 2025.

Exhibit 7: Percent of Graduates Earning Dual Credit

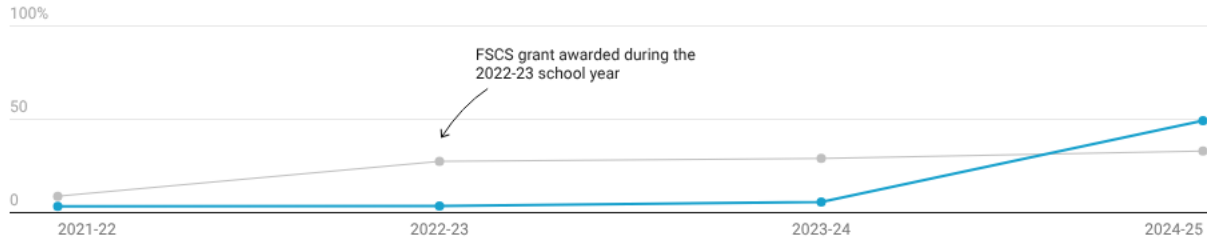


Exhibit reads: Since 2021-22, the number of Jenkins Letcher graduates who earned dual credit has increased by 46%, from 3% to 49% (blue line) compared with an increase of 24% statewide.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

The FSCS team has supported expanding opportunities for students in Letcher County to succeed after high school. The grant has supported both college preparation and career readiness. On the college front, in addition to funding expanded curricular materials and professional development, such as AP classes and science lab equipment, the team is growing the college trips offered in the summer to more students and families. These trips, while serving relatively few students at Letcher County Central High School (LCCHS), provide students a glimpse of the world outside Letcher County that many would never otherwise have.

On the career side, the Area Technology Center (ATC), which adjoins LCCHS has been able to offer additional and improved course and internship opportunities due to the grant. PRI’s partnership with Rural Up has provided additional summer internships for students as well.

Strengthening lasting community partnerships

The grant has forged enduring partnerships with both public and private stakeholders. PSA staff have heard consistently and repeatedly effusive praise and gratitude for PRI’s support of their work in Letcher County. Several partners work closely with the grant team; others work more in parallel and present opportunities for closer coordination and expansion. Examples include:

- Rural Up provides summer internships for high school students.
- With support from the grant and in partnership with Whitesburg ARH Hospital, Dolly Parton Imagination Library provides a book to every child born in Letcher County every month from birth to age 5.
- Cowan Community Center offers multiple programs after school and during the summer to expand and enhance youth opportunities. These range from a head start center to summer camp to Cowan Creek Mountain Music School which builds youth self-esteem through an understanding and appreciation of their rich cultural heritage.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The following recommendations and suggested next steps build on the findings above. We offer them to identify high-leverage ways to build and sustain progress to date.

The grant has supported critical first steps in Jenkins and with KidsKave. The grant will never scale these accomplishments to meet the imperative of all children in Letcher County being kindergarten ready. They can, nonetheless, be invaluable proof points to demonstrate the potential and raise awareness of the promise, potential, and priority that needs to be placed on kindergarten readiness in Letcher County, particularly if they focus squarely on the Academic Cognitive and Motor Skills domains of Brigance. PRI's reputation makes it well-positioned to encourage LCPS, JIS, partners, and the county to prioritize kindergarten readiness. PSA observed an interest from partners in linking the Appalachian Pregnancy Care Center with KidsKave as well as Dolly Parton Imagination Library. These should be straightforward connections to make.

PRI, JIS, and LCPS are keenly aware of the challenge and urgency of addressing chronic absenteeism in Letcher County. The strategies in place appear to be working by virtue of both districts showing greater improvement than the state. Continuing the current strategy may be the best course. Given the foundational importance of attendance, however, revisiting practices for early identification, relationship-building, and removing obstacles should be at the top of the agenda for meetings of community partners.

While LCCHS and the Letcher County ATC offer much improved and expanded opportunities for students, the work of each remains largely separate and unaligned. Better alignment between the two would benefit students. School counselors can play a critical role here to ensure that students understand the opportunities. Another option the schools should consider is building on the house system at LCCHS (and Jenkins Middle High as well) to layer an academy or career pathway model on top of the house system. The house system provides all students with connection and belonging in school. Adding explicit career pathways or academies would provide both additional connection as well as an earlier focus on possible postsecondary education and work options. Lastly, while the disconnect between Jenkins Middle and High School's CTE program and LCCHS/ATC seems intractable, it is squarely the grant's role to raise county-wide awareness of the issue.

As with addressing kindergarten readiness, expanding students' postsecondary options, particularly their "college knowledge" is not something that the grant can scale to all students in Letcher County on its own. The grant should explore additional partners not just to scale the work but to raise and prioritize the need and value to Letcher County of expanded postsecondary education opportunities for Letcher County students.

PRI has assembled an impressive set of partnerships in Letcher County. As the grant begins to wind down, institutionalizing these partnerships *among the partners themselves* needs to be the next step. A new convener of partners has been identified; the grant should ensure that the transition happens quickly. The FSCS grant design emphasizes strategic thinking and choices. Letcher County has experienced a whirlwind over the past five years from pandemic to flood to flood. As mindsets shift from crisis management, the grant again occupies a unique position not just to institutionalize its accomplishments but to foster the kind of shift in thinking from crisis to strategy that will sustain the hard work of the past

three years. PRI has built enormous trust, goodwill, and capital. Now is the time to spend it to support the local leaders who will carry the work forward.

