



MARCH 2026

Full Service Community Schools: Lee, Meniffee, Powell, & Wolfe

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 support 15 schools across four Eastern Kentucky districts—**Lee County School District, Menifee County School District, Powell County Schools, and Wolfe County School District**. These communities contend with sustained economic hardship, high rates of poverty, limited access to healthcare and social supports, and the added strain of traumatic flooding.

In this context, schools function as essential anchors for students and families, often providing the most stable and accessible support in their communities. Even so, challenges such as chronic absenteeism, limited counseling capacity, college and career readiness barriers, and significant family needs often exceed what schools can manage alone. The grant helps address these realities by strengthening the structures of the school and partnering with local organizations to expand academic assistance, connect students to health and social services, offer meaningful learning opportunities beyond the school day, and supports students for life after high school.

About this Report

This report draws from needs assessment data, surveys of school staff, students, and families, and site visit interviews to illustrate how the grant is unfolding in schools and communities. Based on these data, the brief examines how the grant is:

- Improving kindergarten readiness
- Supporting early literacy
- Expanding creative and experiential learning opportunities
- Advancing postsecondary success
- Strengthening community partnerships
- Planning for the future

The sections that follow describe these developments and offer considerations for continued improvement.

Evaluation Findings

Supporting kindergarten readiness

Across sites, the grant has strengthened kindergarten readiness supports by building more intentional transition programming and early learning experiences. Teachers, school coordinators, and community partners describe coordinated efforts such as summer kickoff events, “day in the life” visits, and recurring preschool engagement activities that help children become familiar with the school environment. These opportunities have given students repeated, low-stakes chances to meet teachers, practice foundational skills, and feel more confident entering school. Teachers emphasized that these experiences created “a little level of comfort” for students because “we weren’t a stranger” when they arrived in the fall.

STRENGTHENING KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION SUPPORTS IN PRACTICE

Not content merely to improve transitions, the grant also worked to deepen partnerships with community organizations to continue the work after the grant ends. Across districts, staff described how the grant helps schools build more intentional and supportive transitions into kindergarten by

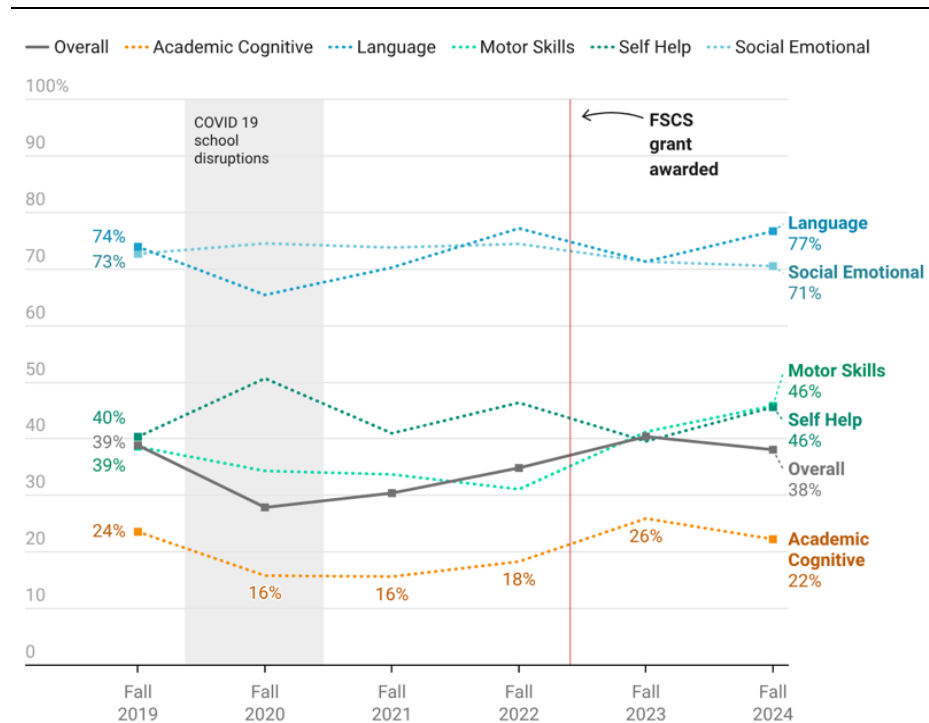
strengthening collaboration among teachers, families, and community partners. One school provides a particularly clear illustration of how this work has taken shape in practice.

The Kindergarten Kickoff—now held at local parks in July—is a two-day summer transition event designed to help rising kindergarteners make the leap to elementary school. The event gives students opportunities to meet teachers and peers, as well as to become familiar with routines and academic expectations. For example, teachers guide students through Simon Says to support body-part recognition and lead sorting games that strengthen color and number knowledge. As the school coordinator and teachers explained, these activities were intentionally tied to readiness expectations, including skills “we knew were tested on the Brigance,” making the experience especially valuable.

Teachers emphasized that the benefits extended beyond academic readiness. Staff described children as being “a lot more comfortable” during the first few days of school because they had already formed relationships with teachers and peers. One teacher noted that participating students had already “started [forming] relationships...so they had a friend,” which helped them feel connected from the start. The events also created meaningful opportunities to engage families. All families received books and take-home activities purchased through the grant: “They got to go home with a book every day...and instructional activities that worked on kindergarten readiness skills”. Participation increased from five families to 28 in two years, suggesting strong community response.

These qualitative findings are reflected in kindergarten readiness data from the Kentucky Department of Education (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Kindergarten Readiness in Lee, Menifee, Powell, and Wolfe Counties



Readiness at Lee Menifee Powell Wolfe declined during the COVID-19 period but has increased steadily since the grant was awarded, with gains across multiple developmental domains—most notably in language and social-emotional development. While readiness levels have not yet returned to pre-pandemic highs, the upward trend since 2022 suggests that expanded transition programming and early-learning supports are contributing to improved kindergarten entry outcomes.

In addition, the grant has strengthened ongoing early-learning experiences that help children acclimate

Exhibit reads: Across all districts, kindergarten readiness rates have returned to their pre-Covid levels of 38 percent of children ready.
Source: Kentucky Department of Education

gradually to school. The “Day in the Life of a Kindergartener” series—a monthly preschool program—now benefits from closer collaboration among the school, the Family, Resource, and Youth Services Center (FRYSC) and the public library. Children participate in whole-group literacy activities supported by grant-funded materials and rotate through stations that build early numeracy, matching, sorting, and fine motor skills. Teachers and the school coordinator noted that these repeated exposures help children adjust emotionally as well. As families saw these effects, participation grew from 8–10 children to 33.

DEEPENING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO SUSTAIN READINESS WORK

Schools are building deeper, more intentional partnerships with the community partners. These community partners have, in many cases, proven to be dependable sources of support as schools work to bring other programs and opportunities to the school. Some of these partners include local banks, the police department, local media teams, public libraries, etc. One school, in particular, has been able to build a more intentional partnership with the public library, which now plays a unique and important role in kindergarten readiness. The librarian conducts outreach across all county schools and provides weekly story time for zero-to-five-year-olds, drawing as many as 85 children. Working alongside the coordinator, she has co-designed skill-based readiness activities, themed literacy events (e.g., *Pete the Cat*, *Cat in the Hat*), and the summer kickoff sessions in community parks.

The grant made it possible for schools to have a dedicated point person (i.e., the school coordinator), whose presence educators and the community partners consistently identified as central to the work. One community partner emphasized that having a specific person responsible for early-childhood coordination has significantly expanded both the scale and coherence of programming, as well as the partnership between her and the school. She explained that “Since the grant, the relationship increased.” The school coordinator now participates in every major early-childhood program hosted by the library, bringing both the capacity and expertise that had not previously been available. As the community partner noted, “Having [the school coordinator] over there with their resources . . . that’s the thing that really impacts it the most.”

Supporting early grade literacy

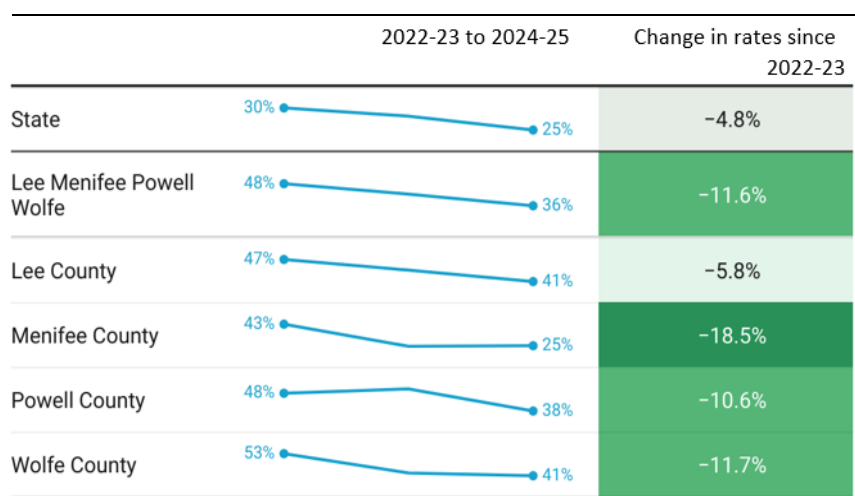
Teachers and administrators across roles described the grant’s support of literacy initiatives as “life-changing” for students—particularly in a rural community where families often lack access to both books and the kinds of enrichment experiences that deepen reading comprehension. Teachers noted that grant-funded literacy activities, especially those connected to experiential learning, have increased students’ curiosity, background knowledge, and willingness to take academic risks. For example, fourth- and fifth-grade students participated in a Daniel Boone literacy experience that began with an in-school historical reenactment and continued the following week with a field trip to Fort Boonesborough. Staff emphasized that the coordinator “always ties it back to literacy,” purchasing related texts so students could keep engaging with the content after the experience. Teachers highlighted how meaningful these opportunities have been, noting that for some students these trips represented the “first time [they had been] on a bus” or their “first time going to a play,” underscoring how rare such experiences are and how powerfully they can shape students’ engagement with reading.

The grant has also strengthened literacy supports by making books more accessible, embedding reading into school culture, and pairing literacy with joyful experiences that motivate students to read. At one elementary school, for instance, the school coordinator described purchasing leveled Dr. Seuss books for every child during Read Across America Week. The grant also supported students selecting one book of

their own at the book fair—an opportunity that not only grew home libraries but also sparked excitement and personal agency around reading. She explained that she uses moments like these “to gauge their interest in a book they would like to read” and then purchases additional titles to keep students engaged.

Similar investments have supported community literacy events across sites. School coordinators have purchased books and supporting literacy materials with grant funding and distributed these at school and community gatherings, giving students repeated opportunities to connect with reading in meaningful ways. One teacher noted that while she cannot yet quantify test-score growth, she has seen students “become more confident readers” who have “an eagerness to read”. In other schools, grant funding has supported renewed energy around structured literacy programming, such as strengthened Accelerated Reader (AR) efforts and linking family engagement events with literacy enrichment activities. Similar family-focused events across sites sometimes bring “maybe a hundred” participants.

Exhibit 2: Chronic Absenteeism Rates



With this parallel focus on family engagement, chronic absenteeism rates across the four districts averages 36% (see Exhibit 2). More notably, the rate of decline in each of the districts was greater, in some cases much greater, than Kentucky as a whole. Menifee County showed the most substantial drop in chronic absenteeism, dropping 18.5% from 2022-2025 and now matches the state average. In 2022-23, Menifee County was 13% *higher* than the state average.

Exhibit reads: Chronic absenteeism rates have decreased an average of 11.6% across all LMPW districts 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

Teachers and administrators described how the grant has

helped reshape school literacy cultures by tying together multiple efforts into more coherent, engaging experiences for students and families. In one elementary school, the librarian explained that the school coordinator worked with a local bank to supply a book vending machine so that “On...kids’ birthday, they get a birthday coin...and they get a book,” a shift teachers described as “changing the trajectory of what an award is,” because students now view books as something exciting to earn. These opportunities have contributed greatly to reading proficiency; specifically, the change in the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient in schools served by the grant was greater than the statewide average (see Exhibit 3). In all grades, across the grant, the change in proficiency outpaced the state average from 2022-23 to 2024-25.

Exhibit 3: KSA Reading Proficiency

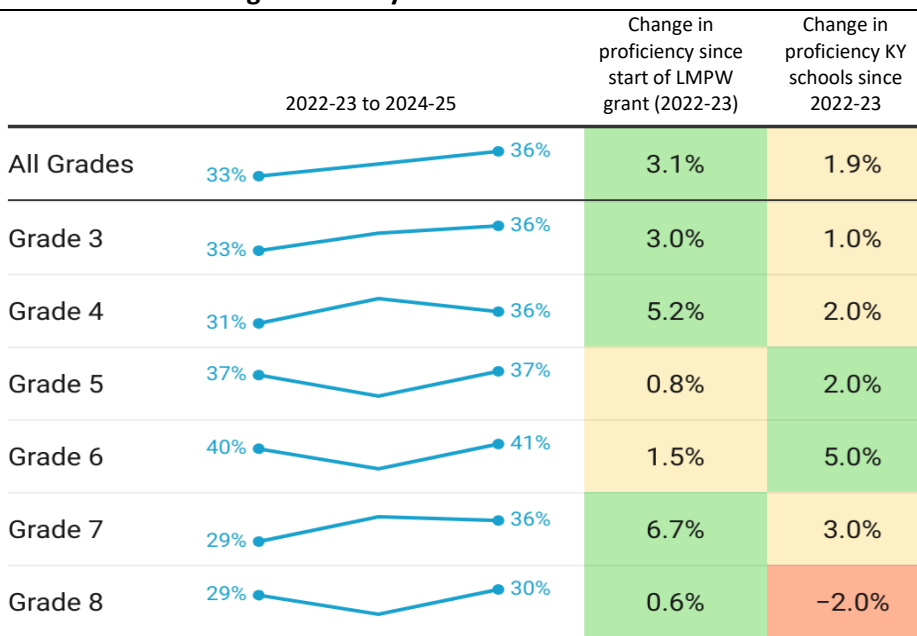


Exhibit reads: Across all districts in LMPW, reading proficiency rates have increased an average of 3.1% since the start of the grant in 2022-23. Across other Kentucky districts, the increase was 1.9%.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Advancing postsecondary success

Teachers and administrators described career days at one school as “a mess” before the grant, with events often overcrowded, students and professionals packed into the gym, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement that left most interactions brief. One veteran teacher described past events as “very meet and greet and move on,” leaving room for “very short conversations.” With the help of the school coordinator, however, Career Days have wholly shifted. Now, he recruits 20-plus professionals from a variety of fields (e.g., cybersecurity, law enforcement, veterinary studies), places each in a classroom, and rotates students through half-hour sessions in both the morning and afternoon. Teachers and administrators emphasized that this redesign is “much better” and the experience, as a result, has become a “really good, practical day-to-day learning” instead of just surface-level exposure.

Beyond Career Day, community partnerships have also given students more meaningful exposure to real workplaces—allowing them to see behind the scenes, meet professionals, and better understand what different careers actually involve. In one district, for example, students toured a local hospital, meeting staff across departments and “experien[ing] things like radiology that you can’t bring to the school.” The hospital’s marketing director, who serves as a liaison between the school and hospital, emphasized that this kind of authentic exposure helps students picture themselves in these roles and make more informed choices about their futures. She noted that the experience allows students to decide, “Is this something I really want to do—now that I’ve actually done it?” and often sparks powerful “aha moments” as students begin to see new possibilities for themselves.

Career programming has moved beyond exposure to create concrete entry points into high-demand fields by helping students earn industry-recognized credentials. In one district, for example, leaders developed a phlebotomy certification course to expand students’ access to healthcare pathways,

ultimately supporting 23 participants. The grant removed a major barrier by covering costs—“The class itself is \$500 per student and the test is \$129,” expenses that would have been “an out-of-pocket” cost most students “wouldn’t have been able [to] do on their own.”

EXPANDING HANDS-ON CAREER PREPARATION ACROSS FIELDS

In addition to healthcare and technical fields, the grant has supported pathways in education that offer students meaningful, hands-on experience working with young children. In one district, a robust Early Childhood Education (ECE) program gives high school students interested in teaching the chance to work directly with two-, three-, and four-year-olds in an in-house preschool. Students plan lessons, prepare materials, and lead instruction. As the teacher overseeing the program described, “There’s like a day a week that’s set aside for this... the little kids will come in and our kids have lessons and activities planned for them... and our kids, the high schoolers, get to be the teachers.” Teachers described it as one of the most meaningful and sustainable pathways, because in many ways it “addresses the needs of the community”—one without a robust daycare system nor a strong pipeline of K-12 educators—and positions students for future careers.

The grant has also broadened access to creative and media-focused career experiences by supporting partnerships that connect students with professionals in their own communities, often supplying students with work-based learning opportunities. At one high school, students work regularly with a local media partner, spending time learning broadcasting, production, interviewing, and editing. Staff emphasized that the success of the program reflects both access to equipment, funded through the grant, and the consistency of the community partner, who has been “a big” part of helping students grow their skillset. An administrator described the media team as a “powerhouse that our whole community is in awe of,” noting that students now run “media days, graphics, banners, [and] community events,” work that has helped students build both confidence and a visible presence in town. Several students have already secured paid opportunities, underscoring a broader pattern across districts in which 32% of students in SY2024-2025 earned an industry certification—credentials that help translate coursework into paid, career-aligned experiences (Exhibit 4). The principal noted that students are also receiving formal job offers to do the work they first learned through the media team.

Exhibit 4. Dual Credit and Industry Certification Rates

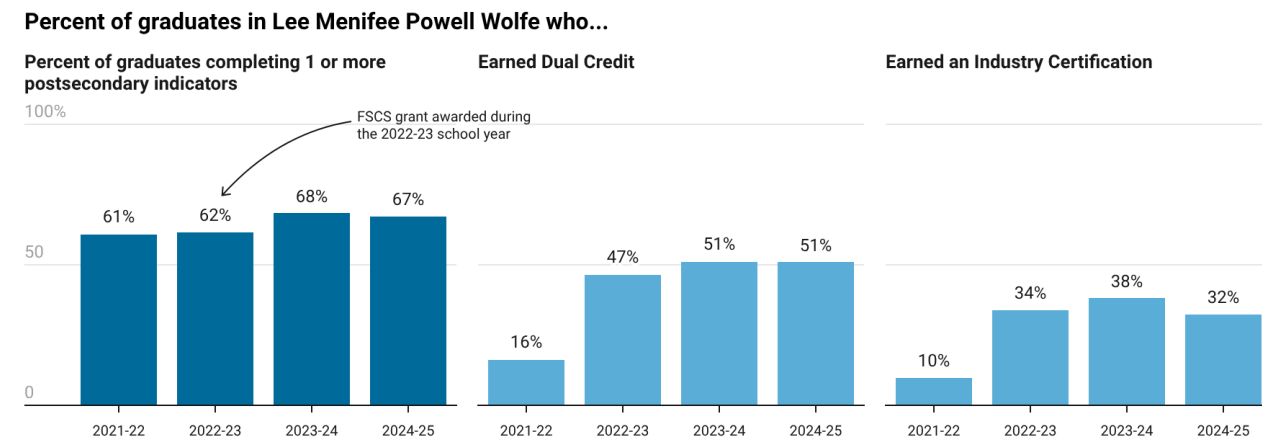


Exhibit reads: Since 2022-23, the first year of the LMPW grant, graduates in LMPW who have completed one or more postsecondary readiness indicators (e.g., dual credit, apprenticeship) has increased by six percent, from 61% to 67%. Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Strengthening community partnerships

Across counties, school coordinators have used the grant period to build partnerships that now operate as more regular, coordinated supports for students and families. One of the clearest illustrations comes from an elementary school's relationship with the local public library. Before the grant, the librarian visited occasionally; now, the partnership has become a year-round collaboration anchored in shared goals for early literacy. The librarian described collaboration on school events as something that is now embedded in her work and that she and school staff now "plan things together." Because their work now spans multiple initiatives—such as literacy nights, preschool Fridays, and kindergarten transition programming—the library has woven this collaboration into its regular rhythm.

Across counties, school coordinators have used the grant period to build partnerships that now operate as more regular, coordinated supports for students and families. One clear example is an elementary school's collaboration with the local public library. Before the grant, the librarian visited only occasionally; now, the relationship is year-round and anchored in shared early-literacy goals. The librarian described collaboration on school events as something that is now built into her work, noting that the school coordinator's involvement has "increased since the grant," and that she and school staff now "plan things together." Their joint work now spans multiple initiatives—such as literacy nights, preschool Fridays, and kindergarten transition programming—making the partnership a routine part of both the library's programming and the school's support for families.

The health partner has also internalized their commitments in ways that appear to extend beyond the grant. When the medical center staff was first contacted, they were hesitant, unsure of how to teach and interact with students; over time, however, the coordinator helped ease those concerns. As the work took shape, medical staff quickly warmed to students, noting that they "love being part of it [their learning] and watching the students and teaching [them] different things." The partnership is now a regular part of the center's engagement with the school, with "someone from every department" participating, contributing to the center's long-term recruitment strategy.

Similarly, the media and radio partnership has become a staple in the school and community. The partner described his involvement simply: "Kids just need someone to teach them the craft," and emphasized that he plans to keep working with students because "it matters to them, and it matters to this place." Teachers explained that students now expect him to return each semester and that the partnership has become something of which the community is proud. Over time, participation has grown from "two kids... [to] four... then eight... now [it's] 16 kids." Several students have already received paid opportunities because of the skills they developed through the partnership. The consistency of involvement, coupled with growing student interest and tangible outcomes, suggests a partnership that has already become a sustained presence in the school and community.

Other partners have also begun adapting their own organizational infrastructure to sustain collaboration beyond the life of the grant. Prosper Appalachia, for example, now operates its work-based learning programming independently of PRI funding, and staff emphasized that they fully intend to continue placing students. While they still rely on the school coordinator as a liaison, the partnership itself—the stipends, application processes, placement systems, and employer relationships—has been incorporated into Prosper Appalachia's core programming as opposed to as an add-on initiative. Staff described leadership as "very impressed with the partnership," underscoring that it is viewed internally as a durable component of their youth development portfolio.

Across sites, school and community partners increasingly see themselves as co-owners of the work initiated under the grant, and many already describe clear roles and routines they expect to continue after funding sunsets. Even without formal sustainability plans in every case, many partners are embedding collaboration into daily operations and, in some instances, adjusting internal structures to sustain their engagement over time.

Planning for the future

Sustainability efforts took multiple forms: investing in durable goods that outlast the grant period; identifying individuals who can carry initiatives forward; cultivating long-term partner relationships; and redesigning or initiating programs with strong potential for institutionalization.

INVESTING IN DURABLE GOODS AND REUSABLE MATERIALS

The grant has prioritized durable materials and school infrastructure that expand what teachers are able to offer, explaining that “we wanted to invest in things that would still be here in five years.” This approach was especially evident in career and technical education (CTE) programs, where new equipment and instructional resources now make it possible to provide richer, more hands-on learning, with one teacher noting that “students are finally getting to work with real tools and real experiences.” Similar thinking guided decisions in elementary settings, where schools added curricular materials, literacy resources, and enrichment supplies that strengthen daily instruction; as one staff member shared, “*These aren’t one-time things—this builds our program.*”

The purchase of Yondr pouches also represents an investment in a product intended to support schools beyond the grant period. Administrators emphasized that the pouches have already shifted school culture around cellphone use, helping students remain present in the classroom and improving student behavior. Teachers also described noticeable improvements, as their “classrooms feel a lot calmer now,” making it possible for them “to get through more instruction.” Although actual durability will become clearer with continued use, the pouches are intended to be reused across multiple school years, positioning them as a potentially long-lasting tool. To support sustainability, districts may wish to periodically review wear, replacement costs, and possible alternatives over time.

IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUALS TO CARRY INITIATIVES FORWARD

While community partnerships are illustrative of how outside organizations may continue key elements of the work, sustainability within schools also depends on identifying specific people who can carry initiatives forward. Recognizing that FSCS funding is time-limited, school coordinators are deliberately planning for continuity by pulling colleagues into the work and clarifying who will own particular programs and practices going forward. As one school coordinator explained, “A lot of the programming that we have done... I’m handing that off to a faculty member or staff member... making sure to hand that over to a specific teacher so that they can continue doing that when we’re gone.” This has meant deliberately pulling colleagues into the work and clarifying responsibilities so that others feel prepared to lead.

In some schools, this directive has involved gradually shifting coordination of specific initiatives—such as kindergarten transition programming, career events, or library partnerships—to teachers, counselors, or administrators who are positioned to own them long term. Staff noted that this approach has begun to change expectations about shared responsibility, particularly as educators experience the benefits of

well-organized systems and see how manageable the work becomes when roles are clear. As routines become embedded in school practice and specific individuals are identified to steward them forward, schools are increasingly positioned to sustain these initiatives beyond the life of the grant.

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.

Looking ahead, several opportunities emerged for strengthening and sustaining the work that has taken shape under the grant. Districts may benefit from continuing to build coordinated approaches to career and technical education by deepening collaboration with Prosper Appalachia, whose growing involvement in schools offers a promising foundation for streamlined work-based learning placements and more coherent CTE programming across counties. As a next step, districts and school coordinators may consider working with Prosper Appalachia to clarify roles, establish shared goals for student participation, and develop a plan for how work-based learning placements will be coordinated, supported, and sustained over time.

At the same time, there is value in more systematically documenting the impact of kindergarten readiness initiatives. While staff described noticeable improvements in students' comfort and preparedness, formalizing evidence—through Brigance data, participation trends, and input from teachers and families—would help districts refine strategies and make a compelling case for sustaining these efforts. Moving forward, districts may consider developing a clear data plan that identifies which measures will be tracked, how information will be collected each year, and how findings will be shared with schools, partners, and families to support continuous improvement and funding decisions.

In addition, the Partnership Council represents an important lever for county-specific planning and could be further leveraged not only as an information-sharing space, but as a forum for aligning partner roles to priority needs and coordinating services in intentional ways. Next steps could include dedicating time within council meetings for structured planning, using data to identify priorities, and clarifying which partners will take responsibility for specific areas of work.

Districts may also benefit from intentionally designing programs with strong potential for institutionalization. Several initiatives developed under the grant already demonstrate this trajectory—particularly when they include clear structures, distributed ownership, and visible alignment with school priorities. Building on these lessons, districts and School Coordinators might identify programs that are functioning well, codify the processes that make them effective (e.g., scheduling templates, partner roles, outreach plans), and ensure that responsibilities are shared across staff so the work does not depend on a single grant-funded role. The overhauled Career Day in Wolfe County and the expanding kindergarten readiness programming offer useful models for how structured systems, cross-agency involvement, and role clarity can support long-term sustainability.

Finally, while some schools have already begun taking steps in this direction, institutionalizing key partnerships by clarifying responsibilities, establishing shared work plans, and formalizing expectations might help ensure that collaboration continues even when individual staff or community leaders transition out of their roles. As a next step, districts and coordinators may want to document partnership structures, identify long-term “owners” of the work, and develop simple guidance and materials so that key programs and collaborations can continue even as staffing or leadership changes.

