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Full Service Community Schools: Kentucky State Scale Up

Partners for Rural Impact Annual Report (2025)

Awarded in late 2022 to Partners for Rural Impact (PRI), the federally funded State Scale Up (SSU) grant supports the implementation of the Full-Service Community School (FSCS) model in 14 districts¹ and 67 schools across Kentucky's Appalachian region. These districts serve rural Appalachian communities with strong community ties but limited community resources and high poverty rates. SSU launched in a context in which schools were, in many ways, already serving as community hubs, yet significant resource constraints—including the loss of teaching positions, geographic isolation, and limited community infrastructure—created gaps and urgent needs for children. Each school and community is unique, with distinct resources, needs, and challenges. The FSCS grant has supported the development of tailored programs across SSU districts and schools that meet the needs of schools and families, addressing academic achievement, attendance, family engagement, and postsecondary readiness through partnerships with community organizations.

About this Report

This report synthesizes data collected by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) during summer and fall 2025 site visits² and draws on contextual data from interviews and focus groups conducted in prior school years, as well as data from the schools' needs assessments administered to staff, parents, and students, and from principal and school coordinator surveys. Over the three school years during which PSA has visited State Scale Up schools and districts, we have visited a different set of districts and schools on each visit to gain insight into how the FSCS model is implemented across the many schools involved. This report focuses on the ways in which the grant is:

- Expanding kindergarten transition programming and supporting early learning
- Strengthening math and literacy through tutoring and targeted supports
- Improving attendance by engaging students and families and transforming school culture
- Reviving arts education to engage students and families and expand students' horizons
- Expanding career and college pathways for all students
- Building and strengthening community partnerships to meet the needs of students, families, and schools

The report concludes with a summary of school coordinators' and schools' and districts' efforts to ensure sustainability and potential next steps for grant leadership to consider as the five-year grant moves through its fourth year.

Evaluation Findings

Expanding kindergarten transition programming and supporting early learning

Improving kindergarten readiness has emerged as a persistent concern across SSU schools and districts. Since the pandemic began, kindergarten readiness, as measured by the Brigance assessment, has declined, and school staff have struggled to engage early learners and their families (Exhibit 1). In low-resourced,

¹ The grant funds Full-Service Community Schools in Barbourville Independent, Bell County, Clay County, Harlan County, Harlan Independent, Jackson County, Knox County, Middlesboro Independent, Owsley County, Pineville Independent, Whitley County, Williamsburg Independent, and, as of the start of the 2025-2026 school year, Leslie County and a school in Rockcastle County.

² During the fall 2025 site visit, we spoke with one superintendent, seven school administrators, and ten school coordinators. Over the summer, PSA conducted focus groups with 36 KinderCamp coordinators.

geographically vast communities, reaching children in their homes to provide resources that support home literacy and numeracy before they enter school can be challenging. Often, a single public library serves an entire county; in communities affected by the July 2022 floods, many public libraries were damaged or destroyed, further limiting families' access to early literacy information and resources. Compounding this, there are few formal early learning opportunities, such as district-supported prekindergarten programs or Head Start centers. For many children, kindergarten is their first time spending significant time away from home during the day and their first exposure to a formal learning environment.

Kindergarten readiness camps are a strategy to support children's successful transition to kindergarten and broader kindergarten readiness.³ State Scale Up funding has significantly expanded summer kindergarten readiness programs, KinderCamps, which are intensive, one- to two-week programs that prepare rising kindergarteners for school entry. School coordinators reported that these camps prioritize two interconnected goals: building students' comfort with school routines and introducing foundational early literacy and numeracy skills.

KinderCamps supported by the SSU grant typically employ school-year kindergarten teachers, leveraging their expertise to deliver developmentally appropriate instruction and introduce children to future classmates, teachers, and the school building. One school coordinator emphasized the importance of reaching "the kids who have never set foot in a school before." KinderCamp teachers frequently use the Teacher Created Materials curriculum, purchased with grant funds, and lead students through activities such as name writing, letter and number recognition, scissor skills, and social skills development. These activities align with the core readiness domains measured by Brigance.

School coordinators noted that parents appreciated and engaged with KinderCamp programming, a notable finding given that caregiver involvement is a critical component of children's successful transition to kindergarten and school routines. School coordinators and school administrators observed that parents valued the chance to meet teachers and observe the classroom environment, which helped reduce family anxiety about the kindergarten transition. Some camps provided take-home activity books, extending learning opportunities into the home and building parents' capacity to support their children's readiness.

Exhibit 1: Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

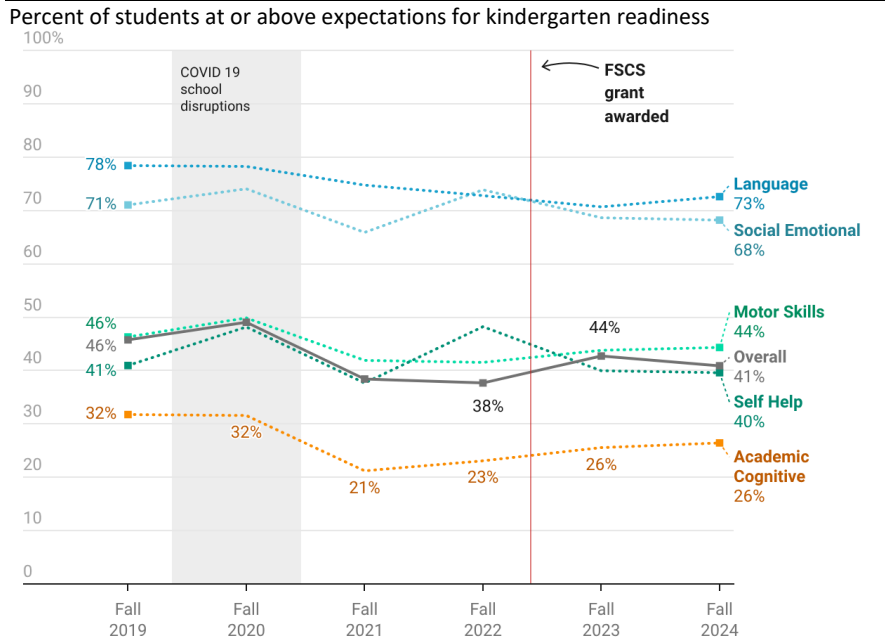


Exhibit reads: Across all districts in SSU, kindergarten readiness rates have improved from 38% in fall 2022, shortly before the start of the FSCS grant, to 41% in fall 2024. Source: Kentucky Department of Education

³ Eisenhower et al., 2016; Fain et al., 2016; Griebing & Gilbert, 2020

School coordinators and staff described the camps as successful but noted challenges that limited broader participation. Transportation was a significant barrier to reaching the students who would benefit most from KinderCamp. Several coordinators noted that families without reliable transportation often could not participate, despite targeted outreach. Budget constraints also limited camp duration; while coordinators generally agreed that two-week camps would better serve students, most were limited to one week due to funding. School coordinators expressed interest in better coordination across funding streams (including Save the Children and 21st Century grants) to support extended programming.

Although we do not yet have data from the fall 2025 kindergarten readiness assessment on the potential impacts of the summer 2025 readiness camps, the overall trend in kindergarten readiness across SSU schools and districts has been positive since the start of the FSCS grant (Exhibit 1). With adjustments to the summer readiness camps to expand their reach and collaborate with community partners to provide materials to children and families before children enter school, we expect to see improvements in overall scores and across domains in the coming years.

Strengthening mathematics and literacy through tutoring and targeted support

Across schools, school coordinators described tutoring as the cornerstone of their academic support strategies, and both school coordinators and school administrators noted its meaningful, measurable impact. Administrators cited the recently released 2024-2025 Kentucky state accountability report as evidence of effectiveness. Two Clay County elementary schools participating in the FSCS grants ranked first and second in the state accountability ratings, and many schools across the SSU districts showed growth in reading and math. School coordinators and administrators also provided specific examples linking tutoring to student learning gains. For example, at one SSU middle school in Bell County, a seventh-grade student had been earning D's and F's in math, but with consistent one-on-one support from one of the school's tutors, the student's grades improved to B's and C's, and the student showed significantly more confidence in their math abilities. They added that the school ranked 11th in the state for academic growth in 2024-2025.

Across State Scale Up schools, the percentage of students scoring at proficient or advanced on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) has increased faster in both reading and math than in other Kentucky schools (Exhibits 2 and 3).

Consistent with reports from schools about the impact of tutoring, middle school students' proficiency rates in SSU schools have notably increased since the grant award in January 2023—up 9% in math and reading for seventh-graders and nearly 7% in math for eighth-graders. Even the slight increase (1.1%) in eighth-graders' reading proficiency is important given the 2% decline in reading proficiency among other eighth-grade students in Kentucky. From the perspective of school coordinators and administrators, the tutoring supported by FSCS funding has been an important driver of students' academic growth.

Schools have implemented a range of tutoring models, from small-group before- or after-school sessions to in-school

tutors who work alongside teachers in classrooms. These approaches reflect variations in school start times and transportation availability across districts. One middle school coordinator explained their school's model, in which academic tutors work within classrooms rather than pulling students out of class. Students do not feel singled out—particularly important for middle schoolers—and teachers can observe and learn the strategies that tutors, many of whom are retired teachers, use, thus building long-term instructional capacity that will outlast the grant. Another school uses a before-school model because its bus schedules leave students with at least half an hour before the formal school day begins, just enough time to meet with a tutor before their first class, but no time or available buses that would allow for afterschool tutoring.

Schools also differ in how they identify and recruit students for tutoring. At one elementary school, tutoring serves 70 to 80 students per day across all grades, recruiting all students below grade level in reading or math—a reflection of both the need and the demand for academic support. At another school, the school coordinator and principal reported that their tutors focus on third-grade students reading below grade level. They added that their current group of third-grade students made substantive progress toward grade-level reading between the fall and winter MAP⁴ assessments.

Exhibit 2: KSA Math Proficiency

Percent of students scoring at or above proficient

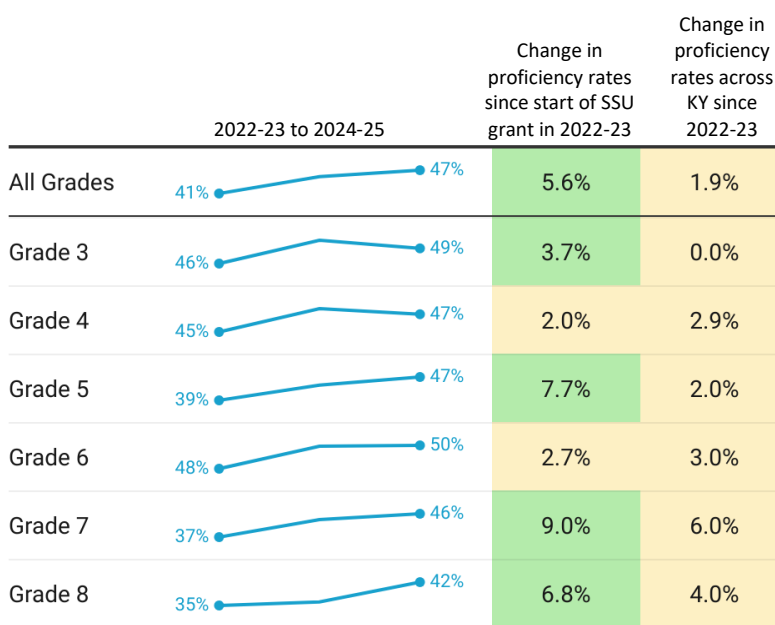


Exhibit reads: Across all districts in SSU, math proficiency rates have increased an average of 5.6% since the start of the grant in 2022-23. Across other Kentucky districts, the increase was 1.9%.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

⁴ Many districts we've spoken to use MAP Growth (Measures of Academic Progress) assessments as their interim assessment. School staff and coordinators look at MAP data from the fall, winter, and spring administrations to make decisions about which children to recruit for small group or one-on-one tutoring.

Exhibit 3: KSA Reading Proficiency

Percent of students scoring at or above proficient







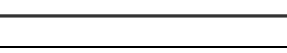
| | 2022-23 to 2024-25 | Change in proficiency rates since start of SSU grant in 2022-23 | Change in proficiency rates across KY since 2022-23 |
|------------|---|---|---|
| All Grades |  | 5.5% | 1.9% |
| Grade 3 |  | 3.4% | 1.0% |
| Grade 4 |  | 6.4% | 2.0% |
| Grade 5 |  | 7.2% | 2.0% |
| Grade 6 |  | 4.4% | 5.0% |
| Grade 7 |  | 9.3% | 3.0% |
| Grade 8 |  | 1.1% | -2.0% |

Exhibit reads: Across all districts in SSU, reading proficiency rates have increased an average of 5.5% since the start of the grant in 2022-23. Across other Kentucky districts, the increase was 1.9%.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Tutoring interventions also reach high school students. In Kentucky, all high school students take college entrance exams as part of the state’s accountability requirements.⁵ FSCS funds have supported preparation programs, including those offered by Test Prep Mom,⁶ a Kentucky-based educational consultant that provides virtual and in-person classes for college admissions exams. Although these courses focus on a single assessment, ensuring that students attending FSCS schools have access to them, regardless of their caregivers’ ability to pay, is critical to helping students overcome barriers to postsecondary enrollment, a foundational goal of the SSU grant described further below.

Improving attendance by engaging students and families and transforming school culture

Improving academic outcomes is central to the State Scale Up work, and school coordinators and principals recognize that academic gains first require getting students to attend school—and to want to be there. The grant has supported schools in addressing both attendance challenges and the broader issues of school culture and student engagement.

Schools have documented concrete improvements in attendance rates and decreases in chronic absenteeism since the start of the grant (Exhibit 4—Chronic Absenteeism Rates). At Bell County's Page School Center, staff described how “Our overall attendance went up a whole percentage level last year, which was like monumental in the world of attendance.” School coordinators and principals in other schools and districts similarly reported that “attendance went up,” though they acknowledged the significant challenges persist.

From the perspective of principals and school coordinators, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted attendance patterns, and schools are still working to reverse these disruptions. One school coordinator explained that “It got really bad after COVID” because “parents and kids got the mindset

⁵ In past school years, all students have taken the ACT. Beginning in the 2025-2026 school year, Kentucky will require all students to take the SAT rather than the ACT.

⁶ <https://www.testprepmom.com/about>

that, you know, they could stay home, because that's what they had been doing during that time.” The shift to virtual learning during the pandemic created lasting complications. As one principal put it: “During that, you come if you want to, you stay home if you want to...that opened up a whole other Pandora's Box.” He explained that some students internalized the message that virtual learning was equivalent to in-person instruction: “You had a lot of kids, they're like, ‘Well, I can stay at the house and do my lesson online....’ We still fight that today.”

To combat this, school coordinators have focused on creating school environments where students genuinely want to attend. Principals told us that visitors to their schools have noted changes in the schools’ climates. One principal shared what a regular visitor and mentor told him: “I can see this building transforming... especially three years... I've seen a huge difference in the building.” The principal explained that “Kids want to be here now. And I said, you got to have them here before you can educate.”

Specific programs funded by the grant have become strong motivators for student attendance. At one middle school, student group days—which grew out of grant-supported activities such as the media group—have become highly anticipated events. The principal described a particularly telling moment: “We had a kid here... it's a day of student groups and the parent came in for whatever reason to sign the kid out... they didn't want to leave because it was student group day.” He added, “Man, it's pretty good when you've got kids that don't want to leave.” Across schools, we heard that the SSU grant-funded media equipment and arts programming were a strong draw for students, giving them access to tools to create and share their and their schools’ stories.

Exhibit 4: Chronic Absenteeism Rates, 2017 through 2025

Percent of students chronically absent

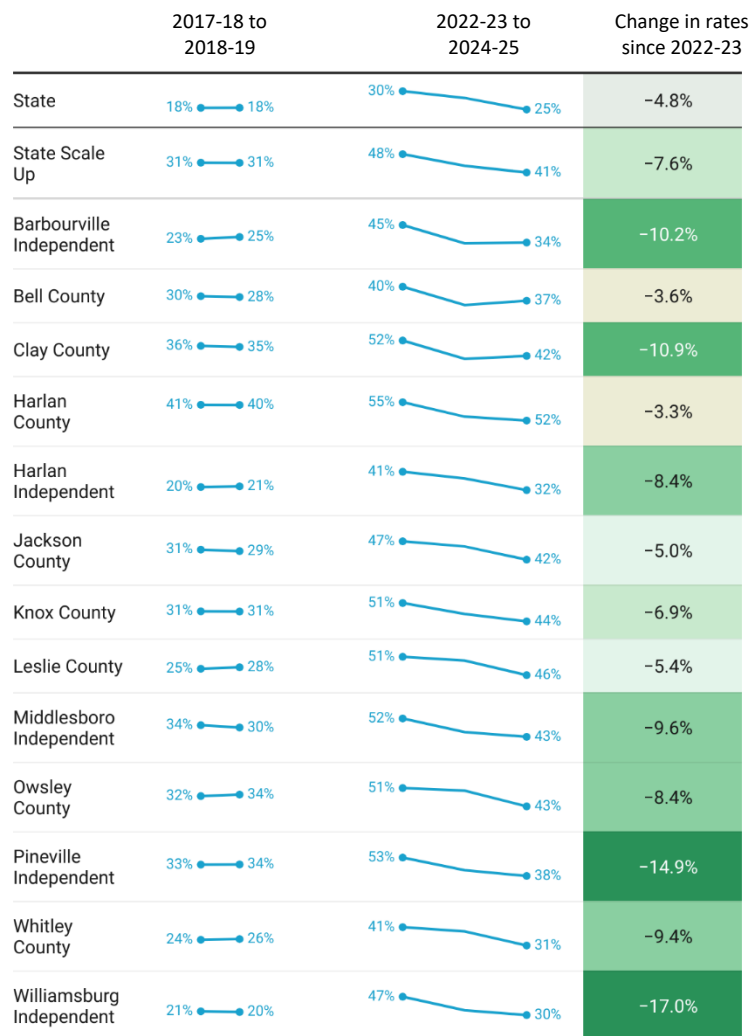


Exhibit reads: Chronic absenteeism rates have decreased an average of 7.6% across all State Scale Up districts since the start of the grant during the 2022-23 school year, a faster rate of decline than across other Kentucky districts in which the average decline was 4.8%.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

For school coordinators, improving attendance and culture has meant building trust in communities where outsiders are often met with skepticism. Although 85% of SSU school coordinators live in or have worked in the communities where they are school coordinators,⁷ they are often new to the school building—a distinction that matters. One Clay County school coordinator described the difficult early period: “They questioned everything I did... they would call the principal back and ask who I was, what I was doing... it was very hard at the beginning.” But through daily, visible presence, trust grew: “I showed we cared... I'm at pickup. I'm at drop off. They see my face talking to them. They realize... that I'm just there for their kids.” As school coordinators and administrators report, students are now approaching school coordinators directly with ideas and needs, and families that were once skeptical have become advocates for the school coordinators and the programming that FSCS funds.

This approach—being present, accessible, and showing an investment in students' well-being—has helped shift both attendance patterns and the broader school culture. Since the start of the grant, chronic absenteeism has declined by nearly 9% across the SSU districts (Exhibit 4). In Barbourville Independent, Clay County, Pineville Independent, and Williamsburg Independent, chronic absenteeism has fallen by more than 10% since the first year of the FSCS grant (2022-23). Although absenteeism rates remain, on average, 9% higher than in the 2018-2019 school year, school staff and school coordinators have made notable improvements, with some districts' chronic absenteeism rates only 5% higher than in the pre-COVID school year.

Reviving arts education to engage students and families and expand students' horizons

Nowhere is the grant's impact more visible, quite literally, than in the revival of arts programming across State Scale Up sites. Due to budget cuts over the past decade, districts eliminated certified art and music teaching positions. At Hacker Elementary, the school coordinator, a former teacher at the school, reflected: “At one point early on in my career, we had an art and a music teacher, but we did not have a full-time art and music teacher.... We've not had an art or a music teacher for a very long time.” In Clay County, school coordinators described how “There's no art class in the elementary school anymore, and so all the art that they're exposed to is what we bring in.”

The grant has enabled schools to bring artists back into schools through PRI's Artist Directory and local partnerships that school coordinators have built or nurtured. Teaching artists now visit schools regularly, bringing pottery (students make ornaments, bowls, and cups), painting, music instruction (ukuleles, drums), and even blacksmithing.

The arts programming has also become a powerful driver of family engagement and career exploration. At Bell Central School Center, every enrolled student collaborated on a school-wide art project. Every family can visit the school and see their child's contribution. Paint nights in Clay County draw large crowds: “There, when you say she's going to be there, you don't have a no-attendance problem,” one school coordinator said of a popular local artist. At another school, a second paint night drew such overwhelming attendance that organizers had to move it from the library to the cafeteria to accommodate everyone. One school coordinator described how her school's culture has become “more positive because you've got parents that're eager to come to these family engagements, versus before, even at open house, you had very few.” School coordinators say that the grant-funded arts events attract families who might not otherwise enter the building, creating opportunities for school

⁷ Source: PSA Spring 2025 School Coordinator survey.

coordinators to connect with parents about their family's needs and school- and community-based services available to them.

Beyond special events, many schools have also purchased art carts—mobile stations stocked with supplies that can be wheeled into classrooms or used during evening family events. These durable investments are to ensure that even without a certified art teacher, students and families can access quality art materials and activities.

School coordinators and teachers report that students value the arts' contributions to their schools. For students, arts programming addresses engagement in ways that purely academic interventions cannot. The 3D printing program at one middle school became what the principal called the "single biggest relationship-building tool" in the school—reaching students who might not connect through sports or traditional academics. Theater programs, pottery classes, and music instruction give students who "maybe didn't feel like they were part" of the school community a place to belong. When a visiting musician performed at one middle school, a sixth-grade student approached the principal afterward and asked, "Can we please hire that person?" The school coordinator noted it was remarkable to see a student advocate so passionately for keeping arts in their school.

Importantly, as school coordinators, administrators, and district staff noted, in communities where many students have never left their county and may want to pursue a career close to home, arts programming has broadened students' view of their communities and the potential careers they can pursue without leaving. Teaching artists bring not only skills but also concrete stories of their own career paths and their physical and creative ties to the communities where the students live. The blacksmith who sets up outside schools to demonstrate his craft or the jewelry designer who teaches students how to use welding irons introduces students to both an art form and a potential career path.

One school coordinator we spoke with emphasized that arts programming complements the grant's broader college- and career-readiness work. College visits show students' academic pathways, and career exploration introduces them to healthcare and trades. Arts programming also challenges students to solve problems creatively and exposes them to potential careers. For example, in theater, they write plays, gain carpentry experience by building sets, learn about electrical trades by running sound and lighting, and sew costumes.

Expanding career and college pathways for all students

In communities where students may be geographically isolated and have limited exposure to opportunities beyond their region, SSU school coordinators have worked with their schools to expand students' understanding of the diverse postsecondary college and career paths available to them.

Supported by grant funds, school coordinators have organized college visits to two- and four-year colleges throughout Kentucky and Appalachia, including Lincoln Memorial University, Union College, the University of the Cumberlands, and Bowling Green State University. For many students, these trips are their first time leaving their home county. One Clay County school coordinator shared a story that captures their significance. "Some of the kids that got on the bus when they got on the interstate, they thought they were somewhere special.... They had never been on an interstate." When students reached the city and could see across the Ohio River, she explained, "They would have been satisfied with that trip without even going in."

One principal emphasized that these visits help students “realize that yes, this is an option for you, this is something you could do.” A principal in a different district described how the college-going culture has shifted, “We've got students now—they're going to Western [Kentucky University], [University of] Louisville... when I first became principal, we just had kids that were going to Alice Lloyd, Eastern [Kentucky University], and now they're seeming to branch out.” He shared the story of a former student now at the University of Louisville, who calls to report that “Everybody says, ‘Now, where are you from?’ Because he has a big-time country accent ... he loves it.”

SSU also supports student trips that expose them to career and postsecondary pathways beyond four-year college. School coordinators have organized trips to Southeast Community College's lineman training program, a six-week certification course, to meet the high demand for utility workers in the region and nationwide. Other visits have included a regional Walmart distribution center, which offers high-paying jobs to high school graduates and allows them to continue postsecondary education through the company’s tuition assistance program. The Clay County principal and school coordinator articulated a comprehensive vision echoed by many high school administrators: “If it's career and technical, if it's just go straight to the workforce, or if it's go to college, we just try to support 'em in any endeavor that they want to choose.”

Community partnerships, built and nurtured by school coordinators, also support career exploration. Many school coordinators reported hosting career fairs at their schools, attended by community partners who also help provide vision, dental, or medical support services. Partnerships with medical providers, in particular, have been instrumental in giving students access to hands-on apprenticeship experiences in local industries that need workers. In Harlan Independent, for example, students participate in mock surgeries, explore different medical departments, and learn about healthcare careers firsthand. The partnership has grown from tentative early conversations into a robust program in which hospital staff eagerly engage with students.

Exhibit 5: Postsecondary Readiness Indicators

Percent of graduates who...

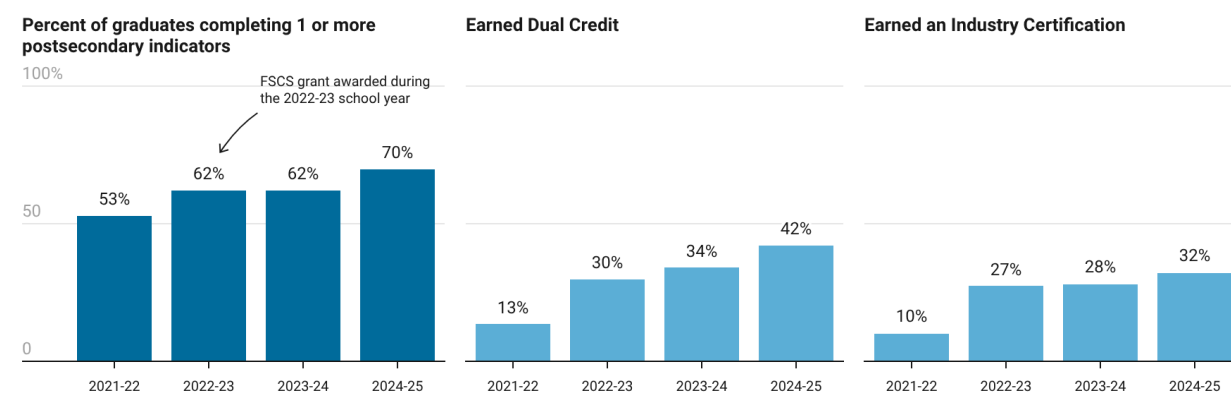


Exhibit reads: Since 2022-23, the first year of the SSU grant, graduates in state scale up who have completed one or more postsecondary readiness indicators (e.g., dual credit, apprenticeship) has increased by 8%, from 62% to 70%.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

At the elementary and middle school levels, career exploration takes different forms. At Clay County Middle School, for example, health fairs with eight to 10 community partners, including Cumberland Valley Health and the local hospital, let students interact with medical mannequins, learn CPR, and explore health careers.

Another career-readiness and engagement strategy—expanding students’ access to STEM programming—has led the SSU grant to purchase 3-D printers for schools. At one school we visited, students design and print items they then sell, using the proceeds to buy filament, making the program self-sustaining. School coordinators and school staff reported that some students are so intrigued by the possibilities that they seek out 3-D design programs to create and print their own designs. Administrators and school coordinators shared that the technology the grant has enabled them to purchase draws in students who do not always thrive in traditional science and math classrooms: “[One] third-grader who is actually on the autism spectrum. And he loves [going to the STEM classroom with the 3-D printers and robotics equipment]. One day, he built a robot that worked with a remote control and was rolling it down the hallway to us.” A partnership with Southeast Community College, supported by the grant, provides ongoing technical support for schools’ printers, increasing the likelihood that the design and printing program will continue beyond the grant period.

The postsecondary readiness strategies appear to influence the share of students meeting key indicators of preparation for life after graduation, whether in college or in a career. Since the SSU grant award during the 2022-23 school year, the share of graduates completing one or more indicators has increased from 62 to 70%, while the share completing no postsecondary readiness indicators has decreased from 38% in 2022-23 to 30% by the end of the 2024-25 school year (Exhibit 5). Although these data cover only the first two years of the five-year grant and reflect the experiences of graduates for whom the program began midway through their high school enrollment, they support the beliefs expressed by school coordinators and administrators that students are graduating better prepared because of the activities funded by the SSU.

Building and strengthening community partnerships to meet the needs of students, families, and schools

School coordinators have cultivated partnerships that go beyond transactional relationships, building connections rooted in shared commitments to students and communities. Partners include educational institutions, such as colleges and public libraries; vision, dental, and medical providers who offer screenings and services; government agencies, such as county health departments, the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, and law enforcement agencies that support educational programming and career development; and non-profits, social service agencies, and religious institutions that provide emergency food and housing assistance to students’ families.

Southeast Community College has evolved from providing one-time technical support for 3D printers to what one school coordinator described as a “lifelong partnership.” The college now offers CPR certification, hosts campus tours, and invites students to visit its lineman training program. Similarly, Eastern Kentucky University’s Manchester Campus has opened its doors to Clay County students for FAFSA nights, college visits, and meetings, offering the school its space free of charge. Public libraries have also become essential partners, providing space for events, contributing books for giveaways, and hosting storytellers who visit schools.

Local hospitals and doctors’ offices have also emerged as committed partners, motivated by genuine care for students and by the recognition that they must actively develop the next generation of health care workers. In addition to providing staff time and space to support health care career exploration, as described in the previous section, hospitals and medical offices provide medical screenings for students and families, and dental and vision practices provide students with regular checkups. In coordination

with their FRYSC coordinators, school coordinators ensure that students have access to restorative treatments and glasses.

County health departments and extension offices have also proven reliable partners across the SSU schools and districts, offering free programming on hygiene, nutrition, and healthy eating. Each county in Kentucky has an extension office that, in partnership with schools, provides financial literacy and banking education, as well as nutrition programming. School coordinators emphasized the importance of building these partnerships not only between grant staff and partners, but also among partners and schools; these services are free and can continue beyond the grant funding.

Additionally, school coordinators have built or strengthened partnerships with nonprofits to connect students and families in crisis, directly or indirectly, with social services. For example, to address behavioral health needs in their school communities, school coordinators have connected their schools with organizations such as Operation Unite, which provides drug prevention and recovery services. Cumberland Valley Behavioral Health also provides mental health programs in schools. School coordinators have fostered closer relationships among schools, local grocery stores, and food banks to help families and students address food insecurity. In building these partnerships, school coordinators were clear that their intent was to strengthen relationships between the partners and the schools, with the grant serving as an initial connector rather than as a long-term intermediary, ensuring that services for schools, students, and the community persist beyond FSCS funding.

Planning for sustainability

School coordinators and principals reported that they have had intentional sustainability plans since the start of the FSCS grant. To ensure that the schools can continue to support the FSCS work without the additional funding and the school coordinator position, school coordinators, principals, and district administrators have prioritized alignment with the schools' and principals' overarching strategy, spending on durable materials, increasing teacher capacity, and building partnerships between schools and community partners that do not require the level of funding the grant provides.

School coordinators reported focusing their purchases on items that will last beyond the grant period. One school coordinator explained, "I do try to make sure that I also purchase things that can be used for years to come." These durable investments include life-size skeletons for science instruction (one school's skeleton is affectionately named "Frank"), globes, math manipulatives, Chromebooks, and art carts.

The grant has also invested in building teachers' capacity by providing opportunities to observe programs and purchasing curriculum materials. For example, teachers observe "Test Prep Mom" leading SAT/ACT prep sessions to learn and apply the methods themselves. Academic interventionists work in classrooms rather than pulling students out, ensuring that classroom teachers see the strategies in action and can replicate them. SSU grant staff and school administrators believe this capacity-building approach increases the likelihood that effective practices will persist after grant funding ends.

Every principal and district administrator interviewed in December 2025 made it clear that tutoring was a top priority among SSU-supported activities they would find a way to continue; they have seen its impact on their students' achievement. In the words of one principal, "Things that I know have a definite impact, then it's my job as an administrator to find that money somewhere." Administrators were similarly unanimous in their support for continuing arts programming, with the intention of maintaining

the partnerships with artists that school coordinators have built. One principal commented, “It offers a group of students...that before they may not have felt like they were part of the school community.”

However, administrators and school coordinators are realistic about the programs or services they have purchased that do not meet those criteria. For example, i-Ready assessments, purchased with grant funds, are popular with teachers but are too expensive to replace MAP as the districts’ interim assessment. Some technology programs face uncertain futures: “Just like financial, I do worry about a robotics class... that stuff only lasts so long.” Principals also acknowledge that while students love field trips, “Anytime a bus rolls, it's expensive.”

A school coordinator offered perhaps the most interesting insight into the potential to sustain SSU grant activities beyond the funding period: “Grants are the cars that help us take kids and families places they want to go [...] the connections [school coordinators] have made in our communities and with our families will remain for years to come.” The relationships and trust school coordinators support—among teachers, families, and community partners—should endure beyond the grant period, and these partnerships and relationships will form the foundation for sustainable programming.

Summary and Recommendations

Over the first three years of the SSU FSCS grant, schools have documented improvements in kindergarten readiness, gains in math and reading proficiency that outpace state trends, substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism, and higher rates of postsecondary readiness. These outcomes reflect not a single intervention, but a constellation of interconnected efforts tailored to the needs of the schools and communities where they have been implemented, including academic tutoring, arts programming, career exploration, and family engagement.

In this fourth year, early childhood and kindergarten readiness represent an area where additional partnership development could strengthen both immediate efforts and long-term sustainability. Kindergarten readiness data show progress alongside persistent gaps. KinderCamps have proven effective in smoothing the transition to kindergarten for children and their families. However, reaching more children before summer programming begins is also critical to building early literacy and numeracy skills and may require partnerships to engage children and families in their homes and community spaces. School coordinators have successfully built partnerships with colleges, hospitals, health departments, and extension offices to support school-age students and families. These same partners, along with others, may play valuable roles in early childhood outreach, extending kindergarten readiness activities and resources into homes in the years before children enter school.

School coordinators have been effective connectors, building relationships among schools, families, and community partners that have transformed school culture and expanded student opportunities. To ensure these relationships endure beyond the grant, school coordinators, schools, and districts should consider how to institutionalize these connections to sustain key partnerships and coordinate services beyond the life of the grant. During our December 2025 site visit to districts in Bell, Clay, and Harlan counties, we heard from coordinators and school leaders planning for sustainability. However, the State Scale Up grant funds schools in nine other districts, and it is important to ensure that all schools are equally attentive to sustaining their work. When community partners see themselves as truly part of the school community, those partnerships are far more likely to endure.

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